

“Lorraine O’Grady,” *Alternating Currents**

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Catalogue essay for the Buffalo biennial on O’Grady’s two-part exhibit: *The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me*, photomontage diptych, 1991; and her new complement to it: *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, video, 2010.

LORRAINE O’GRADY

American, b. 1934 / Lives and works in New York, NY

Not long after her diptych *The Clearing*, 1991, appeared as part of her first solo exhibition,ⁱ Lorraine O’Grady expanded the work’s title as a way to explicate its meaning. Unlike other work featured in *BodyGround*,ⁱⁱ an installation of photomontages, this piece encountered a particularly negative reaction. In this investigation of interracial relationships, the artist uses the visual language of Surrealism to represent the white male/black female union. With its concurrent display of eroticism and domination, the work exposed enduring cultural anxieties. Most disturbing, however, was the resistance of some audiences to engage with the work at all. There was no debate about the work’s aesthetic or conceptual basis; instead, those who might participate in such a dialogue ignored it completely, censoring what proved too provocative. Dismissing the diptych was an attempt to silence it, but when O’Grady renamed *The Clearing*, she began a process of recuperation. Expanding the title to *The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me*, the artist reveals her place in a larger historic trajectory: as **both** an African Caribbean American with an inherited bicultural background, **and** as an active participant in interracial relationships.

* Carolyn Tennant, “Lorraine O’Grady,” at University at Buffalo Anderson Gallery, *Alternating Currents: Beyond/In Western New York 2010*, pp. 114-115. Published by Albright-Knox Art Gallery, The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Buffalo, NY, 2010.

The Clearing... demonstrates how the diptych, as a formal device and a conceptual tool, serves a strategic function in O'Grady's work. The left panel presents a naked couple in an ecstatic embrace, floating in the sky, hovering above the trees; on the ground below, a young boy and girl—the offspring of this union—run after a ball as it rolls towards a pile of the adults' discarded clothing, amongst which a handgun is seen. The right panel portrays a man and a woman on the ground in the same landscape, however, their bodies are arranged in a sinister pose. Clothed in chain mail, a skull replacing his face, the white man leans dominantly over the black woman's naked body and fondles her breast. Her face is turned away, her arms stiff at her sides, her eyes fixed on the sky above. Rather than an attempt to negotiate different points of view, O'Grady uses the diptych to contain opposing forces.ⁱⁱⁱ Once the "either/or" fallacy is revealed, the artist can reframe binary oppositions as "both/and." In this way, O'Grady's work dismantles Western dualism and those false dichotomies that sustain systems of power.

Two decades later, O'Grady continues an ongoing process of recuperation. Even as a bicultural President sits in the White House, *The Clearing...* remains radical, perhaps, the artist suggests, because the work has not been "de-fanged."^{iv} "Silencing is a process that needs to be constantly reinforced, but un-silencing also needs to be reinforced."^v Her latest efforts involve the introduction of a new panel, a time-based video installation that she now considers part of the diptych. Like the expanded title, the video provides yet another way to reclaim subjectivity. Working with one of her most striking characteristics, her curly mane, as a metaphor, O'Grady opens the work up to new contemporary meanings; for those with multi-ethnic backgrounds, hair has provided evidence of one's background long before its use in DNA testing. By including a sound collage composed from a dialogue about the work and her experiences as an artist, as a woman, and as a multi-ethnic artist, O'Grady, quite literally, gives it voice and breaks a decades-old silence.^{vi}

Since her earliest interventions, O'Grady's art has served as institutional critique.^{vii} "The black female's body needs less to be

rescued from the masculine 'gaze' than to be sprung from a historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, and not paradoxically, it erases her completely," she wrote in a postscript to her widely anthologized article "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity."^{viii} Visualizing what once was only recognized through its absence, she reminds audiences that invisibility and silencing is not simply an art-historical problem, but a continuing crisis in contemporary art.

ⁱ Lorraine O'Grady: *Critical Interventions: Photomontages* (January 21–February 22, 1991) took place at INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center. The exhibition was curated by Judith Wilson, whose writing for the exhibition can be found at <http://lorraineogrady.com/bodyground>.

ⁱⁱ The title *BodyGround* is shorthand for *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theo Davis, "Artist as Art Critic: An Interview with Conceptualist Lorraine O'Grady," in *Sojourner: The Women's Forum*, November 1996: 25–28.

^{iv} The author in a telephone conversation with the artist, June 29, 2010.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} The audio source material is an interview with the artist conducted by Andil Gosine, PhD, who teaches Sociology at York University in Toronto. Arranged thanks to Sur Rodney Sur, the dialogue investigates, among many topics, the function of nature in *The Clearing*... It took place on June 14, 2010.

^{vii} In her earliest performances as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, O'Grady used public interventions as a means to both criticize the white art establishment and also to provoke black artists on their own territory. Dressed in a gown made from white gloves, she warned of the dangers of compromise and the erasure of politics for acceptance: "BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS."

^{viii} The artist continues, "My own concern as an artist is to reclaim black female subjectivity so as to 'de-haunt' historic scripts and establish worldly agency. . . . It takes a strong and flexible will to work both with the script and against it at the same time." "Olympia's Maid" (1992, 1994) was most recently anthologized in the 2010 edition of Amelia Jones's *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, published by Routledge.