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

"AN OUTWARD-LOOKING MODEL":
FUTURE(S) OF THE UNIVERSITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION
WITH KOENRAAD BROSENS AND BLAKE STIMSON

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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.

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 at the Clark, which generously sponsored our scholarly colloquia and ensuing public conversation and 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 the 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 the concerns central to 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 the series.

Blake Stimson
With the advent of any new technology, whether it's something like photography or the internet, or if we think about social technologies--like the idea of the modern state, or the idea of a capitalist economy--anything that organizes people into a set of relations, it affects how we think about our work and affects how we think about the function and the meaning of art. It affects how we think about our sociality.

Anne Helmreich
In this podcast, we're bringing together several participants from our Spring 2019 convening at the Clark Art Institute that was dedicated to "The Grand Challenges of Art History: Digital Computational Methods in Social Art History," and we're continuing that conversation today. I'm Anne Helmreich, with the Getty Foundation, and joining me today is Koenraad Brosens from the University of Leuven in Belgium, and Blake Stimson, from the University of Illinois, Chicago. Today, we're thinking about the future of the university and higher education in the digital age. And we're going to look at these questions through the lens of our shared practice in art history, and our shared interest in digital art history.

So to launch our conversation, before we dig into the topic of the future of the university, and higher education, I'd really welcome the opportunity to learn more about your backgrounds. More specifically, how did you end up working in higher education? After all, an art history degree can be a pathway to a lot of different institutional settings, from museums, to auction houses, and galleries and other types of arts organizations. So what brought you to the university and higher education--your professional home? Koen, if I can ask you to start?

Koenraad Brosens
Thank you. I guess I never really wanted to become a professional art historian, so to speak. All I wanted to do was to learn about art. I wanted to read about art, discuss art, I wanted to write about art. And so I think most people would call that "doing research." But in my book, "research" is just another word for learning, and vice versa. So I quickly realized that a university offered the best possible setting for me to pursue my ambition and my wishes to learn about art.

Blake Stimson

I have a kind of a mixed bag of a background. I started out as a religion major, of all things, in college and took a few art classes along the way. And then I happened into a career immediately following college in engineering--civil engineering, designing parking lots and sewers. And the same time, I began working on the side, on weekends, essentially as an artist. And so I was doing engineering and working as an artist for a number of years and started in on a career as an artist. And then the 1989 Jesse Helms-Robert Mapplethorpe debacle hit, and that made the art world and the New York art world a much more competitive place, and in many ways, a much less interesting place. And so around that time, I started to study art history. I got involved with the Whitney program, and carried on with my art historical inquiry. I think I never was interested in museum careers and so on, in part just because I realized as an artist, that one of the hard parts about being an artist for me was the business part. The business side of being an artist. And so my focus then was really on the idea part of art making. And then that led me to the academic career in art history.

Anne Helmreich

So I hear you both being compelled by the world of ideas, the world of thinking, and higher education gives you that space for research and exploring ideas with your colleagues, with your students. So I can appreciate that pathway. You're both in universities, but you're also in very different kinds of universities, Koen sitting in Belgium, in Leuven, which is publicly-funded but publicly funded in a very different model than, say, the US institutions--as where you are, Blake, at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Higher education is facing some challenges today. And I'd love to hear from both of you what you see some of those challenges are, which may be the key challenges rather than an endless list--but the key challenges for publicly funded/these public-facing universities, from your particular perspectives. Blake's in the States, in Chicago or Koen, in Europe, in Belgium, and those particular challenges. Maybe I'll take the privilege of starting with a colleague in the States and ask you to start off on this question.

Blake Stimson

Sure. I think, of course, one of the biggest challenges for publicly-funded institutions, generally, and particularly, perhaps, for publicly-funded universities in the States is the political battle. And the idea that publicly-funded universities are an easy target for conservatives. And they're a kind of prize to target, it

would seem, for conservatives, because it is a way to undermine the political debates that exist in the world, insofar as having an educated population is better able to engage in political participation in various kinds of ways. So, we feel that pretty acutely in Illinois, even though Illinois is a blue state, it is also a midwestern state. And so the forces of cultural conservativism--of political conservatism, and so on are pretty readily apparent. So I think that would be the single biggest challenge. I'll add one other thing to that and that is that many of our students--our student demographic, generally at UIC, is first- or second generation immigrants, first or second generation English language speaker, working class, first generation to go to college, etc. And so that means many of our students are under all sorts of pressures. They, many of them work full-time and are trying to go to school full time. Many of them have extended family responsibilities, taking care of kids, taking care of elderly parents, et cetera. And so with the constant pressure to defund, and the constant increase in tuition, the constant decrease in other forms of support for students, together with all these other pressures on them, it makes learning a challenge. It's hard sometimes to get students to do all their homework because they've got so much else going on in their lives. So that puts us in a kind of a bind. It feels like a noble struggle. That is to say, we're really trying to do something that is valuable in educating these kids. But it's hard for them. And that, of course, also makes it hard for us.

Koenraad Brosens
Okay, that's really interesting, Blake, because I think that the situation in Belgium and possibly in most European countries is quite different. Because of course, we have a couple of politicians questioning the need for higher education, but they don't really play a part in the public debate anyway. So I think in Belgium, we all value access to higher education. And so that also means that all programs offered at these public higher education institutions are heavily subsidized by the government. So basically, we can keep the tuition fees quite low, only about 1000 euros per year. So that's all the students have to pay. So that's quite, quite low. And of course, students still get excellent resources. And thanks to the low fees, and also a system of scholarships and support, we can attract students from different socio-economic backgrounds. And of course, these low fees also lead to diversity, equity, and inclusion among our students. So I'm not claiming we are "there" yet, but at least we are on our way. So that's, that's quite different. Of course, we are still facing a complex financial situation in which the traditional modes of funding are changing. So yes, we also feel growing stress on the sustainability of funding. We feel more and more pressure to explore new

sources of income. I think that possibly the next generation of students is very different from this and previous generations. And I think in Belgium, that might actually be one of the most important challenges. So we are welcoming digital natives. But that doesn't mean that they are digital literates, so to speak. They have quite different and very idiosyncratic ways of using tools and technologies.

They also have many ways to access and share information and knowledge--or something that is supposed to be information and knowledge--because it's a thin line between knowledge and fantasy, of course. So I think these students, they challenge authority, and more than we ever did. And I think it's also really important to realize they have different brains. A lot of research has been done on how the use of the internet really changes the brain. And so it seems that we are having to accept the fact that we will see more and more students that are perhaps better in problem-solving as such, or decision-making. But then, of course, because of the internet use, their skills of comprehension and retention are perhaps less developed. So that's a very, very different kind of student, I think. So I think we need to think about changing or adapting the programs so that they feel welcome at the universities.

Anne Helmreich
Blake, I'm wondering if you'd like to respond to what Koen was saying. And I want to amplify something that you said, Blake, as well, picking up on the dialogue with Koen. We're recording this today, on the third of November; this podcast won't be released 'till the spring. But *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, one of our leading journals for higher ed has been reporting, for example, the freedom of information or academic freedom claims by faculty at University of Florida, who've been feeling political pressure and not being able to participate as expert witnesses. So these are these are things that are playing out in the news headlines here in the US. And then I'll just add that I took the opportunity to quickly check that US News and World Reports indicates that the average student debt here in the United States is $30,000. What a contrast, Koen, to the fee structure you were describing in Belgium, which brings us back to the question of impact on students. Koen, you are adding that dimension of how the digital and growing up in it as an internet native is changing students too. I'd welcome your thoughts on that.

Blake Stimson

I taught for the University of California system for many years. And of course, the University of California system back in the '60s was free for students. And so it was more or less the same kind of model that the European universities are still operating under, that was changed in part by then-Governor Ronald Reagan, who led with the charge to add tuition fees to the University of California system. So, we experienced that here, I think it's a constant struggle. And it's a struggle, by and large, that we have not done well in--we're on the losing side of that struggle. But that of course does not mean that we do not keep fighting the good fight.

One other comment I could make about Koen's thoughtful commentary on how students are changing under the influence of being digital natives, is that one of the dynamics played out in this country and playing out on university campuses across the country is that our students and faculties and others, are constantly being baited by conservatives on the right--invited to enter into the culture wars. And of course, the conservatives bait university audiences in this way, because they know that if it gets into a battle between a white identity versus other identities that are there in this country, still there are more white people, and that they're going to win that battle. And so they're constant entreaties to do that.

And this affects the digital question in very concrete ways. Because of course, one of the consequences of digitalization is that we are routed more and more into interest groups, to smaller and smaller communities of like-minded people, because the internet enables that we're not all watching the same TV show every night. We're all chiming into our different interest group communities. And that's, of course, I'm sure as much in Europe as in the United States. It affects the way students think, coming into the classroom or onto Zoom. And in that context, they're often very quick to divide themselves into smaller interest-group camps, which has lots of consequences. One consequence is, of course, that it enriches the conversation, that you get more detailed and multivalent and multiple positions that are developed in conversation. At same time, though, sometimes you get less and less mutual understanding that becomes harder and harder to bridge, at moments, at least in my experience. One of the nice things about UIC, which is an incredibly diverse campus in terms of the backgrounds of the students, is that you do see in these 18, 19, 20-year-old students a real desire to bridge those differences, to be multicultural, to have conversations and so on. But part of what I've experienced as well in the classroom, and it seems

since COVID hit to be exacerbated because of the isolation, is that that can sometimes be a struggle. And students have a hard time understanding each other. They have a hard time understanding instructors sometimes. And just communication becomes a little bit harder despite the expanded mediasphere, with the internet, in terms of the possibilities of communication.

Anne Helmreich
I think this idea of these bridging conversations could be a segue to a topic I know that we wanted to return to in spring 2019. Koen, recalling our conversation back in Williamstown in spring of 2019, you brought up the model of the third-generation university, which I remember you talking about as a bridge between disciplines. A rethinking. I'm wondering if you could share with us a little bit more about what you mean by that third-generation university. And why you think this model is worth considering? And then Blake, I welcome your thoughts--your perspective about that notion of a third-generation university. And is it a future we should be considering?

Koenraad Brosens
The image of this third-generation university has been painted by Hans [J.G.] Wissema. And he's a professor emeritus of innovation and entrepreneurship at Delft University in the Netherlands. He published the book on the third-generation university in 2009. So it's not a fresh concept, so to speak. So if there's a third generation, you have a second...the first- and the second-generation university, of course...and the first-generation university that was the medieval university, and that was a university that not that did not promote what we call research. So they focused on teaching age-old accepted wisdom over and over again. And it was only later in the late 15th, 16th century that the scientific method only started to develop properly. And that's interesting. In itself, I think, the scientific method developed outside of the universities. And so of course, the universities were not always happy with the development. But that's another story.

And it was only in the 19th century, that research became the second objective of universities--so, next to teaching. And these universities became the second-generation universities. But these universities were not interested in the application of research findings. It was only after the Second World War, that universities started to develop a proper outward-looking view. And that they started to interface the research with societal challenges, and also with the

market. So this outward-looking perspective, and to a certain extent, the monetization of know-how, became the third objective of what we now call the third-generation university. So basically, that's in a nutshell what Wissema describes. So I'm not quite sure about the focus on the market and the monetization of know-how in these third-generation universities, but I really like the idea that universities should be outward looking, and also that the traditional organization in schools and departments should be or could be reconceptualized, and really aligned with challenges and debates that are happening as we speak.

For example, at this point, there's a debate on the restitution of works of art. What this could mean is that we, as art historians, could team up with philosophers, with colleagues working in international law, but also with computer scientists. So we could team up and form a hybrid research unit that focuses on the restitution of works of art, but also possibly on the, let's say, the replicas or the digital replacement of these works of art. So it couldn't be a way...perhaps it is not the best example. But the third-generation university has this promise of constantly reshaping itself, readapting itself. We basically ask professors or specialists to form teams that are really zooming in on things that are happening in society. And that's something I really like about this third-generation university.

Blake Stimson
I particularly appreciate the idea of the outward-looking aspect of the model. And indeed, this feels very close to me. My main focus, as an artist, and then as an art historian, has always been to think about the relationship between artistic practice and larger social issues, political issues, historical issues, etc. One of the things that I've been thinking about recently and writing a bit about is the PMC, the professional managerial class. So the concept that was developed in the in the late 1970s. What it typically refers to is that moment in the 19th century that Koen was referring to when universities started to become research universities. And the basic idea behind this, as a class category, was that professionals should have their own standards. Engineers should have their own standards for what constitutes a safe bridge, what constitutes a safe building, etc., or with my experience, a safe parking lot. This allowed for the production of a separate class category because then engineers could say to their employers, the capitalists who employ them, they can say, "No, I'm not going to do just what you want, I'm going to do what the professional standards tell me to do." And in that way, they

could separate themselves from their employers, and present themselves as professionals, charge professional fees, etc.

This second-generation model, of course, could be said to be an extension of the first-generation model, where the monastic intellectuals in the Middle Ages started to separate themselves from the social order in universities, and out of that emerged, eventually humanism and the Renaissance, and then onwards to the Enlightenment, and so on. So that capacity to separate yourself from the economy, separate yourself from the employer, and have some social leverage has been a really valuable aspect of the first- and second-generations of the university. One worry that I have about the third generation is that we forfeit that distance, right? And we get collapsed into the larger economy. We no longer have leverage to make professional distinctions about the quality of a bridge or a parking lot, we no longer have the leverage to make social distinctions, and therefore engage in the world as cultural critics, as social critics--saying to the politicians, and the business people, the people run the economy, "Hey, wait a minute, the way you're doing this hurts people." And we have enough distance that we can see that and articulate that and we have enough professional authority, as, say, holders of PhDs or whatever the credential is, that allows us to make that critique with authority. So my hope for any third-generation model is that there would be a way to re-articulate not only the outward-facing views, and meaning involvement in the world out there, but also a way to articulate the distance that allows for a separate professional status.

Koenraad Brosens
That's really great, Blake. So then we are basically developing the fourth-generation university right now. (Laughter).

Blake Stimson
Let's write the book.

Anne Helmreich
I think that sounds like a great idea.

Koenraad Brosens
Who's going to read books? We're in the digital age. Right? So...

Blake Stimson

Let's write the Tweet.

Anne Helmreich
This notion of expertise--it's always been there. As you said, Blake, with regards, to the PMC model....in Chicago, I studied and worked with a historian, Harold Perkin, who wrote a book on the rise of the professional class, describing Great Britain at the end of the 19th century. But I think about some of the challenges we face today, when we're trying to create some of these collaborations. But maybe these challenges have always been there, with humanists trying to work with technologists and computer scientists--when the realms of knowledge are so far apart. I hear humanists describe what an algorithm is doing as the black box. I wonder if both of you have any further thoughts on that desire you're both describing, to envision that fourth generation university, where that expertise is respected, and one has an ability to stand back and look critically at the work being done. But the challenges we face when understanding the nature of that work is beyond our scope of training. And maybe there's an element of trust in there that I'm not quite surfacing enough. Blake, I'll pass it over to you first, then Koen, if you have any further thoughts.

Blake Stimson
No, I think that's an excellent question, Anne. And I suppose one of the ways I tend to think about it is to just think about the age-old, scholarly question of rigor. And you know, one of the worries that I have had and have experienced with the concept of interdisciplinarity as, for example, it has developed in areas like cultural studies, as an area of study, is that sometimes it means the muddying of the distinctions between disciplines rather than the mutual enrichment between disciplines. All of my students, of course, are very interested, as they should be, in interdisciplinarity. And it's something that I support and promote with them. But I try to hold them to standards whereby they are fully trained and fully rigorous as art historians as well as, say, women's studies scholars, or sociologists, or economists as well as political theorists. So that they can lay claim to full scholarly, disciplinary rigor in every area that they bring together into interdisciplinary dialogue. Or they collaborate with somebody and allow for the interdisciplinary rigor of their collaborator in its full glory, together with their art historical rigor, and its full glory. And those two things enter into dialogue. And so sometimes, this is another variant of the worry about looking out--that sometimes it means abandoning the standards of

the discipline. And we lose something in that process, sometimes...obviously, not all the time.

Koenraad Brosens
That's really interesting Blake, because in my lab, I always tell the art historians that they should hold hands with the computer scientists, but they are not allowed to kiss each other. So there is this idea that they have to walk together. And one of them is looking at the trees, and the other one is looking at the plants. And so by walking together, and by discussing things, hopefully, they'll create something new, but they have to respect each other's boundaries, so to speak. And that's really important. I think, in the past, perhaps people have been too hasty in, like you were saying, in muddying the distinction between disciplines.

Blake Stimson
That's really terrific, Koen, and I'm going to, heretofore adopt your metaphor and have a strict no kissing rule. (Laughter).

Anne Helmreich
Koen, maybe you could just say a few words about the nature of your lab.

Koenraad Brosens
So in my lab--of course, I'm an art historian--so most PhD students are art historians, but we also have postdocs and PhD students in computer science, and also in philosophy. And we have one philosopher, who is a co-supervisor of this team. So we really have a hybrid team. We tried to rethink traditional art historical questions. And then we see even to what extent digital methods and digital tools can help us to re-address these questions. And also, of course, by doing that kind of work, we also get new art historical questions. But in the beginning, I felt that the art historical questions were the Alpha and Omega of the project. But then after a while, I started to realize that both the computer scientists and the philosophers had really interesting takeaways from this kind of research. And that's why I started to realize that perhaps doing interdisciplinary research means respecting and accepting that we all speak different languages in the end.

Anne Helmreich

I take it, because it connects to the way Blake was describing mutually enriching [collaborations]--one is not in service to the other, that they're both on a mutual path of exploration. But those paths may also be shaped by the genealogies of those disciplines, that the history of the questions that are being asked...the audience to which those questions will be posed. I don't know, Blake, if you have any further thoughts on this?

Blake Stimson
In my experience, most of the interdisciplinary work I've done in terms of collaborating with others has been with people in the humanities or with artists. So of course, it's a different beast than working with computer scientists. But perhaps not so different from working with philosophers. One thing I would just add to the discussion is that, while I love working collaboratively generally-- I've done a lot of it and have a lot of publications and so on, that have been collaborative--I also find that sometimes working collaboratively and interdisciplinarily can be difficult, and some of the difficulties have to do with just very different ways of thinking about things. So one example of that would be working with literature scholars in the humanities. And in part because, particularly, the English departments on campuses in the US are much bigger than art history departments. It sometimes feels like a colonial relationship with art history being the colonized discipline. And--extending the metaphor, just as parts of the world that had been colonized in the past have railed against many things, among those things they have railed against is the ignorance of those that are colonizing them. The way in which they don't really understand what they're talking about. They're confused, and it feels like--I don't know, adolescent art history, something like that. That's been part of my experience. So it feels like a holding hands, and you know, maybe, an occasional slap in the face, as well...just like "no kissing," no punching. No, really, it's more a shaking of the shoulder saying, "What are you talking about?"

Anne Helmreich
I've been looking at other models. Koen, you inspired me to do more research and reading on this. And so I was looking at an article that was in a journal that's published here in the States called *Campus Review*, which is about higher ed. And it was an article by Martin Betts. He was taking this idea that you have three horizons that we find in industry, and thinking about using that model, or metaphor, in higher ed. So in this framework, the first horizon is the product. The thing that you make-- so for us, in higher ed, it would be the ways we do

pedagogy--the ways we teach, the ways we do research. Then the second horizon is the incremental innovation that happens to that. So, for example, let's have the flipped classroom; let's not have the faculty member having the authority in the center. And then, he goes on to say, "Look, 2020 turned some of these things upside down." If you thought there was sort of this progress of incremental innovation. There was no way to teach face-to-face. There were no ways to have student gatherings on campus in the ways we might had. Research labs weren't functioning in the ways they used to function.

So we were forced to have breakthrough innovation rather than incremental innovation during this period. And I'm curious, in that sense, as a result of the global pandemic, there was this tremendous pivot to the digital. And I'm wondering how the digital showed up in your research and teaching? And did it feel like a breakthrough innovation? More incremental? Or maybe something else? So I'm wondering how that turn towards the digital in the wake of the pandemic, how that maps on to this notion of the second horizon of incremental innovation or the third horizon of breakthrough innovation? Or was it actually something entirely different? And that model just doesn't really fit this moment?

Blake Stimson
Maybe I will start out on the smaller level--just the "apps-that-I-like" side of things, and then go from there to a more social question. There is this app called "Perusall." And it's basically just a social reading app. And it's worked out great in my classroom, because the conversation gets up and running around the [assigned] texts prior to the actual meeting, and the threads can be super lively. So it's really expanded the classroom experience in a rich and productive way. So I think of that as being an unqualified positive.

As to the larger social issue, I'm currently teaching two courses. One is a graduate seminar, and that's synchronous on Zoom. And I have students piping in from Brazil, Turkey, and India, and occasionally from the East Coast, and so on. And so that is an unqualified positive because you have students involved in the classroom that would not otherwise be able to be there. And it works pretty seamlessly, by and large. That's different from being in person, but it is very effective. The second class I'm teaching is an asynchronous introductory class with 150 students. And there is a ton of pressure to offer these asynchronous classes, coming from two sources, one from our neediest students at UIC, who are working full-time or taking care of their parents or their nieces and their

nephews and trying to go to school full-time at the same time. So this is a great efficiency for them. So that is terrific. There's also pressure from the university because it's a money-making model. But of course, it's also very hard on the students, because they have to be disciplined themselves to screen these videos, and keep up with the course material. They can't just come to class Monday, Wednesday, Friday... and so we have some students that excel at it. And it's a real plus. But then we have a lot of students too, who just fall behind, because it's too much to ask of them and for an 18-year-old to be sufficiently self-disciplined to keep up with this model. So this is going to carry on forward, I believe, and it's going to have many positives. But I think it's also going to have a bunch of negatives that go along with it. So I think as far as a paradigm shift, it's a little bit more of a mixed bag.

Koenraad Brosens
I completely agree with you, Blake. At first, because I'm a big believer in in digital technologies and remote learning, I hoped that this was going to be a real game changer: that we as professors--and that universities--we would really reinvent ourselves and that we would fully understand and use the possibilities of these digital tools. But then, of course, I don't think we were prepared to do that. And that's a shame because we were forced to invent things and put them out there before testing them properly. And of course, and perhaps this is just human nature, but people tend to remember the failed experiments rather than the good things that happened during the pandemic. So I think I was hoping to have this breakthrough innovation, so to speak. But then I quickly realized that no, it was going to be incremental. And not all courses, not all professors, not all students are going to like the same thing. We have to think about this blended learning, the flipped classroom, the remote learning, and what kind of things are we going to do this year, next year. But it's interesting to see how things have changed, and what's going to stay. For example, the student-teacher relationship. I must confess that prior to the pandemic, I never really appreciated how important we as teachers can be in helping students transition to adulthood. So I provided a safe and respectful classroom. And of course, I delivered high-quality course content, or I tried to do that. And I used teaching strategies to make the students the best possible art historians. And basically, I simply assumed that was all I had to do, or could do.

And now perhaps I realized it's even more important to be human. So I hope that one of the things that might be a breakthrough innovation--perhaps within this

Belgian university landscape--is that we take more time to show students that we too, are struggling with emotions and frustrations, and that we all experience stress, and that all our cultural differences and personal stories, perhaps shape our identities as students but also as young professionals, and perhaps not-so-young professionals. So by having to deal with Zoom and lamenting the loss of direct contact, that's really something that I will always remember. In Belgium, of course we have to take care of students, but the thing is, we are not their parents, right? It was always assumed that they have to work hard and we have to provide the best setting, but we don't necessarily have to take care of their mental health. That's something that their peers were going to do, and their parents were going to do. But now I think our roles have changed. So that's one of the things that perhaps, from my point of view, at least, is a breakthrough innovation, and the digital tools or the methods--that's simply incremental, that can never be a proper breakthrough, I think.

Blake Stimson
I could just add one quick thing to that. And that is--I'm sure that you have experienced this as well--is the different kinds of intimacies that happen over Zoom. And the way I was talking about it with a friend yesterday was to say, I no longer have the desk between me and the student. You know, there's a way in which even though you're now not in the same room, you're just on screen, there's both a heightened distance, but then there's also a heightened intimacy. And that's something that's been interesting to navigate and interesting for us [the teachers]. And I think, interesting for the students, of course...you have students who don't turn the cameras on sometimes, and so on. And so that creates also another kind of weirdness where they're kind of listening in, and most of the students have their cameras on, but a few of them don't. And so you're trying to navigate that, as well. So I think it's a totally interesting social experiment that we're going through. It's hard to know how we come out on the other side of it. I think we're all grappling with it in good faith and doing the best we can. But it is a little tricky at moments.

Anne Helmreich
I want to say how much I appreciate both of your thoughtful engagement with your students and your willingness to be self-critical about your practice. I wish I could be a student in your classroom. You've talked a lot about your teaching and your engagement with the students, which is part of your practice as art historians, but I'm wondering if we could take this question about the pivot

we've made--the digital turn in light of our discipline of art history, and how we might rethink or re-approach our discipline with that lens? Or maybe, is that a false question because we've been in this moment, and I'm applying this lens to the discipline because it feels so present in my life-- this turn to the digital, and use of apps, etc.? So I'm curious if you feel that there's an opportunity for the discipline of art history that you want to share? Or cautionary tales--on the one hand, opportunities we want to take advantage of, and on the other, cautionary tales that we might want to be wise and savvy about. I know both of you will have thoughts about this, but maybe Koen I'll invite you to start and then Blake.

Koenraad Brosens
I like to think that the glass is half full. I know it's half empty, of course, in real life, but I'd like to think that it's half full. I think that we have to focus on the opportunities first. The pandemic has also made me realize that it's much easier to organize our field. And that's an open door, of course. It's now much easier to collaborate. On a national, but also international and global level, of course, it's much easier to participate in events and workshops all over the world. It's much easier to meet, no desk in between, but unfortunately, no coffee or no cocktails in between either. But it's easier to meet colleagues. So in the beginning, there were these people who are shy, and afraid of the camera and switching on the camera, but I think most of us have overcome that fear. So we are now participating in this global dimension of art history. At least at Leuven University, and in Belgium, and I think in a lot of European institutions--libraries and archives--they also further developed their online programs. So it's now even easier to access materials. So that's something that I really think is a good thing coming out of this pandemic--and then of course, also the very object of our field. I think that from the pandemic we've learned that nothing beats the real thing. We still want to see and touch and smell the work of art, of course. But at the same time, the pandemic also highlighted the importance of and the effectiveness of these digital collections and digitized art. So I think that also helped a lot of museums, for example. But also the art market, of course. Auction houses had to really think about ways to promote and make accessible these huge digital collections we used and to help people to engage with these collections. So I think that's also something that we can be grateful for. And then perhaps, who knows, in the future, people will say that 2020/2021 were the years in which digital art really became a thing--that digital art became something that a lot of people started to consider. It's not that it began in 2020/2021. But now I find that even more conservative colleagues are really

thinking about digital art, and trying to develop the debate with students on this digital art.

Blake Stimson
I would second everything that Koen said there. And just to add that, on a more abstract level, of course, with the advent of any new technology, whether it's something like photography, or the internet, or, social technologies, like the idea of the modern state, or the idea of a capitalist economy, or anything that organizes people into a set of relations, it affects how we think about our work and affects how we think about the function and the meaning of art. And so I think that all those things are shifting as we speak. And I think that the pandemic was a little booster--[digital technologies were] already there with the internet to begin with. The pandemic has certainly been a kind of booster shot, and that just through very mundane things like our experience of working on Zoom, or our experience of asynchronous education, it affects how we think about our sociality. And that then becomes a model that structures how we think about the value--the meaning of art; functions how we think about art as playing a critical role in society, and playing a role critiquing society, etc. So I think that is all material for research--material to reflect on, in the course of our research, as we continue to do the interpretive work that we do.

Anne Helmreich
I appreciate your point, because it's truly an unfolding narrative. And it's one that we're exploring together. And then there'll be a point at which people look back and re-explore.

Koenraad Brosens
It was just thinking about these fourth-generation universities still. I think one of the differences is also that in the past, there was this emphasis on building the physical infrastructure of university campuses and libraries. And of course, now we have to think about building the virtual infrastructure. And I think that's a good thing as well, because that means that we don't need all these campuses perhaps anymore, and that we don't need all these people traveling back and forth all the time. So that might be what's happening in Glasgow right now, with the climate summit--that might also be something that hopefully will change the future of higher education.

Anne Helmreich

And I've heard interesting models of satellites and hubs, how we might leverage and connect between where we have these physical instantiations? How might we leverage those and connect without having to build more? And I think it is interesting, because that building more was so much the paradigm for so long, right? It was grow, grow, grow? And how might we rethink that, as you said, using a virtual lens? Blake, do you have any further thoughts?

Blake Stimson
I would add one thing to that, and this relates to our prior collaboration. Thinking about the models of digital-institution building, digital relations that we look to to think about our practice in the academy, our practice as art historians, and so on. I think it's really important. And so one distinction I tried to make in the collaboratively written essay that we all contributed to, was the idea that if Wikipedia represents one interesting model--because it's based on something like the idea of the social contract, the 17th- and 18th-century model of the social contract. And of course, there are many other models we could look to that might be less appealing. So if we think about something like Uberization, and the way in which that is producing new, precarious forms of labor. And I think that we quite naturally will look to existing models as we seek to digitize our own practices. And I think it's just a critical question to be open and clear about what models we're looking to, and how we're thinking through the benefits and the pitfalls of those different models.

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 Buteyn, music by lightchaser, 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.