The case for progress
by Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D.

In Roof Life, a work that is (and is not) about her parents, grandparents, cooking, photography, buying a house, and selling a Mark Rothko painting, Alpers reflects on what she calls “the psychology of the observer.” The title of her book, she indicates, refers to the discoveries one makes when “looking out from high windows with distant and therefore distinctive views” of the surroundings; the “state of mind such looking represents;” and implications of a life lived under such circumstances, which might include “the finding of and separating into one’s self.”

Roof Life is, by turns, singularly idiosyncratic, frustrating, resonant, elusive, and enlightening. Following her retirement, Alpers moved to New York City. Like the protagonist in Alfred Hitchcock’s movie Rear Window, she began to use binoculars to observe people in other apartments and on the streets below. She once saw a man she thought was about to commit suicide; as Alpers contemplated her next move, someone “stretched out his hand with a container of coffee – as the jumper considered it, the other men rushed in and seized him.” Detachment, she discovered, depends on engagement. “Things seen at a remove,” she writes, appear strange and therefore can “be more clearly seen.” At the same time, “being limited to looking constrains the narrative, but it unleashes the imagination.” And roof life was her perspective – and hers alone.

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Detached Retina: Review of Roof Life
Svetlana Alpers reflects on the psychology of the observer
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In The Roofwalker (1961), the poet Adrienne Rich imagines builders standing on a roof at night, “the wave of darkness about to break on their heads” and the sky “a torn sail where figures pass magnified, shadows on a burning deck.” The narrator feels “like them up there: exposed, larger than life, and due to break my neck.”

Svetlana Alpers associates herself with this sentiment. The only child of Wassily Leontief, a Nobel Laureate in Economics who pioneered computer modeling, and the poet Estelle Marks, Alpers is a Professor Emerita of Art History at the University of California at Berkeley, and one of the most influential art historians of the second half of the twentieth century. A specialist in the Dutch Masters, she has used history, as the novelist A. S. Byatt suggests, “to make things strange.” People should not look at paintings to find the meaning hidden inside them, Alpers has argued; they should take them in to see whether – and how – they match what is happening in the artist’s world.

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reveals, however, that her “curiosity about people is not a rear window affair.” Alpers hears (and presumably overhears) details about the lives of her neighbors in the “slow and dignified” elevator ride up and down nine floors: “a lot can be conveyed in that short time and small space. Loft dwellers become masters of that.”

*Roof Life* has too many recipes and too many pages about posing for photographs. Alpers leaves you wishing she had elaborated on her provocative, and in their own way personal, insights about “looking.” She prefers cookbooks without illustrations, she indicates, so she can imagine how a new dish will look. If you eat something new, she adds, “it is to that sight that you default when you discover the taste.” With photographs, she reminds us, in a passage that gets at the heart of her strange and stimulating book (and her work as an art historian), place matters most: “not I was there, but there was where I was.” It’s a principle worth including in the psychology – and philosophy – of participants and observers.