

Lorraine O'Grady: The Space Between MATRIX 127

by ANDREA MILLER-KELLER. 1995

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Wherever I stand I must always build a bridge to some other place. Lorraine O'Grady 1994¹

Lorraine O'Grady is a conceptual artist who has used performance, photography, and collage, along with lectures and critical writing, to speak her mind. O'Grady's work reminds us that terms such as "black" and "white" are no longer adequate to describe individuals who are unique composites of diverse social, ethnic, national, educational, and economic backgrounds.

O'Grady was born and raised in Boston. As a first-generation African-American of African-Caribbean-Irish descent, she is unwilling to accept the fragmented and often disparaged identity that our class-race-gender-conscious society would impose on people whose backgrounds are culturally mixed.

O'Grady intends for her work to challenge the binary thinking that pervades Western thought. As O'Grady reminds us, the "either/or" paradigms implicit in binarism are essentially divisive. Certain conceits in our society rely on this long-standing mentality: for instance, black as the inferior supplement to white, female as the inferior supplement to male, working class as the inferior supplement to wealthy. Refusing these models of binary oppositions, O'Grady instead promotes an idea of "both/and," which embraces the notion of "hybridization," the blending of different elements. This strategy resists the dominant culture's inclination to freeze subjects into ostensibly rigid categories —

categories which are the basis of the stereotypes which build and sustain discrimination and privilege.

O'Grady's work strains against these prevailing oversimplifications. Offering resistance in both her life and her art, she champions the positive values of hybridization. O'Grady has been, she says, "obsessed with the reconciliation of opposites: past and present, conscious and unconscious, black and white, you and me."²

For O'Grady, her own multi-racial, upper-middle-class background has been both a source of displacement and empowerment. Her culturally-complex childhood often left her feeling that she "belonged everywhere at once and nowhere at once."³ But, from these same circumstances she learned to negotiate skillfully a range of social, racial, and class milieux. This prowess, acquired by many multi-cultural individuals, is widely under-acknowledged, she suggests.⁴

O'Grady's authoritative voice reflects, with self-confidence and style, the integration of her subjectivity and her intellect. Her focus is "on the black female, not as an object of history, but as a questioning subject." She continues: "In attempting to establish black female agency, I try to focus on that complex point where the person *intersects* with the historic and cultural."⁵ The unequivocal centrality of the *whole* black female in O'Grady's work marks her as a pioneer. This is ironic, since women of color, when placed in a global context, cannot correctly be classified as a "minority," either in terms of race or gender.

The distinctive elegance that characterizes O'Grady's work is also integral to her outspoken critique. Though media stereotypes might suggest otherwise, such elegance is frequently evident in many different black communities from Soweto and Kingston to Harlem, from Addis Ababa and Paris to Hartford.

This MATRIX exhibition features two separate installations by O'Grady: her debut into the New York art world as the fictional **Mlle Bourgeoise Noire** (1980-82) and her most recent work, **Miscegenated Family Album** (1994). Reconciling these related bodies of work, O'Grady has titled this two-part, diptych-

like presentation ***The Space Between***. In doing so, she inverts the apparently binaristic approach suggested by a diptych-based, two-part installation and urges the spectator to hybridize the content and meaning of the work in their own minds as part of the process of reception and reflection. Furthermore, O'Grady's notion of hybridity is not only about seeking to blend but also about foregrounding the "already-blendedness" of all subjects.

The artist's guerrilla performances as **Mlle Bourgeoise Noire** (1980-82) are now legendary. In the guise of this invented persona, clothed in a glamorous costume with a rhinestone and seed-pearl tiara and beauty-pageant sash in celebration of the Silver Jubilee of her coronation as "**Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Internationale) 1955**," O'Grady invaded several select New York art openings. She intentionally disrupted these occasions with short, inflammatory performance pieces in which she challenged the complacency of the audience with terse, polemical poems expressing her concerns on art and race.

O'Grady spent three weeks stitching together Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's splendid gown and cape out of 180 pairs of previously-worn white gloves. It was important to the artist that these used gloves carried the unknown histories of the women who had worn them. White gloves, of course, were not only a sign of propriety and (speaking of hybridization) "good breeding," but they also signal a condition of impaired efficiency and stifled action. The thirteen photographs exhibited here were taken in September 1981, when Mlle Bourgeoise Noire crashed a preview at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City. The opening exhibition, **Persona**, presented nine artists whose work featured public presentations of invented surrogate characters. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's intervention protested the fact that all nine of the museum's chosen artists were white.

Forthright expressions of anger by a woman, especially a black woman, are exceptional in our society. However, **Mlle Bourgeoise Noire** also references the revered tradition of black women "acting out," that is, suddenly bursting forth, hands on hips, hurling expletives and disbelief at an outrageous situation. For O'Grady, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's rambunctious incursions made perfect sense. "Anger is my most productive emotion,"⁶

says the artist who is puzzled that the “enabling quality of anger” is so overlooked in our society.⁷

O’Grady’s contrastingly quiet installation **Miscegenated Family Album** is a series of sixteen Cibachrome diptychs, each containing an image of the ancient Egyptian Queen Nefertiti paired with a corresponding image of the artist’s deceased sister, Devonia Evangeline O’Grady Allen, and/or members of their two families. The physical resemblances between the two are sometimes startling. Both families, in fact, reflect the consequences of generations of cross-cultural exchange and inter-racial marriage.

Miscegenation, the procreation between members of different races, was still an illegal practice in fifteen states in 1967, when such laws were finally overturned by the United States Supreme Court. Says O’Grady, “The word ‘miscegenated’ refers both to the album’s aesthetic and to the process of racial hybridization by which each family was founded.”⁸

The dramatic contrast between the evolution of Nefertiti’s family, largely the result of advantageous political alliances, and that of Devonia’s forebears, subjugated into slavery and then dominated sexually and otherwise, resonates throughout this installation. In defiant triumph, the artist illuminates the regal bearing of both families.

Contemporary scientific research along with the radical shift in demographics over the past several decades combine to challenge the accuracy of our notions of self-contained ethnic, racial, or national groups. These categories, which have long dominated our patterns of social and economic organization, are increasingly understood to be artificial constructs largely contingent on the values and interests of those who hold power.

Miscegenated Family Album has its origins in an earlier performance piece, **Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline** (1980), that represented O’Grady’s attempts to come to terms with the complexity of her feelings about her sister Devonia, who was eleven years her senior and died unexpectedly at the age of 38. As the emblem of success for the O’Grady family’s social

aspirations, Devonia had been placed on a pedestal. With her sister's untimely death, O'Grady had to face the ambivalence of her feelings about Devonia's acceptance of the family's bourgeois values. At the same time, the artist struggled to reconcile both her idolization of her sister and a long-standing sibling rivalry with her feelings of loss.

Underlying O'Grady's appropriation of images of this ancient dynasty is an understanding of the shifting placement of Egyptian civilization within the Western canon. O'Grady, an ardent student of history and an amateur Egyptologist, recalls that even as a young grammar school student, the removal of Egypt from the study of Africa left her feeling that something important had been subtracted from her legitimate heritage. Eventually questioning the prevailing, racist interpretations of traditional colonialist Egyptologists, O'Grady learned that the much-admired early Egyptian Dynasties (I-IV) — those whose contributions to world culture (and to Hellenic civilization in particular) are considered most significant — were, in fact, black Africans of southern Egypt.⁹ Over centuries of imperial politics, these rulers inter-married, and royal blood lines, as we can see in **Miscegenated Family Album**, became racially mixed.

In the past decade, O'GRADY has moved away from performance, choosing instead formats in which the convergence of such complex ideas "can be held still and studied."¹⁰ **Miscegenated Family Album** is not a series of photographs offering a linear narrative. Rather, it is an installation piece in which time is collapsed and, using the diptych format, O'Grady's personal, historical, and cultural concerns do indeed, intersect.

A past recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts (CAPS), and Art Matters Inc., Lorraine O'Grady has been selected for a 1995-96 Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe College. This summer, she is in residence at Yaddo in Saratoga, New York, and at the MacDowell Colony in Petersboro, New Hampshire. A graduate of Wellesley College and the Writers Workshop (MFA, Fiction Writing) at the University of Iowa, O'Grady lives and works in New York City. She is a faculty member at the School of Visual Arts, where she teaches Surrealist and Symbolist literature and art.

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¹ "Lorraine O'Grady, conceptual artist," artist's statement prepared July 18, 1994 for Susan Cahan and Zoya Kocur, eds., *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*, publication pending.

² O'Grady. "Lorraine O'Grady" in King-Hammond and Stokes Sims *Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum* 1988, n.p.

³ In conversation with AMK, April 30, 1995.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ O'Grady. "Thoughts on diaspora and hybridism," 1994, unpublished lecture.

⁶ O'Grady, unpublished artist's statement prepared January 1, 1981, for Lucy Lippard's *Acting Out: The First Political Performance Art Series*.

⁷ In conversation with AMK, April 30, 1995.

⁸ O'Grady, gallery hand-out for *The Body as Measure*, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA. 1994.

⁹ A recent two-volume publication, *Black Athena* by Martin Bernal (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ. 1987) presents evidence that "the conventional view among Greeks in the Classical and Hellenistic ages...[was that]... Greek culture had arisen as the result of colonization, around 1500 B.C. by Egyptians and Phoenicians who had civilized the native inhabitants." p. 1.

¹⁰ In conversation with AMK, May 2, 1995.