

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Art

February 3rd, 2016

## INCONVERSATION

# LORRAINE O'GRADY with Jarrett Earnest

Lorraine O'Grady crashed into the New York art world as *Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire* in 1980, shouting poems and whipping herself to the distinct displeasure of fellow exhibition-goers. In the subsequent thirty-five years, she's created an elaborate and tremendously important body of performances, photos, collages, and writing. Her most famous, and much anthologized, 1992 essay, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," is a staple of feminist art history. She recently had a survey exhibition, *Lorraine O'Grady: Where Margins Become Centers*, at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University; forty photographs from her 1983 performance *Art Is. . .* (where she entered her own float into the African-American Day Parade in Harlem) are on display at the Studio Museum in Harlem through March 6; and her series "Cutting Out the New York Times" (1977/2010) is included in *CUT-UP: Contemporary Collage and Cut-Up Histories Through A Feminist Lens*, at Franklin Street Works in Stamford, Connecticut (through April 3). O'Grady met with Jarrett Earnest to discuss Flannery O'Connor as a philosopher of the margins, emotions in Egyptian sculpture, and the genius of Michael Jackson.

**Jarrett Earnest (Rail):** A lot of your work relates to archives, both in content and form. When you started putting together your own website, were you thinking about it in terms of framing it as an archive?

**Lorraine O'Grady:** I did it because I thought I'd disappeared in many people's minds—Connie Butler being one exception. Connie had been at WAC (Women's Action Coalition) as a young woman, and I was one of the very few women of color who were active in that group. When she later curated the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007) and put me in it, I knew it would be important, I felt I had to be ready. That's when I put the website up; I wanted to make it possible for anyone that was interested to become more engaged. Everything had disappeared from public view, it was all just sitting in the drawers of my file cabinets. I realized that for any of it to be understood I had to include everything: the images, the texts—it had to be

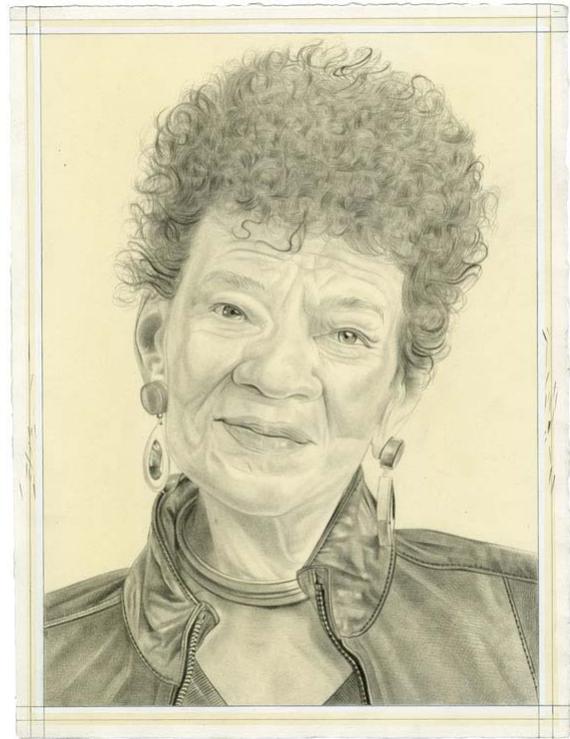
a mini-archive. It's designed to shape my work for the public and be a teaching tool. But it's also meant as a staging for serious research, a start for access to my physical archives at Wellesley. I deliberately built the site to emphasize the connections between text and image—I didn't want people to just look at the pictures. You can't even get to the images without going through text; every link lands you back into text. During my exhibit at the Carpenter Center, I met with art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty's PhD seminar. I think I shocked the grad students when I said, "I would not be here now were it not for my website." But you know, to have just appeared in *WACK!* with *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's* gown, I would have been a one-hit wonder. Having the website up with my other artwork and my writings available would make it more possible for me to be recuperated by a new generation of artists, writers, and curators.

**Rail:** One of the reasons your body of writing is so vital is that it really feels like it has a job to do, creating a context that wasn't otherwise there.

**O'Grady:** Speaking was a demand that the work made on me, and that increasing interactions with others made on me. I learned so much each time I had to find a way to talk about the work.

**Rail:** One thing you've said about the gloves that made up *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's* gown was that they were worn by "women who believed in them." I bring this up because of something Flannery O'Connor wrote that has been on my mind: "Distinctions of belief create distinctions of habit. Distinctions of habit make distinctions of feeling. You don't believe on one side of your head and feel on the other."

**O'Grady:** You noticed the piece on my website about Flannery O'Connor by Guerrilla Girl Alma Thomas? Flannery O'Connor is someone I've read for years—I had a first edition of *Wise Blood* (1952)—



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Taylor Dafoe.



Performance View: Lorraine O'Grady, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* (1980 – 88): Told to swing an incense censer, she stirs sand instead. Photo: Freida Leinwand. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

**Rail:** I did! And it made me wonder if *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* were a *Wise Blood* type character? I think of Motes roving around the South proclaiming the gospel of anti-religion, with his fervor and disillusionment—

**O'Grady:** *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* does speak her mind. Is she a *Wise Blood* character? I don't know, to me she's so much a creature of my own mind—although I do think the reason that I like Flannery is that her mind is similar to mine. And, I did have a period of religiosity—

**Rail:** When was that?

**O'Grady:** When I was a kid. My parents were Jamaican émigrés who helped build the first West Indian Episcopal church in Boston, St. Cyprian's, so all our family traditions were around St. Cyprian's. But it was a very middle-of-the-road Episcopalian church and I preferred a form of worship that was much more "High-Church." So I took myself out of St. Cyprian's and went to Saint John's of Roxbury Crossing, which was staffed by people at the Harvard Divinity School because they couldn't get anyone else—it was this tiny little church. St. Cyp's is still there but St. John's is gone now, destroyed by a fire in the '60s. It was brilliantly formal—the formality of the High Episcopal ritual always appealed to me, it wasn't the belief system. The thing about being Episcopalian is that it's a way of being Christian without worrying too much about what you believe. But I was permanently formed by the aesthetics of that experience, of the rituals, which are a more stately and elegant version of Roman Catholicism. I did *believe* until my mid-twenties, until my sister died, then I stopped believing.

**Rail:** To this day?

**O'Grady:** Well, I don't believe in the Bible or Michelangelo's God, that's for sure. But belief in terms of how things are connected? That's something I'm not sure I've got away from. I've found that if you are attentive, sometimes there are hints of interconnections that, if you follow them, can unconsciously help you get to where you need to go—and perhaps this put me in a place where Flannery O'Connor never felt alien to me. But I don't know that I appreciated her as a minority philosopher until I read an article about her by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" (1975), which alerted me to O'Connor's collection of essays *Mystery and Manners*. I was struck by how much *Mystery and Manners* applied wholesale to those of us who are representing our own experience, and the experience of others, from a point of view that is distinctly different than the majority's. Flannery wrote brilliantly and definitively of the responsibilities and opportunities of that position. I think I underlined every word in that book.



Performance View: Lorraine O'Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum* (1981): Crowd watches Mlle Bourgeoise Noire as she shouts her poem. Photo: Coreen Simpson and Salimah Ali. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

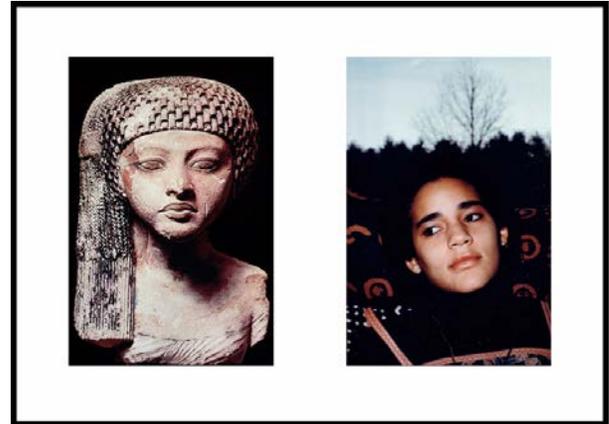
I was one of what the Guerrilla Girls called “gig girls” who did lectures around the country. I ended up doing a gig in Milledgeville, at the College that used to be the old Georgia State College for Women, which Flannery attended. And while I was there I got into a conversation about Flannery with the woman who was chair of the English Department. Before I left, she asked me to write about Flannery for a Festschrift she was editing and I did, as Guerilla Girl Alma Thomas, the person she was inviting, but years later I *had* to put it on my website because I thought it was one of the most important pieces I'd done.

**Rail:** I was grateful you put it up where I could find it, even if it meant it was quietly outing yourself as a Guerrilla Girl. I guess this interview makes it official?

**O'Grady:** What studying Flannery did was make me understand that the work of the minority artist is the same wherever they are in the world: fighting to make their work understood. Flannery had to defend what she was doing, and thank god she understood that she had to defend it. I mean, she was tough! She was not apologetic about any aspect of herself, including her lack of traditional femininity, her position as a Southerner when she went North, or her position as a Catholic down South—she defended those positions completely, and I learned *a lot* from that.

**Rail:** I found the pieces from *Miscegenated Family Album* at the Carpenter Center very moving. There is a reference that it was made as a memorial for your sister who you had a complicated relationship with—could you give me more of the context? Egyptian funerary sculpture is not exactly sentimental—it's not warm and fuzzy—but I think through cropping and pairing you coax out something extremely touching.

**O'Grady:** Not too long after my sister Devonia died, I found myself in Egypt. I was there three or four weeks. It was 1963 and I'd been working for the United States government so I'd made a stop at the Embassy almost as soon as I got off the plane, after several months in Ethiopia. I parked my suitcases there and went to cash my travelers checks at the American Express in the basement of the Nile Hilton. As I was walking from the Embassy to the Hilton across the square, I looked around and I could not believe it—there were so many people who looked like *me*. I had never been anywhere like that before—it had not happened in Boston certainly, and it had not happened in Harlem. Downstairs in the American Express, behind the counter there were three agents, two Egyptian men and a young Egyptian woman, and I got into one of the three lines.



Lorraine O'Grady, “Miscegenated Family Album,” 1994. *Worldly Princesses*. (L, Nefertiti's daughter Merytaten, R: Devonia's Daughter Kimberly.) Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

The lines were filled with Danes and Germans. And there was me. When I got to the counter the young man who'd been speaking perfect English to the person ahead of me immediately started speaking Arabic. I said, "I'm sorry but I don't speak Arabic." He looked surprised and then from the other end of the counter I heard this voice, the young Egyptian woman, say "Oh, she's such a snob!—*she* doesn't speak Arabic!" At that point I knew the resemblance was not in my head, and I began to think more deeply about my general attraction to Egyptian aesthetics and what I'd always felt was a strong resemblance between my sister and Nefertiti.

**Rail:** It is an extremely simple idea: pairing images of Ancient Egyptian sculptures of Nefertiti with photographs of your sister—but the total effect is very complex, emotionally. It's also interesting that that specific moment of Egyptian art, from the reign of Akhenaten, is the only instance you can really say: that looks like a specific, idiosyncratic individual.

**O'Grady:** I essentially became an amateur Egyptologist of the Amarna Period. Akhenaten, with his monotheistic religion, was a total aberration and a threat to the established powers, including the Theban priesthood. After he died, they destroyed all traces of that place. They erased Akhenaten and Nefertiti's names from cartouches throughout the Two Lands. Everything was buried—which is why the Germans could unearth Amarna's sculpture workshops almost intact in the 1890s. The person the priesthood put in charge of destroying Amarna was General Horemheb, the husband of Mutnedjmet—Nefertiti's younger sister. I'd been thinking of the relationship of Mutnedjmet to Nefertiti because the usual images you saw of her were in processions of Nefertiti followed by her six daughters, and then following them at the end would be Mutnedjmet accompanied by two dwarfs. When I realized that it was her husband that destroyed Nefertiti's city and memory, I could imagine how Mutnedjmet might be feeling, and I knew that I wanted to get past that feeling in relation to Devonia. So, my imagined relationship between Nefertiti and Mutnedjmet enabled me to resolve these issues between my sister's memory and myself. Actually, I had good luck with my creative timing because, after 1980 when I put together the "Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline" performance, Egyptology continued to evolve. It discovered that the figure at the end of the processions was probably *not* Mutnedjmet, the wife of Horemheb. But I'd already used her for my own purposes. So there you go!

**Rail:** Given the depth of your meditations on history, how have you noticed the narrative of feminist performance art evolve—how has it been constructed?

**O'Grady:** Well, you know, there were a lot of people doing feminist performance that were not connected to Womanhouse. Black women, Chicanas, women around the globe. To many, much of the early history of feminist performance art—as well as of the feminist movement itself—seemed constructed to foreground the concerns of white, middle-class women. At the time, white women dominated the movement, which seemed driven by two goals: the right to a career outside the home and the right to sexual freedom. But while those goals were valid for them and no doubt benefited other women, they were not universal. If you asked what those goals might

mean to black women who'd never had the right *not* to work, never had the right *not* to be considered sexual objects, you could see the goals might need calibrating. That same calibration was also required for the art that was made or that needed to be made. The attitude to the physical *body* in performance art that's accumulated the largest concentration of scholarship and the most definitive modes of teaching has seemed defined by the white woman's revolt to take off her excessive clothing. That wasn't really most black women's rebellion. When Adrian Piper took her clothes off in *Food for the Spirit* (1971), it seemed a spiritual and psycho-intellectual act—not one about the sexualized body so central to white feminist performance of the time. That's not to say there may not be different ways to talk about the same thing—nudity and dressing up both have to do with sex and self-love. But feminism is a plural noun, and we need all the feminisms and feminist scholarships we can get. The fact is, in some ways the right to *dress up* was closer to the needs of many early black performance artists. The situation is changing a bit now. I think feminism itself, both inside and outside of the academy, has been changing since the early '90s, especially in response to theory around intersectionality, cultural studies, globalization, and so on. I find younger scholars much more aware of these issues than those trained earlier. But it's slow-going. It can still take twenty years for a new idea to take hold and transform the thought patterns of feminists and scholars.

**Rail:** Your famous essay “Olympia’s Maid” was partly about your engagement with the black female nude in your art, attempting to reclaim it as a site of subjectivity—

**O’Grady:** You’re right. I’m so aware that there are things about my work that may seem contradictory. On the one hand, I’ve not been interested in performing nude; on the other, at that time I was one of the few women using the black female nude in my two-dimensional work. What looks like inconsistency on the surface is something I’ve had to come to grips with: when you are the object of irrational contradictions, then you are in a position of having to struggle in contradictory ways. If you are simultaneously being seen as the universal prostitute, and at the same time as the sexless matriarch—the Jezebel and the Mammy—neither of which have anything to do with what you are, then sometimes you have to fight for the right not to be either, and sometimes for the right to be both at once. I kept my clothes on while performing, and sometimes I took them off while making art. That contradiction is all over “Olympia’s Maid,”



Lorraine O'Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum* (1981): Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire beats herself with the whip-that-made-plantations-move. Photo: Coreen Simpson and Salimah Ali. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

where the language can shift mid-sentence and take the opposite stand. But the two arguments don't negate each other, they keep the line of struggle flexible, supple.

**Rail:** "Both/and" instead of "either/or"—it makes me think of your continued use of the diptych as a formal device: they are not alternatives, this *or* that, but this *and* that. You wrote "Olympia's Maid" in 1992 and then a post-script in '94—which is twenty years ago now. How have you seen the questions posed in that essay evolve today?

**O'Grady:** To be honest, "Olympia's Maid" is something I don't know if I've given a serious re-reading over the years. I've been afraid I might have to rewrite it! I can sense that everything has changed and at the same time, nothing has changed. Or rather, I should say that the changes and lack of change have become so much more subtle, so much more difficult to describe and to battle, that it's simultaneously hopeful and frustrating. The obverse and the reverse of the coin have become much better defended now. Those you used to be able to call the victims have become more powerful in taking control of their own lives to the extent the situation allows,

and those you used to be able to call victimizers have become more skilled at declaring nothing is wrong and avoiding the responsibility to change anything, including themselves, so "Olympia's Maid" would be hard to go back to. I can tell that the piece is still alive, people still refer to it and teach it, and it seems nothing has replaced it. Every year, or every other year, there's a brouhaha about the situation of black models in the fashion world, an important nodal point for judging the acceptance of black beauty, and someone will cite "Olympia's Maid." And I do observe changes in the status of blacks in the art world—*Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* herself has been welcomed into the museum. (Of course, this might be seen as the co-opting of black artists and black artwork by the white art world, the usual form of neutralization.) At the same time, it does seem to me that we are still not past the situation where the exception proves the rule. But I am noticing things now that I didn't a few years ago. Up until five years ago I could confidently say that the entry of black artists into the mainstream art world had been safely bracketed: it didn't actually affect any of the theorizing, marketing, or role modeling that was going on; it was safe. I'm not sure when I would say things changed or if they have, or by how much, but I do think the average white student in an MFA program has begun looking over his or her shoulder, is feeling less in control of the discourse, a bit more relativized. I myself won't be fully convinced until the average white male artist is looking as much at David Hammons, and in the same way, as at Jeff Koons for his image of success in the art world. It's really a question of who do you think is important? Who do you want to make yourself like? I think *that* is what determines change.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* (1980 – 88): e voice on tape says: "Mount and straddle tubs of sand, which are now touching. . . face audience." Photo: Freida Leinwand. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

**Rail:** *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* is very beautiful.

**O'Grady:** That's so funny. During Carrie Lambert-Beatty's seminar there were all these pictures of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, and Carrie said "I just can't believe you were forty-five when you did this!" And then, "Art historians always say the women who did this kind of work were so *beautiful*—from Carolee Schneemann and you in the '70s and '80s to Andrea Fraser now." I don't know, I suppose that to do this, to put yourself on display this way, you have to have a certain kind of confidence. Would I have been able to become a performance artist if I didn't think I was attractive enough to receive the gaze? For sure, this is part of some kinds of performance work, though not all. And in some ways I stopped doing performance because I thought I was becoming less attractive. Well perhaps not *less attractive*, but beginning to look different. I'd started performance in 1980, when I was forty-five. By 1983 I was forty-eight and aging was becoming a subtext of my performances whether I liked it or not. I didn't want to have to deal with "aging" when, for me, there were so many more pressing issues to examine. Just by chance, I stopped performing in 1983 because my mother got sick. When I came back in 1988, I was asked by Lowery Sims and Leslie King-Hammond to be in *Art as a Verb*, a landmark exhibit of avant-garde black art. That's when I decided to go to the wall. I also did the last performance of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* for that show. It was a relief to not be looked at.

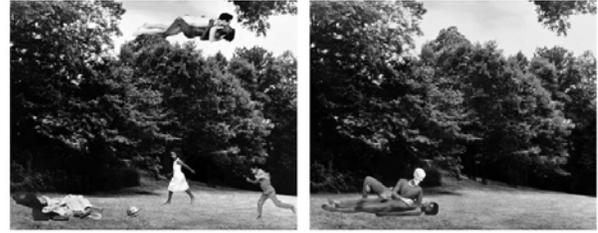
**Rail:** What do you believe art is supposed to do?

**O'Grady:** I'm old-fashioned. I think art's first goal is to remind us that we are human, whatever *that* is. I suppose the politics in my art could be to remind us that we are *all* human. Art doesn't change that much, actually. I've read lots of poetry from Ancient Egypt and Ancient Rome and they talk about the same things poets do today. Is anyone more down and dirty and at the same time more introspective than Catullus? At one point I was a rock critic, and I did an interview with Gregg Allman. To me, Gregg is one of rock's few truly tragic figures. A lot of people are pretending to be tragic, and they are able to make work out of that, but Gregg actually was tragic and to me, he was the best white blues man ever, he really cared about his lyrics. He showed me the black-and-white composition book where he did his writing. He said, "My brother always told me there is nothing new to be said in this world—just different ways of saying the same old thing." This is what it is. Gregg gets it. I don't think the average person who becomes an artist starts off thinking of it as anything other than self-expression. I taught in art schools for thirty years, and if you ask students how old they were when they knew they were artists, most will tell you—"five." Which means they went through adolescence in a totally different way because they were doing everything self-consciously. By the time they get to college they still want to express themselves. That gets educated out of them gradually. "Self-expression" is something that gets tamped down in graduate school in particular—teaching at UC Irvine, I watched people struggling against that, against having to learn how to fit into the market. I don't know that the nature of art itself has changed; I do think the idea of an "art career" has changed.

**Rail:** Do you feel there have been any persistent misunderstandings about you or your work?

**O'Grady:** There may be a failure to see that, no matter how varied in form or content, all my work is surrounding aspects of the same issues and takes a unified approach to them. All of it is connected. The only thing that changes is the medium, each of which

imposes its own rules and perhaps implies different audiences toward which the approach might shift, but the issues remain the same. The inability of people to see the connections between the bodies of work, perhaps due to unfamiliarity with the issues, has been one of the most difficult parts of being an artist for me. One thing that keeps me going is to try and lasso all of this into a single, unique body of work that people will be able to see as that.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Body is the Ground of my Experience" (1991 / 2012). *The Clearing: Or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, N. and Me.* Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

**Rail:** Could you describe your piece *The First and the Last of the Modernists* (2010), a sequence pairing images of Charles Baudelaire with Michael Jackson?

**O'Grady:** You know I taught a course on Baudelaire and Rimbaud for twenty years at SVA. There are many things about Charles that Michael shared, an overpowering father being just one. But if I had to say which of the two was the better in his own art form, I would say Michael was. What shocks people when they see them side-by-side is they think: how can you compare a pop star with an avant-garde poet? When I look at them, I see Michael as the greater genius.

**Rail:** When I looked at those photos of Michael Jackson I can't help but think of him as "suicided by society."

**O'Grady:** The reason for doing the piece was to try and understand why I loved Michael so much. I knew why I loved Charles—that was clear to me. I loved him for his aesthetic courage, for his openness to a changed historic reality, his eccentricity, his relationship to Jeanne Duval. Michael was a very sad and lonely figure; he'd always been sad and always been lonely, but he did the best he could. He's one of the few child prodigies who ever fulfilled his talent so completely as an adult. But on an interpersonal level, he was severely limited. I myself don't believe he actually had sex with any of those boys—I was relieved of that attitude. But I think he was a fool in many ways. He thought children came to him with no agenda, but he didn't seem to realize their parents had multiple agendas. I feel he played out his childhood with those kids in a way that only someone who can do whatever they want, might. He was self-indulgent, a limited person in the way child prodigies often are. You look through history and see that most are not exactly the greatest people.

**Rail:** Through making this piece, what did you ultimately understand about loving Michael Jackson?

**O'Grady:** I've learned a lot about Michael, as a flawed object still worthy of my love. But I'm not sure I understand what caused my tears when he died. I suspect there are a lot of people out there like me. I know when Michael died there were a billion people crying, and there were probably half a billion who didn't know why they were crying. They think he's beautiful, they think he's talented, an incredible musician—but *that doesn't account for the love*. How did he manage to reach so many different people? And they don't know why. I think there's something ultimately about Michael's vulnerability—that vulnerability he always displayed, even as a small child, and the unhappiness he had even as a child, and at the same time the resignation with which he lived with that in order to achieve glamor—that made you identify something of yourself with him. Seeing or hearing him reconnected us to that sad, resigned, but determined part of our selves, even if we fail. What I learned was I was just like all the others who cried.

---

#### CONTRIBUTOR

##### Jarrett Earnest

JARRETT EARNEST is an artist and writer in New York. He is the faculty liaison and teaching "Emotional Formalism" this fall at the Bruce High Quality Foundation University, New York's freest art school (BHQFU.org).

---

#### RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

#### INCONVERSATION



## Living Under Sick Machines

### PETER LAMBORN WILSON / HAKIM BEY with Jarrett Earnest

JUNE 2014 | ART

Peter Lamborn Wilson, also known as Hakim Bey, is a subcultural monument—authoring countless books, tracts, and slogans that weave political resistance with poetry.

## Space Between

by Samuel Feldblum

SEPT 2015 | ARTSEEN

Peter Schjeldahl, speaking with Jarrett Earnest in the July/August issue of the *Rail*, pointed out that sculpture can be "irritating" because, unlike some of its peers, it competes for space with the viewer. We wonder "what it is, why it's there, and when it will go away."

**INCONVERSATION**



# THE POETIC POLITICS OF SPACE

REBECCA SOLNIT with Jarrett Earnest

**MAR 2014 | ART**

Since the 1990s Rebecca Solnit has authored a river of non-fiction at the fertile intersections of environmentalism, political activism, art criticism, and memoir.

**INCONVERSATION**



# ALEX DA CORTE with Jarrett Earnest

**APR 2015 | ART**

For his solo exhibition *Die Hexe*, Alex Da Corte transformed Luxemborg & Dayan's elegant Upper East Side townhouse into a haunted mansion, covering every inch of its three floors. Embedded within his complex tableaux are objects by Mike Kelley, Haim Steinbach, Bjarne Melgaard, and Robert Gober. Da Corte met Jarrett Earnest there to discuss the ways colors create space, memories, and feelings.

**SUBSCRIBE**

to the *Brooklyn Rail*  
start your subscription today!