

VIEW to the U transcribed
Season 5: Checking in with Profs; Episode #3
Professor John Paul Ricco
Department of Visual Studies
U of T Mississauga

[intro music fades in and out]

John Paul Ricco (JPR):

I mean, I do think, and maybe this speaks to in general the value of art in all of its various forms, which is that it is probably our principle and most developed way of being attuned to the world and to be perceptive, and to try to register and record those perceptions and to really take stock and also to think about how to reshape that, other forms that might take. So, I think it plays an incredibly important role and that it's a moment when people are looking around and really being interested again. And what about art? What about writing? What about the humanities? That's been noted all along. They really are such a source of sustenance, but more than that.

[theme music fades in]

Carla DeMarco (CD): The value of art in the time of social upheaval

Hello and welcome to *VIEW to the U: An eye on UTM research*.
I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga.

VIEW to the U is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs, and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM. We're back for the home edition.

Bear with me as the sound quality might not be as clear as it has been in the past. The next few episodes – or maybe next several episodes depending on the duration of the physical distancing – is meant to be a brief check-in with faculty members from various departments at U of T Mississauga to find out how their research might be shifting, or how their focus might relate to the new reality of COVID-19, and how they are managing in this era of physical distancing.

In this episode I chat with Professor John Paul Ricco in UTM's Department of Visual Studies about his art & art history research, and also about how past health crises have shaped art movements. We also talk about some of the ways in which this current pandemic may influence artists now and in creations to come, and what kinds of things John Paul is doing in this time of solitude.

[theme music fades out]

John Paul is an art historian and queer theorist whose interdisciplinary research, teaching and writing draws connections between late-twentieth-century and contemporary art and architecture;

continental philosophy; and issues of gender and sexuality, bodies and pleasures, pornography and eroticism.

He graduated from New York University where he majored in art history and minored in Medieval and Renaissance Studies. After a couple of years lecturing for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, John Paul went on to complete a PhD in the Theory, Historiography and Criticism of Art History at the University of Chicago. During his doctoral studies at Chicago, Ricco was a Graduate Exchange Scholar in the School of Architecture at Princeton University.

As a young scholar in the early-1990s, John Paul contributed to the formation of three newly emerging fields of study: Gay and Lesbian Art History, Visual Culture, and Queer Theory, and he was one of the first scholars to bring questions of space, geography and architecture to bear upon the discourses of queer theory and the politics of AIDS.

John Paul joined the Visual Studies department at UTM in 2006.

CD: First and foremost, I just wonder how are you doing, John?

JPR: Yeah, I'm doing fine. Thanks for asking. I've been saying that summer mode came earlier this year, in that I feel as though to a large extent, I've been able to transition into that pace and rhythm that I'm used to in the summer, a month or two earlier. It's been disruptive in other ways of course, but that's helped just to put myself back in that frame of mind. And that has helped with the kind of day to day. How about you?

CD: You know it's a new ... People keep tossing around "new normal," "new reality." Work has been relatively busy so I've got that going on and so I think being busy has helped. Because I was thinking about this too, just in reviewing some of the material you sent, but also just something I've been thinking about and like how much of our lives are defined by work and by the work that we do. And so, being busy as helped, but also thinking about how it's the artists that are seeing some of us through this time. I feel like the music that's been coming out and people live streaming, I've seen musicians that normally I don't get a chance to get out to see very much, but they've been doing all this live streaming on Instagram and Facebook and there's just this outpouring. And I think it's the artists who are helping us through this and they're the ones who usually, the funding's cut or they're living off very meager means and they're the ones who are the most giving with their time and their creative skills.

JPR: It's so true. And it really is a lesson and hopefully that lesson will be taken, and something will be done with it going forward. The joke is always that when capitalism collapses, as it has done, socialism comes to save you. And the same thing when I don't know what you want to call it, when your social affective world feels like it's imploding, art and aesthetics are there to save you. There's some way in which these are the things that ... And, of course, they're related, the socialism and the aesthetics, in that they're both committed to thinking being together, and the form that that can take.

JPR: In the most general terms, my work is about the relationship between art and ethics and that's a relationship that I understand as mutually co-determining. So, there's a way in which there is an aesthetic basis to ethical rapport and relation and that there's a way in which art is one of the principle means by which we can stage the ethical encounter and being and sharing in the world together.

So, I think about them in this kind of back and forth relationship. And in my second book, *The Decision Between Us*, which is subtitled *Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes*. Part of my intervention within art and art historical discourse was to move from objects and things to scenes. That is to spaces of ethical sociality that take on various art or aesthetic forms. So, right now the phrase social distancing is taken to be an oxymoron. People think, well social and distancing are basically incompatible, but I theorize the social, including in this book, *The Decision Between Us*, as structured, always structured by distancing and separation. That you really can't have a sociality unless you have difference, unless you have some space between things. That's the space in which something like the social can happen, but when I'm talking about the separation, I'm always just talking about it as a shared separation because just as much as the social is structured in terms of separation, the social is also structured and gets enacted through the sharing of that separation.

And so shared separation, this kind of hybrid term, again, that brings together two seemingly opposite concepts or notions is one that is trying to carve out a space that is neither that of a kind of unified coalescence or a fusion of things, nor a kind of strict isolation. And I just have to think that in the current situation, this is what we're called upon to think about, to think about how in our solitude we are also able to find ways of connecting. But I don't think that this is only a condition of the present moment and policies of social distancing and self-isolation, but it really is fundamental to what it means to be a social being and an ethical subject, right?

That is to constantly negotiate the very question of the ethical and even the political, is the question of how to deal with that separation. Separation is there regardless, but how do you do with that and do you kind of sustain it together to keep that open, that space open for possibility, for difference, for a sense of freedom? Or do you want to shut it down and say we're all the same, or kind of explode it out into an atomized sense of everyone is different and everyone's in their own pots. So, this is trying to open up space between those two, right? Between the kind of fusion and isolation.

CD: I know that you have thought this quite a bit, but if you can talk about maybe other large scale upheavals that have happened in the past that have sparked great art and creativity, perhaps some kind of movement you can point to that emerged in response to a crisis.

JPR: Yeah. Well, of course, the one that I'm most familiar with and the one that I've actually spent a fair amount of time and work thinking about and working through is the AIDS pandemic. The first few years of the AIDS pandemic coincided with my undergraduate university education and by 1990 I was in grad school, and at that point we were at what was considered sort of the peak of the AIDS crisis and I was very much involved in

AIDS activism, but I was also exploring ways in which contemporary artists were also trying to contend, maybe not so much in a political activist way, but certainly on the register of the aesthetic. And, so for instance, while I was pursuing my PhD, I was also curating contemporary art exhibitions and one in particular which took place in Chicago in 1996 was entitled *Disappeared*. And that was an exhibition that brought together about eight contemporary artists around the question of the politics of representation in relationship to AIDS. And disappeared was both a word used to refer to the disappearance through deaths or just social political erasure of so many people, so many lives, so many bodies.

JPR: But it also was a way for me to start to develop a theory of what I call the disappeared aesthetics, which would be art that could respond to loss through an aesthetic perceptionable register, that seemed as though there was nothing there, as though the content had disappeared. So, I was really struck by Derek Jarman, the British filmmaker's last film, which was called *Blue*, which was a monochromatic screen. That's what you saw. There was a soundtrack that accompanied that. He made that film while he was suffering from AIDS, which rendered him blind.

And so, he really took on the proposition of what does it mean to be a visual artist, not be able to see and yet still be able to produce work. And so, he made this beautiful 73-minute monochromatic blue film. And so, that was in the show and there were other works in the show that were also dealing with color and even the monochromatic in ways that, as one of the artists said, on the night of the opening, "Gosh, if anyone walked in here and they didn't know what this exhibition was about, they might think that it's just an exhibition of minimalist art." And that's because this was art that was deliberately trying to say something about the unrepresentability of AIDS and working against other current impulses to document, put a face on AIDS, and so forth, and instead to really talk about how difficult it is to really capture it, but at the same time not to give up on the project of making art.

CD: That is very interesting because it does sort of make me think, and again, I know these are two different viruses, but just that people have spoken about, say COVID-19, in terms of it actually being an entity, but really, it is invisible as well and I find that an interesting parallel.

JPR: That's right, because it's often ... This is, I think, one of the most interesting things that art can help us contend with is exactly those things that cannot be seen or not so readily seen. And what we do with that difficulty, what we do with that problem. And of course, typically, conventionally, the impulse is to, that's one definition of art and representation, to render visible that which is otherwise invisible, right? But there is a whole nother strand of modern and contemporary art that has actually said, "That which is invisible, we should present or show the degree to which it is invisible." Which is a very different kind of artistic proposition, right? Which is basically to present the invisibility of the invisible rather than render it visible. And that's what they were doing, right? That's what the artists were doing in this show, really remarkable works.

But you know, there was another artist, he wasn't in the show, but his work was very much part of the inspiration for it, and that was Felix Gonzalez-Torres. And at the time, in the early '90s, he was doing these installations in galleries of piles of candy, ordinary, generic, mass produced, individually wrapped pieces of candy. And the premise was that when you encountered the pile of candy, you could take a piece of candy. What you then did with that was really part of what I mean by this kind of ethical decision around the aesthetic thing, right? Which in this case was just an ordinary piece of candy. At a time, at the peak of the AIDS crisis when there were so many prohibitions against physical contact, let alone consuming things orally, putting something into your mouth and taking the hard candy and sucking on that candy and this delicious sweet.

JPR: The work was inviting audience to transgress these prohibitions and I think it's the same thing today. We can imagine art being made in the midst, and in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, that takes up this prohibition of physical proximity, touching and contact, and uses that as the means to kind of explore what it means to be in physical proximity, to have contact and how art can kind of stage that and enable people to engage with that, perform that, enact that.

CD: And I think another parallel, and I don't know if you really want to get into this, there was a lot of homophobia that came about when the AIDS crisis was happening, and I now see a lot of racism happening because of this latest crisis. And I don't know, it sort of still takes me by surprise how awful people can be, I guess.

JPR: Truly, I mean, again, this impulse that still prevails to stigmatize, to scape goat, it's what I meant, in part, by the impulse to put a face on something like a virus. Why would we want to do that? The virus is this non-living entity, in fact, it is some kind of a lower than biological form, certainly is far from the anthropological. And so, it should not be anthropomorphized or rendered in some kind of familiar sort of social identity category of one sort or another, whether that's AIDS or COVID, or whatever. But there is this tendency, often, to want to do that, to want to portray the virus. And in doing so you really then create all the sense of inclusion and exclusion and othering, and with that vilifying and so forth.

CD: Absolutely. And so, based on your knowledge of art and art movements, and again, I'm not asking you to be a fortune teller, but I was just wondering if you have some sort of sense of what kind of work or art do you think might come out of this? As we were talking about the social distancing and the enforced solitude, how this isolation might be impacting either sparking or suppressing artist's inspiration?

JPR: The way I see it, the social is thoroughly aesthetic. What do I mean by this? I mean that the social is aesthetic to the extent that the social is always about the relation between things and bodies, and places. So, that we can think about the composition of the social to use an aesthetic term. We can also talk about the social as the very question of how to draw lines of connection and separation between people, places and things. And so, then we're talking about contours and outlines, things like silhouettes and so I think that there's a way in which the current mandate to keep six feet apart from each other ... I mean, I

think it's as much an aesthetic proposition as it is epidemiological, meaning that there's this interesting, what we were talking about earlier, about the visible and invisible. There's this kind of way by which everyone is now measuring both visibly and invisibly the space between what I'm calling the space of separation.

And as we move through the city, for instance, taking the measure of our social proximity and distance from others. I think one of the things that has happened, in the midst of this, is that there's developed a whole new awareness of ourselves in the world and with others. I mean, some of that might feel kind of paranoid and anxiety provoking, but there are other ways in which it could be more positive. It could really be a way of thinking about the fact that yes, we are always in the world with others in proximity. And that really is the terrain for not just the ethical but political. And then, of course, in being in a world and with others, we also have a keen sense of what it means to be in the world without others because the streets are at the same time so much more empty.

JPR: So, I just think that there is right now this sort of entire choreography happening of moving bodies on the streets and in the parts of cities, yeah, but without any kind of master choreographer or score, it's completely improvised. It's this mutual kind of acknowledgement and this flux and flow with these adjustments and these detours, people zigzagging. I find myself cutting across from one side of the street to the other and it's not a dismissal of the other person that you're approaching. It's an acknowledgement of them and giving them space and allowing them to make their way and you pass. It's kind of remarkable, I think, actually. One of the other things, more specifically, that I think could come out of this is art about touch and art about trust, and the relationship between touch and trust. And I have to say in the last couple of weeks I've returned to a paper that I never fully developed and finalized and published.

It was actually my job talk here in 2006 and it was called "Touching Trust and Trusting Touch." And it was all about, both from a philosophical level and a contemporary art context, thinking about the relationship between touch and trust. So, I'm going back to that paper and I'm going ... I've been working on it over the last few weeks and I really hope to publish it soon, but that was about art since 1945 that takes up the tactile, which is interesting within visual art because, of course, it's another perceptual modality and sense other than sight. And so, I don't know, and thinking ahead, of course I'm an art historian in art, so we always want to think back as to the genealogy of where we might be headed.

And I think about a couple artists, I think about, for instance, Marina Abramovic and in 1977 she did this infamous piece called "Imponderabilia" where she and her partner stand in a very narrow doorway that's the entrance to an art gallery on either side of the threshold, naked, facing each other and everyone who wants to enter the gallery or leave the gallery would have to pass through this very narrow passage between their two bodies.

I'm just saying that COVID with all of this concern and thinking about proximity and touch and distance may have us looking back on art of the past and seeing it in a different

way. And then the other piece from the recent art historical past that I would mention briefly, would be Vito Acconci's "Following Piece" in '69. And what did he do there? He went out, this was while he was in New York City. He would go out into the streets of New York and follow a stranger and have this documented photographically and through maps, and so forth. And he would just stay a certain distance from that person in order to follow them without being noticed until he could not follow them any longer. Say if they went into a building that he couldn't access or so forth, right? So, this is again looking back art historically, there are artists who have thought about the physical proximity of bodies within the everyday and within the city and walking behind someone. And I think we're all kind of performing following these today on the streets of cities like Toronto.

CD: But I also like what you're describing just in that it's something else that I think a lot of us have been thinking about and it's just we've been given this time, and again, maybe this enforced solitude, but just to return to some ideas that maybe, like you said, you're going back to this paper that you hadn't thought of in a while. I think that there's this sort of introspection and reflection happening on ideas that we'd thought about in the past, that we're now having the time to maybe ponder about a little bit more and tease them out. And I think that's kind of a gift right now.

JPR: Yeah. I couldn't agree more. And I think what you were referring to earlier as in terms of the kind of output that musicians and others, right? I mean, I think we can't help but, that if you have the material means, that what has dropped away is a lot of what I think going forward, we will look back on and understand as extraneous and not necessary. The things that kind of accumulated in our days and weeks and sometimes maybe encumbered the work or the thinking.

If there's a kind of reduction, if there's a clearing that allows for more focus. Because I think it's without question that what I'm seeing is not a kind of unemployed, not in the sense of people having lost their jobs, which is totally tragic, but not this kind of, I don't know what to do with myself and I'm just at a loss for it, right? But amongst those who do have a vocation, the ability to really focus on that. And I think people are really taking the time and using the opportunity to do something that isn't work necessarily, that isn't like hyper productive, but nonetheless is very fulfilling, and...

CD: Yeah. And so, then this sort of then ties into my next question and you've touched on it a little bit, but I'm just wondering what kinds of things that you've been incorporating in your own life in this era of physical distancing or any successful coping strategies that you'd like to share?

JPR: Well, in part my answer might sound a little bit boring because I might sound like same old, same old. But again, this has been a real opportunity for me to read, and to read things that I haven't had a chance to, or to go back to things. But also, it's actually been a really great time for me to write and to write in response to the pandemic. And so, I suppose, I mean someone might say, "Well, that's one of the ways in which you're coping, through writing." Maybe it's having that positive effect, but it's certainly, it's become an impulse for me. And I've written six or seven short essays in response. Those

first go up on my professional blog unbecoming community. Three of the first were gathered as a single contribution on my part to a collection that the UofT Press, through its journal *Topia* published online, which is a great collection. One of the first collections out there, by in this case, academics teaching in Canada, in response to the pandemic.

And a fourth just appeared yesterday in a publication that the Blackwood Gallery that UTM publishes, part of their SDUK, Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge Broadsheet Series, which the Blackwood launched expressly in response to the pandemic and in order to support artists, to put money in artists' hands, to pay them for their contributions. But then they also asked a few of us salaried professors at the university, who were not going to get paid, to write short pieces. And so, I have a piece in the first of the two issues that they're going to be publishing, both of which are called *Tilting* because there's this sense that the world has kind of tilted, but maybe both in a positive and a negative sense.

But here's one of the other things that's happened. I have two colleagues, who along with a few others are part of this reading group that I've been running now for three years, we're going into our fourth year, and it's dedicated to the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. And with Victor Li and Philippe Theophanidis, the three of us have had, for almost two months now, almost a daily email correspondence. And not just like checking in and chitchatting and so forth, but these real serious, sustained conversations, focusing on difficult concepts, responding to Agamben's ongoing written responses, himself, to the pandemic, doing readings across texts together.

JPR: We've been friends, we're colleagues, but this never happened before. We did not have this kind of almost daily, week-in and week-long, week-on-end, kind of thing and it's been marvelous. We all feel that way. The three of us feel like we really, something has happened because of this and we just got this thing going and it continued right to this morning. Philippe already read the piece in *Tilted* that I published there, and was responding to that and so it's just this real kind of exchange back and forth.

CD: Yeah. And that's something I have been witnessing in my own experience connecting with people. It makes it seem more valuable.

JPR: We are more, ironically, more present in each other's lives, daily, and several times during the day...And it's just, they've been so rich.

CD: That is great. I just wondered if there are any books or music or movies or any online resources that have been providing you with some comforting diversions that you might want to recommend?

JPR: Yeah. I can mention a couple. One, would be, for really trying to figure out, what I was calling earlier in terms of art, the genealogy of our present moment and really help in thinking about questions of public health and social medicine and the political. I've been returning to some of the lectures and essays and interviews by Michel Foucault, from the late 1970s and early '80s. And what you realize there in reading Foucault who was such

an archivist, he really read those 18th century treatises and tracks, is that the public health and medical systems of today were established back then. It's really remarkable. We are still living that history. And then from those like larger systems to a slightly smaller scale on, in terms of the social and the affective, which is more in line with some of the stuff that I was talking about in terms of my own work, early on in our conversation.

I've been reading really quite slowly, almost chapter by chapter, one at a time, Ann Dufourmantelle's beautiful poetic and philosophical book entitled *In Praise of Risk*. She's a beautiful writer and she's very challenging. She argues that all of those relations that we have with others and with the world that generate negative affects what would be called negative effects. The things that often lead us to want to protect ourselves against them, to securitize. She argues that those are exactly the things that we should embrace, and why? Because she says that its existence exactly that we risk as the living beings that we are. Right? So, the risk for her is to the source of our sense of being alive and to avoid that is to avoid the sheer kind of force of living. Wonderful short, each chapter's three or four pages and really beautiful.

And then, finally on a level that might be a little bit more on the personal, it's the short essay by Catherine Malabou. And she wrote in response to the policy of self-isolation. And this is an essay that you published in the journal, it's the online version of *Critical Inquiry*, and her essay is called "To Quarantine from Quarantine." And basically, what she argues is that in the sea that we all live in now, what she calls the sea of isolation from the social, we need to find ways to create islands of solitude. So, hence her notion of a quarantine in the quarantine. And so, she's looking to Rousseau and she's looking to Daniel Defoe's famous novel *Robinson Crusoe* in order to think about these islands of solitude that we can create within the sea of isolation. So, again, this important distinction between solitude and isolation. There's one other thing that I can mention, and this is really less in terms of a comforting diversion and it's actually this article that will appear in the April 27th issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, but that I found yesterday on their website.

JPR: And actually, it's one of those articles that gives you the option to read it or to listen to it being read. And they have such excellent readers at the *New Yorker* and in this case, I would definitely recommend listening to, it takes about 35 minutes. The article is by Rivka Galchen, of their regular contributors. It's titled *A New Doctor Faces the Coronavirus in Queens*. And I have to say, of all the articles and all the reporting on the coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic, that I've encountered, none compares to this. There's something about this reporting, there's something about this narration, there's something about the story she tells, in its detail following ... It's all structured around this one 29-year-old really young, new doctor in New York City. And it rendered this situation more vivid, for me, than anything I've ... And it's not easy to listen to at times because the stories are difficult, but all the more important I think, because there's something of the reality that comes through. I think it's award-winning journalism. It's fantastic. And so, I just listened to it yesterday evening and wow, really-

CD: Stopped you in your tracks, hey?

JPR: Yes. I mean, I learned a lot. I really got a sense of this is something new. This is something different. I mean, I think it's like what I was saying earlier about the AIDS crisis, really, really hard to grasp, really hard to represent because it's multidimensional and this did a very good job of presenting that.

CD: Yeah. Oh wow. That sounds amazing. Okay, I've got that noted down. John, I just want to thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today and tell me about your work and what you're doing to keep you buoyed during this time.

JPR: It's my pleasure. I'm really glad that you invited me and that I had the opportunity to do this. It's really nice to talk with you. Thank you.

[theme music fades in]

CD: I would like to thank everyone for lending me your ears as a “captive” audience for to today’s show.

I would like to thank my guest, Professor John Paul Ricco from UTM’s Department of Visual Studies, for taking the time to chat with me and tell me about his work and for providing a comforting diversion talking about arts, humanities, and how he is spending his time during this time of solitude.

I would like to thank the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research for their support.

I would like to thank the Office of Communications at UTM for their support, in particular Angelia, as well as Vinita Haroun at UofT’s Centre for Research and Innovation Support, who have helped to promote through their social media channels.

Lastly, and as always, thank you to the tuneful Tim Lane for his tracks and support.

Thank you!

[theme music fades out]