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IN THE FOREGROUND: CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"DIRECTED TOWARDS HOW WE SEE OURSELVES"

SOCIAL ART HISTORY IN A DIGITAL WORLD WITH PAUL B. JASKOT AND BARBARA MCCLOSKEY

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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.

Anne Helmreich
Hello, and welcome to this podcast series on Grand Challenges of Art History: Digital Methods and Social Art History. My name is Anne Helmreich, associate director of the Getty Foundation.

Paul Jaskot
And I am Paul Jaskot, Professor of Art History at Duke University.

Anne Helmreich
The contributors to these podcasts all responded to our invitation to address what we self-consciously described as a "grand challenge." This was organized under the auspices of the Research and Academic program with the Clark, which generously sponsored our scholarly colloquia, and ensuing public conversation in April 2019. The phrase "grand challenge" is one frequently adopted in the sciences to refer to the great unanswered questions that represent promising frontiers. For art history, we saw the conjoining of digital and computational methods and the social history of art as one of those grand challenges.

Paul Jaskot
Given that investigating society, in all its complexity, also seamlessly calls for the big data so central to computational methods, we asked the podcast participants how digital art history might help us explore the grand challenges of social history of art's future. How are digital methods effective, or not, at analyzing large-scale structural issues important to art history and modes of visual expression? Our intent is to discuss central concerns for contemporary practitioners of the social history of art, as well as those of digital humanists, who claim an allegiance to these same questions. In doing so, we aimed to consider practical, rigorous, archival, and theoretical ways of addressing such a task with both computational and analog means. We hope that you enjoy this series.

Paul Jaskot
There's nothing that says social art history more than a critique of economies of technologies of institutional practices that are hidden. Indeed, that's one of the things we really do is we reveal those hidden problems and hierarchies. And maybe we can't even understand the algorithm. But certainly, we can understand that it has a hierarchy to it. We can understand its impact and its effect, because we understand humanities and we look for questions of power and struggle. And so as those worlds of the digital come into contact, both with our scholarship, and with artistic production and display, then we are the ones that should be able to ask critical questions of the digital world--from our perspective of social art history--that is both powerful and impactful.

Anne Helmreich
I'm Anne Helmreich, now with the Getty Foundation. Joining me today is Paul Jaskot, from Duke University, who co-convened the Grand Challenges Workshop with me and Barbara McCloskey from University of Pittsburgh. And today, we're going to be speaking about social art history in a digital world. And this conversation has been sparked by the observation that both the social history of art and the digital humanities emerged in the 1970s. And we'll also want to ask, beyond this observation, have we yet realized their full potential? We also want to recognize that we're considering this observation and this question almost two years from our original convening--tumultuous years that witnessed the fragility of American democracy, a global pandemic, and a rising environmental crisis--to mention only a few challenges that likely mean that we'll bring a different lens to a discussion of humanistic thinking and the digital today than we would have had in spring 2019. So with that context setting, I'd like to turn to both of you. Both of you self-identify as social art historians, and I'd welcome the chance to hear what the social history of art means for you? And, from your perspective, not only what is it, but what's at stake in the social history of art? So Barbara, I'll invite you to kick us off and then pass it over to Paul.

Barbara McCloskey
Thanks very much Anne. It is nice to be back with the two of you and to revisit these issues together. In terms of what the social history of art means to me, I gravitated towards it when I was an undergraduate. I had started out studying art history and not feeling a connection to some of the courses that I was taking because they--as I now know--were taught very much from a formalist

perspective. Then I began to take courses where it was clear that the orientation was social art historical. And this made a lot more sense to me. It appealed to me as somebody who had not had much in the way of an artistic background growing up. The art world seemed very remote to me. What the social history of art revealed to me was that this culture that seemed very distant for me, was in fact, my own culture, and that I could actually learn from it, and also help others to get a point of access to artistic culture and its significance. So, I felt more empowered through the social history of art as somebody, again, who didn't necessarily come from a background predisposed to the arts. But I also continue to see the social history of art as comprised of many facets: feminism, critical race theory, all these can be linked back to basic social art historical principles. And I think that we see today, for example, with the debates over monuments, that culture *does* matter. Having a critical perspective and some purchase on what culture has to do with us is really important. And, at the same time, museum spaces and the kinds of questions that they can raise are ones that we need *more* of, not less. And interestingly, they're becoming one of the few spaces where those conversations can take place.

Paul Jaskot
Social art history, for me, really goes back to some heroes--some of the foundational thinkers-- the great art historians like Arnold Hauser and Meyer Schapiro. What distinguishes it from merely contextual art history is what Barbara talked about in terms of seeing herself. That is, social art history isn't only directed at understanding the art object--that's very important, of course--but it's really directed out from the art object to the society of which it's a part. And that's where we see ourselves, right? So that's the question. The question is not, "Oh, how do we explain this painting by Manet?" But rather, "How does the painting by Manet help us explain the world, and the way that the world works, and specifically, the way that the world works through conflict and through struggle?" I think those are really two important words.

And in that regard, if we're social art historians, we believe, not only that we're looking at the world, historically or analytically, but we believe that art tells us something in particular about that world. So it is still very much an art historical project. I add here, I also think culture is relevant. I mean, culture is all around us. It plays its own role. And that needs to be understood in its own terms, even as it helps us to understand the terms of the society of which it's a part. That dynamic is very exciting. I think that's the best of social art history. And for me,

specifically, it also is why social art history comes out of a specifically Marxist tradition, at least the way that I think about it, because there it really is about the dynamics of class and also race and gender and these large systemic problems that we grapple with and experience on a daily basis. Any social art history that's in that tradition has to take on that systemic level: the goal is to articulate something on that systemic level. And that, again, to me is very much a Marxist project. And the result of that is, I think, and this gets the last part of your question Anne--the result is that it becomes a matter of real urgency. It becomes a matter, especially although not exclusively in the modern world, to explain in capital, and to explain neoliberalism and explain globalization and explain post-colonialism and to think about those huge problems we deal with--and the way that that culture is central to these and indeed, is urgently an important part of what we need to explain and understand.

Anne Helmreich
I'm taken, Barbara, with your point about starting to think about it as an undergraduate. As an undergraduate, I was a history major. And actually, I suddenly found it really compelling to think about material culture as a way in which history plays out. But I also take your point, Paul, that it's not just to consider that social art history is different from contextualizing. And I think that that point really needs to be underscored, because it also goes along with the point that the art object isn't just a mirror to society, right? It is the place by which and through which, with those conflicts and struggles, where the artwork is riven, or the built environment is riven with those struggles itself. Barbara, you mentioned your undergraduate experience. I'd love to know a little bit more about how you came to be practicing the social history of art. What went from the moment of exposure to, "This is the methodology I want to pick up in practice"? And I'm interested how that informed your graduate school experience, but maybe even more so, how your careers have unfolded in light of developing that commitment to the social history of art? How has that played out in your careers?

Paul Jaskot
I can really remember it. I was in the shelves in college at Swarthmore, and I was looking for books for a research paper and there it was, Hadjinicolaou's *Art History and Class Struggle*. And that was a title I didn't expect. It was something I never thought of-- so I pulled it off the shelf and I started reading. And that really was a game changer. I mean, of course, it was part of a whole environment. I

was already interested in activism at that point. And this seemed to me to give some urgency to art history that I was missing before, even though I was passionate as an art historian. But that brought me to Northwestern, which in the 1980s had a rich variety of social art historians, and particularly in the Modern area, but not exclusively, so. And that rich mix--especially of questions of class, and gender, and politics-- this really convinced me that this was the way to go. It wasn't just intellectually stimulating, it was exciting. The surprise was that then I became less of an art historian interested in painting, which is what I thought I was going to do, and instead I stumbled into architecture. The shift was that the specific social art historical questions I was tending towards were political, economic ones. So they were less social in that sense. They were more systemic--a word I keep coming back to-- and the political economy, that is, at the level of materials and resources and labor--that really drove me to art historical questions. And those art historical questions, in turn, drove me to the German side of the department and thinking with Otto Karl Werckmeister about the ways in which the deeply embedded politics of Nazi Germany were necessary--both necessary to explain art and were explained *through* art simultaneously. And at the time, that also meant that there was this really wonderful tradition of art historians people like not only Werckmeister, but also [inaudible] and Berthold Hintz. German art history was rife with people that were taking critical art history very seriously--going all over the social art historical map. So that really seemed exciting to me, and something that was worth pursuing. And I've stuck with it ever since. I consider myself very much embedded in a political history tradition, but also one that is very much about these larger systemic questions. And although I've done my time working with different medium, including painting, I still find myself working at the level of the building and the built environment. That seems to be the area of social history that I feel most compelled to research and to explore. It certainly has, I think, also, a needed urgency all the time in the world around us. I'm still surprised when you tell students, when you're looking at building, “you're looking at real estate,” and “you're looking at property,” and you're looking at all those things that they know...but they don't put it all together until we weave those threads together in an art history class. And that can be also quite inspiring.

Barbara McCloskey
I want to clue in on your on your statement, Paul, about how for somebody who has an activist background or is inclined towards political intervention, that social art history, particularly this sort of Marxist critical tradition, is a way in

which one's intellectual life is part of one's activist life, which was very, very attractive: that what I was doing in the classroom wasn't different from what I would do outside of the classroom. So again, that kind of ability to sort of see yourself in that work was very strong. My undergraduate work was at UCLA. I was not a student of Tim Clark's, but he had just left UCLA at that point. And UCLA had a very strong reputation as a center for Marxist art history. Karl Werckmeister was there, Al Boime was there, David Kunzle, Arnold Rubin, and numerous other people. A spectrum of Marxist and social art historians. I had gravitated to art history in my last two years of college. I stumbled into a class that that really excited me. And so I stayed with it. And like Paul, I became very attracted to studying German art history, particularly with Karl Werckmeister. And I, too, have stayed with this area of focus. And, through the approach that social art historians were taking to the study of German culture in the 20th century, to my mind, you really see some of the crucial questions of modernity and modernization in Germany, in an extreme form. And so it was both things at the same time: [first] studying a culture that seems so vitally important for how we understand ourselves and continue to interrogate ourselves today. Obviously, the issues of fascism and democracy are very much with us right now. We're still struggling with that central question. And [second] to really have the opportunity to delve down into the study of German art history, from a social art historical perspective, that helps me in the classroom. It allows me to help students to see what this culture and this history has to tell us about now. And how we might navigate our way through it. So it is still very, very much at the center of the work that I do.

Anne Helmreich
In full transparency to listeners, we're all graduates of the Northwestern program, although I ended up working on British material, and again, I think it was inflected by that undergraduate experience. I had done a senior thesis that was very much grounded in historiography, and I got exposed to the *History Workshop Journal*, and that radical Marxist tradition of coming from history. So when I started reading in the art history literature in the '80s, it was with a shock…. Anne Bermingham is beginning to start her work. Those questions of class that the historians had been addressing were just beginning to infuse art historical literature. So it was really out of a desire, similar to what you're saying…here's a culture that dealt with issues of capitalism, modernity, the shift from the rural to the urban and the clashes that produce what we're dealing with today—plus colonialism, post-colonialism that are imperatives today. And

wanting to see the art historical questions engage with that, with the same rigor that you saw in the history community. It was a real pleasure when Lisa Tickner came as a visiting professor at Northwestern. I also felt fortunate that I had faculty that--although there were no British art specialists--faculty who were willing to say, "We'll help you with the questions. You go research the content." Rigorously thinking in the social history of art, alongside that social charge--the rigor and the way of testing evidence and hypotheses--I still find this really compelling.

So, in our context of these original conversations about the social history of art, we're thinking about the digital, which has, increasingly become part of our practice as art historians. Whether it's just simply the de facto of the PowerPoint that's a digital form, all the way up to, Paul, in your work, you've been using GIS to help us understand space and change over time, and power dynamics and space. So I'm curious for both of you when, and how, you recognized the impact that the digital and computational might have on art history. You know, for me, I can date it back to my graduate work that began at University of Pittsburgh, and we had a small little computer lab with those early iMacs, that were supposedly portable, but they weighed a good 50 pounds each. And Alison Stones, a professor for medieval studies focusing on manuscripts, had a whole team of students scanning photographs of these illuminated manuscripts to try and do some matching and parsing. Really trying to leverage what computer vision does now, but that she saw that opportunity in the late '80s. That was just a sort of passive experience of, if you were in that computer lab, everybody saw what was going on. Barbara, since we share the University of Pittsburgh connection, I might pass it over to you first.

Barbara McCloskey
Alison [Stones] was my first introduction to what could be done with the digital, and, she was quite a pioneer, dealing with less than adequate computers and hard drives. So this was an ongoing project for her for a number of years, and it's still housed at the University of Pittsburgh. At that point, my understanding of the digital was exactly what she was doing, or what I perceived her to be doing, which was coming up with a database, that kind of cataloguing of images that might be something on the order of the Princeton Index [on Medieval Art], with that sort of principle involved. Today, my experience of the digital comes largely through both you, Anne, and Paul, and the kind of work that you've done, and my colleague, Allison Langmead, now at the University of Pittsburgh, who runs a

very lively, highly-subscribed lab in our building. And she, interestingly, is the catalyst for several different kinds of research projects that various faculty and graduate students hook into at various points. So through her, I've seen how one can move beyond mere cataloguing, to asking research questions, and yielding new kinds of knowledge about material...material that I think in its earliest days, we weren't very clear on what--moving beyond cataloguing-- the material could do. It's interesting to see that evolution over not such a long span of time.

Paul Jaskot
For me, the origin story is certainly that I fell into it. I guess, maybe we all fall into it. And I fell into it in 2007. The Holocaust Museum wanted to bring together specialists in digital mapping--so GIS with Holocaust Studies specialists who work on spatial questions. And most of these were specialists in transports, ghettos, but I was the built environment [scholar], so I was the 3D-space guy. And I had no idea what GIS was. I had no idea what kind of powerful tool it was, or what digital methods could do. And I have to say I walked into that really dubious that the digital could really show me something that I was interested in. I was sure it could show me something I didn't know. But I doubted it could address a topic that I thought was a really critical research question. And I'll never forget it, there were about 10 of us there in that room, and we're equally divided. And, and the kind of point of these seminars was that you would go in and you talk for two weeks, and then everybody would give individual presentations, and at the end we'd say how this had impacted our own individual work. On Day Two--I don't know who suggested it--but we just scrapped the whole schedule for the seminar, scrapped everything. And we said, "Okay, we're going to work on a digital project, all 10 of us," and we're going to do one presentation in ten days. And that was the scariest thing I've ever heard. I thought, "We know this is impossible. We haven't done any research, how do we do this? You know, we need years of research before we present!" And it was thrilling. So it was that moment of collaboration. And, the moment when you had to really be vulnerable, and admit what you didn't know, and ask basic questions. How do you turn on the computer? But the others were asking basic questions, too. And there's something about that two sidedness of it: that when someone who's a real expert in GIS says, "Well, gosh, did Nazi Germany have a building program?"--and it's that level of knowledge, you sometimes need really basic knowledge, but it's possible in a respectful, trusting environment. As a result, we came out with a presentation that to this day I'm quite proud of. But it's that trust in the collaboration--I already saw that as potential for social art history. It reminded

me of the moment of feminism in the '70s and '80s, when there was such a powerful force bringing people together, bringing dialogues together. Or looking back at questions of class, specifically in the '60s and the '70s, or now, how we are thinking about critical race theory. So these moments when we have a shared agenda in which we can leverage our knowledge and be generous to each other, and also come up with something bigger than ourselves. To me was a really, that was a big lesson. And yet I still walked out dubious that I needed to worry about the *digital* end of things--I presumed they were going to take care of the technical elements for me. But I came out thinking that this was a kind of collective practice that was politically and institutionally critical. And from there, I started working with my colleague Anne Knowles, and eventually had to sit down with the sophomores and learn GIS myself, and really allow myself to think about collaboration as a core part of my work. And to this day, I think that knowing how to structure a database, knowing how to work with the database, knowing how to ask questions of the database, and being brave enough to ask naive questions when they need to be asked. The digital provides a critical edge when you want to do something like answer, "How does art relate to society?" For me, it's still very much a social art historical question, even though it's deeply a digital methodological one as well.

Anne Helmreich
It's interesting what you say, Paul, because I was thinking (as I was listening to you both), "What was my generative experience?" I had been exposed to what Allison Stones was doing, but it wasn't until I was trying to answer my own questions that I realized I needed digital tools to do it. So I now work on the history of the art market, which is socio-economic at its core. And understanding the ways in which the market recaptures art as commodity is essential to thinking about what we practice as art historians, because it creates value structures. In particular, I was trying to understand how the market worked. And we're starting to think about network analysis: how is the market like a network? How are the social actors a Bruno Latour network? And I signed up for a two week workshop--again, the two week miracle-- that was sponsored by Tim Tangherlini at UCLA, the Institute of Applied Mathematics. That two week institute was amazing. There's a whole host of projects, from somebody studying Yaddo--who wrote letters of support for people getting into Yaddo? Who got invited to Yaddo? And from there on to my suitemate, Elaine Parsons, who worked on the Ku Klux Klan as a social network, and has written a brilliant book on the Reconstruction South and the rise of the Klu Klux Klan. We saw the

power of this tool to help us think through social behaviors and the roles of actors. We attended amazing talks about social media and Facebook and Twitter...talks that already made me very skeptical, in 2010! So I have found it an incredibly compelling way to work, but also I recognize, I'm using tools like Gephi. I've tried to teach myself what those algorithms are doing. And yet that's not my background or my training. So I have to reach out (to Paul's point) to collaborators in the field, people who understand the software better than I do, and ask them to educate me, to test my hypothesis, and test my understanding.

For the first article, which was co-written with my colleague, Pamela Fletcher, I invited an expert in network analysis to review it even before it went out for peer review, because I was also frankly concerned about the peer review process. We thought, what are the strings they could find that would be able to really push at the mapping, and the network analysis tools we were using in this article? So I really wanted somebody who would push us...and bring that rigor we're talking about in the social history of art to answer those questions. I really appreciate the theme of collaboration in this conversation.

Barbara McCloskey
I think we are beginning to see movement in institutional structures as well. That was always a stumbling block. For instance, having done a collaborative project used to be close to impossible for being promoted. It's not galloping ahead, but slowly, the structures are beginning to change in ways that I think will enable more of this kind of work to be done.

Paul Jaskot
Structures will only change faster--going back to Anne's point--they'll only change faster if we center this on our own research questions: if the research question--if the humanities, or the art historical research question is visible. And so that shift, it's got to be both a methodological shift, but also a humanities shift that happens so that the institution can recognize those collaborative projects.

Anne Helmreich
I suppose at the same time, it's also unpacking for our colleagues what is entailed in this work. Building a database is already a set of intellectual choices, for example, "What's the evidence I'm going to collect if it becomes rendered as data? How am I representing those historical events or actors or objects as data? How am I structuring that data? What's the language I'm using?" All my

colleagues in library and archives have been really scrutinizing our cataloging practices, and pushing us to be more anti-racist in the way we describe our terms and the language we use to do so. The stakes are already high at the very moment of representation. Archival manuscripts already are an act of representation, then we're re-representing them in the form of a database, then we build visualizations out of it. So how do we help our colleagues understand all those choices involved that, to my mind, are just the same as the choices you make when you write a book and you say, "I'm going to give you three case study examples to support my larger argument"...? I have to trust you (the author) that those were well-selected and that you haven't overly cherrypicked your archive, from which you're making your claim. So I appreciate your optimism, Barbara, but also that you're saying that we have some work cut out for us, as well.

Barbara McCloskey
In developing the collaborations, we all have to get on the same page about the questions that we want to ask. For instance, Paul, your work at the Holocaust Museum, that's kind of readymade: this is an institution that has very specific questions that it's after. At the University of Pittsburgh where we're all different faculty with different questions that we pursue...there's still that that structural part that makes it difficult.

Anne Helmreich
Maybe this might be a good opportunity to turn to the question that we had taken up in 2019 at the Clark and to revisit it: for the social history of art in particular, how might digital computational approaches impact its practice? And it stakes? Or, on the flipside, can we use social art historical methods to interrogate the role of computers and the digital in our art historical work? So I see it as a both/and type of question. How does the computer and the digital impact the social history of art? And how can we bring the social history of art to bear on the role of the computer/the role of the digital in our art historical practice?

Paul Jaskot
It picks up on several threads we've talked about. One side of me says, “Well, we don't really need to worry about how computational methods are helpful for social art history because social art history is already going in that direction.” I tried to use digital *methods*, not digital tools, and it gets this point that a method requires a certain kind practice--requires a certain organization, requires certain

kinds of critical focuses. And, and, and thinking about that… social art history has always used and been criticized for is being too quantitative. I mean, if you're going to look at the price of wheat in the Middle Ages, that's really not getting to the Gothic cathedral, right? And that data set of the inventory from the 15th century, well, what does that do to really explain the Botticelli? So these data sets--which we used to call this archival evidence--much of the archival evidence for social art history is already tending towards, of course, the social. That is the scale of the quantitative in some senses. Not always, of course. Yet for me, that means that if I'm looking at the question of labor, and I'm looking at that the scale of the distribution, both of thousands of people in the construction industry, but also millions of bricks, as a material--I see these as art historical questions. Thus already, the computational methods helped me to organize that. And ask the question at a much more systemic level. Computational methods allow us to scale it up. That's what's really exciting. We can scale it up to the social. That's really quite compelling. I'm reminded of Gombrich's famous *Art Bulletin* review of Hauser, in which he says, you're kind of imagining society up here and art down there, and guess what-- mediation--you you're leaping. And to me, digital methods allow us to fill in the gap. To not be accused of what Gombrich quite rightly pointed to as a weakness in that particular analysis. There, the computation really helps the social art historical, but I think the social historical in reverse helps the computational-- in one of the things you pointed to earlier, Anne, which is our need to critique the digital methods themselves, and to critique things like the black box, the hidden algorithms that we can't understand.

There's nothing that says *social art history* more than a critique of economies, of technologies, of institutional practices that are hidden. Indeed, that's one of the things we really do is we reveal those hidden problems and hierarchies. And maybe we can't even understand the algorithm. But certainly, we can understand that it has a hierarchy to it. We can understand its impact and its effect, because we understand humanities and we look for questions of power and struggle. And so as those worlds of the digital come into contact--both with our scholarship and with artistic production and display--we are the ones that that should be able to ask critical questions of the digital world from our perspective of social art history. I see these two methods--these two approaches--as absolutely mutually necessary to pursue.

Barbara McCloskey

I agree with you Paul, that social art history has a lot to offer the digital. I'm recalling something that we read in the seminar two years ago, that was just written into an essay as though it was acceptable: that there was copyright on the algorithm, and that the root of the entire project would never be revealed because it was copyrighted. And we thought, wait a minute! So this becomes an overtly political struggle, actually. And I think the kinds of questions that-- not just social art history, but humanistic thought in general—have to bring to bear are critically important. This will be an ongoing issue.

In terms of the reverse, the issue that I struggle with… Paul, I can understand entirely issues of scale, and scopes that you can get with a digital project, dealing with building economies or an architectural environment or an art market. And the issue is making a slippage between scope and scale and the actual question. And I know, that's not what you're doing. But I think sometimes that *can* become the issue—the belief that the more data that we acquire is going to reveal X, Y, or Z, when in fact, what has to be first and foremost is the critical question. I'm not sure there's much to be gained, with a broad-based analysis of, say, the art market in the 19th century, to yield the kind of knowledge that I think is still central in dealing with a particular individual artwork. That's always the gap. The database itself can bring lots of information together. It can help us shape certain questions, but we still have the job of that artwork. I still hold to the idea--and I know that this is not something that all social art historians hold--that the work of art and the visual material is central to what we do. That's what distinguishes what I do from my historian friends, for instance. So I still stumble in thinking that problem through: what is the relationship between the individual visual manifestation, and this larger scope and scale that we're able to get with the digital environment?

Paul Jaskot
And I'll push back a little bit, because it is exactly the status of the object that is at stake here. And it's the status of the object, both as a rarefied form--what I would call the tyranny of Panofsky. But it's also the status of the object as the thing which drives our market relationship, the umbilical cord of gold, that Anne works on-- and that it's indeed that status of the object, which we also have to critique at the center of our field, and to imagine *not* getting rid of it, but that there are alternatives. For example, thinking about communities who have been written out of history, because they have no objects associated with them anymore. And so we have to do something. We can either have an art history

that excludes them as a big gap in the book—or, we can try to use other methods, other approaches to think about their cultural production, that also is about art historical questions. And that means not thinking about objects. So there it is. We have to be careful. It's tricky. And it can be speculative in a way that makes many of us, especially social art historians, quite uncomfortable. But I think there are ways of modeling of simulating. I'm using vocabulary here of a wonderful digital humanist called Willard McCarty and thinking about the way that he talks about simulation as a critical act that allows us to recover histories that are gone. And that, to me, also seems like something that should interest us as social art historians.

Anne Helmreich
This conversation puts to mind to the fact that we have this evidence in some cases…it comes from these cultural moments of this anxiety or even overproduction of counting. And we must never forget why that counting was happening. Because it was often happening for notions of property ownership. Power. Control. So, once it becomes the pixelated, all ones and zeros... the danger is that that becomes antiseptic. To never forget why those acts of counting, or whatever renders as evidence that that can then be made computational--why those acts of counting happened, why those account books were left behind. Why--and in Paul's case, in some cases--why it wasn't left behind, why it isn't there. And so I think the kind of slippage that we're describing is pull ourselves back and remind ourselves how that evidence came to be. We're anticipating something, again, that we talked about, I think these previous conversations are, are circling around: which is, what opportunities or challenges but also dangerous pitfalls we should keep in mind, as we think about that intersection between digital art history and the social history of art?

We've talked about the danger of the black box ("I don't understand what's happening inside this technology"). We've talked about the danger of extracting that evidence and making it quantifiable...how are we describing it? It's an act of translation--it's an act of representation. But at the same time, we've been talking about opportunities-- Paul's point is, "I can scale. I can get to the social. I can understand broad patterns. I can understand power in a way that's hard to sometimes in the case of a single instance--a single case study where it's harder to see the levers." So I'm interested in what you think about those opportunities and challenges --where it can help us answer questions, but where there might be pitfalls or dangers…maybe not only for research, but also teaching? We

haven't touched that much on teaching. Both of you are in places where you're thinking a lot about why the humanities matter...how do we bring in that next generation? How do we engender those critical thinking skills?

Paul Jaskot
At the risk of criticizing my own defense of scale, I'll say the scale of course reveals as much as it conceals. And that's an interesting dynamic, and one that we really have to be aware of whether we're digital art historians or not. I think about something that we've all used in our work--for example, newspapers. They're a bread-and-butter source for modern social art historians in particular. And I think about that painful page-by-page turning to find the article on architecture or the article on Wölfflin. It's tedious, painful work. And if we had just natural language processing, throw that into a corpus linguistics interface. And before you know it, we could find all the mentions of the Bauhaus or whatever you wanted. And so that would have helped all of us back when we were doing that kind of work. So, we could scale it up in a way, which would be really exciting. What took two years, we could do it in a week, maybe even less. Sure. But we all know what that means. We know that we will miss the advertisement next to the article, the crossword puzzle, the thing which is revelatory about what the *real* question is. I think we need that scale. I need to be able to look at Kim Gallon's wonderful Black newspaper project and think about digitizing every African American newspaper from the 19th century. Every one of them. That is a really exciting project. And I need to be able to assign a student an individual week of a newspaper and really do a deep dive. So we need both.

I think about that in the classroom. Since you brought up pedagogy, I'm teaching Chicago architecture next semester, and I want to do a digital mapping assignment, some kind of visualization. I haven't quite decided what's going to happen....but it can't be a kind of, "Here's Chicago architecture in a close, analytical way. And now here's the digital assignment. Oh, now we go back to Chicago architecture." We can look at the challenges and possibilities--at the dangers and the critiques--if we keep certain questions in mind: why are we doing this? Why is it interesting? Why is it relevant? Why is it giving us insights into our practices as art historians and the world around us, and the ability to understand the social meaning of culture? If we can answer those questions--and I hope to answer those questions--then I can assign a StoryMap assignment

in the middle of a bread-and-butter course on Chicago architecture, and be happy with both.

Barbara McCloskey
In these discussions, there's both danger and a utopian aspect: the idea of collaboration, the idea of the resources available to do this kind of teaching that you're exactly talking about Paul, you know, maybe we're heading in that direction. But, you know, it's--and I don't mean to make this into an either/or--there is that uncomfortable realization that more and more money is being poured into digital technology than it is into departments of art history, right? There's a part of me that still wants to stand very fast. That there are certain things that simply cannot be done through a computer analysis framework, and we need to hold onto these things. This is part of the larger threat. I do see it as a threat to humanistic learning in general. That we'll only improve the value of digital technology and humanistic thinking if it's maintained and supported and promoted in an environment that acknowledges that some things can't be done through computer analysis. But what I'm seeing at a number of places around the country is quite troubling... we're capable of getting all sorts of support for digital work, but not, as I say, for art historical training. It's an issue. Not one that we can solve, but it's out there, and we have to be alert to it.

Anne Helmreich
The pandemic and COVID has made me even more alert to this paradox. I've had unbelievable access, because I work on the 19th century. Because--thank you, Internet Archive, I can get my hands on a lot of sources. I was surprisingly able to advance my research--thank you get a Research Portal. All these efforts to digitize have been tremendous, but at the same time, I'm here in Los Angeles, and I couldn't go into a museum for over a year-and-a-half. So, Paul, to the point you were making about speeding through the pages, I immediately thought, "Oh, but when they're crumbling in your fingers, and you realize you're dealing with cheap wood pulp, and the smell of acid coming out...". Just to be with the physicality of the object…the digital in the material--it's hard not to end up feeling like they're oppositional. But I don't think we mean to; they can be complements. I can be just as happy that I have access and be just as sad that I couldn't have access. I can live in that paradox of both/and.

Paul, too, even as you were talking about speed and efficiency when someone uses digital, that was making me worried. I think about the ways in which we

prize things like slow looking, or even our colleague Koen Brosens, who was part of our workshop, who deliberately talked about digital approaches as slow artistry, that he doesn't want what he's doing with this project to be mistaken for an act of speed or efficiency--they've labored over assembling these datasets, and it's a carefully built collaboration. So maybe it's a paradox. What do you all think?

Paul Jaskot
It's a paradox that in some ways may be very unique to social art history because of the imperative to address the world around us, which is a digital world, right? It would be insane if we said, "Oh, well, we're not going to think about the digital, that's not a social art historical approach."...in working in any period, right? If you're researching the Song Dynasty, you still need to be thinking about the digital because you're a social art historian. At the same time, we believe in the archive, and we believe in the power of that archive, which is also the power of the material object. And I will defend here the object in that regard. But we know this serendipity that comes with thinking...and if humanity is nothing, it *is* about thinking. The process of putting things together that didn't belong together-- that we didn't notice together, or that would never have come together without *the human*, that's really what we don't want to lose. And certainly that's what social art history is meant to defend as a critical practice, right? The *human* ability to manage the world equitably. With justice. That's the project.

Barbara McCloskey
I don't know whether it's misfortune or good fortune to have had to teach a course I love (which is our foundational course for the art history program) in fall of last year, when we went totally online. The structure of the course is such that we're supposed to be in the museum every single class period, looking at works of art. So I hear you, Anne. The pandemic has made me acutely aware of possibilities, as well as limits. I had the students choose objects online. We never saw them in the flesh, so to speak. So the questions that I asked them to explore had to be totally different; I couldn't ask them to talk about the materiality of the object in any significant way. It became more of an exercise in, "What sort of databases are surrounding this object that my students can explore and learn from? What is it that they're getting from the databases about this object? What sort of information was available? What wasn't?" That became the critical project instead. It does shift the questions. I can tell you that the students were

extremely good sports. It turned out to be a good class. But overwhelmingly, they were very sorry we couldn't go to the museum together. This came up over and over again, the students reiterating, "We really want to go there." And we couldn't. It just wasn't possible.

Paul Jaskot
I think that we need to also be expansive in terms of how we think about the digital as a possibility of extending our world. I have a colleague, for example, that worked with students to reproduce Moche pots from our pre- contact, Mesoamerican collection. You can't pick them up in a museum, but you *can* pick up the 3D print of it, and you can feel it and you can you can blow into it, and you could experiment with it. Or Bruno Latour wrote about the digital version of Veronese's *Wedding Feast*--you can visit the original in the Louvre, but it belongs in San Giorgio Maggiore. And so well, you can't have them in both places, but both places have meaning for the object. So what does it mean? Well, you can have a digital reproduction at San Giorgio Maggiore and so suddenly, we have ways of dealing much more critically with the material culture and the material environment through these kinds of creative approaches. And so it's not either/or.

Anne Helmreich
No one's ever proposing that these simulations are the thing itself--but it's a tool. A way to pose some hypotheses. Test out questions. As long as we keep in mind the presence and the absence-- keep in mind what the archive reveals and what it suppresses, or what's never made it to the archive. That same trace is going to be created when we turn it into a reconstruction... the same revealing and lack of revealing--

Paul Jaskot
--That's also a two way street, Anne. We're missing San Giorgio Maggiore in the Louvre. The object was designed for a space. And so it's also incomplete.

Anne Helmreich
Absolutely.

Paul Jaskot
Through all of our discussions both now, and also two years ago at the workshop at the Clark, what I take away from this is that the digital helps us think about

new problems for social art history and think about the evidence of social art history. Social art historians can also learn certain kinds of questions and even terminologies that helps them rethink the social. Again, the most prominent example is the question of scale. It's a term we have not used a lot in art history. There are some exceptions. Baxandall worked a little bit with scale, for example, at least as a term. Digital methods put scale-- and scaling up scaling down--into the center of the question, and that potentially opens up a new area. And social art history also has the aspiration, again, "utopian," perhaps using Barbara's term—the aspiration to be totalizing. That is, to get to the level of examining society as a whole, we need to take every opportunity to open our questions and to expand on our possible sources and methods. At least at the exploratory level, if we don't engage digital methods as social art historians, then at some point, we're not really being social art historians. And I think that's the challenge: social art historians must always take hold of the methods and the tools at their disposal in order to fashion the most fundamental critique.

Barbara McCloskey
Anne, you had also gestured towards what's going on in the classroom these days. And, this is one of the critical questions that, again, is very much conditioned by the current moment, and the valuation that is being placed on humanistic learning. And what we're finding is more and more pressure towards time to degree. I think the horse is out of the barn. We have more and more students who are learning digital methods. They're learning how to do all this, how to create the databases and the algorithms and more. I've maintained this from the beginning, when it started, in our program, that our students absolutely must understand that environment, they must know themselves in that environment, if only well enough to say, "I don't want to have anything to do with this." We're in this strange space where we're having to negotiate: how much of the education goes towards this, as opposed to that? So, again, I come back to what was an ideal situation for you, Paul, at the Holocaust Museum, where you've got all these professionals with unique backgrounds and qualifications. You can come together collaboratively and use their individual strengths. What concerns me-- if there's anything about the digital that worries me at the level of higher education--is exactly that squeezing out of certain knowledges in order to make room for what's really pretty difficult. It's not something you just walk into. It's like learning a foreign language in many ways. That's just a cautionary tale. But it's here--there's no turning back. And I don't think there should be turning back. We could even talk about the environmental

reasons for why we shouldn't turn back. This is absolutely vital. So, I'm taking from you, Paul and from Anne, that if there's anything that social history of art really trains us to do, it is to be extremely alert to issues of power and control. We have to keep pressing on that as part of our intellectual practice, and as part of this new world that we're going to have to negotiate not just for ourselves, but for our students moving forward.

Anne Helmreich
Absolutely. To your point, Barbara, it's those same tools you want to apply to the digital. The critique should be taken up, whether you're using the tools or not. The critique should be there, or the method should be there. It's a hard moment--these issues about the time to degree, the cost of higher education. It means every moment counts. How can one think about the use of the digital in social art history so it doesn't feel like an either/or situation? How can you be advancing critical thinking, the acquisition of knowledge about the digital, and the ability to think about the ways in which art *is* about society--how society is telling its story through art, by art, about art?

Thanks you to both of you for the conversation, as always.

Barbara McCloskey
Thank you.

Paul Jaskot
Thanks, Anne. Thanks, Barbara.

Caitlin Woolsey (host)
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 Caroline Fowler and me, Caitlin Woolsey, with editing by John Butan. Music by Light Chaser and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Jessie Sentivan. 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.