

British Art Talks podcast

Season 3, Episode 1

Experiments in Art Writing: Catherine Grant

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Anna Reid: Hello, and welcome to the Spring '21 series of *British Art Talks*. I'm Anna Reid, Senior Research Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre. This series, *Experiments in Art Writing*, features a set of highly innovative and distinctive UK-based art writers, asking them to describe the encounters, materials, voices and texts that have shaped the very form of their writing.

Our first speaker, Catherine Grant, is Senior Lecturer in the Art and Visual Cultures Departments at Goldsmiths, University of London. Catherine is a remarkable writer and teacher who is tapped into many of the most exciting contemporary developments within art writing and art history.

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Catherine, welcome.

Catherine Grant: Thanks Anna.

Anna Reid: Let's start by hearing some of your own writing. In 2019, in keeping with your often collaborative and interwoven practice, you co-edited with Kate Random Love your book *Fandom As Methodology*. Let's hear an excerpt from the introduction that you wrote together. First, we'll hear Kate's voice and to follow, Catherine you'll pick up.

Kate Random Love: When fans start to write, they don't hold back. Fan writing drips with desire, crossing boundaries, refusing categories. In the 1985 cult classic, *Starlust*, an early collection of fan letters, confessions, diaries, and interviews, mostly female fans recount often aggressively sexual fantasies about male rock star idols. The book feels hot and too much. The reader is both turned on and cringing. It is a similar experience to reading Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*, in which she painstakingly details her obsession with a prominent academic, a fixation that manifests as a series of letters written mostly by herself and sometimes by her husband, Sylvère, as an attempt to unlock the creative potential of her crazed and paralyzing infatuation.

For Kraus in *I Love Dick*, creativity and scholarly engagement are always intimately entwined with this specific form of fannish love. In one section from the book that is all about authorship and desire, she describes meeting up with a friend to discuss books and poems that feature their shared interest in "mysticism, love, obsession. Our conversations are not so much about the theories of love and desire as its manifestations in our favourite books and poems, study as a fan club meeting, the only kind."

Catherine Grant: The fan scholar is a figure that has been theorised within fan studies to describe the overlapping positions of fans and academics. One thing to say here is that the position of the fan and the position of the academic are blurry, but each are presumed to have particular qualities. The foundational fan studies scholar, Henry Jenkins, has described how the foregrounding of fannish attachments in his academic writing grew out of a commitment to feminist and queer forms of situated analysis and an attempt to think through the effective relationship with material from various media fandoms, material that would traditionally be viewed as marginal or insignificant cultural production.

In *Fandom as Methodology*, we explore how the work of contemporary artists can be seen as that as fan scholars working at the intersection between the effective and critical, combining scholarly research with forms of embodied response, including reenactment and rewriting as modes of reactivating historical material.

Anna Reid: Catherine, this book brings to the fore highly embodied and irrational drives. How do you account for these new manifestations of desire, obsession and anxiety in art writing?

Catherine Grant: Well, I think I can talk about how this came about for Kate and I. We were really thinking individually in our work about how to write about desire, passionate attachments, ones that are loving and also destructive. And both of us realised that the kind of model of fandom and how it had been theorised in fan studies was actually quite a productive space for thinking about the relationship of both the writer and the artist's relationship with pre-existing material.

So for us, that was a kind of way of allowing us to think about processes that weren't completely irrational or intuitive, but allowed for a blending of creative and critical approaches to whatever the object of fascination was.

Anna Reid: Does it feel to you that this kind of exploration has suddenly become permissible?

Catherine Grant: I think there has definitely been a move towards more personal writing and also the blending of fictional anecdotes and fantasy memoir in art writing. It's a mode that has been there for many decades, particularly within feminist and queer writing as a sort of politics of situated knowledge. But I think perhaps one of the reasons it's really come to the fore in the last decade or so is really about digital networks, the rise of blogging, the way that we're much more comfortable sharing material that blends the public and the private.

And a number of writers have started to work in hybrid ways. A book such as Sara Ahmed's *Living A Feminist Life*, I think, is a really great example where she developed many of the chapters on her blog called, Feminist Killjoys. And then that turned into a book. So there was a process of writing that was much more immediate and responsive and I think that, for me, is one of the interesting avenues that's been taking place in writing on art, as well as more broadly when thinking about academic writing.

Anna Reid: I'm really interested in the sense of community that comes through in your writing and your collaborations. And your writing seems to foster and be shaped by contemporary writers who are collaborators and fellow travelers and friends and this community of people who send books and texts to each other in all kinds of diverse forms and digital forms too. Would you say that this is writing as participatory culture?

Catherine Grant: That's an interesting way of putting it. I mean, for me, I can't write without thinking who my audience is. And a lot of my writing does develop out of conversations and friendships, both

with peers such as Kate, but also people from the past, writers that I have a strong relationship to, students that I'm teaching. And with the fandom book, what was really fantastic was it felt that we were gathering together a lot of people that we felt were doing things that spoke to us and were in conversation with our own approaches as art historians and writers, but doing this in all kinds of fields, from poetry to performance art, to memoir writing, to fairly straightforward academic art history.

Anna Reid: Let's move on now to writing by Holly Pesta. Catherine, you've chosen this because of its impression on your writing practice. It was first written and performed in 2016 at the South London Gallery. Here is Holly reading an abridged version of her *Voice in my Head Calling for Witchy Methodologies*.

Holly Pesta: The alien law of witches' prophecies allows me to re-vision what counts as seeing and knowing in methods of research, or say, to strategise method according to witch-ish practices might remove me from the bad theatre of academia. I must start estranged from the imperial pursuits of knowledge that sees research divinely agented to scholarship. I'll open up comprehension to weirded intelligences.

In the film, I begin in a dissident space, another world from academia. Feminist activism and struggle are written rudely, emblematically. A record gets played, *The Witch's Revenge*, and I go into a daydream. Characters from across fictions interact, touch, and make postures. To daydream then is a first step in experimental knowing, a kind of speculative telepathy where I tune into figures and whispers of heretical topic.

There are posters and calls that recall to me potency in writing. Spelling and spelling of an order, acronyms for which swap agency. To misspell is a way to conjure ideas and images into being. Spell by repetition to undo what is image, what is meaning. The illegitimate knowledges of fan fiction are non-totalising of history. They are desire-led and born to collectives who care carelessly. Fanfic tactics say, like speaking to myself, debate the source of knowledge by fictionalising laws of truth to many alternatives. Materials of fantasies speaking outside themselves. Here I am in it.

Anna Reid: That was *Voice in my Head Calling for Witchy Methodology* written and performed by Holly Pesta. Catherine, can you tell us about this invocation of the witch's spell and its very distinctive written form?

Catherine Grant: Well I think Holly Pesta is someone who has really found ways of blending forms of writing. And for me, this notion of invocation might be what has replaced an idea of quotation in recent practices often related to feminism. And when I first heard this performed, it just brought together so many ideas around how to develop relationships with archival material that went beyond scholarly research, but instead a process of reinvention and also one that is unruly and doesn't necessarily want to pay complete attention to what is there. And in Holly's other writing, she has talked about producing archival fan fictions and she has seen this as a space of fabulation. And I think in this text, she really creates this fabulation around what the figure of the witch might mean.

Anna Reid: I'm really interested in your description of the unruliness of what's taking place in this writing. And it does strike me that there's a real daring to these illusions, to incantation and intoxication, reclamation, and also their live presentation too. And I wanted to ask, what is dangerous about this witchy writing and performance? What do you think is dangerous about it?

Catherine Grant: I'm not sure I'd see it as dangerous, but I think the witch has been a symbol of resistance and deviance, both for feminists in the 1970s and also it's been returned to by many writers and artists today. And when I think about spells, which are features in Holly's piece, I think about them as a way of bringing things to life through stories. You had artists such as Linda Stupart who has written spells as part of their writing practice in a book called *Virus* and Stupart sees spell making as something that is a practice in its own right, but it's also a form of viral communication as well. And I think there's a blending of historical notions of witches, the symbolism of the power of words, and also how traditionally that's been associated with storytellers and women and then how that is being developed in digital communities today.

Anna Reid: So the events and collaborations around Holly's piece call for a coven of heretics and a witchy collectivity. And I was interested to hear more about the conversation in this with previous generations of feminist writers.

Catherine Grant: Yeah I mean, this has been a really strong strand in feminist art practice over the last decade or so. The artist, Anna Bunting-Branch was delving into various historical forms of feminism, including WITCH, which was initially an American group which stood for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, which was a hybrid protest and art group. They sort of protested on Wall Street and did various hexes at bridal fairs. But Bunting-Branch's work also touches on other feminist projects, including science fiction and I think maybe that's the flip side to the interest in historical figures, is also this thinking back through feminist science fiction and thinking about what they might offer for the future. And that's where I see practices such as Holly Pesta and Anna Bunting-Branch doing something new with this historical and archival material.

Anna Reid: Catherine, I just have to pick up on your reference to science fiction in feminist writing. Could you tell us any more about that?

Catherine Grant: Oh, there's so much to say. At the moment we're living in a world that feels almost unlivable for many people with many inequalities and problems and particularly from the late 60s through the 1970s, a number of writers, feminist writers, use science fiction to explore possibilities that might not be able to be lived in the present, but in a way they're thought experiments to widen our possibilities, our thinking about gender and sexuality, equality, care. So that has been picked up by a number of young artists over the last decade as a continued space of possibility really.

Anna Reid: This might be a good moment just to pick up on the context in which we are speaking today, which is of course the global pandemic. I wondered if you had anything to say about the consequences of the pandemic for women writers in your community.

Catherine Grant: Well I guess this year of lockdown has been very hard for many people. I mean, it's a very basic thing to say, but what it's done, it's given many people a really visceral sense of isolation and also has really brought out inequalities in people's living situations. So we've got people who are alone with no work, alongside people who are locked onto a screen for hours at a time, to those of us trying to juggle work and caring responsibility, whether that's children or caring for elderly or sick relatives. And basically the support structures outside of our homes have mostly gone.

And how to write in the face of this, I think, has been a question that a lot of people have asked and really at the beginning of the pandemic last spring, it felt it was very hard to imagine what was coming next. So to write into that was quite difficult. And many people experienced a profound sense of writer's block, anxiety and doubts.

I did write about this a little bit in a conversation with Althea Greenan, who's the Archivist at the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths. I was asked to try and write a response to what it meant to be part of a university under lockdown. And I realised the only way I could do it was in conversation. So Althea and I wrote to each other and tried to imagine what a university looked like under lockdown and what a feminist archive might look like. I think as it's continued for some people, it has been a moment of complete pause or reflection, but yeah, it's still a very difficult situation for many people and I'm not quite sure how to process it yet in my own writing.

[music]

Anna Reid: The next extract you've chosen for us is also contemporary and from the new and debut novel, *Lote* by the Scottish writer and self-described socialite, Shola von Reinhold. It is read here by the author.

Shola von Reinhold: Beyond photographs taken for colonial documentation, I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen a photograph of a black woman or man from this era with hair this texture that hadn't been ironed or lie straightened. Certainly never in such a setting, an excruciation of coil and kink for it made me ache with jealousy and bliss. In a chain mailed hand, she clutched a champagne coupe like a holy grail. The other palm was angled just a bit away from the lens, fingers arranged in an obscure saintly message, but at the same time holding a cigarette. I was about to call out to Agnes again, but instead found my hand with the photo in it slipping under the table towards my coat pocket. There was a second picture of the same trio. They changed position, all looking less mannerist but giving an excellent profile.

When I finally called Agnes over, 'Oh, that's your Mr. Tennant, is it not?' And yes, it was. I hadn't even noticed. The young man to the left was Rex Whistler, which I had already vaguely registered, but the other angel on the right, the second young woman was of course Stephen Tennant.

'But who's the young lady in the middle? A singer?' No. Even for Agnes, it was an obvious suggestion, a black woman at a Bohemian party in England in the 20s is not unlikely a singer, like Florence Mills or Josephine Baker, who were sometimes invited to such events as entertainment and also sometimes as guests, but I thought not without knowing why not.

'What does the name say?' Another thing I hadn't noticed. Steeney, Hermia, and Rex. Steeney was a nickname for Steven, but on reading the name Hermia, another rose up in response, Druitt. I was absolutely sure of it. Hermia Druitt. My mouth ached to say the name aloud, Hermia Druitt. 'I haven't heard of her. Should I have Matilda?'

Anna Reid: That was Shola von Reinhold reading from their 2020 debut novel, *Lote*. Catherine, can you tell us something of the society of aristocratic and wealthy artists and writers of the 20s and 30s with which this writing circulates and fixates?

Catherine Grant: So the novel starts with the protagonist, Matilda, exploring pictures of the Bright Young Things, as they were known in the 20s British society, mostly privileged white and queer figures that Matilda, the protagonist in the novel, has really passionate attachments to, what she calls transfixions. But in the book, these are overlaid with artists of colour and black figures who are both real and fictional from this period and asserts a history of black British figures that hasn't really been put into the history books.

Anna Reid: The novel is written from the perspective of Matilda who has been recruited without pay to work on a donation of photographs. What kind of art historian is Matilda?

Catherine Grant: I guess Matilda isn't really an art historian, but that's why she's a fascinating figure for me. She's exploring these photographs for research that is as much about her own sense of identity and history as it is about the photographs themselves. And so she's almost posing as a scholarly researcher to gain access to this material. In the extract we heard, there's another figure, Agnes, who is another volunteer working in archives. And she, in the book, is kind of a rogue archivist where she has also been taking things from archives that document black artists, because she doesn't feel that the galleries and institutions are taking care of them. So she has created her own archive within her house that is a way of preserving this history of black artistic production across the centuries.

Anna Reid: There's a powerful strategy at play in this novel. What do you make of the author's use of speculation and fiction in addressing art history?

Catherine Grant: What I really enjoyed about this novel was the way that it weaves in real historical characters alongside this fictional history of this black, queer, female artist, Hermia Druitt, and the way in which there are extracts from fictional books, one is called *Black Modernisms*. So Hermia is a student at the Slade and the fictional book within a book talks about the existence of many more black students and students of colour in British art schools during the 1920s and 30s, and uses these kind of blendings of fiction and fact to explore the way Hermia is treated by white British society, which then echoes the protagonist's treatment in the 2010s.

And so the book has many unexpected twists and turns. I don't really want to spoil any of them, but what ends up happening is that queer black fem experience is literally the repressed at the heart of a cultish strand of contemporary art production. And there's a way in which the book comments on the whiteness and machismo of the art world and also of our institutions through this very sort of beautiful, fantastical history.

Anna Reid: The next extract that you've chosen is by artist historian, Carol Mavor, Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Manchester. As a writer, Mavor is known for risk-taking in creative form and political content. She published her art and literature *Through the Mouth of the Fairytale* in 2017. Here she is reading from her latest novel, *Like a Lake*.

Carol Mavor: Coda took his first photographs of me throughout my 10th summer in shorts and t-shirt, often just my shorts, climbing up the craggy rocks off the beach, the lone figure within a panorama of mountain peaks, the trail of a river, the opening of a cave. He would often focus on that most noticeable thing about me, my belly button, alive as a rose not plucked. He had never photographed a child before. I do not know what happened to those pictures of me as a child and I do not want to see them. Photographs force-feed memory, causing me to forget the real time and remember only the photograph.

It was not until I was 18 that I would become Coda's model for his series and artist book, *The Temptations of a Mirror Maker*. For those pictures, I often posed nude, but I did not mind. I liked the way the camera felt on me. It was liberating. In *Temptations*, my feet have Christ-like purity. My nude body is bound in agony, seemingly guilt-ridden. My hands are beatific, redemptive, hands like Martha Graham, hands like Georgia O'Keeffe, hands like cypress grove branches, hands like the wings of a dove, hands like love. And my unmistakable navel, my rose unplucked like the navel of a dream.

Coda made a copy of the book for me, keeping the original for himself. We kept our copies hidden, but they really aren't pictures of me. They are photographs of Coda. He is there. He is just too close to see. I can still feel the eye of Coda's giant camera atop his tripod. I can still hear the slip slap of the film being shifted in the magazine as I become him. I am not a famous person, but my nameless nude body was made famous by Coda Gray.

Anna Reid: Carol Mavor there, reading from her 2020 novel, *Like a Lake*, a story of uneasy love and photography. Catherine, Carol is a really extraordinary art historian with a very intrepid and formally adventurous body of work. Can you give us a sense of the direction of this new writing of hers?

Catherine Grant: This novel is a new direction for Carol, but it builds on her blending of fiction within her art historical writing. I mean, she's most well-known for her writing on Victorian photographers, such as Lewis Carroll, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Lady Clementina Hawarden. And in those early books, she's very, very gifted at thinking about the relationship between photographer and model, but also kind of researcher and photograph researcher and history. And in this new novel, *Like a Lake*, she's taking these kinds of modes of relating to existing historical material and using it as the ground for a fiction, which will eventually be a trilogy. So this is the first in a trilogy that takes real artistic works and then weaves a fictional story around them.

Anna Reid: This excerpt from *Like a Lake* is in the voice of Nico describing being photographed as a child by a man named Coda Gray. And Catherine, it recalls your own writing on photography and the adolescent, which was of course the subject of your doctoral research. And in both cases, there is this subtle capture of fluid and emergent identity. It seems to me that this speaks of the process of art writing itself. Would you agree?

Catherine Grant: Yeah, that's a very nice analogy. The reason I chose this extract is I think what Mavor captures here by voicing Nico as the sitter for Coda Gray is something that is very hard to capture in art historical analysis. And there is a need for more literary or subjective accounts to really think about the dynamics and the relationship that's going on here. And Mavor is also very influenced by Roland Barthes, who is one of the best writers on photography, both the experience of sitting for a photograph and most famously, the experience of looking at photographs.

And I think Mavor's work often allows a sense of license beyond what is normally acceptable in more academic art history and in a way expresses for me some of the frustrations I felt as a writer trying to capture something of these very delicate and ambiguous relationships between photographer and sitter, and then also viewer and photograph.

[music]

Anna Reid: Catherine, for your penultimate example, you've chosen an artist writing about art history and she is someone who has continually narrated the position of black British women artists. This excerpt is from an epistolary essay by Lubaina Himid prompted by a commemorative display at Tate Britain in 2011. She recalls her experience of curating exhibitions in the 1980s.

Amy Roxan: Dear Susan, I cannot believe that we really have managed to bring together seven of the artists from the 1980s shows in such a beautiful room at Tate Britain. I'm convinced that my letters to you have galvanised the goddess of exhibitions into action. I love the sensation of being in the room with the work itself, the selection of archive material, and your video showreel with its footage from the state of the art.

My exhibitions and displays are always an invitation to develop any ideas an audience might have, to take up the challenge and build upon whatever it is the art in the space is initiated. It is a strategy that sometimes works in this competitive bear pit, in which venue attempts to outwit venue, and academics are squeezed into leading double lives by having to communicate effectively within and without the institution. Unfortunately, artists' histories can still easily disappear amidst all this, and often only a few re-emerge as awareness surges, then fades seemingly for no reason.

Many are still making very good work indeed. It causes pain. The MAC, Moment and Connections 2011, replaces the text we might've installed all over the walls in the space to make clear the numerous links, relationships and partnerships, and cultural strategies hidden below the more visible records of the 1980s. It is there to be used like a map of course, to understand something of the past, but it also works if people want to go on to make connections, write texts, and make work of their own.

Anna Reid: Lubaina Himid's *Letters to Susan* from the catalogue *Thin Black Lines* read by Amy Roxan. Catherine, what do you find so powerful in this epistolary form?

Catherine Grant: Well, for me in the *Letters to Susan*, what Lubaina Himid achieves is both a personal account of her putting together three landmark exhibitions in the 1980s and the smaller display that commemorates them in 2011 at Tate Britain. But she also insists on this information being added to the historical record. And I think the use of the letter form has a political point here and I've explored this in relation to a number of black British artists using the published letter form as a form that both has an intimacy and immediacy and demands a reply of some kind.

So Himid is putting this history out there through these letters to Susan, but they're also allowing us as readers to think about what our reply to them might be. And I think what Himid is pointing out here is that keeping these exhibitions and the artists within them as part of art history has been an ongoing process that has been very hard and has required labour on the part of herself and her collaborators. And through the letter form, we really get a sense of this in a very emotionally powerful and compelling way.

Anna Reid: Catherine, your reply to Lubaina Himid's *Letters to Susan* is your own 2019, *A Letter Sent, Waiting to be Received: Queer Correspondence, Feminism and Black British Art*. To close this episode, let's hear you read from that article.

Catherine Grant: Reading these letters to Susan, I feel the generosity, humour and weariness of Himid's need to speak to this history over and over again, as well as feeling directly implicated in this history not being more known. As a white art historian whose education in late 1980s and early 1990s British art was dominated by the discourse around the so-called YBAs, the shift to centralise these vibrant histories and networks is something that is very necessary. During the 2010s, this seems to finally be taking place with a critical mass of exhibitions, research projects, awards and television shows on artists of colour in the UK, importantly focusing on communities rather than individual stars.

This essay is a small contribution to returning to these histories, focusing on the overlap between queer, feminist and artists of colour communities across the UK. I have been prompted to do so by groups, such as Collective Creativity, who are urging art institutions, educators, curators and writers to think about the histories they are foregrounding. To think about the strategies to do this, I've drawn on the generosity and desire for conversation found in all these published letters, as well as the anger, sadness and determination that they map in the face of ongoing racism. It is no coincidence that the word passion joins these projects, the passion to keep going, writing, making, organising, researching,

a passion that is then communicated to the reader. This passion is driven in part by the desire to survive both in the present and in history.

[music]

Anna Reid: Catherine Grant, thank you very much for joining us.

Catherine Grant: Thank you.

Anna Reid: Thanks also to our contributors: Kate Random Love, Holly Pesta, Shola von Reinhold and Carol Mavor. To Lubaina Himid for giving us permission to use her writing in this episode, to our reader, Amy Roxan, and to our producer, Miranda Hinckley. If you'd like to track down the writing featured in this episode, a full list of references can be found on the Paul Mellon Center website. Do join us for our next episode when our guest will be Adrian Rifkin.