

IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

“LOOKING AS KNOWING”:
SVETLANA ALPERS ON CRITICAL THINKING AND
PHOTOGRAPHY

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Transcript

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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 speak with Svetlana Alpers, a specialist of 17th century painting, and professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley. In our conversation, Svetlana shares how literary criticism influenced her early encounters with art, and she reflects on the altered state of the discipline today. We discuss the relationship between painting and photography in light of her new book on Walker Evans, and Svetlana recounts parallels between this new project and her seminal work on Dutch painting *The Art of Describing*.

Svetlana Alpers

I got to looking from reading. I was doing with a picture what I'd been taught to do in literature. I was accustomed to taking a critical view.

Caro Fowler

Thank you so much for joining me today. I really appreciate it.

Svetlana Alpers

My pleasure.

Caro Fowler

So we've already talked a little bit about where this conversation might go, but I thought an interesting question to warm up with or to start thinking with is: we're in a moment in which people are often talking about how there are

seismic changes happening. There are major shifts. And yet some people have also said that they felt like all of this already happened in the 70s and 80s with the culture wars. And so I would love to hear your perspective of what it was like to be at UC Berkeley in the 1970s, and how you saw art history as a discipline developing and changing then.

Svetlana Alpers

Well, I want to go back further than that. I arrived at Berkeley in 1962. So my intense times in Berkeley were in those tumultuous 60s and into the 70s. And I began studying art history--and that's of course for me the most important thing--at the end of the 50s in my senior year at Radcliffe in 1957. And from then on through graduate school, my experience was of a field largely populated by professors who had emigrated. So I was moving into a field that was not so much Americans, as Europeans who had had to flee. I have a Russian father, and had gone to Europe a lot as a child taken into Europe. So that suited me just fine. In other words, I felt I was home. I didn't think of myself as a woman among men, though of course I indeed was that. I thought of myself as a person among all these people or many people who really knew from a European point of view a lot about European art, culture, history, society. I suppose looking back, though I didn't feel it then, I am by nature disputatious. I might say that that might be a woman in a world where there aren't a lot of other women, but I didn't think of it that way. I just thought, "Things are not right." And the first thing I thought at Harvard was "People do connoisseurship. They do iconography. They do style and iconography. But a picture is all mixed up. It's neither one nor the other. Why shouldn't we mix those things together as they are mixed up in the making and feeling of art?" So I immediately began to press on that kind of question. And my great luck was that in my second year I went to NYU to study with [Richard] Krautheimer, came back, and then in the spring of my return year to Harvard (that's the spring of 1959), who arrived to teach but Ernst Gombrich. And he made all the difference because he was not a normal art historian. He himself was breaking with what had been done, taking in perception, visual perception, writing, art and illusion. So I felt fine. I'm one of those. Yes indeed,

The Art of Describing was published in 1983, but my issues began much earlier before the 70s.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. Was there a formative seminar that you took with Gombrich that really--

Svetlana Alpers

Well, he taught a seminar on Vasari, which I then learned he had been taught himself by Julius von Schlosser, the great Viennese art historian, when he had been a student. And my first article, which some people in Italian art still think is the best thing I ever wrote, was on Vasari's ekphrasis in Vasari's Lives. Since I had been a textual person--so I studied literature and turned to art--it was perfect for me to get back to a text.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. What did you learn about looking specifically from Gombrich?

Svetlana Alpers

I got to looking from reading. And I might point out that my close colleagues Baxandall and Podro were also both people trained in literature. So I didn't come to art history from art history, but from reading. I was doing with a picture what I'd been taught to do in literature. I was accustomed to taking a critical view--by criticism I mean literary criticism. So it's not so much close this or close that. It's that you attend to the medium.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. And so what were the changes that you saw happen within the discipline of art history from the early 60s to say the late 70s?

Svetlana Alpers

Berkeley was a relatively new department. It wasn't a new department, but it wasn't Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, or Wellesley, or Vassar. So it had no great history. And it was actually started by Walter Horn, who was not Jewish, but a

German who had fled, and who had studied in Hamburg, TK, and who worked on medieval secular architecture. So that had nothing to do with me. And I just got there and tried to find my way. I was going my merry way trying to figure things out. I'm a loner. So I did in the end, behind the scenes, because I was never chair, assembled what was a great department at Berkeley in the 80s, that was Baxandall and Tim Clark, and myself, and it was just super duper--not that we all got along, but to the graduate students it was wonderful. There were great people with me at Berkeley, as I said many times. Edith Kramer became head of the Pacific Film Archives, Betsy TK, and Henry TK. We were just ourselves. We weren't a movement. Movement really wasn't it. Movement is a way of thinking later on. Now it's true in 77. I got together one of many sessions. I'm amazed when I look back, because I forget about these--I did it partly preparing for you, because I don't remember all these things. But 1971 at the CAA, the need for new directions, there I am, and it's about criticism. When I look back, I think "criticism? Is that really [what] I was interested in?" Because that changed. That was brought in from literature. So looking was just what I get. I never thought you could do anything else. It's not something [that] I discovered. It was what I'd really been trained to [do] from reading intensely literary texts.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. And I will say that *The Art of Describing*, which to this day remains, I think, not only one of the most fundamental texts in early modern studies, but art history overall, is a book that comes from close looking, but I have found that that's not always what people understand about it.

Svetlana Alpers

No way. Close looking is not what I mean. Sure it's looking. One of the reasons I'm a little uncomfortable with that is I'm very wary, unlike some other art historians, of writing about what I see. "Look, look, look, look." I don't like that. I don't like to tell people how to look. I like to get them set up so they can look on their own. So my writing is really setting a stage or giving a frame for getting to looking. And I would say what that book really is about [is] art. What people did not realize when I say the art of describing, I'm not talking about realism. I'm

talking about it as an artifice, as an art. So the book is really establishing what art is. It's as much that I would say, Caroline, as it is about looking. Of course it's looking. And I would say I never start any project without a question about something seen. But then I don't go on and on about what I'm seeing. I go on and on about really, how do you situate that scene? How is it constituted? Why were they making an art like that? In fact, *The Art of Describing* is about seeing as knowing. What the Dutch thought was you knew the world through seeing, and that has been largely lost in thinking about the book. In other words, people take off on PC questions--colonialism or something. I'm not interested in that. As far as I'm concerned, that was not the point. They thought they could understand the world through looking. And that's deep in our culture, but in Holland it was central to the making of pictures.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. And so what happened then in the early 90s at Berkeley that made you decide to leave?

Svetlana Alpers

Oh no, wait. We're talking the 80s, right? Basically?

Caro Fowler

Yes.

Svetlana Alpers

I retired in '94. I left because essentially I was one of those lucky people at just the age--I was 58 then--when I was bought out because they had a financial crisis which institutions have again and again for different reasons, and they decided to pay off top professors. And I just made it under six months or something of age to do it. And I had personal reasons for doing it. Also, I suppose things had changed, by which I mean, I'd written *The Art of Describing*. I'd written the Rembrandt book. I was beginning to work on Tiepolo with Baxandall who [had] come to Berkeley to teach, and the students were asking different questions. A major question on their minds were questions of gender. Now curiously, *The Art*

of Describing, because of Francesca TK saying that Dutch Northern art is an art for women, I came into the women's movement. I was one of the founding members of the Women's Caucus for Art. But the curious thing about Dutch art is though it was said to be an art for women, in other words, you cry, you look at it, it's not manly like Italian art, which was the notion of an Italian writing about it, but it was mostly made by men. In other words, it's not an art made by women. It's an art made by men, who, however, were discriminated by the Italians as being women. Anyhow, everybody wanted to talk about gender. It really is not a central question to me. I think it can be interesting, but I don't think everything can be seen through that question. And so there was a push among those students, many of whom are still very close friends, to ask those questions. And when we taught the pro seminar (there was an introductory seminar for graduate students), this is what was pressing them. And it really didn't press me. The other thing that happened is--what I love to teach above all was a huge introductory course from Giotto to Picasso. Now that became under question. How can we teach European art? Now I would say to that any field has to have a constraint, and that the limit, but also, let's say the functional constraint of art history, was greater Western art. And it was a great field when I went to it. It was psychological. It was anthropological. It was philosophical. It was sporadic. It was a great intellectual field, right? But it had to have limits. In other words, there's physics and there's chaos physics. Chaos physics is not physics. Physics to be physics has to put limits. I think any field of study needs limits. That's one of my questions with global art history. I don't know what the limits are. What is the structure of that field? It's just kind of wandering all over the place, and noticing things, and saying they ought to be noticed. Well, that's not thinking. That's just looking around. And we have a field but it became, understandably, under pressure. Why were we privileging Europe? And so that course, which I love teaching because I could teach from Giotto to Picasso and beyond. I could teach all kinds of things that were not my great specialty, and that was a huge pleasure. And you had 300 kids, and they were not all art historians. And by the way, my notion at the time was if you want to study art history, do not major in art history. Be broad. Do anthropology. Do anything, or be an artist. I have artists who were graduate students of mine who have

become prominent art historians who were not art historians. Anyhow, so that went down the tubes. We invented a new course. So things were changing. So I was just going off. I don't think there is a field now. The point is any field is a construct. And if you live long enough, if you look back over academia, it keeps changing. And I think art history as I was drawn to it, and studied it, and lived well in it is finished. It's not a disaster. The art is still there. It's okay.

Caro Fowler

Do you think that this field is finished because there are all these--

Svetlana Alpers

I don't think it's going to be the field it was. Look, I know Europe a bit. And I think it's more as it was in Europe than it is in America. The right thing about America, and that of course can bring us to Walker Evans (that's my first American artist), is that America is America. And why should everybody in America be busy not studying American art? When I was in art history, everybody thought "American art? Who can do that?" We did hire people in American art, somebody in American art who is still there at Berkeley in fact, but it was frowned on and looked down on, and that's ridiculous. That's a good change. But I think it's quite true in America. Why don't people do something different? And so not just speaking about America, I do think the idea that we were there in Berkeley and I was concentrating on Dutch art, Rubens, Vermeer, Rembrandt--you might say, "Well, why not study someone who's doing something out there? Elmer Bischoff or David Park or somebody?" Fine. So I think that is a problem for America. And in a curious way, my picking up on Evans was a great joy for me because finally, well into this, I myself am turning to America, but notably not a painter, but a photographer.

Caro Fowler

I think it's a good time to turn to your Walker Evans book, which is coming out this October from Princeton University Press. And I was noticing that the title for the book, Walker Evans: Starting from Scratch--is that right? Did I just quote it correctly?

Svetlana Alpers

Yep.

Caro Fowler

In some ways, it seems like that also refers to a little bit for you returning to art history, and thinking about what art history looks like from America, and from the medium of photography.

Svetlana Alpers

No, I didn't think of it that way.

Svetlana Alpers

What's interesting in preparing in speaking to you [is that] you are coming from outside me, and I would say, you look at me in my career. I mean, you know my career, I'm happy to say, which is useful as we talk, but when I work, I don't work in my career. I just work. The title refers to--as I say in the book, and you've read that--photography, which starts from nothing. There's no tradition as there is in painting. My great medium is painting, and photography is not my great medium. So for me, and I have not changed, I still think painting is a greater medium than photography, no question. But you start from scratch as a photographer, and that's what he did, no training, nothing. There were schools, but he didn't go to school. He just took a camera, went out, and did it. But for me, it's also an American story, since I think the reason photography could get going so well, so quickly, immediately in America was that you didn't need to have a great pictorial tradition. And the painters had a more difficult time. Hopper went to Paris. He tried to paint the TK. I think they're marvelous paintings. But a very good American painter once said to me, "Oh, they're (his early work, his work from 1906 or so when he went to Paris) so European," and then he became an American. But I think Evans is a much better artist, a much greater artist than Hopper. For me there's no comparison, although they're often compared. And I think it's because he didn't have that weight of that tradition behind. And then finally, of course the book is me starting from scratch. Now you

looking at me coming to this, immediately can see--and you're not wrong at all, you're quite right--connections between my sense of photography, and let's say, the sense I conveyed of looking at Dutch art. You can see there's a connection, right? But I didn't work out of that sense.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Caro Fowler

Of course. I was struck in reading the book that there were themes that carried through from *The Art of Describing* to this book, such as an attention to surface, an attention to description as a mode of knowledge and a mode of making, and also an attention to process and the ways in which knowledge is formed through process--

Svetlana Alpers

Exactly.

Caro Fowler

--and also the ways in which you were really thinking about Walker Evans' position as a maker, and the ways in which he wanted to occlude his presence within his works, and perhaps [inaudible] the world like a surface.

Svetlana Alpers

Yeah, that suited me. No, you're absolutely right. And when you point that [out] I will say, "Yes." As I mentioned to you, somebody, a rather well-known woman journalist who wrote a book on photography, when I said to her that I was publishing on Walker, she said, "You on Walker Evans?" And I immediately said, well, there's *The Art of Describing*. So quickly, I make the connection myself. But what's interesting--I've been thinking about it since we began to talk about this formal conversation--[is] it never occurred to me deeply [inaudible]. There is, however, a relevant footnote in *The Art of Describing*, and I really looked it up, and it is, in fact, footnote 37 in chapter two, which became rather well known,

because I bring up the question of: what about the relationship--which was always claimed, Kenneth Clark claimed it--between Dutch art and photography? And I don't know if you remember that from the book, or anybody remembers it from the book, but at that point, in other words, when I was writing the book, photography had to be on my mind.

Caro Fowler

It is striking to me, the figure of the camera obscura and photography has haunted the history of Dutch painting, and particularly Vermeer. I would be curious to know how that literature was for you in that period--

Svetlana Alpers

No, that literature is a total mess. And that literature is a mess, because people think he's copying camera obscura, and they make a big fuss about this, and it's just stupid. The book is about the art of the fiction, and that erases the fiction. That ignores the fact that this is all a fiction. After all, Walker Evans' 8 x 10 camera was a camera. I say this in the book, [in] a marvelous famous photograph of Belle Grove of a room in a vacated plantation in the South, he is matching that room to his camera. So he sees that his camera is like a room. And that, in fact, is a much more powerful relationship than Vermeer with an image on a screen in front of him. That has never really grabbed me, and I've not found that literature extremely helpful.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, I agree. How do you think that spending a career looking very closely and thinking a lot about painting gives you a particular perspective? Or what do you think that brought to your project on photography?

Svetlana Alpers

Difference. I mean, I'm dealing with something totally different. But I do not hide the fact in the book, and in that sense, the book is continuous with Alpers on painting, because I'm curious about those differences. For example, I'm interested in making. The Making of Rubens is the title of a book, or Rembrandt's

Enterprise: The Studio [and the Market]. There are chapters in the in The Art Describing nobody talks about. "With a Sincere Hand and a Faithful Fruitful Eye" is a chapter on the craft of representation. They get into mapping, because that's easily movable, but there are other things going on. Anyhow, so I think that the problem with the photograph is: what's the making? A painter has a piece of paper. He has a canvas. He or she gets to work, but the photograph isn't like that. And so the whole notion of making is newly problematic. And you might say--and you're asking me about suggesting the relevance of the artist's [inaudible], which is kind of new to me, but not so new--that, in a sense, a photographer like Evans is a very simplified version of Dutch painting. He just goes out there and looks at the world. And I care a lot about art looking at the world. I care about Cezanne. I care about Bonnard. I care about Manet. And now we've got a ground level example of that in a photographer like Evans. He's not a studio photographer, even though he had the camera. He's out there looking. And of course, his big point is Evans's eye. And of course that grabbed me--there's a chapter on that--immediately.

Caro Fowler

I also thought what was interesting about his practice, which I didn't know [since] I'm not a scholar of photography, is that as you point out, editing is also a large part of his practice. And also, he wasn't tied to having one iconic image that he would copy and edit.

Svetlana Alpers

Exactly. He didn't care. He accepted, I would say, the multiplicity of photographs. You could get a whole strip of them. He didn't go in, like the blind man, or steerage--famous iconic photographs we know, [for one photograph]. There are a couple that Allie Mae Burroughs won, the woman down in Hale County has become iconic, but he made four of those. And they're all hanging around. He didn't go in for one photograph. He accepted the fact--I argue--that cameras make many of them. And he also didn't care about fine images. He's not Irving Penn. He's not any of these photographers who make a fuss. He cared about editing, and he would edit them in different ways. His favorite site was a book--

not a wall, but a book. That's what he wanted. It was books, certainly not a museum, and not a collector's wall. But mostly the page--the book--is where he saw them going. And he would put different ones out at different times. But he cared not about the print, but about the picture. It annoys my photography friends, because I don't know anybody who feels that way. He really didn't care. If we go into the marketing [of fine prints] after his life, he didn't he didn't benefit from that, but he also wasn't crippled by it, if I can put it that way. And the marketing for vintage prints, which is a great thing in photography, was made back then. In a way, Evans didn't play that game. And that's very annoying to collectors, because that's what makes a print valuable.

Caro Fowler

Of course. And so one other thing that you've mentioned about this project that's important to you, and that's come out a bit already, is that while the European tradition is part of it, because he spent time in France and it can't not be--

Caro Fowler

--and he loved France, he is an American. And so I'm curious what that means for when you when you think about this project as based in America. You have a chapter on the South and his relationship in minstrelsy, which I found very interesting, so I would like to hear you talk about more yourself and your relationship to America.

Svetlana Alpers

He loved France.

Svetlana Alpers

It's right up to our time. As I said, I went into a field which shared my European background with me. So I felt very comfortable since I knew Europe well as a kid and I belonged there. I live three months a year when I can get there now in France (different months [and] not in a row). But he spoke of himself as an outsider who said he had a great love for America. But he was an outsider, and

he saw it as an outsider. And look, the other great road photographer Robert Frank was another outsider. And what he did was certainly not done by an American. But there are many very American photographers, and in that way Evans wasn't. And as I found that, I could share that a lot. And he hated it. It's so relevant right now in so many ways. He's living through the Depression. He hates the bankers. [During] the last lecture he gave the night before he went back from Radcliffe where he gave it, [and then] back to drop dead in New Haven where he was living, he went right back to how much he hated America, and delighted at when bankers jumped out of windows to their death. He had a lot of anger about America, and I feel ambivalent about America too. So I sympathized with that. That fit my view. On the other hand, he was absorbed by--aside from his photographs, a few in France when he there '26/'27, and that marvelous three weeks he spent in 1933 in Cuba, which was a warm up for the South because there he saw people of all different kinds of colors under Machado, a dictator who was being overthrown. And he had very few illusions that that overthrow would get anything for the people, which in fact it didn't, and maybe it finally did under Castro, but it didn't then. And in that case, it fit him also because America actually had its finger in the pie, as always, with Cuba. So he was sympathetic to the Cubans. He gives you the information on which reform might act. That's what he gives you, and the same in the American South. And I suppose the big turn my book makes about him in the South: he is a great artist of the Great Depression, [and] that's what we say, but the point in my book is it's not the Great Depression. It's the long Civil War. He goes down there. And he sees negroes, as he called them, as much as he sees whites. When he and [James] Agee do *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, they are ordered by Fortune to do a white tenant farmer family. So it was really the first time you get a series of photographs that's in the first edition by Evans, which are all white. That was not his South. His South includes Confederate statuary. They are in the park in Vicksburg, so they will not be turned down because it is in a national military park. Like Gettysburg, there's one in Vicksburg, and those are protected. Maybe they'll go in there and turn them over, but actually they're part of America. So they're there. Although many of them were put up very late, and they were certainly part of the continuing Confederate feeling. But he had a strong feeling

for that. And he's the only one who is a leading photographer who photographed the showbills for the minstrel shows, which were still popping along in the 30s. And of course, 1936, Fred Astaire dances blackface, and that's in my book too, because I think they're both men of style. And I also have Bob Dylan in there, because Dylan helped me understand, coming from music as he did so dependent [and] drawing on a mixture of traditions of music in which black music was central, and minstrelsy was central. And so I think it's wonderful to study it this time. I think that there might be annoyance at Evans photographing blackface showbills. But the fact is, he's doing it not to say this is good or bad, but [to] say "This is part of our culture. This is it."

Caro Fowler

I think you're right to trace it back to the long Civil War, and that's the point you give. But I think some people would argue that the Civil War, while it might be the moment to trace it back to, it's about the enduring relationship between American slavery that has yet to be recognized.

Svetlana Alpers

Oh, sure. We can say that, but as Baldwin said to Robert Kennedy, "We were here before you were here." Definitely true, but I think that the Civil War is a convenient way to put it because--we're now newly made aware it's not so--we assumed the Civil War settled things. And it didn't, right? And so that's what I'm referring to. He saw it didn't. He was down there. And when he's asked by Bill Ferris--he's still alive actually living down there, and we call it Yale--in the 70s "What interested you about the South?", Evans says they used to call it the Civil War. So he thought of it that way. You're absolutely right in your correction that it's a longer story, but he would have thought of it that way.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, that makes sense. And so you bring up that this book has some wonderful references, and Fred Astaire and Bob Dylan are in that chapter. And I especially appreciated the discussion of Bob Dylan.

Svetlana Alpers

That was quite new to me by the way. I really got onto him for this purpose, because I suddenly realized--no, it's remarkable--I needed some protection or testimony that someone looking as Evans did, and caring as he did without being a fighter or revolutionary, had some status. And Bob Dylan gives it that.

Caro Fowler

But poetry is also another part of the story that you tell, and you can dedicate the book to Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Bishop, understandably, who's often thought of as a poet in this descriptive history, and not the confessional history, [which] you talk about quite a bit. And so as someone who comes from literary studies, and obviously has a long relationship with poetry--yet if I'm not mistaken, this is the first book in which you actively read images in relationship to poetry. Is that correct?

Svetlana Alpers

I can't remember, maybe it is. The argument of the book or one of the arguments is to present Evans as a great American artist. And it seems to me that even though he obviously did not read Bishop, he did meet Edmund Wilson and Hart Crane of course. One of his photographs was used for the bridge, so he knew Hart Crane. But I wanted to situate him in a world of like makers. That's why I brought poetry in. And in one particular case, wonderful prose passages by Bishop on Darwin were a way to get at these lone seekers, which I have much sympathy with, [and] which she was, Darwin was, and Evans was. So it was another way to place him.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. One of the things that's coming out is both you yourself feeling as an outsider in the US, but I think also you've mentioned in some of our previous conversations a turning away from academia, and seeking a different life in New York. So I assume from that you yourself also in turn feel a bit of an outsider within academia, although you've been so formative for the discipline.

Svetlana Alpers

Well look my dear, I am a professor's daughter, right? So I grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I went to college there, went to graduate school there, then I spent my next 25 years in--I'm putting this very loosely--in Berkeley. So I had had my whole life in academic communities, and to me that was the world. When I first became a full professor at Berkeley, if you can believe it, I believe there were three women among 1500 full professors. It's unbelievable. But I wasn't fighting about that--maybe to my fault. I never thought of it. I thought I was a person. I still feel I'm more a person than a woman. I'm as much a person as a woman. I feel that deeply. I was outside partly because I was one of these few women, and there were all these guys, and I was just not part of that. But I never dwelled on it. That was just the situation. And then for personal reasons partly, when I wanted to be nearer to Europe--one of the problems with Berkeley is how far it is from Europe if Europe is where your focus is, and my parents were then living in New York and were old, so I decided to move as it were back to New York, which is what I did. And I did it a bit recklessly. I didn't really think, "Oh my god, I'm getting away from the academy." But when I got here, I found that I was no longer really, in a way, functionally part of that world. But you see, I retired, unlike so many of the people younger than I. My students, my goodness they teach until they're 70 or 75, and I was out at 58. And I was a wonderful teacher. I loved teaching, and I loved my students. But I really wanted to move on in some way. I didn't need it. People say to me, "Oh, I couldn't be without my students." Well, I could. [But] not without art. So I went on. So I suppose I always felt closer to art than to the academy. You see what I mean? That's what I would say to you. That's why when I say to you, if art history is no longer engaged with that tradition of art, which has meant so much to so many and so much for me, the art is still there. It's not the end of the art. It's not terrible.

Caro Fowler

When I was doing some research for our interview, I came across your works in the collection of--I can't remember, is it MoMA or Whitney that acquired them?

Svetlana Alpers

MoMA. Yes those prints that we made: paintings then for now. Barney Kulock, a photographer, and James Hyde, a painter, and I got together and photographed those--other people have photographed them too--great canvases of Tiepolo that are up the top of the staircase in that first room, and they remain there all the time, of the Met. And we did those, and it was fascinating because it was a collaboration between a painter, and a photographer, and an art historian. So that was the fun of it. But I would say to you, really, they're damn good prints. They're wonderful prints, and people bought them, and they were very successful. And MoMA then bought a good part of that. Peter Galassi, who's now retired from MoMA, bought a good number of them for MoMA, so they're in MoMA. But I would say looking back, and I say that I think in the acknowledgments section of this book, that was a practical experience for me with photography. I'm a good normal photographer. And although I did lots of photographs of kids and such, really, it's not family stuff, [but] it's making a good image that matters to me. And I've done that my whole life. My father did it too. He had a wonderful camera, and he came out of the German tradition, so he did it. He was very good photographer. So I'd done that. Then I learned about it through this collusion, this collaboration. And so in fact, that was there for me. And I began to know other photographers through this artist and this photographer, and I sort of got drawn into that world. So partly that experience-- I talked about that in that interview with Stephen Melville, and he was pressing me on how meaningful all of that was to me, and frankly it's very difficult for me to quite explain the meaning of making those images. But the practice of making them was [inaudible], because it gave me an experience being occupied with making photographic prints--big photographic, literal prints.

Caro Fowler

And so did you come to the Walker Evans project from making those prints then? Or were you already working on Walker Evans?

Svetlana Alpers

No, I came from the world of photography because I began to know photographers, and I began to look at photography. And at one point, I thought

of doing a book talking to photographers about photography today, because as you get a sense of--I mean talk about my view of art history, you're going to begin to think it's Svetlana Alpers'--I'm a bit dismayed by a lot of photography today. I think photography is not painting. I think it's distinct. And I think when it tries to act like painting, it just falls flat on its face. It can't begin to measure up to painting. So I think it's in a bit of a muddle at this point, the making of photography in a way. I'm sounding like I sound about art history [laughs]. Maybe it's my age. So then having thought I would interview--I'm an old friend of Jan Dibbets, because actually Jan Dibbets turns up in *The Art of Describing* because Jan Dibbets, the Dutch photographer, did images which are like the Dutch images I'm describing. And so I know various photographers, and I thought that "Well I'll interview these people and put together the interviews." But then I slowly drifted and ended up with Walker Evans. I can't quite describe how it happened, but it happened.

Caro Fowler

Well, thank you so much for talking to me today Svetlana. Is there anything else that you'd like to say or address? I find that sometimes people want to make a final comment [laughs]?

Svetlana Alpers

There are little details because you pushed me to *The Art of Describing*, and there's another connection to Evans: a chapter of *The Art Describing* called "Looking at Words"--nobody ever talks about that, but there is--about words painted into Dutch paintings, and also letters: words that we don't see that they're reading. And of course, Evans adored type. That was central to him. Oddly it's another connection, which actually your asking me about *The Art* [of *Describing*] pushed me to say that.

Caro Fowler

Do you find that the main chapter that people have taken from *The Art of Describing* is your chapter on mapping and cartography?

Svetlana Alpers

I suppose that's the one. What do you think? Come on, you're out there, and I'm here, so I can't tell you.

Caro Fowler

It's true. You are always cited when questions of early modern mapping come up.

Svetlana Alpers

Yeah, because nobody had really paid attention before. I was in the British Museum. I was running all over the place. In Chicago, I was all over the place with maps. And somehow people hadn't paid attention. I'm much less interested in maps, and in the PC way of the way they press people who are unfair to people. I'm interested in them as images. And that's again, why Evans is so good: because he doesn't let his social conscience show. He was an angry man, but his photographs are not telling you what to do. They're showing you how it is.

Caro Fowler

That's great. I don't think we can do better than that [both laugh].

Svetlana Alpers

Thank you. It was very good. Thank you so much for having me.

Caro Fowler

Thank you, Svetlana.

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

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