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

"ATTENTION BECOMES A KIND OF POLITICS" SARAH HAMILL ON SCULPTURE AND INTERPRETATION

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Transcript

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.

Caitlin Woolsey
In this episode, you'll hear from me, Caitlin Woolsey, Assistant Director of the Research and Academic Program. I speak with Sarah Hamill, a scholar of modern and contemporary art who is a professor at Sarah Lawrence College, about the role of description in art history, and how description is always a form of interpretation. The embodied experience of sculpture captured Sarah's imagination, and she describes how she came to understand the role of photography in mediating our encounters with art objects. She also discusses her current research into feminist politics, media, and land art in the 1970s, focused on the artist Mary Miss. Finally, Sarah reflects on how art historical practices like slow looking may express an aesthetics of care—a politics of attention—that has the potential to help us grapple with urgent issues today, like the climate crisis.

Sarah Hamill
Description is always a form of interpretation[….] I became aware and attuned to photographs as mediating sculptures, as part of a kind of sculptural medium. That photographs are another form of projection, a way of thinking about a kind of sculptural fantasy or a sculptural documentation—a way of seeing sculpture that is not tied to the object itself, but that shapes how we encounter objects in the world.

Caitlin Woolsey
Thank you so much for joining me today, Sarah. It's a real pleasure to have you on the podcast.

Sarah Hamill
Thank you so much for having me, Caitlin. As you know, I'm a huge fan of this podcast.

Caitlin Woolsey
As you know, we usually start by asking people generally to speak a bit about their orientation towards art history or toward the arts more broadly?

Sarah Hamill
So I actually took an art history course in high school. It was an AP art history course, but not in the way that the curriculum is now kind of formally conceived. We read Janson['s textbook *History of Art*], so we got this larger trajectory, this bigger history, throughout. This was a year-long course. But I think what was so exciting about that class for me was the possibility that we could have detailed close conversations about works of art. It was sort of in that class that I found my people in high school. It was taught by a painting teacher, actually: Alan Fitzpatrick. Previously I was really excited to take classes in English; for example, I took this seminar that was focused entirely on Virginia Woolf, a kind of feminist to close reading. So this art history course was really this kind of entry into thinking about art objects as something that could be an object of study.

I would say too that one of the other things about that time that was so important—and this is why I think this class was so crucial to me—is that the school that I went to was experiencing a transition towards co-education, in this previously all-male boarding school, this elite school that I was going to. I was the daughter of one of the teachers. My mother was one of the second women hired by that school. We actually lived in the first all-girls dorm of seniors to graduate in 1988. I began at that school several years later. So it was very new to co-education and I really struggled with what I saw to be incredible inequities in terms of how women were treated. And also, just seeing incredible inequities in race and class at that institution. That institution has obviously done a lot of work over the years to change, but I think my experience of it was really formative in terms of building a kind of feminist consciousness. Really thinking about power structures and institutions at that time. I even started a feminist group on campus when I was there, to raise awareness around questions of inequity.

So I think that those two experiences made me want to seek out art history at Reed College. I chose Reed because it was very different from this kind of bastion of white male privilege that I saw that, that kind east coast, elite school. And while I'm very grateful for the kind of education that I got there, I also am critical of it.

Reed was so different because it was historically a progressive institution. And it really valued a kind of intellectual seriousness that perhaps was taken too far at moments, like there was a kind of seriousness in the students; on Friday and Saturday nights we would be in the library until 11 o'clock at night and then go to the bar. But it was there that I really deepened my work in art history.

One of my first classes was with Peter Parshall, who taught there for many, many years, before he left, I think in my junior year, to go to the National Gallery of Art as the curator Old Master paintings and drawings. I vividly remember an assignment that he gave us that was connoisseurial in nature. It was in a course I believe on early Netherlandish art. He gave us a photocopy of an unidentified print or drawing that we then had to compare and contrast with the Max Friedlander volume, and to develop a kind of connoisseurial eye to be able to identify the drawings. artist. I think what was so informative about that was the practice of slow looking, of searching the image for clues, of really thinking about what it means to attend to a visual object in detail.

At Reed I had a broad range of interests in art history. I studied East Asian art with a depth and an intensity that I thought I was going to go to graduate school for it. I took Mandarin, I studied Mandarin in China, studied Chinese humanities and history, which really kind of gave me the sense of cultural difference. I think it was taking an art history class on literati painting and really immersing myself in that work. I think ultimately I left that behind because I had this worry that as a white westerner I would never be able to accurately account for those objects in detail. I'm not sure if I would make the same decision now but then I definitely had that feeling. Then towards my senior year, I became very interested in critical theory. I took this incredible of survey of critical theory with William Ray.

So at Reed, every student writes a thesis, and I decided to focus mine on aesthetic theory, focusing on this debate between Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno, on the aesthetic response of shock and shudder. Adorno's response to Benjamin’s shock would be shudder, which he argued was a more dialectical response. So I became very interested in the debates between them, in closely reading their texts. I don't think I had any original ideas in that thesis. I don't think I actually talked about any artworks, as my committee suggested I do, to really connect it back to art history. Looking back at that thesis, I think what it

really shows is that I was so interested in thinking about this question of a kind of physiological affect of artworks.

I feel like during these earlier years, I was really interested in thinking about, how do we think about what an art object is? How do we think about its relationships to a broader social, political, historical context? How do we situate it in those contexts, but also how do we theorize the object's power? So I think this thesis was really trying to think about a kind of physiological response—one that I would say I found in graduate school at [UC] Berkeley, all the more in writing about sculpture, seizing on sculpture, through Anne Wagner's seminars.

Caitlin Woolsey
If I can take you back just for a moment, when you were speaking about your first experience with art history: were there specific texts or critical methodologies that you found most exciting? Or was it more just the horizon of possibility of a kind of awareness of structural or systemic inequity and the possibility of a feminist approach that might offer other ways of close reading or close looking?

Sarah Hamill
I don't think there were any texts in particular that stand out because we were really basing our work on a kind of survey. You know, it was a very small class [the one I took in high school]. I don't think there were more than eight students in that class. And the students were mostly artists. I think what it made possible was the sense that art could be valued as a form of discourse. More generally, that it could be almost a site of resistance. I almost thought of that class as a site of resistance. But then it was perhaps the tools of close reading that I found in literature, in the Virginia Woolf seminar, for example, that helped me understand what it means to slowly unpack something and attend to it on its own terms.

Caitlin Woolsey
How do you think about [your transition to Berkeley] in hindsight, looking back at that moment, and why or how that unfolded?

Sarah Hamill
At Berkeley, I was admitted to work with Elizabeth Honig and I was studying early Netherlandish art with her. I also took a seminar in the Rhetoric

department at Berkeley with Kaja Silverman, on Deleuze, I believe, so I was really kind of continuing this trajectory of early Netherlandish art as well as critical theory.

But in the fall of 2001, I took a seminar with Anne Wagner on modern sculpture. It was a seminar that she was teaching around the development and writing of her book, *Mother Stone*. And, this was a seminar that was really thinking about both historiography and objects—and it was also the year that Alex Potts' *The Sculptural Imagination* was published. We were instructed to read [Rosalind] Kraus before the semester began, I believe. And then we worked our way through Alex Potts, while also reading a lot of Anne's work and other art historians. And I think it was in that seminar that I really got this kind of close view of really thinking about what a sculpture was.

I should say too, that Anne's attention to the object itself meant that I was really encouraged to shed my theoretical skin. It was through this kind of really close attention to what an object was, what a sculptural object was, that I developed this in a kind of phenomenological approach to objects. This seminar opened a whole world for me and I decided then to switch and focus on modern art. Elizabeth Honig was such an exacting and kind mentor and I learned a great deal from her and I think it was quite incredible then that the shift [to modern] was possible at Berkeley at the time.

I vividly remember going to the de Young Museum with Anne's seminar and looking closely at a Henry Moore *Large Reclining Figure* that was carved in wood. It was through these conversations that I began to build this vocabulary of sculpture to think about presence and absence, to think about surface and bodies, that this was a large-scale, hulking thing that was also polished and smooth, that it looked like this body but also a natural form that was carved by water, that had holes in it; that it was hard to see it all at, as a total thing that it required different vantage points.

When I think about the medium of sculpture, I always think about something that Alex Potts wrote, I believe it was on David Smith's sculpture *Australia,* that it kind of impinges on the beholder. That it is something that could potentially, intrude into the beholder space. That's a very different model of thinking about sculpture than something that is small and could be held in one's hand. So I was interested in these different modes, like how do we describe ways in which

sculpture activates as a bodily medium, as something that intrudes in space, or that asks us to think about something that is small in size, and something that architectural in size, that of engulfs the beholder. So I was interested in these kinds of sensorial responses and I think it was through closely accounting for the artwork on its own and really shedding that critical theory skin that this knowledge came into being.

And then thinking too about photographs as shaping how we see the sculptures I was writing at the time a seminar paper on David Smith's photographs of his nudes, which relate the female body to a sculpture. And I remember the excruciating work that it took in order to describe those, because I was trying to find my own voice as a writer. And how hard it was to find a language to describe that artwork, to translate it into a text. To understand that description is always a form of interpretation also. So it was in that class too that I became aware and attuned to photographs as mediating sculptures, as part of a kind of sculptural medium. That photographs are another form of projection, in a way about a kind of sculptural fantasy or a sculptural documentation, a way of seeing sculpture that is not tied to the object itself, but that shapes how we encounter objects in the world.

One of the things that I learned at Berkeley was that the artwork itself is discursive. That it has its own kind of argument or it has something to say, about its social, political, historical surroundings. And so attending to the object means recovering that the best way possible. I also think that description is something that we thought about quite a bit in seminars with Anne Wagner and Tim [TJ] Clark: about the ways in which [writing] is a kind of method. The craft of writing, but also the kind of method of writing, was part of the discussion at Berkeley. To think about description as something that is capable of translating an object, and interpreting it, but that the object will also remain recalcitrant to that. Or that it's always a kind of failure of interpretation. So I think that that very practice was part of our discussions.

I've begun to think more recently about that, like through the work of Tina Campt and others, to think about the ethics of care that slow looking is tied to, or makes possible. That attention becomes a kind of politics. That this really gets to why art history matters, and what art history can make possible.

But I think that leaving behind critical theory—of course, it was never really left behind. It was just that this this object-oriented focus became so critical to me. And I think it's something that I'm constantly wrestling with. Like, am I slowing down enough? Am I really attentive to that object? What more can be said? How can I go back to it multiple times to really think it through in a careful way? I'm incorporating slowness as a practice into writing.

I also wonder, too, how could art history lean into the contradictions? All the more now, If we think of the emergence of art history as a discipline, as a kind of scientific discipline in the 19th century, one thing that comes to mind is this drive towards objectivity, of overcoming those subjective impressions, or systematizing them or making them universal. And yet we are all marked subjects who are looking. There's been some really interesting writing recently: Tina Campt, to go back to her work, or listening to Steven Nelson talk about his recent book would be another example of work that does attend to that subjective position.

Caitlin Woolsey
To pick back up on something that you said earlier about the relation between photography and sculpture, I wonder if you might unfold a little bit more, some of your thinking about the mediation of photography. And I think too about the ways in which photography both perhaps is and isn't like language in terms of being always a descriptive act. That it is a document, but always a translation.

Sarah Hamill
When I was writing my dissertation I became very interested in thinking about photography's invisibility, thinking about the ways in which we take photography to be neutral, to be a kind of exact document.

I began to realize that David Smith's photographs—so he took photographs of all of his sculptures, multiple images, used them as a kind of archive of his work, and that archive was then used by Rosalind Krauss, as far as I can understand it, to write her dissertation and the catalogue raisonné, which was produced as part of her dissertation. So you can look at the pictures in the catalogue raisonné and recognize that a large majority of them are by David Smith and yet none of these photographs had really been attended to things that do that work of translation, of shaping how we see that object. I was really interested in this kind of multiplicity and how a photograph could be a document of an object, that it

could certify the object, that it could stand in for the object in some way, as that kind of indexical quality, of how photography is theorized. But that it could also really shape how we see it. That it could be a work of interpretation, like that act of description. But I think that photography's devices are rather different if we think about framing or the vantage point that what is included in the frame, like for example, in a photographic detail could be seen to radically magnify or fragment an object, to completely detach it, crop it out from its larger spatial setting and turn it into an abstract plane abstracted into an image, or that [there may be] many, many vantage points that we could inhabit to see a sculpture and [photography necessarily] chooses only one of them. So it delimits a spatial and temporal, experience that happens in space, but in a long duration. So what does it mean to look at a photograph of a sculpture that reduces that experience ,or captures it in only one spatial vantage point?

I think [David] Smith explored this question in different ways in his photographs. But he definitely developed a signature style, which I found so interesting, to be able to identify as something that was part of how his work was disseminated and part of how Rosalind Krauss wrote about his work. You know, I think that his signature style—he photographed his sculpture from a very low vantage point, and then monumentalized or magnified it as this pictorial image and flattened it to a single plane. That way of seeing his sculpture through photography was then so important for how Rosalind Krauss wrote about his work as a disjunctive image. I find that to be a fascinating historiographical question, of how photography can impact and shape—or has impacted and shaped—how we write about objects too.

The photograph makes possible the study of the object, to really see it and think about it. But then it also reduces this experience of it. I mean, another way to think about it would be that it really shapes a kind of argument about the object we could think about the ways in which, art historians have used photographs to tell a story about sculpture. this is something that my collaborator on our sculpture and photography volume, Megan Luke, is writing about in her work on Carola Welcker, to think about how there's a visual argument, in the photographs about sculpture.

Caitlin Woolsey
Would you like to speak a little bit about how you're thinking about photography in relation to some of your current research and writing about Mary Miss?

Sarah Hamill
I feel like that project has allowed me to return to sculpture. I'm attentive to the mediation and I'm attentive to how Miss—you know, she has this incredible archive of photographs that she took, but also clippings ,as well as an incredible library. So I'm really interested in photography in this project through the ways in which she's using [photography]. And, through her own research, of sites, of things that she was borrowing, appropriating, and thinking through, and using in her sculpture. What's so exciting to me is returning to the materiality of objects and thinking about how we encounter them in space.

Of course [Miss] also worked in film—films of sculptures, or films that are sculptures. So I'm also thinking through film and the durational qualities of film as a way of returning again to the mediation of space and photography. And of course one of the problems is that most of these [sculptures] don't exist anymore. And so my own encounter with them also has to account for the very limited photographs that I am looking at them through. The photographs that remain of these temporary works. So my own experience with them is mostly—I mean, there's about four of them from the seventies, the long 1970s, that still exist—but it's largely through the photographic mediation and the textual accounts of these works at the time that I'm reconstructing these objects on the page.

This project also allows me to really think about a feminist art history, and to think about what that practice looks like now. I think about this question so much in my teaching because so many of us are really grappling with what it means to tell the story of modernism now, and really thinking about the ways in which it has been constituted, and the exclusionary biases of the institutions of art history and the museum. So what does it mean to tell the story of modernism? And how do we do so in a way that accounts for multiple histories and counts for difference accounts, brings in marginalized and underrepresented histories, and does so in a way that challenges, that isn't simply a revisionist account, but challenges the kind of structure of the canon.

One of the questions that I'm grappling with in my own work is how to return to an overlooked feminist history in a way that insists on its difference, insists on its recalcitrance. So, for example, thinking about Mary Miss, her work and the work of other abstract feminist sculptors that we're working alongside her, their work was marginalized in histories of white feminism in the 1970s because of their abstraction, because they were not making work that was about the body. This work was also marginalized from histories of land art. And I think that is a really interesting question. Thinking about what Miss's relationship to land art is and how she was insisting at the time on making work that was close to urban centers that could access a broad public.

She was reading land art at the time to be a masculinist discourse that was looking at the quote unquote "emptiness" of the West. In today's terms, we think about her critique of land art as [being] almost along the lines of a kind of settler colonialist approach. There's been multiple exhibitions that seek to expand the definitions of land art and do so in a way that accounts for a much broader set of practices, and I think that's a really valuable approach, but at the same time, we need to account for the recalcitrance, or the ways in which Miss's work, is critiquing land art.

So just methodologically speaking, I think these are really interesting questions for the discipline, for those of us who are really thinking about what it means to teach these histories, but also what it means to write feminist art history. And how a kind of revisionism doesn't necessarily really make sense or work for artists who are producing work in ways that critiques those dominant mainstream narratives.

Caitlin Woolsey
I know that one of your current projects or roles at Sarah Lawrence is bound up in questions of sustainability and the environmental, and how they intersect with social justice and the humanities more broadly, outside art history?

Sarah Hamill
I am immersing myself in a lot of the writing around care, and I'm actually co-curating an exhibition on care and climate justice for Sarah Lawrence for next year. That really gets at these questions of attention and the kinds of ethics of care. And how a kind of aesthetics of attention can be a way of thinking through what it means to inhabit this world that we live in, in the face of the crisis, of

climate justice. At Sarah Lawrence, I am really excited to have these urgent conversations in the classroom about issues that students are facing now, have faced, and will continue to face once they leave Sarah Lawrence. Right now for me, not only does that mean revising the canon and really thinking about questions of anti-racism in the classroom, but that also means—in this climate justice initiative we're working on and collaborating with Bronx Community College—thinking about collaborative pedagogies.

I'm working with several colleagues on this, and one of the inspirations for me for this work was reading Judith Butler's work on interdependence and vulnerability, and an essay that she wrote for *Time Magazine* specifically, on the climate crisis and thinking about how collaboration is a tool that is needed in our individualistic, capitalist, competitive society to meet the challenge of climate crisis. So collaborative pedagogies are central to how we're thinking about having conversations about climate justice. This means collaborating between classrooms, collaborating between institutions, having collaboration as a part of the assignments that students do, and really valuing collaboration, which is not something historically that has been valued in the academy.

But I think that what's exciting to me is that we can have these conversations in the classroom and we can use the tools of art history, for example, of slowness, of attention, of a kind of ethics of care, of close reading, to think through and look at works that help us understand the climate crisis. This fall I taught a seminar that had to do with land and landscape, thinking about the ideologies of landscape as well as Indigenous and Black responses to that through a whole range of contemporary works. And thinking about reparative landscapes.

And then in the spring [of 2023], what I'm teaching is much more closely related to the intersections between art and science, and what it means to visualize what sometimes seems to be an invisible occurrence. Something that seems to be happening far away that is not related to major populations and yet is, and then also having conversations with students about the inequities of climate crisis. To think about how those who are most impacted—Black and brown communities in the United States as well as across the globe—are those who are least responsible for producing the climate crisis. How do we have those conversations in the classroom?

I think that an art history seminar is absolutely a place where students can have those conversations. They make possible this very rich and layered conversation where students can bring their own knowledge, their individual knowledge and experience or perception of these major historical events, into the conversation to impact how we're understanding these works [of art].

I think that through my teaching and also through my research, one of the things that I'm really excited about is how we can return to canonical ways of looking with fresh eyes to think about these questions of colonization, to edge towards a decolonized art history, always with a knowledge that it's not fully possible.

I'm really excited by the work that's being done within my own subfield of modern and contemporary around the 1970s and land art. The possibilities that have been open for thinking about critiques of land art by Ian Borland and Alicia Harris, to think about questions of the dispossession of land, the experience of Indigenous Americans, and how that discourse of land art can be rethought along those lines. I'm really also excited about work by Sascha Scott and others that returns to, for example, Georgia O'Keefe, to rethink some of the ways in which her work or [the work] or other artists participates in a kind of colonizing rhetoric. There are so many unanswered questions for those of us who work in particular on American modernism and post-war art to rethink that field, to raise hard questions about it in ways that have the potential to really broaden out the field and challenge us to think differently about it.

Caitlin Woolsey
Thank you so much for speaking with me, Sarah. You are someone I really admire, how you move through the world as a very generous thinker and interlocutor.

Sarah Hamill
Thank you so much, Caitlin. It's such a pleasure to talk with you.

Caitlin Woolsey
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to resources referenced in the conversation, please visit clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with Caroline Fowler; music by lightchaser; sound editing

by CJ DeGennaro; and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Maggie O'Connor.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.