



## America the Beautiful: Vision of Artist Lorraine O’Grady and Voice of Ray Charles Inspire New Biden-Harris Video

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Nov 7, 2020 • 11:58 pm



A NEW VIDEO produced by the Biden-Harris campaign, captures Americans from all walks of life at home and work, in bustling cities and expansive rural landscapes, from sea to shining sea. With the Ray Charles rendition of “America the Beautiful” serving as the soundtrack, the video depicts Americans holding up ornate gold picture frames, striking a pose, capturing the moment and their surroundings.

Individual Americans are unified by employing the artistic device, which symbolically represents the campaign message of President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris, who is poised to be the first woman, first Black, and first South Asian Vice President in the history of the United States. Their message of unity is visualized throughout the video and stated explicitly at the conclusion: “A Country for All Americans. A Future for All Americans. A President for All Americans.”

The concept for the video directly references a work by artist **Lorraine O’Grady**, 86. Titled “Art is...,” O’Grady performed the original work in 1983 at the African American Day Parade in Harlem. Documentary photographs preserved the performance.

The New York-based artist hired actors and dancers to ride on a parade float. Dressed in all white, they waded into the crowds along the route with gold frames capturing candid visual moments—images of four young girls smiling wide, a woman wearing a brightly colored striped scarf and matching skirt, a father holding his infant child on his shoulders. Even NYPD officers participated in the performance.



LORRAINE O'GRADY, "Art Is...", 1983/2009 (1 of 40 photographs, c-print on paper 50.0 x 40.6 inches). | © Lorraine O'Grady, Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY

NEARLY 40 YEARS AGO, O'Grady documented the performance photographically. She hired a couple of friends to take pictures and also sourced images from people watching the parade. When she saw someone taking photographs, she asked for their phone number and followed up with them.

O'Grady revisited the project and composed the photographic version of "Art is..." in 2009. An important early work, it is one of her best known. In 2015, the complete installation was presented at the Studio Museum in Harlem. O'Grady discussed the work with Amanda Hunt, then an assistant curator at the museum.

The conversation was first published in the Summer/Fall 2015 issue of Studio: The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine and also appears in the artist's forthcoming book, "Lorraine O'Grady: Writing in Space 1973-2019." Speaking about "Art Is...", O'Grady said in part:

Parades were big entertainment for us as kids, perhaps because my family is from the West Indies. We never missed a single one! The parade idea came from wanting to expose the avant-garde to the largest number of black people I could find at one time—that was it. My first thought was to just put artworks on the float and let people LOOK at art. A woman had recently said to me that avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people. That was so infuriating to me. It's where the whole idea for the piece came from—to do something that would prove this woman wrong, a piece about art in front of a million people. Of course it didn't end up with them looking at art. They were more making art themselves. I didn't live in Harlem, so I was going into alien territory. I did not know how this piece was going to work. I mean, the only instructions I could give people on the parade route were the words on the sides of the float—"Art is..."—right? I didn't know what would happen. Would they get it? Would they do anything? It could have been something or it could have been nothing, and I had no idea which, so it was scary for me. But then when I heard people calling the photographers over to them, it was like "Wow!" They wanted to be on camera!

Everybody wanted to be on camera, you know. I guess I didn't realize how much people wanted to be on camera.

*"I did not know how this piece was going to work.... I didn't know what would happen. Would they get it? Would they do anything? It could have been something or it could have been nothing, and I had no idea which, so it was scary for me." — Lorraine O'Grady*

ART IS... WAS FEATURED in "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power." The landmark international traveling exhibition presented art by more than 60 Black artists, including O'Grady. In the closing weeks of the Presidential race, the Biden-Harris campaign adopted a slogan similar to the title of that exhibit. Biden giving remarks in the battleground states of Georgia and Ohio, and Harris in Arizona and Pennsylvania, stood at podiums with signs that read: "Battle for the Soul of the Nation." The new video is also a nod to the power of Black creativity.

After Pennsylvania tallied nearly all of its votes, the Associated Press called the state for Biden shortly before noon today. The decision added Pennsylvania's 20 electoral votes to Biden's total, giving the former Vice President 273, and counting, enough to clench the Presidency. The Biden-Harris campaign released the America the Beautiful video in advance of his victory remarks to the nation this evening.

Before making the video, the campaign reached out to O'Grady and her gallery, Alexander Gray Associates. According to the gallery, after watching what the Biden-Harris team produced, the artist said: "I gave to them and they gave to me." **CT**

FIND MORE [about Lorraine O'Grady](#) on her website

COMING SOON "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And," the artist's first retrospective opens next year at the Brooklyn Museum (March 5–July 18, 2021)



*Inspired by the work of artist Lorraine O'Grady and the voice of Ray Charles, "America the Beautiful," from the Biden-Harris campaign. | Video by Joe Biden*

**UPDATE (11/09/20):** New York Times report published today provides further information on how the idea for the video came about

#### **BOOKSHELF**

"Lorraine O'Grady: Writing in Space 1973-2019" is forthcoming later this month. Lorraine O'Grady's "Art Is..." photographic series was featured in "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power," the international traveling

exhibition. She was also represented in “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85.” Two volumes were published to coincide with the exhibition: “A Sourcebook” and “New Perspectives.” “Lorraine O’Grady: Cutting Out CONYT” accompanied a recent gallery exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates in New York. Expected in May 2021, “Lorraine O’Grady: Both/And” surveys four decades of work and “provides a long-overdue close examination of O’Grady’s artistic and intellectual ambitions.” Also consider, “Social Practice Art in Turbulent Times: The Revolution Will Be Live.”