The interview with Dr. Kirstin Ringelberg, Elon University, was conducted on 3/35/2026. This transcript has been edited for clarity and readability.

Rebecca Tucker (RT): This is Art History on Fire, an interview series exploring the current state of the field of art history. We are embarked on a fascinating set of conversations with a variety of U.S.-based art historians in order to get their perspectives on our field. Your hosts are myself, Rebecca Tucker, I'm Professor at Colorado College, and…

Deborah Hutton (DH): Deborah Hutton, Professor at the College of New Jersey. We're here to talk about the present and future of our field. Art history, like higher ed and the arts in general, is facing a variety of threats, at this point, well known to us all.

RT: But at the same time, today's art history is dynamic. It's innovative, experimental, and exciting. That's true in the classroom and in museums across the country, where attendance is up and interest in the arts is surging.

DH: So, in this series, we talk to art historians on the ground to learn from them about what is happening, good and bad, to ask why it's happening, and to gather ideas for moving forward.

RT: It's my pleasure to introduce our interviewee for our sixth installment of the series. We speak with Dr. Kirstin Ringelberg, who is a professor in the Department of History and Geography at Elon University, which is in North Carolina. They received Elon's college-wide Daniels Danieley Award for Excellence in Teaching. And their commitment to teaching is exemplified by the 24 distinct courses they have taught, wow, and 38 undergraduate research projects, plus 23 museum internships and undergraduate teaching apprentices that they have mentored, and I'm exhausted just reading that sentence.

DH: Absolutely.

RT: That's very impressive. Their scholarship explores gender and sexuality in 19th century art. They received the Every Page Foundation Fellowship at the Clark Art Institute for work on their second book, *Chez Madeleine Lemaire, Gender and Genre in the Queer Belle Epoque*.

DH: We're looking forward to our interview, and as always, you can find a transcript of this interview, as well as more information on Dr. Ringelberg and this interview series on our substack, Art History on Fire, and on the project's website hosted by Colorado College.

So let's get started.

DH: All right, for our sixth interview, we are delighted to welcome Dr. Kirstin Ringelberg, Professor of Art History at Elon University. Kirstin, thank you so much for joining us today. Rebecca and I are really looking forward to speaking with you.

Kirstin Ringelberg (KR): Thank you so much. It's my pleasure to be here. I've really enjoyed the podcast so far, and I look forward to listening to other people's entries.

RT: Well, we're so pleased to have you here. In our intro that precedes this interview, we give a very brief summary of your work as a scholar and teacher, but we don't go into that in too much detail, because we want to give you a space here at the beginning of our interview to define yourself and your work. So, to that end, here's our first question for you. How would you describe yourself and the type of art history that you practice?

KR: Well, it's funny, one of my favorite podcasts is the Gender Reveal / Gender Conceal podcast, and the first question is, when it comes to gender, how do you describe yourself? So, I thought I would start there. I'm genderqueer, or as the kids today say, trans non-binary, although I only came out as such in my professional life about 13 years ago. Prior to that, I would have just said I was a queer feminist - nothing wrong with that! I'm medium height, pale, freckly white, and the classic queer shave back and sides haircut that is longer on top and recognizable from a distance. [laughs]

RT: I love that you're giving us a visual, that's awesome.

KR: I'm a modern and contemporary art historian. I also consider visual studies part of what I do, although my title is “Art Historian,” because of when I was hired, I think. I'm a full professor at a school where teaching is considered our primary duty. I started the art history program there with a minor in 2003, which was my first semester there, and then I followed with a major when I was joined by my colleague, Evan Gatti. I think, at both this job and my prior full-time job at Kendall College of Art and Design, I was hired in part because I was able to manage a lot of different generalist teaching and mentoring duties, as well as having expertise in modern and contemporary. I've always been somewhat of a generalist, as well as having specific attention. My major regional foci have primarily been the US, France, and Japan, and I get to play that out a little bit more in my scholarship than in my teaching, which usually requires me to be more global in a good way. My methodological approaches include feminism, queer theory, trans theory, trans studies, social history, visual and cultural studies, critical race art history, and a more broad critique of canons, both within and outside of the discipline. I'm pretty interdisciplinary in the kind of work I do, but I do a lot of historiographic work. And it sounds like, from listening to people

who've been on the podcast before, that that's a pretty common thread, actually, through us, that we do a lot of different kinds of things.

DH: Yes, absolutely. So you said that you started the art history program in 2003 with a minor? And then eventually turned it into a major. We are really curious to hear more about the program at Elon - could you tell us a little bit more about it? What's the status now? How many majors do you have? Is it growing? Shrinking? Key strengths? In particular, we noticed that in contrast to many colleges, at Elon, art history is housed in the History and Geography department, rather than studio art and art education, so we were really curious about how that impacts the program.

KR: Absolutely. So…The first question is around the starting of the major, which was approved in 2007. I actually had a hilarious conversation with the dean at the time, when I was being interviewed. I was really being hired as a service worker for other classes. I said in my interview, “if I come, I'm going to start a major.” And he said, “no, you're not.” And I said, “yes, I am.” And he said, “no, you're not.” And I said, “yes, I am.” And that was, fun. [laughs] I came and started a minor and then moved towards a major. So, that desire came from having worked in a variety of different kinds of programs before, only one full-time but more permanent, where the way that people were thinking about art history was pretty traditional, despite the fact that some of those folks weren't traditional themselves in their work. The way that it wasn't really serving the students pedagogically was also something that I struggled with. So my goal when I came to Elon was to make a program that more closely matched my dreams and values. So that's what I did. It's been a lot of work, but it's been really gratifying to have created a program that I think is a little closer to the kind of program I wish I could have gone to (I was a political science major, so it doesn't really track), the kind [of program] that I think a lot of the students I'm interested in working with are also interested in. Our major's been pretty stable since we built it in 2007. Our high has been around 25, our low has been around 10, but we've tended to hover in the 15 to 20 range pretty consistently from 2008 until now. We have some ebbs and flows. Those almost exactly track with the ebbs and flows of humanities majors campus-wide, so we don't actually stand out from that, and sometimes we're actually a little bit stronger than some of those, particularly better staffed programs. I'm not going to name them because I love them, but we have humanities programs on campus with far greater staffing that have fewer majors than we do. It's not a competition, and you know, some of that we don't really have any control over.

DH: So what's the student population overall at Elon?

KR: About 6,000 undergrad. It's larger than you might think, and we have a variety of different colleges. We have the main College of Arts and Sciences, but we have a communications school, we have a business school, we’re creating a health sciences school as we speak. There's going to be an engineering and computer science school built out of programs that already exist. So it's

becoming less and less of a liberal arts school (which is why I came, because it was a liberal arts school), and more and more of a pre-professional [school]. Going the way of all things, as we might call it.

RT: Yeah, that certainly tracks, right? In our current environment.

KR: Yes, but actually, our last year's Registrar's Report in 2025 highlighted 8 majors in the College of Arts and Sciences that were showing good growth, and we were on that list, right next to engineering and psychology.

DH: Congratulations! That's amazing!

KR: Thank you!

RT: I'm speechless, honestly. [laughs]

DH: Honestly.

KR: Something that we were talking about just before we got started, the number of students who are declaring an interest in art history before they arrive on campus is the highest this year I think it's ever been. Not sure why.

DH: This is exciting, actually, to hear. Wow, that's great. Do you think that the fact that you're in History and Geography, rather than [studio, makes a difference?] Is there a studio arts program at Elon?

KR: There is, and that was the program that I was hired into. We moved to History and Geography nearly 10 years ago now, maybe 8 years ago. I'll say that it has been a boon to me, and I say this as somebody who loves contemporary art. I taught at an art school before I taught at Elon, and there are times when I really miss working at an art school. You know, the way that the [art] students in particular but also some of your colleagues are so excited about what's happening in the contemporary art world is something I miss. I don't have that at Elon, or, I rarely have that at Elon, just because it's not that kind of a school. That's not the kind of student that we draw. But it turns out that we actually do draw a lot of art historians in a way that the art school didn't. So the art school got primarily studio art students, and Elon is more likely to draw an art history major.

RT: I'm fascinated by this. Do you have any speculation or any thoughts about why that's true?

KR: Well, I don't think it hurts to actually to be in the History and Geography department, and I can talk a little bit more about that department, and how we do fit, and, and ways we don't fit as well there. But I think that plays a role. I think another really crucial thing is that we're good at admissions. We show up, we put a lot of labor, and I should say, in recent years, especially, Evan Gatti has been putting so much labor into admissions events, and showing up at admissions events, and making sure that students know who we are, that we exist, where we are, where we can be found, which I think most admissions offices don't do with art history, right? We're too minor of a player. So many students come to Elon as psychology majors. We have a great psychology department, but we all know the numbers, right? They come in as psychology majors, and then they look around and go, “oh wait, there's all these other things.” So we try to catch them earlier. We don't always succeed. In fact, worrying about how many students think they want to be art history majors before they come would probably be a really scary bad move for us if the administration were focused on that. We get most of our students through classes. There are no prerequisites on any of our classes except for methods and senior sem[inar]. So we get a lot of students from our classes, and I think another really crucial piece is both Evan and I teach in a bunch of different programs on campus besides our own.

So, I teach in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, I'll get a student from a class for that reason. We're both pretty well connected. I'm pretty connected with Philosophy, Evan's really connected with Religious Studies, we both do international and global studies, we both do a bunch of different kinds of programs like that, American Studies, Asian Studies, we do all those. We work with those programs, we link our classes to those programs, and we encourage students to try one of our classes coming across from there. You know especially tapping at Elon seems to work the best of saying, you know, you seem to have a knack for this, why don't you try another class. So there's a lot of that kind of groundwork that I think plays a really important role in just getting more students.

DH: It's amazing.

RT: I have about a thousand questions.

KR: I'm ready.

RT: I promise I won't lay them all on you at the moment, but just to parse what you're saying, it sounds like you're saying as [one of] the benefits to the strength of your program is being with a discipline like History that is clearly legible. And, how do I say this? socially sort of acceptable as a field of study.

KR: Yes, for sure.

RT: So that's one benefit, right? And then, obviously, the hard work you all are doing to get art history out there, since most students don't come in with any knowledge of art history from their K-12 experience. I guess my question on that would be, does Elon have a strong double major, or major/multiple minor kind of environment? Does that help as well?

KR: Yes, for sure. I wouldn't have thought to say that, but that's absolutely the case. In fact, probably an overly aggressive tendency amongst the students to stack majors and minors.

RT: Certifications searching, right?

KR: That is absolutely who our students are, very ambitious, very keenly aware of those scenarios. They want a long signature list, and I don't blame them in 2026. So that's been the case. Sometimes a minor becomes a major, sometimes a major becomes a minor, but we do have those cross-connections stacking through the degrees. And History, I think, prior to us joining the department, not many of the History majors made that connection. But one of the reasons why we joined the History department was because we were developing a museum studies and public history minor.

RT: I want to hear about that, too. We're taking a little tangent from our list of questions, but can you tell us a bit about that program?

KR: For sure. So it's a minor that is housed in the department, so a lot of the minors at Elon that are more transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary are separated from departments, but we wanted to create it with the History and Geography folks because there were so many clear connections across the History and Geography folks, and us, in terms of the way that we conceive of museum studies and public history as being done. So, for instance, we have an amazing human geographer, Sandy Marshall, who was already doing what I would call public history in that process. Ryan Kirk, who works on GIS, also does that kind of thing. We had historians who were oral historians, who are public historians, and so we were really interested in developing a program that was focused just on that. We have an arts administration program, but it's really business-focused. And we have a tremendous performing arts department. It's actually quite well known. If you walk down Broadway, you hit a Elon student right there on the street, they're always there. So the arts administration program really focuses on that scenario, the performing arts and business. We didn't have something that quite met the needs of the students, and as you've noted in other podcasts, the museum studies thing really is something that the students are connecting to in strong ways right now. So together, the integrated department built that program as one that meets the needs of all the students. And I think both that and just simply us being in History and

Geography has made students in that department realize, “oh yeah! This is actually a relevant double minor.”

RT: And how big is that Museum Studies / Public History program?

KR: I think there's about 25 or…upper end of 20s minors, and it's only about 4 or 5 years old. Maybe 5 years old?

DH: You all are killing it. This is amazing, these programs are doing so well. I'm really impressed.

RT: Yes, kudos to you all. This is not necessarily a narrative we've heard at some other places, but the next question is, in some ways, related to that success. You seem to have a very strong internal energy in your program (and maybein these other programs as well); I’ll pull out that hashtag of LMTAH.

KR: We say “limtah.” [laughs]

RT: You should tell us about that when I finish! We want to hear more about how do you develop it, maintain it, steward that kind of energy, and disseminate it to your students?

KR: There are so many ways in which I feel like our program has been benefited by things that look bad on the outside. [laughs] So, I feel like people keep putting us in positions that might seem – or “people” is a strong word, but, we keep being put in positions that aren't ideal for our growth and development, and then we just make lemonade with them. And that's one of the keys to it. So we've always been, and we always will be, one of the small programs in a bigger department with people who maybe don't have to worry as much about where their next student comes from, or where their next line comes from, or adjunct comes from. And despite our great success, and sometimes our great success in comparison to those other larger programs, we always have to make a case for ourselves. I think that we got lucky in that I came to Elon with a lot more energy than I have now [laughs], and was lucky to have a colleague hired who has a lot of energy even now. We just put a lot of that energy into making sure that the students in our program feel welcomed, encouraged, supported, that people know that we exist, and what we really do, as opposed to what people think we do, and, that we turn that into different ways of making a name for ourselves. And that energy builds on itself. You draw students who are excited about being in the Island of Misfit Toys [laughs], and then they also carry that as well. So the Learn More, Take Art History [LMTAH] motto was actually the students' idea. They came up with it! We put some labels on the wall in our space that say that: “learn more, take art history.” And then it turned into a hashtag, because hashtags were big at the time. And we all yell “Limta” sometimes! [laughs] The branding part of is entirely my colleague Evan's [work]. I had nothing to do with it. She could

be a professional branding and marketing person. Every year we have a new senior mug that we give to the seniors. On graduation, they get to pick the color and the style of the mug, but then Evan does the branding on it. We have logo stickers for laptops, we do all of that kind of thing, and the students are enthusiastic about that, and so it just kind of builds. The other big piece of the puzzle: we've always been some version of “enthusiastic little engine that could,” trying to make sure that everybody knows we exist in a place where we might not be as noticeable. But, the other supposed-to-be-a-bad thing that was turned into a good thing, is that Evan made a proposal to the institution as we were doing some physical changes of the institution for space for the Elon Collections to be used as a teaching collection. I made a proposal for a space for WGSS (I was the LGBTQIA coordinator at the time) in the Student Union, and both of those plans were rejected outright. And in fact, we learned we were the only two people who proposed anything! They rejected both our proposals. And they had asked for proposals! [laughs] So, it's a tale as old as time in any institution. But what they did was give us was (I think even what they might have considered a last prize instead of a second prize) this cute little white house off the main campus. Which is very aesthetically uniform and appealing in a sort of post-cardy way. Our little house is a cute little two-story 1930s house that used to belong to some donors from campus whose house used to be on campus. It's been moved a couple of times, and now we're kind of off campus near the tennis courts. It is a fabulous space. They thought they were really (I think) maybe going like, “you go over here.” But we want to go over here! And so we've turned it into a space that's very lively and fun. We put all kinds of stuff. When students do projects, those projects go up in the space, and we get to keep them up because we're not in a more formal space. We have books out on the table, we have a little mini art history library, but we also have books about social justice on the table, so if you're feeling down about the state of things, you can read Dean Spade's mutual aid book, or something by Mariame Kaba, and lift your spirits and plan an action. It's a kind of a messy, fun, lively space with food. Students can come anytime and just hang out. And so that makes a huge difference as well.

RT: And they do come and hang out.

KR: Absolutely. In fact, they had a party last month, I think, a mocktails party with, movie watching, something like that.

RT: Institutionally, you're with History and Geography, but physically, you're in your own little house with your own cool library and parties.

KR: Right.

RT: Well, that does sound like lemonade.

DH: Yeah, I know.

KR: Yeah, and these are things that I think, institutionally, don't look that great, right? The institution is very focused on making sure that there's a new building every year, that that new building looks very slick. The students aren't allowed to put flyers up in the buildings. Our space is messy, and our students like a slightly messier space, or – the students who like us like a slightly messier space, a slightly less corporate-feeling space. I think that's a draw as well.

DH: Clearly, even listening to you talk, there's such joy in there that I imagine that some of that is contagious, right? That enjoying what you do helps attract people – that's really inspiring. But you are not just an excellent undergraduate instructor for all. You have won awards and been very recognized for that, but you also have been highly successful in your research. And, notably, you most recently had a Clark Fellowship, right? Congratulations. And that was for your second book that's looking at art genres and genders. So, we want to hear a little bit about that, but we'd also love to hear about the ways in which you think that your research folds into your teaching. How does it impact the program and your students' success, and how do you marriage those two things together?

KR: Well, thank you. It's actually hard for me, because my focus is on teaching and the requisite service that comes with all of that, as I'm sure you all know, it's sometimes hard to think of my research as something other than: the stuff I do for fun for me in my free time. Which is how it feels, most of the time. But the two are actually really integrated, and everybody says this, but it's really foundationally true, I think, for me. I'm not sure that I would have built a program from scratch that tries to be relatively cutting edge if it weren't for my scholarship, if it weren't for the ideas that are important to me in art history. Why art history is important to me as a discipline, all of those things, to me, are pretty bound up together in being a place that has a history of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, all the just terrible, terrible politics in many ways, and sometimes not. But I came to late in part because I think art history was presented to me as relatively esoteric and something that wealthy people did. You know, we've all experienced that. And I think I had a little bit of that feeling of, if I'm going to stay in a discipline like that, I need to change it, and I need to make it more responsive to the kinds of things that I value and that I think we value. Those two things really go together for me. Some of that comes up in the way that we don't use survey texts in our classes. Not that there aren't some really good survey texts being written, in recent years. I think that some of that's a little time-dependent to when we developed the program, and at the time, I would say there wasn't anything like there is written by yourself. But we use readings by experts that we've been reading, and so, literally, we keep up to date in our areas of expertise because that matters to us. We share that with the students in a very direct way, including in introductory global thematic classes. We provide readings that we expect the

students to find too challenging on certain levels. And we're okay with that. We have ways of teaching that try to get at what's important and try to get the students into the things that engage them from that reading, regardless of what they do (or don't) have a background for. So we start the level pretty high, I think, and try to challenge the students to go with it wherever they are, but that is directly connected to our own scholarship. We have a significant number of contingent faculty, or courses taught by contingent faculty (we really need a third line, and we've been asking for decades now), but in the meantime, we have these wonderful contingent faculty, and we encourage them to teach the same global thematic class, or the same upper-level class from their own expertise, so that everybody who's teaching that class brings their expertise to it, as opposed to it being like a class that you have to teach this one way, regardless of how it is. So, a syllabus can be different for the same class every single semester on some level.

DH: That's great. You know, I was thinking, you mentioned before that your undergraduate was in political science, and it actually fits well, I think that suits your approach to art history, which is to see the politics in it.

KR: Yeah, absolutely.

RT: I want to follow up on that a little bit. It sounds like you're building a pretty sophisticated program from the beginning levels. From the moment that the students enter your courses, they're being challenged with this methodologically sophisticated material. I know “rigor” is kind of a bad word in some spaces, but it sounds like a rigorous program throughout. Do you feel like that's part of the appeal that the students are obviously generating by the strength of your program?

KR: Yeah, and weirdly, I'm having the opposite experience of one of the other subjects of your podcasts, in that I find that I'm grabbing students with that approach. Surely, we're all losing students - in 2026, we're losing students if we make them read something, right? Because they can have Chat GPT read it for them – or make them write something. So there are students who are going to reject the challenges of our curriculum, full stop. I expect that, and there's always been that [reality]. I've been teaching off and on in some form since 1993, and that's always been the case. But I've found it easier to grab students – easier is not the right word – but I've found it successful to get students engaged by not having them doing really introductory work at the really introductory stage. Some of our students take AP Art History, and sometimes those students are the ones who are the most disappointed, because they come into the program expecting that the memorization skills that they developed in AP Art History are going to be transferrable, and they're not really transferrable in any college level in the same way. It really doesn't help you necessarily in our class that you know what happened in 1080 [laughs] - what happened, yes, maybe, but not the specific Bayeux Tapestry. So, thinking across those things sometimes get students who thought they wouldn't be interested in art history, because they thought they wouldn't be interested

in sitting in a dark room with the slides going by, memorizing dates, or me pointing out formal analysis. Popular culture gives people an art appreciation view of what we do. And there's valid places for all those different kinds of approaches and ways of doing that. But I've found that just with our particular ways of working, what seems to work better is not that. We're going to dig into a meaty article about something that's pretty specific, that's written by experts for experts, and then we're going to connect it with the other things we've been talking about in class, and we're going to get up out of our seats and map the article on the board. Some people will be looking at images, some people will be doing other kinds of work, and so our classrooms look really dynamic, because they are pretty dynamic, and that's a strength for us. Doesn't work for everybody. You can't do it with 300 students, surely. Or maybe you can! I taught a 110-student architecture survey at UNC when I was a grad student, and I made them get up out of their seats, but it was a challenge. So, that's about the most [students] I've [taught]. But making them really wrestle with the materials at a higher level, and not think of art history as something where you've done it if you've done what we all don't actually do when we're doing what we do. So, that's another way that we put it: we teach our students the kind of art history we do when we do our scholarship, as opposed to teaching them the entry point into that that we were taught (which worked for us, obviously). So the idea is always to have the classroom be a space where they can discover what those complexities are, and then they can reject them or choose amongst them, but we tend to find that students who are getting a little bit intellectually bored in other classes really are drawn by that, especially.

RT: So you found this really productive niche, right? And I can see, just listening to you describe it, that there's a tight connection between your scholarship, the intellectual rigor of your classes, but then also the student enthusiasm, the hanging out and having parties with the books and the movies and the mocktails and hashtags and all that, that's a whole package. It’s mutually generative. It must be super exciting to be part of it.

KR: We do love it. It sounds very utopic right now, and I think a lot of the time it is. I would say, I am a cranky uncle a lot of the time as well, though [laughs], so I don't want to give the wrong impression that, that it's all sunshine and roses, because it certainly is not. Again, it's helpful in the same way from the more negative side to be so disfavored a discipline. Queer and trans theorists talk about this all the time, that there is actually something to the idea that, that some people pick up on (in ways that is not very good queer theory), just creating another binary construct where it's oppressed and oppressor, pretty straightforward in that way. The “it's fun to be the cool, oppressed person,” can be something that affects us. I think sometimes we do get some students who come from that [perspective]: like, “this is the island of Misfit Toys. I'm going to go hang out with them, because I'm also different, weird, queer,” or any number of other things, and that's not not true. But we also are interested in getting at the ways that can be important as

a jumping-off point to doing something meaningful in the world. Which is, in the end, what we care about the most. So we are also more comfortable letting go of some of the basics that we lose from not doing intro [courses] that way. Because what we're really trying to inculcate is students who want to change the world - for the better. [laughs] I need to say that, right? “Students who want to change the world for the better.” In the end, our students might leave being art historians, they might not. The majority of Elon students are not going to be art historians. But a surprising number have chosen to be, and we're proud of that. That's our job, and we work on that. But we also really care about students who are never going to take another class with us again leaving with a sense that there is hope in working towards a better world. And, inculcating that in terms of why art history matters, I think is a pretty direct line for us. It's not going to be a direct line for everybody, but I kind of wish it was, and I think it is for y'all. That's why I love this podcast, because I think it needs to be a line that more art historians see more clearly.

DH: When you were talking, I was just thinking, “oh my gosh, how fun would it be to teach a seminar called “Art History for Good?” [laughs]

KR: I love it.

RT: You're leading into the next question I want to ask, which is about the way you all, when you were founding the program, the way you were early adopters of this values-driven, decolonized curriculum from the get-go, as far as I can tell, from your program. I'd love to hear more about that initiative and how you were thinking about it when you started it, but also kind of how it's developed. Particularly if we're in a downturn moment - maybe it's fleeting and transitory, which would be great – but how do you maintain that kind of values-driven curriculum, given all the pressures?

KR: [sighs] In a way, I have a bad answer.

RT: I can't wait!

KR: I can't imagine doing it any other way. I think that that is hard to transfer to other schools. I would like to think that I could be helpful to you all and to your listeners in terms of ways that you can take what we're doing and try it, because it's working here, and our numbers are steady / growing. Nobody's looking to get rid of us yet. One reason for that is we're in a private school, and it's not a famous private school. Those two things: public schools and famous private schools, especially if anybody in our government went to them, apparently, are the ones that are being targeted. We are in a state that's doing all kinds of terrible things to the state schools right now – we’re not facing any of those things. So we're definitely in a position of privilege, and one that it wasn't my intention to be in. I love state schools and public education, and I never thought I'd be

saying, “well, it's lucky I'm in this private school.” Yeah. So some of the things that are occurring for us aren't totally transferable. One of the urgent things I'm going to interrupt myself to say is that I think we need to fight pretty hard right now, nationwide, perhaps globally too, but definitely nationwide to support public schools and schools where these kinds of things are happening. I really think that we're at a sort of existential crisis crossroads [laughs], in both the discipline and in academia as a whole. Different things are going to work in different scenarios. I feel very privileged being in a scenario where those things are working right now, and I think that needs to be highlighted.

DH: I'm in a public institution, which has some financial pressures, other things, but I'm in New Jersey. So I have a lot of freedom in [certain] terms and I do feel a responsibility of, “I better use that freedom.” Because other people don't have it.

KR: That's right. That's exactly how I feel about this issue - I have spent my career building a reputation as a gadfly, as somebody whose part-time job is critiquing institutions, challenging disciplines, questioning my administration, that's just always been the way that I can't help but operate. To me, it's just not worth it to continue doing this work if I can't do it in that way in some way. For me, personally, I'm not sure I see the value in laying low for a hopeful future, where you can say whatever you really think later down the road. But I also know that I have privileges that make that possible, as well as a personality that makes it impossible not to. [laughs] Not to say I haven't had some moments of cowardice in my own life and career, but I just don't think they're worth it. Originally, the way that I developed the program here was from a more disciplinary perspective. I'm going to these great schools with great art historians, and then when they go into the classroom, what they teach, or the way they've structured their curriculum, is the same as it was when they went to college, and why? Maybe we'll fall flat on our faces, but I know that we could do better, or we could do differently, and differently isn't always better, but at least we can try. So getting rid of survey courses and replacing them with global thematic courses was part of that. We have very broad course descriptions on purpose so that people can teach the courses a bunch of different ways. And we push the expertise of contingent faculty as being something that our students can really benefit from. That's all disciplinary, right? That's all coming straight from art history. I think carrying it on is coming through my desire to wonder why museums that might be on fire, literally, still care if somebody comes into the space and puts some washable fingerprints on a case – to say, we should watch out for the fire that's going to consume this museum. You know – there is no art history on a dead planet, there's no valid art history under fascism, right? All of these different ways of thinking about what's happening in the current moment are in the classroom for us as subject matter, but they're in there because we want our students to care about those things, and because we care about those things, and we can't go through the semester going “doo-do-do-do-do,” like – I guess I'm going to teach, 19th-century

photography and not think about how generative AI is making images of people dropping poop on protesters in the street. Because they're connected.

RT: Given your articulation of the intellectual, values-driven, personal commitment you're making: What's next for you all? I'm really curious to know what you think you might do in these circumstances. Are you imagining new courses, or you said thinking about another hire, if you can get folks to agree, or…?

KR: We have been asking for another hire for a very long time. We actually came the closest we've come in a while last year, and then the provost frosted a bunch of lines, not all the lines, but a bunch of them. We've been trying to get a third person. We desperately need a third person in terms of a human body able to teach and teach consistently. Those things make a big difference. If the institution is saying what matters is enrollment and efficiencies and number of majors, it's very hard to do that when two-thirds of the people [students] encounter change all the time. It's not impossible, and we've had some amazing contingent faculty pull that off. But consistency makes a huge difference and so we're always pushing for that. It's exhausting, honestly, how much we have to keep pushing for that when the return on investment (I hate that phrase but others don't!) is so clear. We're so cheap, right? Art history is cheap. We don't cost a lot of money to maintain, and we more than make up for the money that we cost in the number of students that we can teach from across the campus. Pushing against that challenge is important. Hiring a third person also would allow us to make our offerings more "consistently inconsistent," is the phrase I like to say – to push our curriculum further. We are both white people who are heavily trained in Euro-American art historical standards, and that is not helpful. We are luckily also people who work in other areas and care about other areas and try and hire as many contingent faculty as we can to connect even more strongly with those areas of expertise, but that's not the right way to do it. So I think that's important. Our institutional ship is holding right now but I think that maybe… [sighs].

RT: Do you have any dream projects that you wish you could accomplish in an ideal world, if you're the queen of the universe? That might bleed into our last question, Deborah.

DH: We can open it up to the last question. The last question we're asking everyone is, "what do you think the future of art history is?" You know, just that little question. But also, "are there actions we can take now to ensure the best outcomes for our field?" You can answer that in, like, what you think's going to happen, or what you wish would happen, or what you wish would happen for your program, so [you can] incorporate all of those things.

KR: Definitely I wish we could hire one full-time art historian and somebody to replace the person who no longer works for us running the university collections. Staffing is always our biggest

concern, all the time. We've found ways to have everything else we want, but I want someone to challenge me, honestly, on what must now be old-fashioned ideas.[laughs] I'm the old guy in the department – in the art history program – and I want to be challenged by new ideas and new approaches more than I am being now. I would love that, and I think that that's an important way to be thinking about the future. I see a lot of students who are particularly interested in museums and sometimes library sciences, and those numbers, as you've noticed in prior podcasts, haven't been going down. That seems to be a rich way. I've heard you talk about the way that museums are continuing to draw, and maybe even drawing more people, but art history itself is being denigrated. And I see that, too. I think maybe as we teach those aspects of our field, like museums and archival work, research approaches, from a more decolonizing perspective, hopefully those institutions will start to transform into something new and unexpected, or even maybe be replaced (I know this is a hot take), by something different that does something closer still to the ideal. So, I was thinking if my ideal gender future is no gender, just you and me doing your own thing, separately, together, working for and with all of the members of our community without trying to pin anyone down to one label or identity. Then maybe that's also my future art history ideal. That rather than have these silos, divisions, heavily concentrated resources going primarily to the already privileged few, these canons that seem to only work as gatekeeping rather than rigor, that we have a broad open field of deep inquiry and a mixed bag of skills that we hone on a bunch of different things [in order] to get to where no one's art and no one's art history isn't studied, no one's history isn't studied, can't be foregrounded, isn't valued. And where any good question from anywhere is worth pursuing, and that we know those questions come from everywhere. I sometimes say to my methods class that if they do decolonization right as a method, our class actually ends there. It would dissolve or transmogrify into something entirely other, perhaps unrecognizable as a class in a program in a department in a college in a university, right? All of those things could happen in this really wonderful way, and usually they (as we're doing right now) laugh and shake our heads, sit in a minute thinking about that and how it could be great. And then we get back to business. But I mean it, so utopically! I think if we do it right, it has to all become something else, not this. And we need to be able to imagine that "otherwise," a kind of work of transformation. The one fear I have about that notion – because obviously I'm a utopic thinker, you can tell that from what I'm saying – is that sometimes that's when we get co-opted. Sometimes that's when the "little engine that could" just disappears, because it's not being used anymore in a meaningful way. But I still have that hope that the future of art history is not going to be whittled down to the vision of fragmented mechanistic, transactional unlearning being pushed by both big tech and some people in our government, precisely because they fear it and they can't profit off of us. I think that more expansive vision is the one that I'm looking for. So how we get there is tricky, because how do we get there without dissolving in a way that's bad?

RT: Exactly. In my head, I'm thinking, I'm more of a structures than a utopian person, so maybe we're the ideal team. What do we have to do? How do we get there? What are the systems that would allow us to be comprehensive in the way you're describing, but also, visible and secure as a discipline? I don't know, I have no idea, but it's fascinating to think about.

KR: I think we need to be able to think about it to get there, right? If we just keep doing what we've been doing, we're not going to get there, because that's not heading there in that way. But also, the only time I get territorial academically at all is when these big departments that I think are going to last because of the way people see them, like English or History. In a way, we put ourselves (not on purpose, that wasn't our goal) in a department that's not very likely to get closed down anytime soon. So that's good. The way that the historians, the geographers, and the art historians are really trying to work together and develop something unique together, is not dissimilar to how we do it in WGSS, for instance. That may be a way to get at it. The trick is the way that people are like “now I do art history,” and you're like, “not exactly” - right? So, that's tricky. Interdisciplinary, larger structures might be the way to get at it, but how do you do that without losing what we're really good at that other people aren't?

DH: I feel like your specific story does have a lesson, which is that [you have the] bigger institutional house, that thing that is safe, whether that's History and Geography, or Humanities institutes in general, but then you have your room of your own. You have that little white house. You have that visibility. It's the best of both, in a way. How do you bring yourself [together] with other people, do that kind of collaborative work, have that safe, larger home, but still keep the space of your own that shows why art history matters? I really think that in some ways, that's what we've been struggling with in our conversations with people - this idea of we need to be interdisciplinary, but then how do we not just disappear in that interdisciplinarity?

KR: We have always been, on some level, interdisciplinary as a discipline, sometimes more multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. This sounds terrible! And maybe I don’t mean it, but it's almost the way that other people view [art history] that creates the problem, rather than the way that we've viewed it. That's one of the strengths that we've had as art historians, is that we recognize you have to balance specific skills and techniques and methodologies and ways of looking, with these other things that you also have to get to know pretty well to do well. Especially in an age where expertise is less and less positively viewed. That is a real struggle. How do we not just end up so general as to be useless.

But I think it's worth fighting for. I think I have had times in my life where I'm not sure I would have thought art history was worth fighting for. I definitely think a better world is worth fighting for, but I

feel like – just like in all of my life, they're connected! I feel like art history is worth fighting for because it's part of the better world that's worth fighting for.

RT: That might be our ending point, right? Our takeaway, our hashtag moment.

DH: Absolutely, I agree. Thank you so much, this has been such a wonderful conversation.

RT: Yes, Kirstin, you give us so much to think about, it's been terrific.

KR: Well, the pleasure's been all mine. Thank you so much for inviting me. I feel honored to be here.

DH: Thank you.