

IN THE FOREGROUND: CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING
A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

“One’s Own Bifurcations”: Lorraine O’Grady on Both/And Thinking in Art

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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. In this episode, I speak with Lorraine O’Grady, an artist and critic whose installations, performances, and writings address issues of hybridity and Black female subjectivity, particularly the role these have played in the history of modernism. Lorraine discusses her long standing research into the relation of Charles Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval, the omissions of art historical scholarship and intersectional feminism, and the entanglement of personal and social histories in her work.

Lorraine O’Grady

The basic thing that I've taken away from my work is that differences are not the problem. It's the hierarchization of differences, that is the problem.

Caro Fowler

So you're having your first retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum.

Lorraine O’Grady

I have to tell you, it's really funny that I thought that, for me, the big moment would be when I entered the space and I saw all my work together. And that that would be when I would suddenly understand my work at a deeper level, okay?

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O’Grady

But the strangest thing has been happening, is that because I've been getting these questions from various people, it's actually been the questions that are teaching me about my work [laughing]. It's this process that I've been engaging in before the, uh, before the show opens, um, you know, doing the promotional interviews and so on. That has been really very

interesting. And it kind of like raises the whole question of, of what happens to artists, who are, who do not receive that level of attention.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, well, several people have written about, in regard to your work, that, that you're one of the great under-theorized contemporary artists.

Lorraine O'Grady

Yes.

Caro Fowler

Um, and, and so I imagine that in the next year, that is going to radically change.

Lorraine O'Grady

Oh, I hope so. I mean, certainly, we've all done enough work for it to change. The reality is that artists who are discovered early in their careers, are able to develop in a very different way than those who were discovered late because they are being, their work is being developed in relationship to an audience that they can visualize, or that they can interact with, you know?

Caro Fowler

It's the nature of our human condition that we need to be seen and be in dialogue.

Lorraine O'Grady

Yeah, yeah.

Caro Fowler

We're not all made to be hermits to some -

Lorraine O'Grady

And I was, I was, I was a lucky individual in that I didn't really need the dialogue to go through certain levels of the thinking process -

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

- because I could do that through my writing.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

But on the other hand, just seeing the level of questions and what they take, where they are taking me to is, just really been very eye opening and what, you know what the process would have been like if I had had this when I first began.

Caro Fowler

It seems in recent years, a really important event in New York and the art world in general, was Denise Murrell's exhibition *Posing Modernity* –

Lorraine O'Grady

Yeah.

Caro Fowler

– which obviously had a different iteration than at the Musee d'Orsay. But I would love to hear what it was like for you to see that exhibition and, and to see the ways in which these ideas in regard to race and modernity and 19th-century Paris that you raised so long ago in your essay, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity." What it meant to you to see this exhibition and also the reception of it, and to see many of these ideas suddenly gain a wider currency within art history and of art criticism more broadly.

Lorraine O'Grady

I would say that the most interesting part for me to think about is the reception of the show.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And, I mean, look, you know, I think that there is, uh, this is a show and, and my work is also work that kind of exhibits the difference between primary and secondary research.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And that um, basically, very little, if anything, has been learned about, uh, Laure, the you know, the, the model for the maid in Olympia.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

Or, or Jeanne Duval.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

There's been very little primary research. I mean, you know, nobody has, for example, come up with a birth certificate for Jeanne Duval, you know?

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

So the little that is known still about them has been known for a very long time.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And I think that those of us who are going back to this period to look at it and see how it relates to us, are in a position of having just about as much information as there's going to be. But we each have our own, roads to follow, you know? So my path was that I was an artist and I was making work on a character who I needed to learn more about psychologically –

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

– and relationally, between Jean, and what I needed to know more about that relationship and what it implied. And I think that Denise's was – being an art historian – was more interested in a whole other aspect of it, which I didn't even get into at all, which was –

Caro Fowler

Of course.

Lorraine O'Grady

– which was the exploration of how these figures fit into a larger landscape, the intellectual landscape of Paris at that time. Besides being interested in the figures themselves, I was interested in the critical reception of Jeanne, of Jeanne's role in Charles's life and work. Whereas I think that, I think that Denise's was a much wider ranging –

Caro Fowler

Yeah, definitely.

Lorraine O'Grady

– effort, of course, so, so, I can certainly understand the, the sort of eye opening effect that her show had on large sectors of the public –

Caro Fowler

Right.

Lorraine O'Grady

– and in the art world. But it was astonishing to me to have, to see art critics that, you know, one respects and to see that they actually knew almost nothing. [Both laugh] Do you understand?

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

They know nothing.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And as a result, there were some rather ridiculous points of the reception that were really kind of surprising and weighing, you know? That just show how much work we have to do.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

That is the idea that that Denise Murrell had discovered Laure.

Caro Fowler

Right, right.

Lorraine O'Grady

I mean, that's so ridiculous. Laure's been known from the beginning. I mean she was certainly known when I was working on this in the early '90s. So the idea that something as basic as that could be received at such a shallow and uninformed level within very high places of Western scholarship, it was rather surprising.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And it kind of fed back into my own understandings of the reception, the critical reception that I say that I was focused on. I mean, you know, Caro, it's really shocking when you look at the reception of Jeanne Duval overtime. And I was seeing thing, I was seeing things that I didn't even believe. I knew that they were so off the charts unacceptable, and, and I don't know

horrible, horrifying to me. Basically, the entire, the entire reception to Jeanne Duval amongst the, the white critical minds that were attending to her [laughs], which are only, that she was only a function of jobs of life, right?

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And that she was an illustration of how stupidly he had lived his life. So this person is talking about the difference between, between Charles and Jeanne. I see Jeanne, you know, I was working on a piece of, I believe I worked on a piece with Charles and Michael Jackson that I call *The First and the Last of the Modernists* -

Caro Fowler

Mhm. Right.

Lorraine O'Grady

- and someone said that I saw Jeanne as the first of the postmodernists.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

Because I think, I felt that the, that the position that she occupied as an expatriate from the islands to the metropole, and everything about that, just that, that trajectory would be a normal textbook definition of what postmodernism is, you understand?

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

So she was living basically a postmodernist life in Paris. And at the same time, he was living with her. And whatever his racial attitudes may have been, he became part of her life.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And as a result, he lived many of the things that she was living. So all of these indications in his journal indicated, you know, that whatever it was, it was an authentic relationship. And um, and I may be fantasizing, based on my own personal experience living in interracial relationships or based on the experience I've had of other such couples, that he was learning. He was experiencing his own culture, through her eyes, through her life, in a way that he would never ever have known his culture, if he had not had that.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And, as a result, I feel that it was basic - when he met Jeanne, he was still a sort of romantic symbolist.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And it wasn't until after they had been together for a while, that he became what, that he made, what I would say was the shift from romanticism to modernism. He was the first, he's the first modernist, he was the first person to actually see the nature of what modern Paris consisted of, and what modern art consisted of. And so, I feel that it wasn't you know, it wasn't totally due to the relationship. But certainly - without this relationship, I doubt if he could have made as brave and early a transition from romanticism to modernism, do you understand?

Caro Fowler

Yeah. Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

So, to me, this is an extremely important relationship. And it helps me understand modernism, it helps me understand, it helps me understand my mother. [Both laugh] So, you understand, a lot of things. And to have to, have to wade through a century and a half of critical reception of this woman - that is so beside the point, so uninformed. It has just been painful. And I, so what I was living through with Denise Murrell's show was a repetition of that. We're seeing a very heavy price now, I think, for European and American ignorance of the lives of others. And at this point, even more importantly, the scholarship of others.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

Okay. For 50 years now, there has been a steadily building accumulation of scholarship not just in African American studies departments, but in Asian American studies departments, Latino American studies department, gender studies departments, women's studies departments, you name it. And all of this work had been doing, had been going on with basically no one knowing about it, except they know about it, they know about it. They, their work, but they're very supportive. All of these departments, these ethnic studies, departments are very supportive of each other, and um, and very aware of what each other is doing and basically writing to each other in a way. And this is what has resulted in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, of course.

Lorraine O'Grady

And this scholarship - 50 years of scholarship - is something that white scholars have not read a word of.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

Didn't think it was interesting, didn't think it was important. And the real problem is now that, I would say, they're so far behind now that you know they've become uninteresting, irrelevant. [Both laugh]

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

Do you understand?

Caro Fowler

Yeah, of course, of course. Well I mean -

Lorraine O'Grady

There's no, there's no way that scholars of color could be as unaware of them as they are of scholars of color.

Caro Fowler

This gets to another question I had for you about this. The very popular term now: intersectional feminism. I would like to hear and to know how you think about intersectional feminism now, and how you've seen it develop and grow?

Lorraine O'Grady

There, I think, is a move now, amongst Black feminist scholars to complicate that word, The idea that Black women were experiencing feminism in a different way, I think... I'll give you an example. Which is really kind of like, more something that concerns me, because I've been an active feminist. I've been in various organizations. And, and I've always done my work in white feminist organizations.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

I always thought there was a role to play. I'm not sure that I had any success whatsoever in playing it, though. [Both laugh] But, but just at the simplest level, it really wasn't until I think the Guerrilla Girls began using the term -

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

- that it became a term, and that was the term of "women and artists of color." Besides being a woman and artist of color, I was also, I had also earned a living for several years as somebody interpreting statistical data.

Caro Fowler

Right.

Lorraine O'Grady

And so I have a little hobby horse. That is, I don't - that term is a term that totally elides everything of interest of all it needs to totally incomprehensible and inaccurate statistics -

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

- because Black women are being counted both as Blacks and as women.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

So when the Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington went to try to find, to try to upgrade their collection, you know, to include more women of color, they wanted to make a study of what the actual situation was for artists, women artists of color, and they could not find it. They could not find the situation because the statistics were so inaccurate. One of my goals in the remainder of my life is to see that phrase get changed to something like "artists of color and white women [artists]."

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

As simple as that. You end up getting, you end up running into the reluctance of white women to refer to themselves as white.

Caro Fowler

Right.

Lorraine O'Grady

Everybody else could have to refer to themselves as what they are, but white women feel that it doesn't apply to whiteness, that isn't all they are.

Caro Fowler

Right.

Lorraine O'Grady

So we run into that objection, and it's a real problem.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

So I don't know if-, I don't know.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

So that's, so intersectionality is sort of an attempt to deal - to deal with that kind of elision, I think.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And I don't know to what uses the word intersectionality has been put lately. I think there's a kind of like, universalization of the term -

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

- that leaves it sort of like both, both a code word for Black feminism and a phrase that is simultaneously universal that applies to all feminists. So it's the usual sort of problem -

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

- of not sufficiently acknowledging the differences. That's what I would say.

Caro Fowler

I was reading both your and Hilton Als -

Lorraine O'Grady

Yeah.

Caro Fowler

- I was reading his *White Girls*, and then I was reading your writing. And both of you kind of write about Flannery O'Connor, who I hadn't read since high school, and actually, I went back and read some of her work.

Lorraine O'Grady

Caro, did you read *Mystery and Manners*?

Caro Fowler

I did. I did read *Mystery and Manners*.

Lorraine O'Grady

Yeah, I would say that's kind of probably one of the key documents for understanding minority culture.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

For me, at any rate. It's a document that really describes the role of the artist, the minority artists in a way that one of - it's one of the best analyses that we have of that position, I think.

Caro Fowler

What is it in *Mystery and Manners* that you find... I mean, what is it about Flannery O'Connor's writing? Or what specifically did she articulate in it that is so important to you?

Lorraine O'Grady

Um, well. Flannery was in a situation where she was... Her primary goal was the examination of basically the Roman Catholic vision of salvation, you know.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

That was primarily what she was trying to explore: that moment of grace -

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

- that earned salvation. And although she certainly was a very sophisticated woman, she certainly not-, her life and her horizons were not limited to the South. When it came time to writing fiction, when you have to know more than just cultural information, you have to know personal information. What she found, I think, was that the only lives that she knew intimately other than her own were those of white Protestant southerners.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And so she, if she was going to write, that was what she had to use, because that was what she knew. Basically, defending what she knew was a minority concern.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And, and so... I mean, people may not remember how anti-Catholic the United States was.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs] Of course. I mean, JFK. Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

I mean, it was really a big deal when John F. Kennedy was elected.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

You know, it was a huge deal. Well, I think she was thinking about the position of the minority artist in a way that Black artists and other minority artists in the United States were only able to get to, I think, in the late '60s. And show that whole struggle, the struggle of the minority, or it is pretty, it is pretty keyed into issues of identity and all the rest of it, you know. This is things that one thinks up as humanists' work, you know.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And I've been looking at some abstract art and reading some critics about abstract art. And I tried to think about, like, what they're thinking about, you know?

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And, I mean, you know, the whole basically 'art for art's sake' of Clement Greenberg.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And what that is omitting from the picture of art.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

But I don't want to be, I don't want to be the mirror image of that. I want to find out what it is that abstract art is telling me about myself and about the situation. I want to know what it's capable of doing in terms of our common, what's the common ground that we can find?

Caro Fowler

Beyond Clement Greenberg's kind of neo-Kantianism...

Lorraine O'Grady

You know, I mean, there were certainly a lot of Black artists using abstract art.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And how were they using that, and how did that differ from the way white artists were using Black abstract art? You know, all of that, I think those are all very interesting questions to me.

Caro Fowler

And what have you found in sitting with the work of these abstract artists?

Lorraine O'Grady

Well, you know, the abstract artists that I, who were sort of my age peers, were people like Frank Bowling and Jack Whitten, of course. But they were much more advanced artists than I

was at the time. Not now. [Both laugh] I wouldn't give them that now, but then - yes. So, but they were, it was always a matter of translation, for me.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

In dealing with them. I'm always having to translate, you know. So I mean, there was: to translate across the misogyny.

Caro Fowler

Yeah?

Lorraine O'Grady

Oh my God. And then also to translate aesthetically, across their interest in jazz. They were basically painting to jazz. They were also able, of course, to sort of sneak into whatever worlds were accessible to them, if they were being seen similarly to white abstract artists. But I don't necessarily think they were doing the same thing.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

They were using the same techniques, but for different purposes. And I would say that the thing that you notice about white artists who were exploring the aesthetic possibilities of abstract art, is that they were not so connected to cultural information. They were far more - it was a far more scientific endeavor. We're at this moment, I think... I don't know why, but I think something in your questions was leading me to this kind of thought process here. And that is that, you know, I touched upon the white self-satisfied obliviousness to Black scholarship -

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

- and the price that was being paid for that.

Caro Fowler

What do you think is on the other side of this reckoning for art history then? Because I mean, you know -

Lorraine O'Grady

Well, yeah. I mean, listen -

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Lorraine O'Grady

- I mean, art, art history is very lucky right now. There are many... I mean, I didn't think this would happen. In the early '80s when I was working, I did not imagine, I did not imagine a world where there would be almost enough Black art historians to deal with the large, the increasing numbers of Black artists.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

But there are.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

There are a lot. I mean, my goodness, all over this country they're graduating PhDs in art history.

Caro Fowler

[Laughing]

Lorraine O'Grady

This I didn't, I didn't foresee.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

Because mainly because I didn't perceive Black, as many large numbers of Black students entering into this profession that was so totally white.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

You know? But they did.

Caro Fowler

It's a good time for art history, and transforming.

Lorraine O'Grady

Right. You know, really what has happened - I mean, all we need now is white art historians who are receptive and not defensive.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And white art historians who are willing to make up for a lot of lost time.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

In their discipline to become aware of what it is that Black art has to add to the profession. That, that's all I need, you know [laughing].

Caro Fowler

I think art history will be a very different discipline in 20 years, and for the better.

Lorraine O'Grady

Yeah, I mean, I hope so. I hope so.

Caro Fowler

In some ways, this brings me back to another question I had on the ways in which... you know, one of the large historical questions you've taken on in your research, your research is a challenging of the way in which Egypt in art history, for example, has been associated with the Mediterranean, instead of Africa, for example.

Lorraine O'Grady

Yeah, yeah.

Caro Fowler

And you see this at the Met. I mean, the ways in which you go into the Met and you go right -

Lorraine O'Grady

Right.

Caro Fowler

- to go to Egypt, and then you go left, and you go to the Rockefeller Wing, which also has to do with collection histories and institutional histories... But it, it says something about art history. And so I'm curious to hear more about, you know, the ways in which your own personal histories, and the relationship with your mother and sister in particular, were really important for you in terms of thinking through a historical person such as Jeanne Duvall or Nefertiti. And the ways in which you see the relationship between our personal intimate histories and how

they can't be disentangled from wider historical moments. And so I'd be curious to hear how you think about history within your own practice, and also the ways in which you think about perhaps even your practice and your figurative work as a kind of history painting. Again, thinking about the work you did at the [Isabella Stewart] Gardner [Museum] on the facade, or how do you think about history painting and history within your practice?

Lorraine O'Grady

Well, you know something, this is one of my few hopes, because this is, I would say, the only-, one of the most successful areas of my practice, where I feel like I have made a difference. And, I mean, at the simplest possible level, I don't have to fight that battle of "was Egypt Black or not," you know? [Both laugh] I mean, when I started, nobody was willing to listen to that, you know?

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

So it doesn't seem now that I was being so grandiose or so badly informed that I was comparing my sister to Nefertiti, you know?

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

I mean, I certainly always was quite aware of the difference between their stations in life, right?

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Lorraine O'Grady

You know, that they were hybridized in very different ways, you know.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

Big difference between marriage, politics, and slavery.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

But, but what they represented as hybrid, as the products of hybridity, both culturally and racially, was still comparable, you know? At least to me. But it wasn't to anybody else, at that

moment. So, somebody came through, came to my studio and said, "You're the only person that can vouch for these images." Right?

Caro Fowler

Mm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And that was true at the moment that I made them.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

But, you know, within 8 or 9 years, Martin Bernal was writing his magnum opus, and within, you know, 20 or 30 years, I would say that the discipline of Egyptology itself has rather shifted.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

Or shifted rather remarkably. So now, in my retrospective [at the Brooklyn Museum in spring 2021], *Nefertiti Devonia Evangel-*, I'm sorry, [I mean] the *Miscegenated Family Album* that came out of *Nefertiti Devonia Evangeline*, is going to be exhibited in the Egyptian galleries.

Caro Fowler

Oh, that's wonderful.

Lorraine O'Grady

Isn't it wonderful?

Caro Fowler

That's wonderful, yeah. That's fantastic.

Lorraine O'Grady

I mean, like that, to me is like my, you know... I didn't expect to have any victories.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Lorraine O'Grady

That's a big one, you know?

Caro Fowler

[Continues laughing]

Lorraine O'Grady

That's a big one for me. [Laughs] And I think it's a big one for the culture, too. I really do.

Caro Fowler

Yes.

Lorraine O'Grady

One thing that was curious about that work, was that I found that - you know, I never had the biggest of audiences - but I did find that those were, those parts of the audience that let themselves be known to me, were across every division, every single division of race, culture, age, whatever. The biggest audience that that work ever had, has been women with sisters. The pieces, so crafted between the poles of sibling rivalry in Hebrew worship, right?

Caro Fowler

Yep, yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And everything in between. And you asked me about using history, the way I did... You know, obviously, I was using history to remedy, you know, relationships that were less than perfect between myself and my mother and my sister.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

I was trying to find ways of understanding my situation in my own family.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And it was through this history, through some of these historical associations, that I've been able to understand more. I mean, I'll be honest with you, I learned more about my mother from reading Baudelaire's poetry, several removes as it was even from Jeanne, then I ever learned from my mother.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

You understand? Because he was writing intimately. And my mother, my mother was basically, you know, an early 20th-century woman who was not expressing herself intimately. So I was using this research and this understanding of them through these historical figures, to

understand my own life. That was the engine, that was the engine that was motivating most of it. But then on the other hand, I had also been trained historically. So I mean, I was... I went to a very competitive school before going to college, and it was based on history. I had also been a champion debater at Latin school. And so all of my mother's dreams, for me, had been that I would major in history at Wellesley, and then go to Harvard Law School.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Lorraine O'Grady

And then become the first Black congresswoman.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Lorraine O'Grady

That was her, that was the sort of life pattern that, you know, that she established.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Lorraine O'Grady

And somehow or the other I had gotten, I myself had gotten lost.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

I had gotten lost in my own talents [in history and debate], if you know what I mean. But it wasn't really - she was looking at the world, rather than looking at me.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And so the first thing I did when I got to Wellesley was I changed my major from history to Spanish literature. [Both laugh] And this didn't go over too well, you know. But then, but then when I had-, I was one of the 20 girls on campus who were married and had a baby, I was one of the three or four that had a baby. So I had to get practical.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And so I went to work for the government. But in other words, I'm suggesting that history and the study of history was something that I was trained to do, as well as something that was a personal disposition of mine.

Caro Fowler

I have one final question for you that that might, I don't know, not draw everything together, because that's not really possible with so many threads. But I would like to talk more about your idea of the diptych. As an early modern art historian I like because it is both a formal term, and there's something about the diptych and painting that, you know, historically, often it's been - I mean there, there could be marriage diptychs - so it's conversation. But often it seems to come out of a tradition of prayer, or kind of a way to articulate a conversation with someone who perhaps is or is not listening. But in any case, I appreciate your idea of the diptych. And what I asked you is how you think about it in relationship to a concept that has been important to me, which is this concept of Eve Sedgwick's "besidness." And what I love is - and I'll say, she describes it as, "A wide ranging of desiring, identifying, representing repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping and other relations." And so what I love about this in both of your work is this ability to think either in the diptych or with besidness. Both of them are kind of a means to undo the dualisms of Western philosophy. But also allowing an ambivalence and a kind of a continuing, shifting relationship between multiple terms...

Lorraine O'Grady

I actually think that once you do think in terms of besidness - as Sedgwick's term that she uses - that you don't... it seems to be just absolutely you have to come to understanding that differences - this is the basic thing that I've taken away from my work - that differences are not the problem.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

It's the hierarchization of differences that is the problem.

Caro Fowler

Mm, yeah.

Lorraine O'Grady

And so if you see two unlikes-but-equivalents sitting beside each other on the wall, if you pause long enough, you'll see a conversation happening.

Caro Fowler

Thank you, Lorraine.

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan and Alice Matthews.