

Sweet Dreams: Lorraine O'Grady's Art Is. . .

by JOHANNA DRUCKER. 2005

Discussion of O'Grady's performance *ART IS. . .* in a book examining "complicit art." Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. pp. 82-84, 87-88.

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Inaugurated in the American domestic environment in the 1950s and expanding globally ever since in all manifestations of broadcast media, electronic and digital, television radically altered the landscape of visual culture.

Visual art, the once privileged domain of image production, began to lose ground to the commercially driven advertisement / entertainment industry at a scale unmatched by its earlier competition with mass-produced printed images. Visual art ceased to be able to compete at the level of the culture industry. Production values in the commercial sector outstripped those in the art sector.

. . . . The advent of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s signals the realization that the only valid reinvention of artistic practice had to be grounded in idea rather than production. With no other artistic territory left to occupy, no other identity through which it can achieve viability, fine art retreats to this artistic high ground as the last, and most potent, position it can hold.

What might this mean in relation to a specific work? In an innocent and somewhat anomalous way, Lorraine O'Grady's *Art Is* engages these rhetorical issues through a literal play of framing devices (fig. 4). A photograph records a 1985 [sic] enactment of this piece. It shows children on a Harlem street beaming out from an ornate frame. Their hands clutch its outside edges, supporting the decorative boundaries that enclose their radiant

expressions. Their bodies extend beyond—into the space of the street. They are compellingly engaged in the performance of the piece. *Art Is* escapes the usual art world attempt at self-congratulatory “political” rhetoric and succeeds as a continually challenging, dynamic work. The photograph of the performance of *Art Is* is at once the record of a piece and a piece in itself. Both are focused on and question the dependency between visual art’s literal and referential borders as a means of its self-definition. This act of bordering/defining as an act of framing has several implications for the notion of the art object’s status as an entity that is discrete, yet permeable, and as an arena of activity.

Art Is calls many assumptions into question in its structure as well as its thematics. Making use of formal means—a simple frame—it manages to undo the strictures of formalist autonomy. The very act of “appropriating” that produces the work necessarily goes beyond the boundaries of the already-produced image. The frame is a device for dividing the visual field while insisting on its relation to a co-extensive lived environment. O’Grady’s work made use of the simplest gesture of *framing* as a way of *un-framing* the work of art,, of opening its bounded domain into a dialogue with the world as the source and site of productive meaning. The frames in the piece were beautiful, elegant, gold, gaudy, elaborate, and fantastical. They suggested high art and grand traditions of culture. As the float on which they were traveling moved through the streets of New York City, they were handed down into the crowd. The apparent “emptiness” of this frame was contradicted by the impossibility of there ever being a void in that space. This frame worked actively and passively. The moments at which it was in transit, between one group and another of eager children, demonstrated the continuity of the frame function. This work was not antiart in any sense. Quite the contrary, it was art as action, unleashed from moribund constraints—an ephemeral and yet documented gesture of transformation acting on a broad, unedited social field in a purely rhetorical way. Once the activity was photographed, the framing effect was in turn framed again, by the photographic image, which abruptly cut through the incidental seeming information of the bodies that surrounded the frame, holding it and supporting its enclosing form. The emphatic incidentalness of the frame’s capacity to function to delimit a *visual*—and thus an

aesthetic—field defied the idea that there was any material with an a priori claim on a place within the frame.

What was so effective about *Art Is* was its unpretentious inclusiveness. O'Grady's act of art making was a simple act of distinction between that which *is* and that which therefore by default is *not* art. Given the twentieth-century history of art's games of aesthetic nominalism, of designating, signing, pointing, framing in the self-conscious contexts of art sites, this piece had a fresh openness, allowing the permeable boundaries of the art frame to open to an encounter with the social world of the street.¹ Rather than test the limits to which art's identity can be stretched through manipulation of material means (by evacuating it of content, replacing fine art imagery with mass culture iconography, or reducing its formal means to a minima extreme), *Art Is* demonstrated the *rhetorical* identity of art. *Art Is* is a gesture, activity, and attitude, not a stable artifact possessed of specific material or formal properties that distinguish it. Putting into play a line of differentiation allowed the art function to appear, to be perceived, visible, marked. The active demarcation of the frame was the "is-ness" of *Art Is*—but it was only a continually potential capacity, able to be brought into operation, and not ever able to be stabilized as any defining, final, image. *Art Is* was an affirmative embodiment of the theoretical questioning of the boundaries of art as an exclusive, autonomous practice.

If we think about the implications of O'Grady's piece, we see that the apparent dilemma of art's identity after the 1960s can be put aside. The practice of fine art reassumes coherence on conceptual and rhetorical grounds. A permissive and open-ended pluralist diversity produces a new unity of work in dialogue with, rather than opposition to, popular culture and lived culture of all kinds. Ours is a messy condition. O'Grady's piece would hardly satisfy the aesthetic strictures of a latent modernist or a critical postmodernist. Its pluralistic gesture, engaged and participatory, challenges the very elitist view of the esoteric aestheticist.

Neither does O'Grady's work announce a final, terminal condition for fine art. Even as it created a joyously unbounded

example of art as idea enacting a lived performance of aesthetics through a framing gesture, alive and exuberant, it kept the dour pronouncements of ends and closures at bay. The apparent unity of modernism as read through the academic narrative of formal and avant-garde practices repressed a multitude of diverse practices under its too-conspicuous surface coherence. Conversely, the apparent pluralism of contemporary art conceals a profound unity—that of contingent, sometimes affirmative, frequently nuanced, reflective engagement that makes sense within a historical frame as well as a philosophical one.

. . . Where does this leave us? . . .

Fine art performs a mediating function whose efficacy resides entirely in its ability to register the difference between the lived and the represented with some significance. The transformations of experience into aesthetic artifact carries no requirement that it serve the social conscience of the culture in an instrumental way. But the act of filtering experience into form is itself inherently political, if by political we mean the creation of a space in which individual subjectivity is marked, expressed, and preserved with all of its ideological complexity.

Symbolic values are negotiated through aesthetic expression. Fine art's rhetorical spaces express the relations between individual experience and mediated life, between a sense of history and the impossibility of continuity without change, between a sense of identity and the unsustainable myth of individuality, between a public sphere of commercialism and a private domain shrunk to almost nothing through the colonizing effects of media culture. As a young artist said to me recently, she doesn't use media images to compete with them but in the hopes of making work that might have some, any, meaning. The visual vocabularies that construct our imaginary life are drawn as much from media culture as from the history of art, decoration and applied arts, and traditional and industrial sources. The circumscribed domain of art is produced in a differentiating dialogue with what already is, with what has an individual take on the collective whole. The point where this difference registers as significant, the shifting frame of O'Grady's *Art Is*, remains the

defining boundary of fine art's rhetorical activity in its reconceptualized—but very material—condition.

¹ Note in the original: The reference is to Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism on Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 199). [Interestingly, *Art Is. . .* was created in what I would call my "Duchamp" years: LOG]