AN ARTIST COMES HOME

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Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And—the first retrospective of the acclaimed conceptual artist, cultural critic, and Wellesley '55 alumna—is the debut exhibition at the newly reopened Davis Museum.

Alumnae Association | Wellesley College

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By Kerry Gaertner Gerbracht '01

Winter 2024



accomplished rock critic, writer, translator, and government analyst, was in New York City making her world debut as an artist. Wearing a dress made of 180 pairs of white gloves from thrift shops and some from her time at Wellesley (a reference, she has said, to the Black middle class's obsession with respectability), and whipping herself with a

white cat-o'-nine-tails (widely used during the Atlantic slave trade) of sail rope embellished with white chrysanthemums, O'Grady waltzed into an art opening at the famed Black avant-garde gallery Just Above Midtown.



art must take more risks!!" This persona, O'Grady's website states, "was created under the Futurist dictum that art has the power to change the world." The 1980 performance, as well as future appearances of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, laid bare "the racial apartheid still prevailing in the mainstream art world," according to O'Grady's site. Later appearances would take place at the very white New Museum of Contemporary Art,

where she criticized the institution for its exclusion of artists of color with

While Mlle Bourgeoise may be her best-known work, O'Grady has been a

a poem that read, "Now is the time for an invasion!"

Bourgeoise Noire, 1955," a fictional beauty pageant winner celebrating

the 25th anniversary of her win. She did not shy away from onlookers,

reading protest poems against the segregated art world, declaring "Black

fearless, groundbreaking figure for more than four decades, although for much of that time, she was at the edge of the art world. She has produced a massive, innovative, and provocative body of work that includes images, performances, writings, text, and even her website. O'Grady's subjects offer a close examination of her personal identity while challenging conventional cultural narratives, advocating for inclusivity both in and out of the art world. But it wasn't until her inclusion in the 2007 exhibition WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York's PS1 that her contributions to and influence on contemporary art were recognized in the mainstream art world. Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And, her first retrospective, is the debut exhibition at the newly renovated Davis Museum at Wellesley College, which reopened in February. Amanda Gilvin, Sonja Novak Koerner '51

Senior Curator of Collections and Assistant Director of Curatorial Affairs

hierarchical, either/or thinking. The exhibition was originally shown at the

Brooklyn Museum in 2021, where it was organized by curator Catherine

Director of the Davis, was thrilled. "I met Lorraine O'Grady early in my

Morris and writer Aruna D'Souza. When Gilvin proposed hosting the

exhibition at the College, Lisa Fischman, Ruth Gordon Shapiro '37

at the Davis, organized Both/And—a title that references the artist's

ongoing examination and critique of Western culture's binary,

tenure—a highlight of my first year as director of the Davis, and a relationship that I have treasured since," she says. "It's a homecoming, really, bringing Lorraine back to her roots in Boston and at Wellesley. I love that the occasion of the exhibition lets us celebrate this extraordinary artist—and to claim her yet again and always as our own." (O'Grady received Wellesley's Alumnae Achievement Award, the College's highest honor, in 2017.) Through her own research in the Wellesley College Archives, Gilvin added additional archival material that was not featured in Brooklyn, including O'Grady's yellow class beanie, images of her as a student, and a paper she wrote for a Spanish class. The exhibition also includes a special work created by O'Grady for the Davis: an installation in the lobby's windows based on her seminal "Cutting Up the New York Times" series, in which she created "found" newspaper poems that often intertwine political and personal themes.



that could fill several lifetimes. She worked in the U.S. Labor and State departments, including as an intelligence analyst in the period leading up to the Cuban missile crisis. She ran a successful translation agency in both New York and Chicago. She attended the prestigious Iowa Writers'

Workshop and worked on a novel in Europe. She was also a rock critic for

After graduating from Wellesley, O'Grady began an adventurous career

publications including Rolling Stone and the Village Voice. Ever on the vanguard, she reviewed a 1973 performance by then-newcomer Bruce Springsteen and openers Bob Marley and the Wailers for the Village Voice —but her editor told her it was "too soon for these two." O'Grady was often the only Black person in these workplaces, and as she became more involved with art and culture, she felt increasingly judged by the color of her skin rather than by her education and career accomplishments. She has noted that the world simply could not conceptualize a Black intellectual, let alone a Black woman intellectual. While teaching literature at New York's School of Visual Arts in the

1970s, she felt an affinity with the artists around her and was inspired

O'Grady's career as an artist has been long and prolific, personal and

political. Her work stands at the cross section of visual art, performance

art, and profound philosophical writing, and in the era of major social

movements such as Black Lives Matter, it is more relevant than ever. It

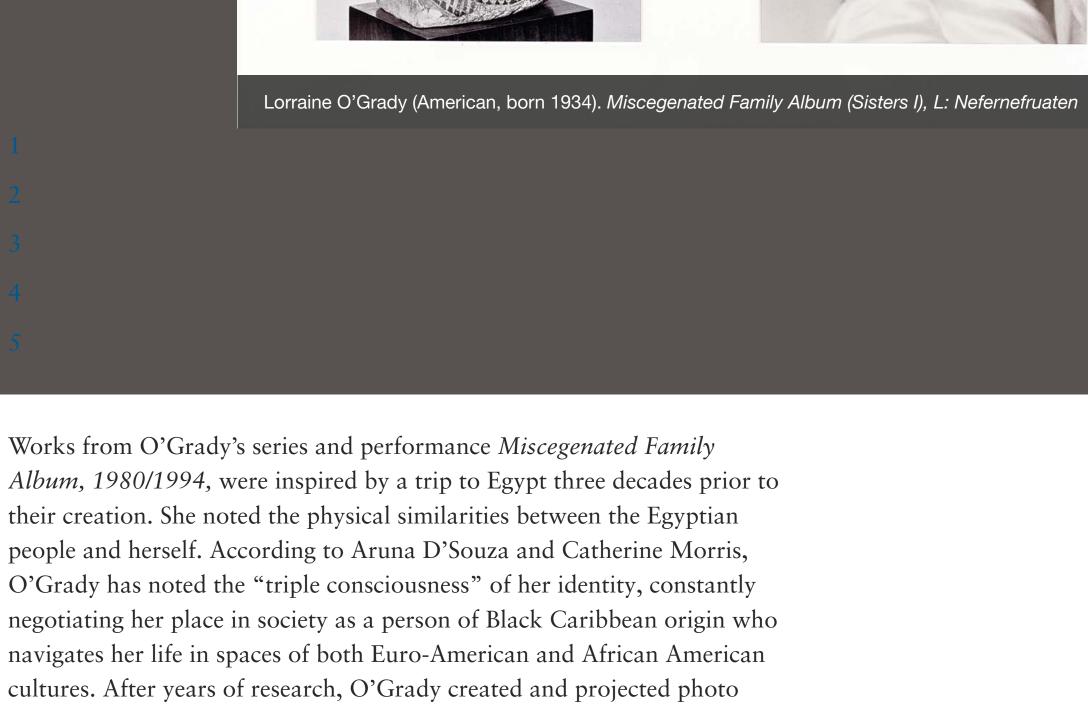
challenges mainstream and largely white narratives about contemporary

art and pushes museums to reconsider the narratives of white supremacy

and sexism that they, often passively, reinforce with their exhibitions and

despite the art world's racist structures.

objects on display.



with those of her deceased sister. The similarities are often jarring.

an example of O'Grady's multilayered and personal approach to race,

unique struggles, social hierarchies, and definitions of kinship, which,

information presented is layered and complicated and can provoke more

performance developed into one of her most moving pieces, Art is ..., a

September 1983 Harlem's African American Day Parade, surrounded by a

group of dancers who held empty golden frames. The frames were passed

O'Grady claims, subvert the Western impulse for dualism. The

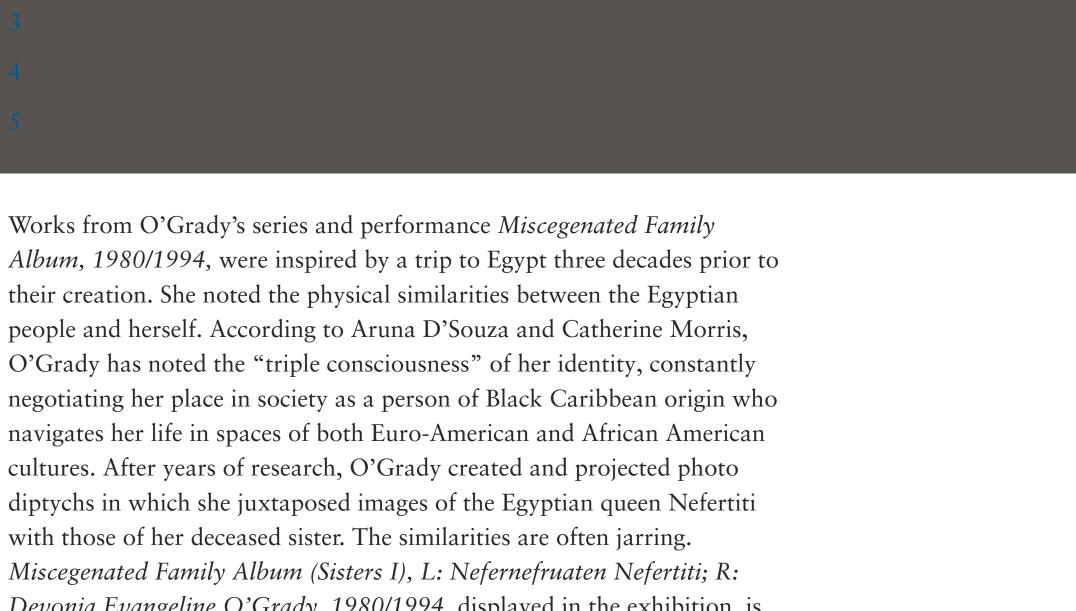
O'Grady's work is ever-evolving. Her original Mlle Bourgeoise

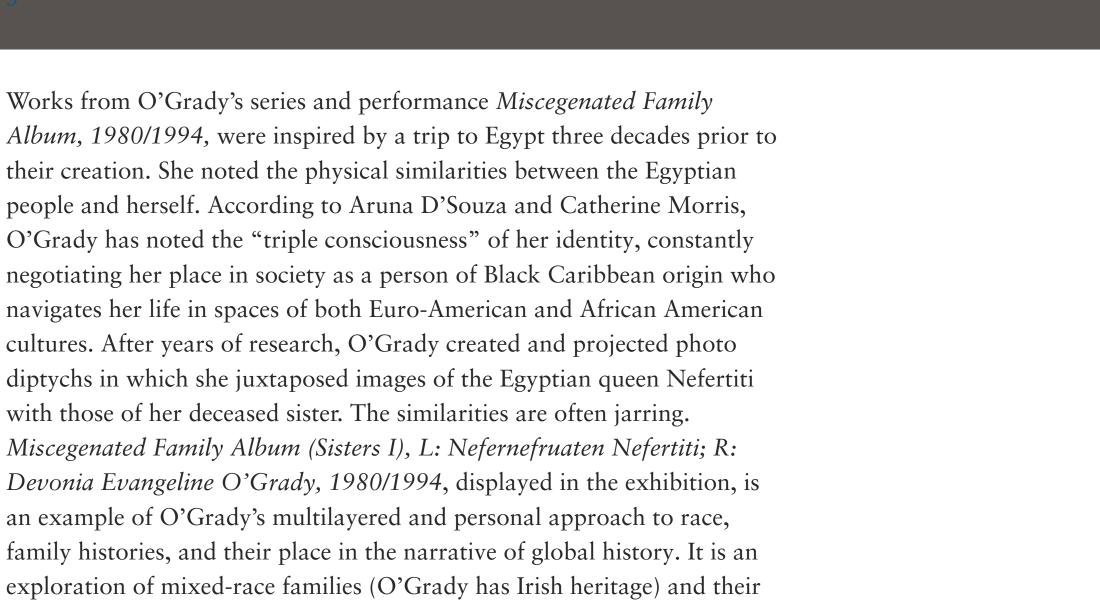
performance in which the pageant queen stood atop a float at the

questions than resolutions.

to visit to the exhibition.

-Taylor Quaye '24







along to parade viewers, who raised the frames to their faces, seeing that they, too, were works of art. This performance, O'Grady has said, was an opportunity to insert avant-garde art into the largest Black spaces she could think of. A tremendously joyful experience, in contrast to her original Mlle Bourgeoise performances, "this piece was to be about art, not about the art world ... rather than an invasion, it was more a crashing of the party," according to O'Grady's site. Photographs of this day are displayed in the exhibition, in yet another evolution, as the effect of the energetic yet static works changes in each environment in which they hang. Both/And will extend beyond the Davis through a campus-wide series of events that will unfold over the course of the spring semester. A daylong symposium focused on O'Grady took place on Feb. 9. Additionally, "Taking the White Gloves Off: A Performance Art Series in Honor of Lorraine O'Grady '55," curated by Nikki Greene, associate professor of art at Wellesley, will accompany the exhibition. The series features six multidisciplinary artists: Ayana Evans, Dominique Duroseau, Eleanor Kipping, M. Lamar, Tsedaye Makonnen, and Nyugen E. Smith. The invited artists will pay tribute to the legacy of O'Grady, whom they credit

as their "godmother in performance art," with performances scheduled on

dozen classes, in disciplines such as American studies and philosophy, plan

"This exhibition and this class is an opportunity, especially for Black students, to get more

campus in February, March, and May. During the spring semester, a

Meanwhile, Greene has created a class for the spring semester entirely

centered around O'Grady and the exhibition—ARTH 314: Lorraine

experience and work within the art world."

O'Grady '55: Writer, Artist, Archivist. Greene says it is the first Wellesley course to explore the biography and legacy of a living alumna and, in the process, "build and analyze a dynamic monographic study of one of the most important contemporary artists of our time—in real time." The class will explore art criticism, feminist art, Black art of the 20th and 21st centuries, performance art, conceptual art, and museum studies, among other topics. Greene plans to make extensive use of O'Grady's archives, held in Clapp Library, which O'Grady donated to the College in 2010 and which include her correspondence, photographs, and audio-visual materials. Students will write a final research paper that will directly incorporate both the Lorraine O'Grady archives and the Davis Museum exhibition. Greene plans to work with the College archivist, Sara Ludovissy, and Gilvin to design exercises at the College Archives and the Davis that relate to weekly reading themes. Students might create programming for the exhibition, meet with O'Grady herself, or interview some of the many artists who have been directly influenced by her oeuvre.

Through this work, the students will contribute directly to O'Grady's

ongoing scholarship in a way that is meaningful to them. "This exhibition

and this class is an opportunity, especially for Black students, to get more

experience and work within the art world," says Taylor Quaye '24, who is

Almost half a century after Mlle Bourgeoise made her debut in New York,

community in a way that allows them to further question and push against

dominant, oppressive narratives throughout culture and to participate in

O'Grady's work returns to Wellesley to engage students and the

the art world and beyond—in a meaningful and often joyful way.

taking the course. "Professor Greene really dedicates herself to creating

spaces for us to exist within this field and do meaningful work—while

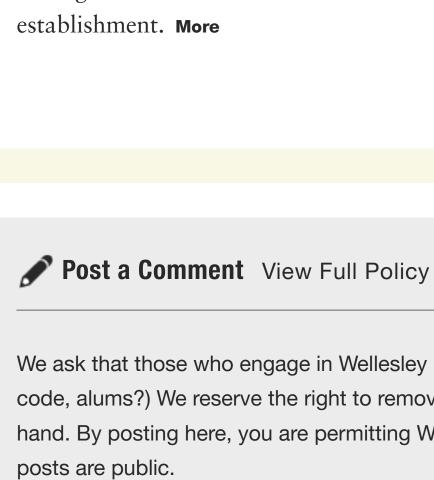
being able to look at art that relates directly to us."

Kerry Gaertner Gerbracht '01 is an art writer and principal of Ver Sacrum Fine Art Consulting. She holds an M.A. in art history/critical theory from Columbia University. She is a member of the Wellesley College Friends of Art and the Brooklyn Museum's Council for Feminist Art, and she is an active trustee of Art at a Time Like This. She recently moved from NYC to the Hudson Valley with her child, husband, and dog, Rosie.  $\Rightarrow \bowtie <$ 

**The Artist as Critic** Race, History, and Art The work of artist Lorraine Assistant Professor of Art Nikki

willingness to take on the art

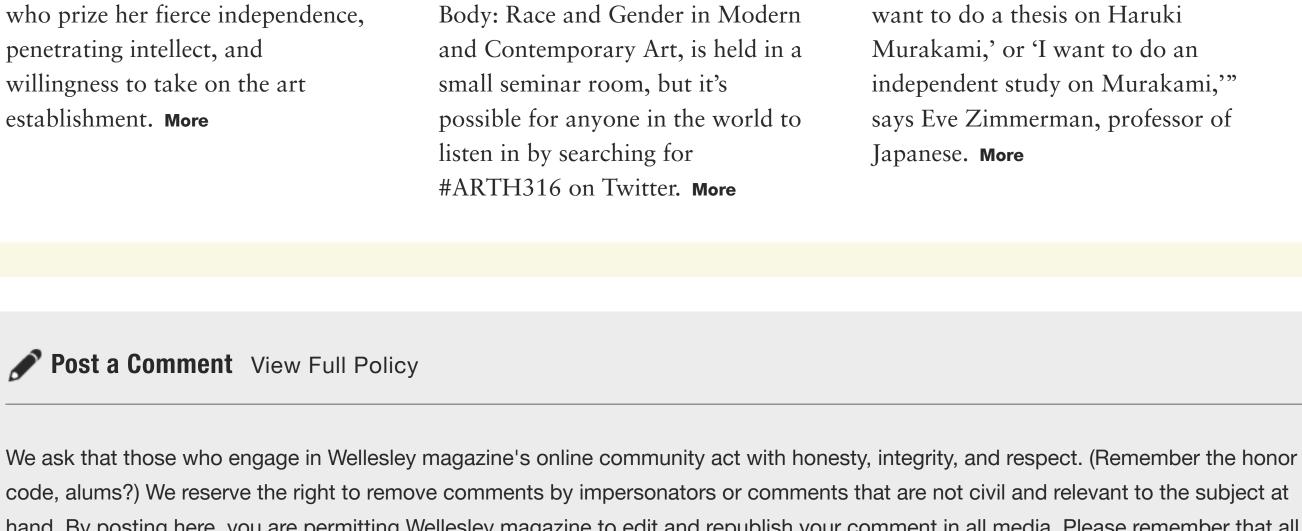
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O'Grady '55 is reaching a new

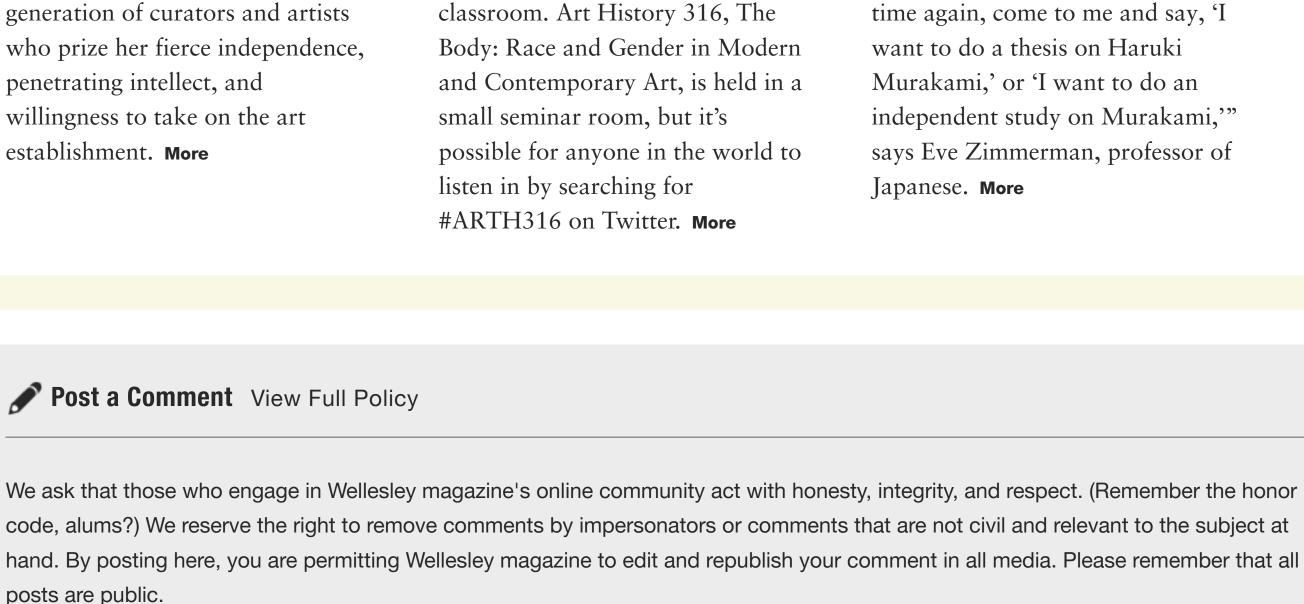
penetrating intellect, and

generation of curators and artists



Greene likes to think outside the

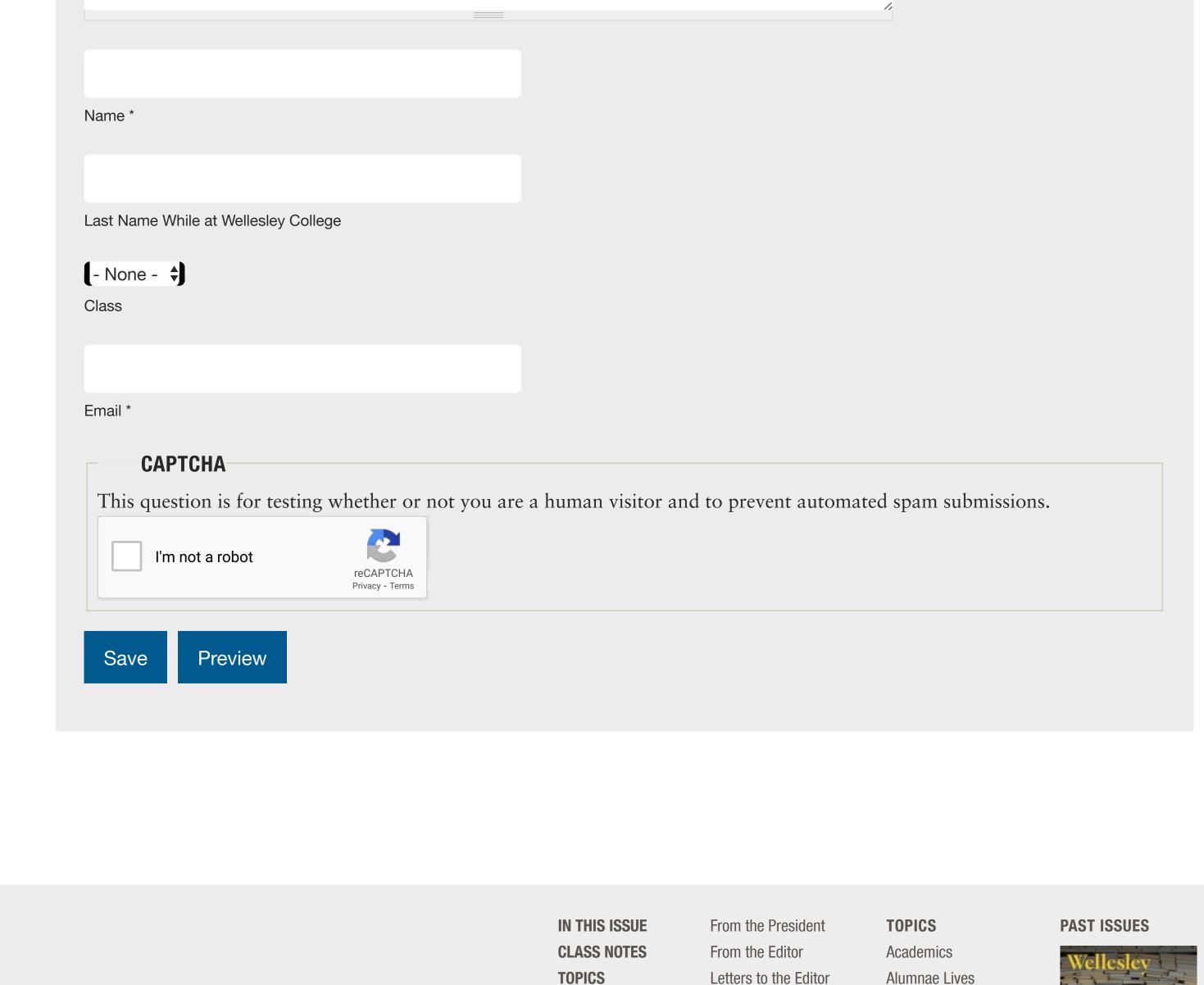
classroom. Art History 316, The



**Murakami's Questions** 

"Ever since I arrived at Wellesley in

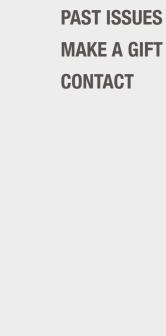
2002, I have had students, time and





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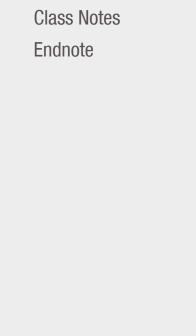
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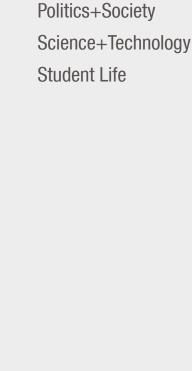
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