

Radio Equals

January 21, 2017, 3 p.m.

Conversation between Rodrigo Marti and Rohan Ramsay. Documentation by Genevieve Flavelle.

Radio Equals, initiated by claudewittmann in 2014, consists of one-on-one conversations about equality in as egalitarian a way as possible. The hour-long conversations are broadcast live in the gallery on select dates and at claudewittmann.ca/radio/radio_equals_TPW.html. They are not recorded; listeners are invited to be present in the gallery during the broadcasts. The conversations are designed as a relay, with each conversation partner inviting the next.

A writer is invited to document each conversation. What follows is documentation by Genevieve Flavelle.

[Beginnings]

When was the last time you gave your full attention to listening to someone else speak? When you prepared yourself to listen to someone, not because they are an expert or acclaimed, but simply because they are unknown to you? As I take a seat on a felt covered bench in the first room of Gallery TPW this is what I am preparing myself for. I am there to listen in public to a conversation which takes place in private and is shared only as it is happening over the radio.

The only record of the conversation that unfolds is my commissioned response as a critic. I have listened to a prior conversation as part of this project, so, familiar with the setup, I select a large pair of headphones and settle myself for the last of three (and my second) performance of *Radio Equals*. This is my second time meeting Rodrigo Marti and my first introduction to Rohan Ramsay.

Rodrigo introduces the conversation with a territory acknowledgement; he admits that this is a gesture and Indigenous solidarity is not something he has put himself in related action too. Rodrigo then introduces himself and his guest Rohan. Rohan and Rodrigo work together at a mechanical engineering firm and have known each other for two years. Rodrigo has selected Rohan because they are friends who frequently engage in animated conversation and they push each other on important topics. They also have different cultural backgrounds and arenas of knowledge. They are both artists. Rohan admits he is full of anxiety about equality. He articulates this as a pressure to maximize your own opportunities as a marginalized/underrepresented artist and expand those opportunities to others.

As the conversation gets underway in earnest it starts to lose its shape, it becomes an interview.

In the previous conversation I was present for, both speakers carefully attempted to maintain the egalitarian prescription of the performance. They took turns to articulate the shapes of their identities, upbringings, and artistic philosophies. That conversation began from a place of similarities; both men were Latin American born artists living in Canada. This conversation immediately begins from difference.

Rohan details his family history beginning with his mother's father who was born in Barbados in 1919 to a young mother. Rohan's own mother immigrated to Canada in 1976, shortly after her sister had made the move. She saw the challenges of Canadian racism early on with her sister's children. Rohan grew up around Bathurst and St.Clair in Toronto and went to a school where he had a diverse peer group. His mother, however, wanted him to be part of a more homogeneous peer group so that his identity would not be questioned. This prompted his move to Grenada for high school. His mother was strongly influenced by the sense of self that black people were developing in the 1970s through black activism. Growing up, Rohan was hyper-aware of education as a tool for opportunity and advancement. He felt a lot of pressure to succeed.

Does a conversation about equality need to be conducted in an egalitarian way? Is it the best method? What does balance in a conversation look like? Is it as simple as speaking for the same amount of time? Is actually listening perhaps more impactful than speaking? If we are preparing ourselves to speak are we truly listening? Can not speaking be as important as speaking? As the conversation progresses I fill in the absence of Rodrigo's story with what I learned from the last conversation; Rodrigo was born in Mexico and grew up in London, Ontario. His family has also been very motivated by class and, while growing up, he returned every year to Mexico City with his family so he would understand where he came from.

[Performing Identity]

Rodrigo asks Rohan if he has considered doing what his mother did and going back to Grenada if he has kids. Rohan replies that he is often in bi-racial relationships so, this is a bit more complicated. He discusses bi-racial identity and how black identity seems easier to negotiate if the black parent is present or if the child is raised in the cultural context of black community. Rohan believes that it is often an absence of identity that can lead to, what he terms, bad identity performances. He explains that if you only know your identity through stereotypes, you are more likely to reproduce those stereotypes.

Rodrigo pauses the conversation to interpret what he thinks he is hearing; a strong grasp on identity through the modelling witnessed by being raised in a community that reflects that identity is helpful in moving through the world/institutions that are oppressive. Rohan responds that knowing who you are, that you do not intrinsically come from a place of disadvantage, which is facilitated by meeting people who are like you but also diverse in their success, is incredibly important.

Rohan feels that if you raise people to not feel defensive about their identity they can then move forward more offensively in the world. He speaks about purposefully entering spaces of white privilege as a black artist. He talks about how people who are othered are conditioned to believe that they should not be in these spaces. He believes the best people from disadvantaged groups are the ones who decide they can cross these invisible boundaries and enter spaces of privilege.

What emerges is the understanding that liberation is in large part about how you see yourself. It is the oppressor who constructs the conditions that makes you feel not worthy. Being raised in an environment where you are not othered, where you are able to see your identity and culture reflected in different ways—ways that make you feel like you have options, produces agency.

[Intersectionality]

Rohan speaks about coming to terms with his identity as both oppressed and oppressor and his understandings of the intersections of identity. He admits he doesn't know how to move forward in regard to fighting sexism and disability discrimination, but feels an urgency about it. He speaks about knowing large groups of men who continue to normalize misogyny and sexism. These men are holding fast to gender norms. He compares statistics around racially motivated violence with statistics of violence against women and sex trafficking. He emphasises that we must be open to all forms of liberation and that all struggles need to coalesce.

My own journey through identity as a white queer women raised in Toronto has been so different from these two men. Yet I learn that we have been to the same parties, and that our understanding of working from an intersectional framework is similar. It is fascinating to me to learn about someone else's upbringing and their complex understanding of their own identity. I think back to a panel conversation I attended at U of T in the fall. Scholar Anjali Arondekar spoke about how we need to consider not only the intersections of oppression, but also the conjunctions of power which produce oppression. She argues that through this analysis we can shift from a politics of identity to an ethics of alterity. This shift feels increasingly integral to me the more I think and write about the shifting facets of identity.

[Imaging Utopia]

Rodrigo redirects the conversation by speaking about how last time he realized he had very specific images in his mind of an equal society. These images were very generically utopian; Brave New World aesthetics which included green pastures, white walls, and post racial society. Rohan's images of equality are framed as specific moments; Reverend Jesse Jackson crying at Obama's inauguration, the black punk band Bad Brains. He identifies that these are strange events, events in which the unpredicted has occurred. Rohan believes that change will be built underground through tunnels paved by resistance rather than an open sky of idealism.

The conversation is textured with intimacy; it feels like these two men are speaking candidly about their ideas, frustrations, and struggles. Sitting in the small knot of the gallery audience listening to Rohan and Rodrigo speak over the radio feels in turns special and uncomfortable. In our disembodied digital culture it is common to not know to whom we are speaking. This not knowing becomes especially apparent when the conversation closes on the topic of women.

The speakers are unaware that those listening in the gallery are mainly women. It feels uncomfortable to listen to one of these men talk about how hard he is trying to learn to actually listen to the women in his life, however, I realize this is the heart of the work – listening and speaking across difference. Whether intentionally egalitarian or not, public or private conversations that try to build bridges across chasms of difference are urgently needed.

Conversation is a political act, it is integral to any political project that seeks transformative change. We when we ask what equality *looks* like are we are neglecting what equality sounds like? Perhaps it sounds like having difficult conversations in which generous acts of listening and speaking are exchanged. Perhaps it looks like bringing unlikely parties into conversation. In an increasingly polarized global political landscape, and a country which is still failing to address its settler colonial structure, developing strategies of critical intimacy and practicing listening through difference feels vital.

Radio Equals is a project initiated by **claude wittmann** in 2014 and which has been given life by about 15 people up until now. Radio Equals aims at being a thread of bodies and minds exploring equality in process and content and it manifests sporadically as one-on-one egalitarian, one-hour long conversations about equality. The conversations take place in intimate settings, such as a sound booth in a performance art festival, a closed kitchen of a gallery, a home or an office and this intimacy is extended to listeners through the intrinsic quality of live radio, be it FM narrowcast and/or FM broadcast and/or live streaming through an internet channel (NAISA, CFRC, CKUT. Wikiradio UQAM, Radio Equals temporary live-streaming site). Radio Equals is not recorded or podcasted.

Rodrigo Marti is a Mexican-Canadian artist working primarily in drawing, painting and installation. He has a Bachelor Degree from Concordia University and an MFA in Social Practices from OTIS. His work traces personal, familial and cultural histories in an empirical process of discovery that is constantly negotiating his role, rights and responsibilities as an artist, citizen and an individual. His recent body of work looks at his historical use of imagery and weaves personal mythologies through a drawing diary, assemblages and the making of stage props that mark pseudo-fictional life events. He currently lives and works in Toronto.

Grenadian-Canadian **Rohan Ramsay** is a Toronto based photographer. Tripping head first into art by working at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto Canada, Rohan became obsessive about western art's inclusion and its esoteric discourse. This found Rohan questioning the fluidity his own identity and that of many socially alternative groups through portraiture. Creatively starting out in wardrobe styling, it became apparent that he could engage different persons with different clothing. These two variables help Rohan express the nuanced ideas of intersectionality and normative behaviour.

Genevieve Flavelle is an independent curator and writer. She holds a BA in Art History from NSCAD University, and recently completed a SSHRC funded MA in Art History at Western University. Genevieve's research and curatorial interests include contemporary art, feminist curatorial strategies, curatorial interventions in museums and archives, and queer theory. She is a settler of British ancestry currently living in Toronto.