

45 Grant

📅 Thu, 3/17 6:20PM 🕒 18:02

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

reenacting, reenactment, artists, art, feminist, performance, history, feminism, catherine, oriana, performing, sex, interested, guess, fascism, called, feel, thinking, recite, moments

SPEAKERS

Catherine Grant, Olivia Branscum, Milan Terlunen, Tianyi Ding, Mansi Garneni

M Milan Terlunen 00:02

This is How To Read. I'm Milan.

O Olivia Branscum 00:06

And I'm Olivia, the producer of this episode. Today we're talking with Catherine Grant, an art historian with a focus on feminist and queer performance art. This episode is about reenacting the past.

O Olivia Branscum 00:21

When you think about historical reenactment, you probably think about reenacting Civil War battles, or performing a character at a renaissance fair. But Catherine Grant is interested in artists who use reenactment to ask questions about the history of feminist and queer activism, and the role of artists in political life. By reenacting and remixing scenes from history, these artists revive stories from the past that might illuminate the present in surprising ways. Beyond the realm of art, Catherine wants us to recognize the power of performing repeated actions in our everyday lives.

M Milan Terlunen 01:03

Catherine Grant, welcome.

C Catherine Grant 01:06

Thank you for having me.

M Milan Terlunen 01:07

So we are going to talk about the topic of reenacting the past. And I understand that one of the things that your research is about is specifically artists who are reenacting the past. Which in itself is kind of interesting to me, because I guess when I think of like, historical reenactments I think of, well, I think of being a child and going to the Black Country Museum on school trips, and sort of people acting like, you know, historic characters. And I also think about, people sort of reenact historical things as a hobby, you know, if it's like, Civil War reenactment, or medieval reenactments. But none of those I think, are really what you would call artists. Maybe they are but, I don't know... So I'm curious, can you give an example of the kind of art that you're interested in that is reenacting the past?

C Catherine Grant 02:11

Yes. And I really like your examples that you give from your own life. And...

M Milan Terlunen 02:17

I have to say, I am not a historical reenactor, no disrespect.

C Catherine Grant 02:21

I mean, some performance art scholars have explored kind of like Civil War reenactment, like Rebecca Schneider, the performance art scholar has done extensive work on that in relation to performance art, so you're not completely outside...

M Milan Terlunen 02:35

I shouldn't be too quick to... yeah, yeah. Okay.

C Catherine Grant 02:38

Yeah. But I guess for me, that wasn't how I came into thinking about reenactment, it was more that I came across a number of young artists' work in the kind of early 2000s, that were often returning to feminist and queer histories. So one of the first works I saw was by an artist called Oriana Fox. She's an American artist who's based in London. And she did a work called *Our Bodies Ourselves* in 2003, where she put together reenacting scenes from *Sex and the City*, the 1990s TV show, but performed all the characters as 1970s style feminists, kind of quoting from an artist called Judy Chicago, who explored what she called "central core imagery" as this kind of feminist imagery based on the vagina. So there's a kind of humorous clash of the things she's reenacting. So it's already

M Milan Terlunen 03:41

Uh huh, wait, so... so she's on the one hand, she's reenacting, like a scene from *Sex and the City*, is that right? So she's kind of speaking the dialogue that the actors in *Sex and the City* had spoken, she's sort of reciting it?

C Catherine Grant 03:56

What she did was she's actually lip syncing to the dialogue. So he takes the scene, and then she lip syncs and performs each of the four characters herself. And then cuts them up together.

M Milan Terlunen 04:08

Okay. And so she's dressed as this earlier feminist, making this kind of vagina like...

C Catherine Grant 04:17

A vagina quilt, yeah.

M Milan Terlunen 04:18

A quilt, okay. Wow. Yeah. So I feel like that for people who know *Sex in the City*, those might seem like very different kinds of feminism, or maybe even just very different kinds of women.

C Catherine Grant 04:31

Mmm-hmm. So Judy Chicago's model of feminist art, based around a kind of a biological woman's body and sort of around a "central core imagery" — for a lot of feminists at the time, and since, they saw that as a rather limiting kind of model for a feminist art practice. But the same time she put together one of the first feminist art programs in California, and the work that the group of artists did there was really transformational. So she was proposing a whole new theory. But there were flaws in that theory. And she enabled a lot of artistic practice. But also there's problems with it. *Sex and the City*, I guess, well, kind of, it's it sort of, at the time, it was seen as kind of having feminist potential because it was a show that focused on four women. And at that moment, that wasn't very usual. But what the women mostly talk about are boyfriends, sex, shoes and money, so it's a very materialistic sort of heterosexual capitalist notion of what empowerment might look like. So she's kind of exploring both the attractions and problems to both forms of feminism, but in a very humorous way.

M Milan Terlunen 05:51

So, so with that, that work of art that Oriana Fox created, is it that she is kind of wanting to sort of create a new feminism for herself, that takes kind of the best of both, but also is kind of rejecting some of the things that looking back she doesn't like in each of those?

C Catherine Grant 06:13

I guess it doesn't quite get to a new feminism, it's more about sort of trying to take on the personas and the stereotypes of these two models. And kind of, in a way, sort of turning them inside out and looking at them without necessarily knowing what the alternative is yet. It's almost like a questioning and a research that is done through this kind of playful re-performance.

M Milan Terlunen 06:39

Yeah, that's interesting, because then it's almost like the way that we're talking about it now, sort of, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see sort of different sort of political things in it to do with like different kinds of feminism and the pros and cons. But actually, it sounds like what you're saying is she went into it, maybe with a more kind of open-minded, open-ended goal of like, "I just want to inhabit these, these roles, these these stereotypes, these personas, and I don't know what I'm gonna learn."

C Catherine Grant 07:07

Yeah, I definitely think it's an exploration, about politics, about feminism, about what it means to be an artist. Do you want to see yourself as a woman artist or a feminist artist? And it kind of plays with those questions without necessarily having a straightforward outcome.

M Milan Terlunen 07:24

Yeah, so so, yeah, when we're talking about reenactment, one of the things that maybe, well, one of the things I'm getting is that it's actually a lot about the experience of the person doing the reenactment. So you know, when I think about, like, you know, my school trip visit to the Black Country Museum, there's people that are kind of paid actors doing it for the audience. But it sounds like for her, for Oriana Fox, and maybe for other artists that you're interested in. It's as much about the artist's own experience, state of mind, you know, as they go through those actions?

C Catherine Grant 08:02

Yeah, I think so. And then the challenge is, how do you create a work in which the viewer also gets something out of that process? And that's where I've kind of been interested in the way it leaves it quite open. So the viewer has to really kind of question themselves and think, "Well, what might what is my response to *Sex and the City* or Judy Chicago? Because she doesn't answer the question. She poses them for us. And so even though we're not reenacting those scenes, I think we're still asked to kind of take on some of the questions that she's proposing through it.

M Milan Terlunen 08:34

.....

Yeah, well, it's making me think almost like, okay, so, yeah, we may not be literally like lip syncing to *Sex and the City*, but insofar as the artist is revisiting these things from the past, we also revisit them as we watch her performance.

C Catherine Grant 08:51
Definitely.

M Milan Terlunen 08:52
Hmm. But one thing that, that what you've been saying is actually helping me to realize that I've never quite got about performance art before, which is like... When I've been to museums, and I've seen like videos of performance art or I've seen photographs or whatever, it can sometimes feel quite kind of dead to me. But actually, now I think what I'm getting is that it's partly maybe, can be maybe, not always, but it can be about that experience of the person performing it, so that when we watch a video or we see photos, we're not getting the actual, the thing that's most valuable about the artwork. The thing that was most valuable was the experience of the person who did it. Does that, does that make sense?

C Catherine Grant 09:31
That does, and some scholars from performance studies are really interested in the way that much performance art that is performed live is very hard to document. And so really thinking about it as this live encounter between the performers and the audience, and their situation, which can't be recreated, and the documentation will only ever be a sort of incomplete trace. Now for me that's interesting in terms of reenactment, because what you're often picking up is incomplete traces that you then have to re-inhabit, if that makes sense?

M Milan Terlunen 10:10
Right, yeah.

C Catherine Grant 10:12
So I was trying to come up with a way of writing about these forms of reenactment that I saw in pieces like Oriana's work. And first of all, I thought about them as embodied quotations. So quoting from something else, but what it means to take it up in your own body. So the fact that you're processing it through your own body will make the quotation different, like it can't be the same immediately as you take it up.

M Milan Terlunen 10:40
Yeah. So I feel like our conversation has, is, is kind of making me think differently about like, history. And I think, I feel like we've been talking a lot about kind of like the past and sort of bringing the past into the present. And it feels to me actually like these reenactments. They're

bringing the past into the present. And it feels to me actually like these reenactments. They're a way of I don't know... It's just I feel like I keep ending up talking in clichés, but like "bringing history to life" or something like that. But I guess, you know, what do you feel that this thinking about reenactments can offer to how we think about History with a capital H?

C Catherine Grant 11:23

Well, I think one thing it can bring is to think about what's included in history, and what can kind of end up getting kind of forgotten or sort of only a very small stereotyped version of it. So if you reenact something, you've got to really attend to it with a lot of attention and detail. And that, for me, is one of the really compelling aspects. Obviously, that's not always going to happen. But often these artists are mining kind of artworks or histories that might otherwise just be kind of a footnote. So it kind of, it's also sort of about an opening up of these moments in history and making us really attend to them and think about them in relation to our moment, and what we might be able to get from them, and often kind of saying, well, let's, let's sit with this for a bit. Let's see what the problems are, what the possibilities are, rather than just saying that's outmoded, and seeing history as progress that's linear. Instead, it's kind of got a looping or disrupted time to it, where different things are relevant at different moments.

M Milan Terlunen 12:35

So can you explain that a bit more? So people might think of history as linear, but actually reenactment can help us understand it differently?

C Catherine Grant 12:44

Yes, so I guess, maybe as we're in the 21st century, and kind of in the, in a kind of an ecological crisis and sort of financial crisis, maybe we understand perhaps that progress is a fiction now?

M Milan Terlunen 12:59

Right, that things don't always get better.

C Catherine Grant 13:02

Yeah. So I guess what reenactment does is kind of return to previous moments, and sees that they still have possibility for the present, but also dangers for the present. So we could think about the dangers of fascism coming up again, in our political landscape. So that's an example where, kind of for many of us, we hoped what happened in World War Two was history, was gone. But now we see it returning "in a different way, but it's not... it's not dead. It's not a politics that have kind of completely been put into the past.

M Milan Terlunen 13:40

Yeah. So it's like, it's like history, or maybe just like time itself, life itself, is looping back. You know, things that you think we've moved on from return in a different form. So like, we need to be looking back to things from the past in order to deal with the things like fascism that, you know, we might have hoped were left in the past, but are back.

C Catherine Grant 14:06

Exactly.

M Milan Terlunen 14:07

Okay, so so. Yeah, I'm curious, like, can you remember like, as a child, the first thing that you reenacted? Something that maybe not consciously at the time, but that now you look back on and think like, oh, yeah, like there was a seed of that reenactment right there?

C Catherine Grant 14:28

Well, I have a very sort of interesting example, which is learning the Lord's Prayer. So I went to a Church of England school, but I wasn't brought up as a Christian. But I still had to repeat the Lord's Prayer every day at school for a number of years. So when I was thinking about reenactment as this form of embodied quotation, something that sits inside your body, I was reminded of this. I can still repeat the Lord's Prayer, word perfect, and I will be able to until I die. And it still has a sense of kind of, I guess kind of security, even though it's a belief system that I have no investment in. So it's almost like a counter-example. It didn't teach me about politics, but what it taught me was about communal speaking, and repetition and how powerful it can be.

M Milan Terlunen 15:25

That's so interesting. I really relate to that. And for me, it was Christian hymns that I think I had that with. Like you, I went to a Christian school, but didn't, wasn't raised Christian. But some of those hymns I really loved. And there's some... I'm feeling like choked up even thinking about it but... but "Be Thou My Vision," which like, when I kind of take some distance, I'm like, okay, it's not that great, whatever. But if I sing it, or even if I think if I had to, like, recite the words, like, it really, it has an emotional impact on me... That is not to do with believing in the message or, you know, being a Christian. But it's to do with actually that kind of history of my own life of reenacting it and feeling that emotion every time I've sung it before.

C Catherine Grant 16:21

Yeah, so I think kind of culture understands how important it can be to reenact and recite things. And what I'm interested in is the kind of radical possibility in the way that artists have taken up those modes, in their art practices. Because it's often something that's happened so

many times we don't attend to it. And it's often when it's histories that are unexpected, like kind of *Sex and the City* and Judy Chicago together, then we become more aware of what's happening.

M Milan Terlunen 16:52
Yeah. Catherine Grant, thank you very much.

C Catherine Grant 16:57
Thank you so much.

O Olivia Branscum 17:02
That's it for this episode. For links to books mentioned in our discussion plus further reading. Visit our website, howtoreadpodcast.com You can also listen to a bonus clip, in which Catherine explains what she and her students learned from reenacting a performance by Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, in which performers smear blood " or red paint " on huge sheets of paper.

M Milan Terlunen 17:26
To hear about our latest episodes and news, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, @howtoreadnow. This episode was produced by me Milan Terlunen,

O Olivia Branscum 17:38
and by me, Olivia Branscum,

M Mansi Garneni 17:40
with editorial assistance from me, Mansi Garneni,

T Tianyi Ding 17:44
and from me, Tianyi Ding.

O Olivia Branscum 17:47
Our theme music is by Poddington Bear. Special thanks to Columbia University for its support. And thank you for listening!

