



This Will Have Been: My 1980s

by Lorraine O'Grady

Lorraine O'Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Leaves the Safety of Home*, 1981, photodocument of performance (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photograph by Coreen Simpson, provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York)

Based on a lecture delivered at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, March 15, 2012, during the exhibition *This Will Have Been: Art, Love and Politics in the 1980s*, curated by Helen Molesworth. Lecture co-sponsored by the Museum of Contemporary Art and Columbia College, Chicago.

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First, I must thank Helen Molesworth for curating such a brilliant and brave show and for allowing me to be part of it. *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s* is an unusual exhibition. It attempts to deal historically with a period that has not yet disappeared, one that is still vexed in present memory. Its admirable qualities leap out at once—a refusal of the curatorial temptation to evaluate and re-categorize, its willingness to let the period “live free,” Molesworth’s exemplary admission of her own biases in shaping it.

I won’t be responding to the show on the walls, but more to the catalogue—whose richness I can’t recommend highly enough—and to what a quiet reading of it in New York made me think and feel.

Molesworth’s own extraordinary essay helped me get to a place it would have taken me years to reach otherwise. I am especially grateful to the invitation extended in its final paragraph to others’ alternate visions of the period, its recognition that even those of us with similar goals can never be fully in synch but that, if we can express our differences “without losing time,” we may get there in the end.¹

None of the differences between my perception of the 1980s and Molesworth’s should be taken as a criticism of *This Will Have Been*, of course. If I saw the 1980s differently than Molesworth—and I did—my responses are more an attitudinal selection, my differences a case of the glass half-empty and half-full.

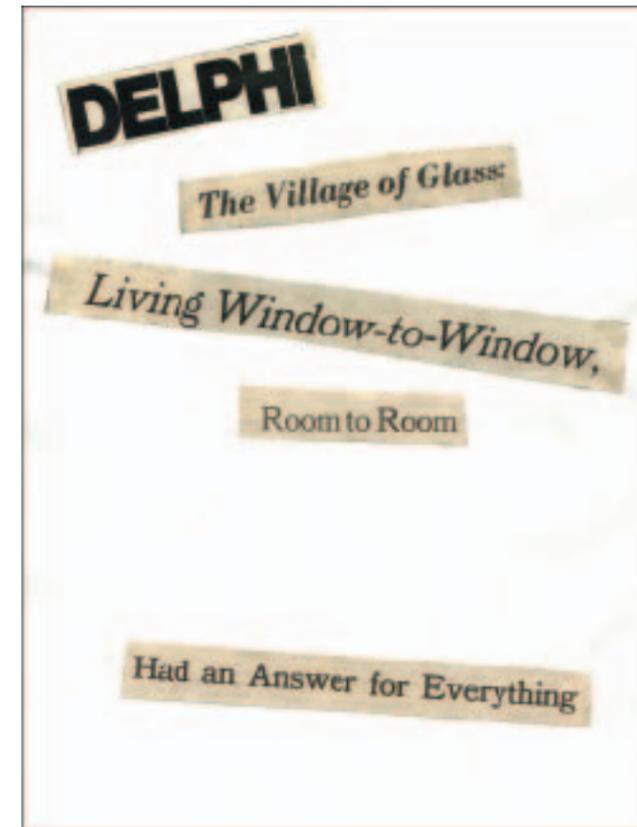
Molesworth sees the 1980s as a moment of nascent ideas, as the incubator of an expanded “understanding of identity and subjectivity” which would arrive more fully in the 1990s—in effect, as the beginning of the postmodernist period.

On the other hand, I see the 1980s as the last gasp of modernism, a modernism newly under pressure, un-self-confident, making a desperate last effort to control the narrative.

Molesworth refers to feminism and the AIDS crisis as “stakes in the ground” shaping the contours of the vision of the 1980s that she explores in her show.

For me, the theorizing of white feminism was one last cruel obstacle to be overcome.² And AIDS was a source of private loss without outer acknowledgement. Though gay artists made some of the best art of the period, their work was not valued as it should have been, nor is it still. It sometimes feels as if the very centrality of homosexuality to the period may be the biggest reason the 1980s are seen, to use Molesworth’s phrase, as “just too much.”³

However, I do agree with Molesworth that the 1980s may have been the “last movement,” the last to believe that art based in individual desire could be socially and culturally transformative.⁴ Sadly, individual desire is one of the human qualities most easily and effectively structured by political economy, which is to say, power.



Lorraine O'Grady, “Cutting Out the New York Times,” 1977, panel 6 of *A Conversation with Fata Morgana*, Sunday, June 19, 1977, newsprint on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm) (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photograph provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York)

For me, it was at times infuriating to watch modernism’s end and post-modernism’s arrival being celebrated prematurely in the 1980s.⁵ Modernism was indeed coming to an end. But in the three decades since the start of the 1980s, some of us have had to live with flailing attempts by the usual suspects to hold on to the old methodologies and “truths,” all the while proclaiming their departure a welcome farewell.

Johanna Burton writes in her catalogue essay that the editors of *October* have at last thrown up their hands and declared that, to paraphrase, they can no longer analyze and predict.⁶ What a relief! The effort to control the narrative was a mandarin project like any other and was bound to fail in any truly postmodern era defined by splintered consensus.

The master narratives that characterized the we-they, top-down modernism typical of colonialist empire seem aberrant interruptions between, on the one hand, the totalizing narrative regimes of premodern, homogeneous cultures and, on the other, a newly postmodern globalized world in which all stories are becoming dangerously equal.

The economic dispersal and ensuing fracture of the art field of postmodernism that seems finally to have

arrived in about 2008, with the worldwide economic bailout and the election in this country of Obama, are quite terrifying. And yet, the current moment feels safer for *me*. I am so glad I made it here, even though there’s no way to predict where this sundering of narrative unity is going. I spent all of the 1980s and the 1990s feeling, “God, will it never end? Will they never stop taking up all the room, stop speaking for themselves as though speaking for everyone?” The death of the author? The total construction of subjectivity? Sexual liberation as a prime victory of feminism? For you, perhaps. But for others, there was more.

History as the single-minded story of the winners is something premodern and modern cultures have in common. But history has, in reality, always been just one story among many—and not always the most interesting, not always the most useful to the present. It was just the story that was needed to survive, to justify power, or the one capable of being understood with the mindset then available. I’d like to see the lost stories recuperated: stories to use, to amuse.

I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, when you could take a course called “World Literature” in almost any university in the country and not encounter a single writer who was not either European or Euro-American. But you know, that was the story they were telling about the world then. Still, it was beautiful and edifying and exhausting, all that identification with exotic characters, all that reading one’s self into their stories with nothing to compare.

But sometimes you have to tell your own stories, not just to understand yourself but to understand the

world, to find the space between their stories and yours, to learn what's really going on.

I often say that I was “post-black” before I was “black.” For a long time, I felt that I had escaped the limitations imposed by blackness. In those days, in the years well before 1968, living in my insular worlds of elite education and government employment, in a seeming meritocracy, I didn't feel I had difficulty being noticed or being taken seriously.

Then in 1977, when I was still post-black and experiencing the kind of personal crisis that now seems routine, I did a series of newspaper poems. But not like the Dadas and Surrealists—the former draft dodgers from World War I whom I'd been teaching—had done. World War I had been one of the stupidest and most devastating wars ever waged—more combatants were killed or wounded, or rather a greater percentage, than in World War II,⁷ and all for mysterious economic power reasons that nobody understood. Those artist sons of Europe, with their rigorous, old-fashioned educations, had been shocked to learn that beneath the rationalism drilled into them as Europe's foundation was a blind irrationality that only occasionally saw the light of day.⁸

One of the best pieces of public performance art I've ever heard tell of was performed by a regiment of five thousand French soldiers being marched to fight in the trenches during that war. Each village the soldiers passed through, as they marched down the main street, they would baa (baaaa, baaaa) like sheep being led to the slaughter. As they left the town, they would fall silent again.

The newspaper poems of the young Dadas and Surrealists were a self-conscious surrender to the random in order to expose it, to bring the irrationality out from where it lay hidden and create a *sur-réalité*, an “above” reality they could benefit from. My newspaper poems were almost the opposite of that. My last job with the government had been at the Department of State, in the Bureau of Intelligence Research (INR), the American Republics branch. It was during the Cuban crisis of the



Devonia O'Grady's sixteenth birthday party, Boston, 1939. snapshots
Front row: Ruth Silvera, third from left, Devonia O'Grady, fourth from left. Dancing: Catherine McCree, second from left (photographs provided by Lorraine O'Grady Studio)

Kennedy years, and I had to read five to ten newspapers a day and plow through transcripts of three different Cuban radio stations. At a certain point in the day, you could watch language melt away. More than a dozen years later, in 1977, in my own little crisis, I started cutting headlines out of the *Sunday New York Times*. I would smooch the cut scraps around on the floor until a poem appeared. My newspaper poems were more of a *sous-réalité*, an “under” reality. an “under” reality. They were an effort to construct out of that random public language a private self, to rescue a kind of rational madness from the irrational Western culture I felt inundated by, in order to keep sane.

In 1977, I was still post-black, and the poems were all about universal stuff, the meaning of life and art and all that. I did a poem a week for twenty-six weeks, and they averaged about ten pages each. But in 1979 I had an epiphanic experience at 80 Langton Street, an alternative space in San Francisco. I'd gone to see Eleanor Antin, whose *100 Boots* I adored. I had no idea what to expect. As it turned out, she was doing a performance of Eleanora Antinova, her black ballerina character who had danced with Diaghilev in Paris after World War I. I liked the concept, it made me think of my mother Lena, of what might have happened had she emigrated from Jamaica to Paris as an eighteen-year-old instead of to Boston at exactly that time. But my mother was tall and willowy, the black ballerina type. And neither this short, plump white woman in blackface nor her out-of-kilter vision of the black character's experience could compute for me. That was the moment I decided I had to speak for myself.

In 1980 I volunteered at Just Above Midtown, the black avant-garde gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant that had lost its space on Fifty-seventh Street and now had to create a new space in Tribeca. I became a sort of in-house gallery PR agent. One day, I called the *New Yorker* and spoke to the editor of “Goings On About Town.” I wanted her to list the gallery's opening show, with pieces by David Hammons and others. JAM had never had a listing there, of course, nor had any of the other black galleries. I told her that the name of the show was *Outlaw Aesthetics*. When I heard her reply, my blood froze. “Oh, they always put titles on shows there, don't they.” That was the moment I was transformed from post-black into black.

Installation view of WACK:
Art and the Feminist
Revolution, 2007, The Geffen
Contemporary, Museum
of Contemporary Art, Los
Angeles (photograph by
Brian Forrest, provided by
MOCA, LA)



Ah, recuperation. It's so boring, especially if you don't have anything to recuperate, if all your stories are already known by you and by all those who need to know them in order to survive. But if I must get my stories told so as to visualize the space between my stories and theirs and gauge where truth might lie, then they need me to tell my stories so as to do the same, to measure the distance between their stories and mine and find a corrective truth for them.

We must try to be analytic with our recuperation. But even so, it may be difficult for some to realize that they need our stories both to understand themselves and to learn the selves they present us to deal with, to see accurately the world in which they increasingly must live.

Since one of my projects in art is to make the invisible visible, I'd like to discuss a few pictures of a kind I imagine most have not seen before. These are photos taken seventy-two years ago, in November 1939. The party is for my sister Devonia's sixteenth birthday, and the young people range in age from fifteen to nineteen. The girls are dressed in floor-length formal gowns, the boys are wearing suits and ties. An unusually attractive group as teenagers go, relaxed and jovial but still well-mannered, intelligent and poised. But if you look more closely, it can be unnerving. The group is so uniform, so carefully selected. These are not new friends; they have grown up together, been carefully vetted by complicit parents, groomed to compete successfully in every way. It's the world of prewar Black Brahmin Boston, the world I came from and was in perpetual rebellion against. I was five years old at the time and not at the party. The chaperone, in whose home it was held, was my godmother Ruth Silvera, my mother's best friend.

Later, these young people would achieve great things. Catherine McCree's brother Wade became Solicitor General of the United States, appointed by Jimmy Carter. Devonia herself would help to set up the country's first school social work program, in Stamford, Connecticut. But neither they nor memory of their accomplishments entered public consciousness. They were obliterated by glazed eyes programmed to eternally render them invisible.

When the Obamas arrived unexpectedly seventy years later, those same eyes, with cauls suddenly removed, saw them as having dropped from Mars. Bless her heart, Michelle has always insisted, I'm not unique, I'm just one of thousands. She is, and not the most beautiful or the most brilliant. But she is one of the most self-confident. That woman has been well-loved.

In 1980, after being transformed from post-black to black, I did my first public art work, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, for the opening of *Outlaw Aesthetics* at Just Above Midtown/Downtown. She was a persona who wore a gown and a cape made of 180 pairs of white gloves, gave away thirty-six white flowers, beat herself with a white cat-o-nine-tails, and shouted poems that criticized the mindsets of the white and the black art worlds. It was a hard performance, perhaps the most difficult I've done. I had to strip away everything that had been instilled in me at home and at school. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire wore a crown and a sash announcing the title she'd won in Cayenne, French Guiana, the other side of nowhere. (Black bourgeoisie-ness was an international condition!) Her sash read "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire 1955." That had been the year her class graduated from Wellesley. The performance was done in 1980, so it was a jubilee year, a year in which she would enact a new consciousness. Well, not entirely. At Wellesley, I'd worn white gloves myself and still had them in a drawer. But I didn't include them in the gown. I couldn't go that far.

After invading openings where she shouted poems against black caution in the face of an absolutely segregated art world, with punch lines like "Black art must take more risks!" and "Now is the time for an invasion!" Mlle Bourgeoise Noire became a sort of impresario. She presented events like *The Black and White Show*, which she curated at Kenkeleba, a black gallery in the East Village, in May



Lorraine O'Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum*, 1981, photodocuments of performance (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photographs by Coreen Simpson and Salima Ali, provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York)



The Black and White Show, 1983, installation view, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, 1983, a Mlle Bourgeoise Noire event (photograph © Lorraine O'Grady). On far wall, Jack Whitten, Omikron I, 1977, acrylic on canvas, and Keith Haring, *Untitled*, 1982, sumi ink on paper

LEFT: Randy Williams, *Between the White Man and the Land There Was Thus Interposed the Shadow of the Black Man*, 1983, toilet seats, wood, razor blades, stadium light, installation view, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, 1983 (artwork © Randy Williams)
 RIGHT: Jean Dupuy, *The Printing Table*, 1974, wooden table, paper, lamp, periscope, mirror, installation view, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, 1983 (artwork © Jean Dupuy)



1983. The exhibition featured twenty-eight artists, fourteen black and fourteen white, and all the work was in black-and-white. The curating and the work were subtle, but the intention was perhaps not. To a blindingly obvious situation, sometimes you make an obvious reply.

Another Mlle Bourgeoise Noire event was *Art Is...*, a September 1983 in the Afro-American Day Parade in Harlem. A quarter-century later she would convert photodocuments of the performance into an installation, a selection of which is on view in *This Will Have Been*.

When she presented these events, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire would pin her own gloves—the gloves

she'd lacked resolve enough to put into the gown—onto her chest as accessories. Perhaps she was getting stronger.

People often ask me to compare the live performance of *Art Is...* and the installation, but I can't. They were incommensurate events. The day of the parade was hot, one of the hottest of the summer. There were a huge number of floats and marching bands, and they each had to wait on a side street before they could get en route. We shared the block with the Colt 45 group for almost four hours



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . .* 1983 © Lorraine O'Grady performance, a Mlle Bourgeoise Noire event, Afro-American Day Parade, New York (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photograph provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York)

before our turn came. While we waited, the young actors and dancers I'd hired, none of whom may have known each other previously, began to bond. And some did more than that, I'm sure. It was that kind of day. We got onto the parade route about 1:00 p.m., and by the time we finished it was almost 6:00.

I've never had a more exhilarating and completely undigested experience in my life. The float was stop-and-stall, sometimes for fifteen minutes at a time. At other times, it would be moving so fast that in order to stay in line, you had to run like crazy, or just jump on and ride. I wasn't from Harlem, so half the time I didn't know what I was looking at. But I had deliberately not put the float into the West Indian Day parade in Brooklyn, where I would have felt at home, because I didn't think avant-garde art could compete with real carnival art. I felt it might do better with the umpah-umpah marching bands and the beer company floats. The fact that I didn't know what to expect is what made the performance a personal challenge and may have made it ultimately successful.

It was scary because I had no idea if it would work. But in the end, I think it met the challenge of the black social worker who'd told me in our *Heresies* issue collective, "Avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people!" There were more than a million people on the parade route, and time and time again we had confirmation that the majority of them understood that the piece, and their participation in it, was art. "Frame me! frame me! make me art!" we heard. And "That's right! That's what art is. We're the art!"

I was on a bigger high at the end of the parade than I can tell you. But at the same time, I couldn't describe what my full experience had been.

There were hundreds of slides taken that day. In 2008, I took the images out of their storage box and made a time-based slideshow for my website using forty- three of them. But the sequentiality of the slideshow didn't do it for me. A year later, for Art Basel Miami Beach, I reduced the slides to forty and made a wall installation, totally rearranging and mapping them. When I saw them like that—spatially,



Lorraine O'Grady, Left Wall, 2009, computer screen-grab, partial sketch for the *Art Is . . .* installation, composed from 40 photodocuments of 1983 performance (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photograph provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York) all over and at once—I felt I could finally intuit what the experience had been. But only what it had been for *me*.

Although it had been a joyous occasion, it wasn't the joy that attracted me. It was the complexity, the mystery, the images that no matter how hard I looked would never become clear, would always remain out of reach.

The guy in the photo I call "Caught in the Art". . . I could never have imagined him there. I made him the center of the installation.

And the place in the next photograph! I could write a novel about what I can see and can't see here.

The ambiguous gesture of a girl pointing. The girl is delightful, but is her response response one of ironic complicity or is it dismissive?



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . . (Caught in the Art)*, 1983/2009, C print, 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8cm) (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photograph provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York)



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . . (Stone and Brick with Egyptian Motif)*, 1983/2009, C print, 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8cm) (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photograph provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York)



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . . (Girl Pointing)*, 1983/2009, C print, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm) (artwork © Lorraine O'Grady; photograph provided by Alexander Grey Associates, New York)

By the mid-1980s, Linda Bryant and Just Above Midtown had fallen on hard times. In the same way she'd been the first to put titles on her shows—something later done routinely—Linda was the first to see the need to move from Tribeca to lower Broadway, the first to understand the role of cafés and office space rentals in supporting alternative art spaces. I'm not sure the funding agencies got her. In any case, it became impossible for JAM to support its artists' careers. I think it closed in 1985. Most of the artists drifted to academia or to other straight jobs. As for me, I found myself having to care for my mother, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The photo is from the good days of Lena, otherwise known as "she who must be obeyed," and lately, "the will-have-been black ballerina."

In 1988, I did my first tentative wall piece, the Sisters quadriptych that would later evolve into *Miscegenated Family Album*. In 1989, I made a decision to perform *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* for the last time. While looking with a desultory glance over my shoulder, I couldn't believe what I saw happening. Adrian Piper, after the imposing retrospective at Geno Rodriguez's Alternative Museum,



Lena O'Grady with sedan, Cochituate, Massachusetts, 1928, snapshot
(photograph provided by Lorraine O'Grady Studio)

and David Hammons, after a great show at Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo's Exit Art, were being recuperated!

My exultation was short-lived. Oh God, they're doing it again! Remediating the situation so nothing will change. Fostering a few successful careers but staying in control of the narrative.

In 1988–89, I was at my mother's place in Brookline, Massachusetts, living in the madness there. And that was the end of my 1980s.

You know, I'm still hopeful. But I have to acknowledge that change can be glacial. I may feel that 2008 was a turning point, but it's so recent that I can't see its outline. Your guess is as good as mine. Will the arrival of the real postmodernism bring a moment when we are all finally just an other of someone else's other? I can't imagine how long that will take. I mean, for me the 1980s took forever to end.

A slightly different version of this article appears in the College Art Association's Art Journal Vol. 71, no. 2 Summer 2012

1. The phrase is from Helen Molesworth, "This Will Have Been," in *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s*, exh. cat. (Chicago and New Haven: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and Yale University Press, 2012), 43. Writing of Félix González-Torres's *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987–90, "in which two store-bought clocks hang plainly, side by side," Molesworth elaborates: "Synchronized at the time of their installation, they slowly, inevitably grow out of step with each other. . . . Now, more than two decades later . . . these two clocks, ticking ever so slightly in and out of rhythm with one another, offer a model of history and subjectivity. . . . there is never one story, one account, one sense of time that prevails. There is always more than one. The game—of history, of politics, of art, of love—is to figure out how to let the clocks strike differently without losing time."

2. See Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2010), 208–20.

3. Molesworth, 15.

4. The last movement" is the curator Ann Goldstein's phrase to describe, according to Molesworth, "the last time artists, however seemingly disparate their respective bodies of work may have appeared, nonetheless held in common a set of hopes and assumptions about the role of art in the public sphere." Molesworth, 17.

5. It's hard to avoid magical thinking with the term "postmodernism"—in my case, the barely disguised longing for pluralisms with enough weight to unseat the master narratives of modernism. In general, though, my definitions oscillate between the evolving and necessarily inconsistent view of postmodernism in the earlier and later Stuart Hall, i.e., between seeing it as a primarily American view of history (as in "the end of") and then seamlessly appropriating it as an analytic tool to understand "globalized" ethnicity and the diasporic subject. I also wonder if the older white male audience member who, after this talk, advised me to use the

word more carefully because postmodernism was not a sociological or cultural theory but an aesthetic style, might not have had a valid point.

6. See Johanna Burton, "A Few Troubles with 'The Eighties,'" in *This Will Have Been*, 254.

7. The French forces had a 73 percent casualty rate (combined dead, wounded, imprisoned, and missing), an almost unimaginable figure. See "WW1 Casualty and Death Tables," PBS, *The Great War*, Resources, at www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/casdeath_pop.html (as of September 10, 2012). The British Empire's military deaths were three times those of World War II. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties (as of September 10, 2012).

8. The preeminent war historian John Keegan has written: "The First, unlike the Second World War, saw no systematic displacement of populations, no deliberate starvation, no expropriation, little massacre or atrocity. It was . . . a curiously civilized war. Yet it damaged civilisation, the rational and liberal civilisation of the European enlightenment, permanently for the worse. . . . Pre-war Europe, imperial though it was in its relations with most of the world beyond the continent, offered respect to the principles of constitutionalism, the rule of law and representative government. Post-war Europe rapidly relinquished confidence in such principles." John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 6, rep. online by New York Times at www.nytimes.com/books/first/k/keegan-first.html?_r=1 (as of September 10, 2012).