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IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"AN EMBODIMENT OF EXPERIENCE": STEVEN NELSON ON AFRICAN ART AND WRITING HISTORY

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Transcript

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Caro Fowler
Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode of *In the Foreground*, I talk with Steven Nelson, who in March of 2020 was named Dean of the Center of Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, otherwise known as CASVA. Steven's broad interests in design, travel, and histories of the African diaspora are reflected in his winding path toward a career in academia. And we discuss how graduate education shaped Steven's specialization in African and African-American art, his writing practices, and his latest book project, which focuses on the Underground Railroad and American myth making.

Steven Nelson
We think of ourselves as academics or intellectuals, or whatever label we want to use—"Art Historians" with a capital A and capital H. I think we're also storytellers.

Caro Fowler
Well thank you so much for joining us today, Steven.

Steven Nelson
Well thank you for the invitation. This is fantastic.

Caro Fowler
Oh it's my pleasure. Well it's very exciting to have the new dean of the CASVA on this inaugural podcast series, so we're very excited. And one of the main structures of these conversations have often been about teaching, and the ways

in which art historians today have been formed by their own teachers. And I was so fascinated to read that you actually began as an artist, and as a studio art major at Yale, is that right?

Steven Nelson
That is true. And it never occurred to me to take something like art history. I grew up in suburban Boston, went to public high school, and we didn't have art history. I'd never heard of it. And so when I got to Yale and declared an art major, we were forced to take art history classes. And so we had to take three, and I wound up taking eight. I wound up in a class in Japanese art history for which I was uniquely unqualified, and did terribly, but loved the professor and loved the material.

Steven Nelson
Carolyn Wheelwright. She taught Japanese art at Yale for some time back in the 80s when I was a student there. And I then started taking modern with Ann Gibson. And the two of them, I just loved them, and they were great. And you know what, they were nice [both laugh]. And Ann had been an artist herself.

Caro Fowler
Who was the professor?

Caro Fowler
Right.

Steven Nelson
And we talked a lot about art making and art history, and the juncture between the two. And art history was always a way to push making. And so I could see different things from different classes appearing in studio work. And professors in the studio would say things to me like, "are you taking Japanese art history? Are you taking modern art history?" because they could see it. But at Yale I eventually moved. I actually had a career as a graphic designer before I became an academic, but it was a very gradual move.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. Who were your early influences in graphic design? What drew you to graphic design?

Steven Nelson
I loved the idea of communicating visually. At Yale in the art major, you basically just major, and you could then parse out painting, drawing, printmaking, graphic design. And I veered towards graphic design. I didn't want to paint, and so I did a lot of graphic design and printmaking and photography. And I think a part of it was thinking through information, and at this moment in the 1980s, people were doing a lot with information graphics. Edward Tufte was starting to produce his books, and his wife the graphic designer Inge Druckrey was my advisor. But I think there's an interesting through line from that work to then working. I worked in newspapers for seven years--

Caro Fowler
Oh wow.

Steven Nelson
--and made information graphics, and wrote and edited, and did all of that kind of stuff. I tried my hand at illustration, and then went into academia.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. So you went to Harvard for graduate school, correct? And you were there during the late 90s.

Steven Nelson
Yeah.

Caro Fowler
What was Harvard like in the late 90s?

Steven Nelson
I got to Harvard in 1981. And so I was there for most of the 90s [both laugh]. And Harvard at that moment was at a really interesting point, because they had just hired Yve-Alain Bois. They had just hired Norman Bryson. I had gone there to study modern art. And so I started working with Yve-Alain and Norman, and Henri Zerner and that crew. And it was mind boggling to me in that I had been out of school at that point for a while. I graduated from college in the mid 80s. And so I had a career, and then came back. So I was almost 29 when I started graduate school, and got placed into this cohort of people who were extraordinary. And it was this moment where I had these extraordinary classmates and interesting professors, and everyone was reading critical theory [both laugh]. Art history was--

Caro Fowler
There was that moment [both laugh].

Steven Nelson
--there was that moment. There was that very moment.

Caro Fowler
Who was in your cohort?

Steven Nelson
David Joselit, Pamela Lee, Branden Joseph, Harry Cooper, Andrei Zervigon, Cassie Mansfield--it was an amazing group of people, a shockingly amazing group of people. I always felt like a misfit in a way, because I had come in through other means. I had been out working, not in academia or in art history. And so for me, there was a really steep learning curve, and I almost quit after year two.

Caro Fowler
Oh really?

Steven Nelson

Yeah. Because it was the moment of critical theory and all this, but also the AIDS pandemic was raging, and I had a lot of friends dying, and all this stuff was going on. And I was working. There was one year I was in graduate school full-time and working in an HIV antibody test site at the same time. The juxtaposition was crazy for me. And so I thought, I'm going to leave and become a social worker. And my mother, who was a social worker said, "don't do that. It's a bad idea." And so I stayed in. But there were all of those forces at play at that moment. And so a lot of us were what we thought of at the time as sort of angry activist graduate students, which I think was probably not as true as we thought it was at that moment. But it impacted the kind of work that we did, and the kind of work that we thought was important. And we thought that critical theory could help us untangle all of those political arguments. And to a certain point it could, and to a certain point it couldn't. Because for me, the important thing was always that connection between the theoretical apparatus and what's happening on the ground, whether that's politically, or even in the work of art. So for me, that was the big lesson: being able to apply A to B. So to read, say Bryson and [Mieke] Bal on semiotics, but to then understand how it applies in the world. And that was tough. That was really tough. But Harvard in the late 90s--that department changed a lot over the 90s in terms of people coming and going. They were one of the first departments to drop the survey. They did a lot of different trials over the years. But there were shifts, and it was incredibly stimulating intellectually. But because I had gone in as a modernist, [and] came out as an Africanist--actually we did a search my first year of graduate school for an Africanist, and they put me on the committee as one of the graduate student reps. And so I wound up having to learn a lot about the field. And it was interesting working with the faculty on that committee in this other way. And so it was Irene Winter, and Yve-Alain Bois, and Neil Levine, and Anthony Appiah from African-American Studies. It was this amazing committee. And Anthony I'd known when I was an undergraduate. And it was really interesting looking at the hiring process, but also understanding how to take apart a field you don't know: think about it, analyze it, and see how people do what they do--how to write, how to put together an argument. And so we hired Suzanne Blier. And within a

year or two she became my advisor. So I do like to joke that I hired my adviser [both laugh].

Caro Fowler
So you did your fieldwork in Cameroon, is that right?

Steven Nelson
Yes.

Caro Fowler
And how long were you there for?

Steven Nelson
I was there for an academic year. So I went to Boston Labor Day, came back around Memorial Day. And so I was living in a village in northern Cameroon--a fairly big village, but one without creature comforts like running water and electricity. And it was an amazing experience. It's interesting thinking about our current moment with quarantine and COVID. And actually, that field work was really good training for this. So I spent all my time alone.

Caro Fowler
Was Craigslist operative? I mean, how did you find housing? You landed on the ground and...

Steven Nelson
You landed on the ground [both laugh]. I got lucky because I did a preparatory trip a year earlier. And so I went there for three weeks. And hysterically, David Joselit went with me [both laugh]. And we went to Cameron. And we're scoping out--where are you going to work? What are you going to do? What's the project going to be? And we went to this village called Pouss way up in the north, and I was there for a day. And it smelled like dried fish. And I thought there was no electricity, no running water, and I thought, "I cannot live here. I can't do this." But we met a Peace Corps person who was in that village at that moment. And

we then went to the Cameroon grass fields, which is in the western part of the country. And I thought, "This is beautiful. I'm coming here. It's great. It's this--it's that. It's close to the capitol--close being five hours--and I can do this." And I wound up going back up north. There was something about the material. And I got introduced to the material through Suzanne. And so she showed me these Mousgoum houses, and she said, "this is a dissertation waiting to be written," which is a line I have used on dozens of students over the years. And so I did that project. But being in the field was amazing, because the project I thought I was going to do was not doable. And so you think through the material you have as you're doing it in a really different way than you might in an archive, and also because of the technology. We were still writing letters. So there were a lot of decisions I made on the fly immediately that now I might not have to because I would be able to do digital this or digital that, or save it and look at it later, or know immediately what it looks like. But the the project that came out of it really was the product of being situated in this place for 10 months. And just talking to people. What is important? In art history I like to think that we--and I have colleagues who feel the same way--play a game of follow the artist, right? And in the situation of being out in the field, it was follow your interlocutors. What are they telling you? And so as an Africanist, I was told that in the field, if someone tells you something is beautiful, don't listen to them. "Why do you do x?" "Because it's beautiful." And so I was getting this again and again and again and again. So finally, in about month eight, I'm getting this again and again and again and again. And the one thing that I did do that I thought was important was [that] I made sure to talk to women. I was always talking to women. And so I was like, "Well, why did you do x or y in your family compound?" "Oh, because it's beautiful" [both laugh]. I got really frustrated. And I just impulsively shot back, "Well, who cares? Why does it matter that it's beautiful?" And that opened up the whole project. That was the right question. And so it wasn't [that] the advice not to ignore beauty was wrong, but it was the opening into--because beauty became the sort of repository for a whole number of ways that people around there thought about other people, thought about art, thought about architecture. and thought about space. And I said, "oh, here's the project." And as the dissertation became the book, that became more and more of the story.

We think of ourselves as academics or intellectuals, or whatever label we want to use--Art Historians with a capital A and a capital H. I think we're also storytellers.

Caro Fowler
Yeah.

Steven Nelson
And I wish I had known that when I was writing the dissertation [laughs].

Caro Fowler
I don't think anyone tells you that right?

Steven Nelson
Nobody tells you that.

Caro Fowler
The necessity, the rhetoric of art history, I think, is so often ignored in favor of--I don't know.

Steven Nelson
Yeah. We don't think about writing, and what that means. And I was lucky, because even back then--actually, Pam Lee and I used to talk a lot about writing, because we were writing dissertations at the same time. We don't often enough get the time to just sit and think about writing, and what writing does and how writing works. And I feel really fortunate that I've been able to do it here.

Caro Fowler
Well, because really I think that after the research, writing is what we do. It's what we produce. It's how we think.

Steven Nelson

Yeah. I was always really nervous about my writing--still am to a certain extent. And thinking that either I don't do it well, or I have imposter syndrome--and especially having come from a studio background, because I wasn't writing. And so in graduate school, I was just kind of insane, and there were a bunch of us who always shared our reading with each other before it went to our professors. But what we did when we were reading academic articles--that part of the charge was the material, whatever it was, but also seeing how an argument got put together. If I was writing about an exhibition, not a review or something like that, I would just go to books on exhibitions or chapters. How did someone write about this? What does that look like? Whereas when I was writing my dissertation, I actually started reading novels. How is this put together? And I still do that. When I get stuck, I go to other people's writing. How did they get through this conundrum? How do you start [a] chapter? Which chapter readings do you like? And you try something on and see if it works for you [laughs].

Caro Fowler
Who are the writers that have been really influential for you? Because I also feel like you do have a very specific tone in writing. Although this is perhaps some of your more art criticism pieces, but I feel like you'll address things in parentheses, [and] it can be intimate sometimes. You share something about yourself that's intimate, and then you pull back and look at a larger question. I feel like you have a very specific engagement with writing and art history. Who have been the major influences for you in articulating that?

Steven Nelson
That's a great question, and [it's] many different people for many different reasons. Part of it's artists. Carrie Mae Weems--I hear Carrie Mae Weens speak, and I'm like, "Okay, this is what I want my writing to look like" [both laugh]. And it's true. She could read me her grocery list and I would be happy. But people like that--Sadiya Hartman. I think for my current project, for the Underground Railroad project, her book Lose Your Mother was actually hugely important. So Sadiya Hartman--but even people like Norman Bryson was hugely influential for me, because he writes beautifully and I like how he approaches artworks and the

like. And even Yves-Alain Bois. I would like to think that in a certain way, the world is a meeting point between a reasonably formalist art history, and the kinds of interventions made by people like a Huey Copeland, or even a Robert Farris Thompson for example--that it all comes together. Because for me, one of my big complaints about, say African-American art, when I was coming up, was that so often every artwork was treated like a social document. And so it was a window into some reality. How do you start to really engage with these works? How do you start to really submit them to the kind of rigor that you would show to everything else--things in your field, things in modern art, things in other fields--even in African art. So that's what I started doing. But in terms of the personal, I think part of that was there from the very beginning--back to that, "okay, we're activist students." We're coming out of this place where people keep talking about the death of the author, but we're all authors, and that's part of what is important here. And so I think it's more apparent in later work. I mean, the Underground Railroad is intensely personal. But even other pieces--the Underground Railroad project came out of the Mousgoum book in many ways. And the part of the Mousgoum book that is most like the Underground Railroad is the introduction, where the Mousgoum book opens up in Japan at a World's Fair. And there's this passage about being in Japan in the rain, not speaking the language, and being bumped and jostled. And I just left it in the book. And my colleagues in other fields were like, "We can't believe you did this. We could not do this." And my editor at Chicago, who's the same editor as for the Underground Railroad, read that and said, "Do you want to write a trade book?" So that was the beginnings of that. But what's so interesting is that part of the Mousgoum book was about taking apart travel writing, and traveling in Africa, and travelers who've been in this area looking at these forms. And what does that mean? The Underground Railroad book is a turning of the lens upon oneself, as traveler or as interlocutor. And that's tough.

Caro Fowler

When did the Underground Railroad project start for you? When did you take the trip? How did it became clear to you that it would become a book? If Sadiya

Hartman was influential for you, did you experience the same kind of estrangement that she discusses?

Steven Nelson
That's a great question. And the Underground Railroad book started as an idea for a book. I would love to say it was my own idea. But it was not [laughs]. It was suggested. Susan Bielstein approached me from the University of Chicago. She was the editor of the Mousgoum book, and she was the one who read that introduction, and suggested that I could write a trade book. And so she approached me in 2008, I think. And we talked back and forth. And she asked me if I wanted to do this for her series called "Culture Trails." And so the Underground Railroad was part of that. So I made the trip. I actually took the trip in 2009. But coming to your question about estrangement, there were multiple kinds of estrangement for me in that trip. Part of it was being in the south.

Caro Fowler
Had you spent any time in the south before?

Steven Nelson
Not really. And so I had an uncle who lived in Nashville, Tennessee, and I visited him once when I was 18 years old. But I had spent almost no time in the south. And on the flip side had spent years of my life in Africa. So I went to Mobile. I started out in Mobile, Alabama. And so there was that sense of weirdness of being in this place. It actually looked a little like West Africa, [and] that certainly smelled like West Africa, but it was the US, and a part of the US that I basically knew nothing about. And on top of that, it was Barack Obama's first summer in office. And all of the healthcare stuff, Henry Louis Gates being arrested in his own house--all of that stuff happened while I was traveling. And that stuff made its way into the book because it was impossible to be this sort of disembodied disengaged traveler in a world of social media, and the car, and accessibility, and the cellphone. It became a way to think about race relations in the US, and how convoluted they are, and how convoluted they have always been. So it became this combo of traveling. And then I went to a bunch of different places. I was on

the road for three weeks, and wound up eventually in St. Catharines, Ontario. And so there were muses. Harriet Tubman was my muse. But I didn't want to follow her route. But she lived in St. Catharines for about eight years, and so I wound up there. It was such a different kind of writing. How do you write about estrangement? How do you write about the Underground Railroad, which is as much myth as it is fact, which in many places--especially as an art historian--I spent years doing backflips explaining how this is an art history book. And at the end of the day, it kind of isn't.

Caro Fowler
And that's okay.

Steven Nelson
Exactly right [both laugh]. But there's that sort of weird line--that weird, blurred boundary between the real and the not real, or the factual and the mythical that I found really interesting. And as an academic, it was really hard. Because I want to go in and say, "Okay, this is not right. This is right. This is fact. This is fiction. And see, I've done my work." But part of the question was surrounding this notion that myth works on us. And so why is it so powerful that Underground Railroad site A may not have been real, but is still functioning as a museum and as heritage, and all of those things that we want it to do? And what is important about that? In certain ways, and at certain places, the Underground Railroad is framed as the world's first multiracial humanitarian effort, which makes it sound much bigger than it was. It makes it sound like a groundswell when it was really a trickle. And what it does do--and I don't know whether it might be a neutral when it comes to questions of "does it support structural racism or not"--is that it allows everybody to feel good about themselves. Everybody wins. And so black people win, white people win--everybody wins. And so in terms of the relationship of that book to art history, I think that what it is, what it absolutely is, is what an art historian and architectural historian can do with the materials before them in a frame that is not an expected sort of monographic frame. And of course, I've still got monographs under my belt. But this kind of writing is inflecting the writing of subsequent books. And for me, it's a model of bringing

together accessible writing with research, with rigor, with all of those things that we, I think, falsely presumed go away when we write for general audiences, and there's a falsely erected firewall between the two. And I would like to trouble that. And I think that a book like this does.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. It seems to me one way in which the research institute as an entity is being challenged right now is that museums are these public spaces where the major cultural questions are happening. And they're happening in the exhibitions, and they're happening in the protests, and they're happening in the hiring decisions. And museums are what everyone is looking at right now for creating discourse of how people are thinking about art.

Steven Nelson
Yeah. And I that really for research institutes, for a place like RAP [Research and Academic Programs] and a place like CASVA, the question is how to effectively engage with our colleagues, with our--

Caro Fowler
They're vital for the discipline, and they're vital for all academic departments.

Steven Nelson
Yeah, I think that's right. And so what I would like to see, and what I hope is that these places become these meeting places between the academy, and museums, and a broader public, and I don't think that's antithetical to still having a wonderful program of fellows who come in and do their thing. The question is how to enhance, and it is about enhancing what a research institute can do and can be. I don't think they need to--the term I think of--and this is part of CASVA's success frankly, has been its unique position, its almost cloistered nature within the gallery. And I think that understanding what it does really well (and there's a lot it does really well) and how one can make that a bit more public-facing would be a really--I think that's an important charge. And I think it moves towards the continued relevance of the discipline, because we often forget that the fellows

we bring in are often museum professionals too [laughs]. Even those of us in universities, yes we have come to do our writing or our research, but we still have publics too. And we often forget that. Unlike museum professionals, the professoriate often has the luxury of acting as a free agent, which is great, and which is not great. And so they forget that their stuff--or maybe I should say we--is attached to other things in the world.

Caro Fowler
But it also seems like such an important model for graduate students coming along too, especially as tenure track academic jobs are becoming fewer and fewer. And I'm so worried about the next five years, I mean, my god, I have no idea what the job market is going to look like. In order to really make it in art history now, you have to be willing to be nimble, you have to be willing to be an administrator, you have to be willing to write for many different kinds of publications--

Steven Nelson
Yes. And I think in many ways this has always been the case. It's just much more acute now, especially with COVID. I think you're right. I think that it should affect and must affect how we participate in graduate student training. I think it's incumbent upon faculty to lose the idea that they are going to produce mini-mes. I think it's incumbent upon students to realize that the end game may well not be a tenure track job, because for most of them at this point it won't be. And to be clear about what is possible for them. I was about to say why they want to do it, but I think that's the wrong question because people's ideas change. And I think that the research centers can help with that. And again, another fireline that need not exist between research and vocational training, which in some of these places that has always been one in the same, except the question is the kind of vocational training that we're talking about. Because you've been a [inaudible], you know.

Caro Fowler

It's interesting to me. So you came into Harvard working on modern art and working with Yves-Alain Bois and Norman Bryson. And then you left, I think as you said, really as an Africanist/African modernist. So you've been in the field now of African and African-American Studies for a while. How have you seen it change? I think that right now it's kind of a golden age it seems for African-American Studies. I don't know if that's also true for African Studies, but it seems for African-American Studies it is, and African Diaspora [Studies]. Do you have faith that these positions that are being made, and that the inroads that are being made are going to change the discipline? Or does part of you still worry that this is art history's fascination for now, and then these positions will be lost, and the structural inequalities will continue?

Steven Nelson
Both [both laugh]. I know that sounds crazy.

Steven Nelson
It's very encouraging to see the field expanding--and it is expanding--and to see more opportunities for people, even in a larger terrain that seems to be contracting. But there's always the question of five years from now. And so suddenly, what happens five years from now. Are these people still in these positions? Or do we have a situation where people have come in to museums or academic institutions, and get so badly treated that they leave? Because I think the thing we don't talk about enough is retention. I think that's part of the piece of your question, right? And this is, I think, true not only in my field, but I think in the discipline more generally with questions of inclusion/questions of diversity. It's like a romantic comedy. At the end, everyone gets together, and everyone lives happily ever after, but we don't see them 10 years later. So what happens 10 years later? Are people still there? I think that not only in the field, but in the discipline more generally, and in universities more generally, and perhaps in museums more generally, people still are not very good at thinking outside of the box. And so they will clamor for field or for diversity, but it always has to be on the same terms as everything else, which gives this sort of false impression of equality. But people sort of conflate equality and equity. I'm really glad that you

made the distinction between African-American and the Afro-Atlantic diaspora and African, because I think we may see them move in different ways. In many ways, if we're thinking about that piece of the world--that very large piece of the world--as a kind of entity that really brings three different fields together.

Caro Fowler
No!

Caro Fowler
Well, I'm so excited to see what you do Steven--

Steven Nelson
Thank you Caro. Given our positions, we're all going to be talking a lot.

Caro Fowler
Thank you Steven.

Steven Nelson
It's been really fun.

Caro Fowler
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.