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Remembering the Generosity and Mentorship of Lorraine O’Grady

By *Chloë Bass* March 24, 2025 3:11pm

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In 2016 I sent **Lorraine O’Grady** an invitation to be the first guest for my talk-show project, *What is shared, what is offered*, at Independent Curators International in New York. I was 32 at the time; Lorraine was 82. At that point, she and I had met briefly through Simone Leigh’s initiative Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter, organized as part of “The Waiting Room,” Leigh’s New Museum exhibition that same year. In my initial email, I addressed Lorraine formally as “Ms. O’Grady” and presented myself as someone who had been profoundly influenced by her conceptual work.

Five days later, I received a response that has become the cornerstone of my own ability to say no. Henceforth, I have referred to this message, both privately and publicly, as a lesson from the “Lorraine O’Grady School of Refusal.”

After expressing thanks for the invitation, Lorraine wrote, “Sadly, due both to greatly increased production and writing schedules and to advancing age—and with a heavy dose of ‘tough love’ from others—I’ve finally adopted hard-and-fast protective rules for myself: (1) No more than two public events per year ... And (2) No further interviews at this time.” At the end, she added, “I hope it will work for us to work together at another time.”

This message was not a rejection. It was the beginning of an artistic friend- and mentorship.

Lorraine has left behind her enduring concept of “both/and”—a rejection of the “either/or” binary that brings artists of color toward critical flexibility beyond the bounds of Western thought. The act of memorialization itself is both/and: when we eulogize, although the purpose is to honor the dead, the memories, language, and mode of emotional presentation are entirely that of the still-living speaker. In other words, this is as much about me as it is about Lorraine. It is a gift, and also a responsibility.

In 2018 I went to a book launch for Aruna D’Souza’s *Whitewalling*, an event at the Brooklyn Museum that featured Lorraine as a speaker. Lorraine spoke aloud a simple idea that I and many others in the room had felt but never put into language before: the idea that white supremacy may no longer require white people in order to reproduce itself. I have often felt a proximity to certain historical legacies, but at that moment, I was quite sure that I had witnessed a historic *moment*. Lorraine had that ability—to leave us with an unsettled chill with just a single sentence—and to present an idea that is both ahead of its time and inevitable.

Lorraine was the person who pushed me toward greater rigor, and encouraged me not to become anyone other than my weird—and sometimes difficult—creative self. It was Lorraine who taught me, through her practice and her guidance, that the production of a masterpiece—the only kind of art she said she had time for—entails not just the conception, realization, and presentation of an artwork. It also includes all the detailed work around the work: the correspondence, the theory, the interviews, the interpretation, the citation, the footnotes, the hyperlinking.

Lorraine left me with a lot. I treasure a trove of correspondence that includes inquiries about both when I met my husband *and* when we became lovers; a request to explain TSA Precheck and Global Entry; and, more recently, links to two beautiful music videos featuring roller-skating. And I’ll always treasure a backlog of ideas that will feed me for a lifetime.

It was Lorraine who, through her series of “Performance Statement” writings, introduced me to a relationship to performance as both an acceptable political option and a problematic category with which to identify. It was Lorraine who made me understand “writing in space” as an integral part of an artistic practice. And it was Lorraine who helped me connect with my gallery, Alexander Gray Associates. As an artist who has followed personal obsession rather than the market, with work that shifts in form and material, it is a true gift that she supported me in that way.

This past July, the last time we saw each other in person before her death, I told Lorraine she was impeccable. She laughed, and said it took a lot of work.

The work was worth it. I will miss my mentor. I will miss my friend. Lorraine O’Grady’s memory is already a blessing.

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