

**Lorraine O'Grady and Connie Butler chat about  
*WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution.*  
WPS1 Art Radio, January 28, 2008\***

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Full transcript of the 45-minute conversation between Lorraine O'Grady and curator Connie Butler in WPS1 Art Radio's broadcast studios two weeks before the opening of *WACK!* at PS1-MOMA, Long Island City, NY.

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**CONNIE BUTLER: Thinking back a little bit on the last year of activities around feminist art—there have been so many exhibitions and projects—you were able to go to Los Angeles where the show opened and did a wonderful talk there and had some sense of the audience response there, I thought maybe you could reflect a little bit on all of this.**

LORRAINE O'GRADY: Well, I have to say that I was a little bit surprised at how big that opening was. It really kind of took me aback. *(She laughs)*

***(Connie laughs)* We all were.**

I had no idea! I had been teaching in southern California at Irvine and I had no idea that there was that large a latent interest in Feminism. But, I mean, I guess, in fact, it's probably not surprising because one thing that I had sensed while teaching was that, although students were preparing themselves for the reality of the market place, they were doing it a bit reluctantly. That they had still come into art for the old reasons which was that they wanted to make meaningful work and they were starved for meaning and the opening to express meaning.

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\*Unpublished full transcript of interview first broadcast by WPS1 Art Radio on January 28, 2008.

So, I suppose it's not such a shock that when they saw that show, it answered some rather deep need. I'm not sure if they'll be able to act on that but it must have been very exciting for them to see work that both operated from this other basis of art making but also that they had just sort of heard about, that was just sort of so legendary and that they've never had the opportunity to engage with in that visual tactile way, having it all in one place and at hand. I mean, mostly I think they had learned about it through slides and that kind of thing. Nevertheless, it was just such an amazing thing, that opening! The music and the crowds and so forth! That was lovely.

**I was overwhelmed too by the response on the part of students, but also, younger artists and I think "latent" is a good word because there was a real sense of: "We're longing for this material but we don't actually know what it is." And I think you're right, you know, seeing it in the real was quite a powerful thing.**

**Maybe you could talk, then, a little bit about the project of yours which was included in the exhibition in Los Angeles and was kind of positioned as one of the entry points in a way.**

I wasn't quite sure whether it was an entry point or an exit point, you know, because it was made in the last year the show was covering so I didn't know exactly which was the reference point but I never do when I'm in a museum. I never know which is the start and which is the end; whether I'm going forward or backward, it doesn't matter.

**Let me just say that the exhibition does cover the historical time period of 1965 to 1980, albeit loosely, but your work was, as you say, at the, sort of, end of that bracketed period.**

I was very thrilled to see the piece. I mean, obviously, I had sold it to the Nortons, but I hadn't actually seen it physically since it had left my possession some years ago, so just seeing it again, to me, was like seeing an old friend that you haven't seen for a long time. But, you see, it was never meant to be an installation. It was never meant to be an "art work." It was something that I

was doing and the distance of it becoming art was something strange and exotic to me.

**Can you describe, just for people who are listening and don't know the piece, exactly what it is?**

Yeah. I did a guerilla performance in the early-'80s called *Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire*, which is French for "Ms. French Bourgeois." She wore a gown and a cape made of 180 pairs of white gloves and she carried a whip, a cat-of-nine-tails, made of white macramé that was studded with chrysanthemums and she gave these away during the course of the performance while smiling and saying, "Won't you help me lighten my heavy bouquet?" When she entered with her crown and her gown and her cape she looked very much like either a debutante or a beauty queen. I was sort of playing off of both of those roles. But then once the flowers were gone and then she was left there with the whip, she took off her cape and beat herself with the whip. The whip was basically a metaphor for external oppression and the gloves were a metaphor for internal repression.

Her point in doing these performances was to protest the still very segregated nature of the art world at that time. There was basically a white art world and a black art world. It was 1980 and the mainstream art world did not get meaningfully integrated until the exhibitions of David Hammons and Adrian Piper in 1988 or '89. So, this was a piece done very much in advance of that and it's hard for people to realize that the art world has not really been integrated for that long; it's less than twenty years since that, you know? So, the piece was very badly received at some level because many people thought it was simply too confrontational, and, you know, it certainly didn't integrate the art world. (*laughing*) The art world went about its business for another eight or nine years right until the economy basically integrated in some ways. What has happened to the piece, in some ways, is that a few images have circulated; mainly of me beating myself with the whip and another one of me shouting out my poem of protest. But the entire context of the performance, the audience, the movement through the audience, the giving away of the flowers, and the general building up to the

performance of beating myself and shouting, none of that is anything that most people have been able to put together.

**Also, the context of where you actually first made the performance, which was Just Above Midtown Gallery, in response, as I remember, to an exhibition that was, actually, at P.S. 1, a Black Abstraction exhibition.**

Exactly! Oh, right! I've always called *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire* and equal-opportunity critic or castigator because the first time that she came out was to protest a sort of mind set that had set in among black artists who had had the doors so completely closed in their faces. They had done what black middle-class people had been doing for generations: trying to make themselves acceptable and one of the ways they make themselves acceptable is to make very controlled—and beautiful—but very safe abstract art. And I felt that they had to stop that and take risks and forget the fact that these people were not letting them through the door. So the punch line to the first poem that I shouted which was Just Above Midtown Gallery which was where most of these artists were located—and I have to say, these are all artists that I admire enormously, and, you know, who were my friends, and who are still my friends—but it's a mindset that is unavoidable if you are excluded. You know, you try to make yourself palatable for inclusion. And, so, the first performance was at Just Above Midtown Gallery, and I ended the poem by shouting: "BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!" But a year later, I did this piece at the New Museum, you know, when it was still at the New School on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and there it was protesting the idea that you could have a show of nine artists and not invite a black artist to be in the show. Because I had used a persona, I was not invited to be in the show, but I was invited to be in the outreach, you know, give the lectures to the schoolchildren and I said, "Let's just talk about it after the opening." So, I went to the opening and did *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire* (*she laughs*). The point of that performance was to, again, in some ways, I was addressing the thoughtlessness of the white exclusion. Once again, you know, I was talking to an institution that was run by a woman that I totally admire and respect, and an institution that I respect, and even there, there was this thoughtlessness. But the main audience at some level was, to my black colleagues, I was

saying: "You can't just sit back! You know? You have to invade!" The punch line was: "Now is the time for an invasion!" So the audience was double in that sense, you know, for that performance.

But, at any rate, to get back to how it looked at MOCA, oh my goodness, it was really beautiful. Thank you, it was beautifully installed, and the lighting was incredible there. But for me, it was really wonderful to see it, you know, on the model, and I felt: "Oh my goodness, I can still fit into this!" (*She laughs*)

**It's funny, you talk about how beautiful it was. One of the reactions I had [when] installing the show was, sort of, I had a moment where, when the work started to come in, and we began to install and I thought: "Oh my God, what have I done to this artwork?!...By bringing it into the institution and framing it, is it just gonna kill it?" In some funny way, it looked so beautiful, but at the same time, so "museum-fied," and, in fact, I believe very strongly in the positive side of the curatorial act, the act of bringing work into the museum. That act can be an activist thing, and a great thing, where you can readdress history in that way. But I know that a lot of the artists were afraid because so much of the art was made in resistance to institutions of all kinds. So then, to be brought in and, especially performance, which is ephemeral by nature, anyway; maybe you could talk a little bit about that.**

When I was making performance in the early-80s, I was very much of a purist. I had been teaching Duchamp for ten years by the time I started doing my performances and I was very much a Duchampian at the end of that point. And I didn't have any desire at all in terms of the art world recognizing me, or buying me, or anything. It wasn't about that. In fact, one performance that I did, *Art Is*, which is the parade piece I did in Harlem, I didn't even tell the art world what I had done. I got a grant from the New York State Council of the Arts, which helped me make the piece, but I didn't tell anyone that I was doing it. So, basically, nobody knew about it for about five years. The work that I was doing was not for the history books. It was for my peers, it was for, I don't know, it seemed to me that the

best critique of art was to make an artwork. I was critiquing art. But anyway, to say that I was a purist at the time that I made it, I have to confess that I later became much less of a purist (*laughing*). So it is quite nice, and I am quite happy to have this form of recognition.

**I encountered that with many of the artists in the exhibition. That, at the time, and it was part of the ethos of the whole period, really, there was this lack of concern for documentation. I mean, nobody was thinking about their history or what would happen in thirty years or anything. There was the urgency of getting the work done and getting it out. But now, people are thinking, artists are thinking, in all sorts of interesting ways about how to actually display this work, how to, sort of, indicate this moment in time and the politics behind the work, but do it in the proper way so that this period and these works are being historicized. I think that's fair and that's responsible.**

This brings me to another issue and that is the documentation. People always ask me: "Do you have, you know, videos?" I do not have videos. I wasn't actually, perhaps, that sophisticated or as self-conscious when I was making the work. I wasn't thinking of recording the work. But even when the thought of recording briefly flitted through my mind, I would never have been able to, at that time, afford video documentation. It was very expensive; at least, traveling with it. If you were, you know, sitting in a studio with a still setup, it was not quite so expensive, but to try to have an actually video of something live and in motion was prohibitively expensive. I think that was another problem for black artists where economics and personal situations were not geared toward making certain forms of art. In fact, I was one of the very few using performance as a medium because of that very reason. I mean, it did cost money. It cost money to put the gown together and to put the performance together. I didn't have, after I expended that amount of money on just the doing of the performance, I didn't have the additional money to document it. I just feel lucky that some photographers were there and were interested and did enough shooting of it, with a camera, with still-cameras so that there is something left to

show. I do feel that the installation at MOCA was important, in terms of, there were thirteen still photographs on the wall which gave a sense of the movement of the performance from its start, you know, it had a narrative, it began and then it went through certain motions and activities and then it ended. Actually, it ended in a restaurant with me in a restaurant celebrating with my friends. I thought, though, that that was very important because, what's happened to the performance, is, as I was saying earlier, it has become the images that are so focused. The one of me beating myself with and whip and the other of me shouting have become reproduced in a sort of isolated way. They become empty signifiers. People see this woman with her mouth open and they don't know what the hell she's doing! I mean, nobody can figure it out. So, I think that, in addition to, sort of, the personal gratification that's being realized, I'm extremely happy for the form that the show has given this piece that allows it to be understood.

**Yes, it's such a layered work and that's why I thought it was important to show it because I think it needs to be understood and it is emblematic and canonical at this point, but for all sorts of other reasons. When we first spoke about the exhibition, I remember you had all sorts of interesting reflections back on some of the other black women artists who were involved in the feminist art moment: Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper, and the different positions or different ways in which you participated, or not. What was going on? Maybe you could talk about that.**

Yeah, you know, I am not sure...um, well, as you know, the word "feminist" has had a problematic relationship with black women even at the time of the feminist movement at its height. The word was contested by writers like Alice Walker, who refused to use the word "feminist" and substituted the word "womanist." This was rather complicated because the programs of mainstream, white feminism were rather to the right or off the center of what the preoccupations of most black women were at the time. I am not sure, because I do think that, and I know that I have seen, Adrian Piper has written what I think all and if not, many black women would say which is that, in our culture, race

trumps gender. We can't just push that one under the rug. There were recently the pictures in the New York Times of Katie Stanton and Fredrick Douglas. This is an issue that's gone back a hundred years. And so most black women feel that they are dealing with two forms of oppression, racial and gender, and deciding for yourself what the problem is at any given moment. It's almost like a chess game. I would say that every black woman has a different relationship to these issues depending on her life and depending on what's happening in the world. It really is a complex set of variables and I don't think you could find any two black women artists who were dealing with it in the same way at the same time. So, when I look back at that moment, say 1980, '81, '82, you know, at the time, I didn't think that Adrian Piper was a feminist. I didn't see her as a feminist or as a black artist. In fact, very few black artists even knew that she was black. Later on, though, when you view that work and you see that even though she was operating within the mainstream white art world, she was working with many of the same issues that many of us were dealing with in this other way. Would you call her a feminist? I don't know. I think that someone like Howardena was much more engaged in the dialogues of feminism. She was part of A.I.R. Gallery, and so on. I would say that I was not as actively feminist as Howardena, but I was very much working out of my position as a woman. It wasn't just *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire*, it was very definitely all about the socialization of a black middle-class woman; but also I did another performance called *Rivers, First Draft*, which basically was about finding ones way as a woman. The piece was about finding myself as an artist. Taking myself seriously as an artist, after a lifetime, almost, of being a playgirl. It was about this moment of stopping being a playgirl and becoming an artist. This is actually something that I have to say very honestly. It took me a long time to stop being "pretty" and "empty-headed"—well, not empty-headed. I could never be empty headed, I was too well educated, but you know what I'm talking about.

**Sure. Playing a certain role.**

Right. Playing that role. And I was in my forties when I started making these performances. Until that time, I was, you know, a "chick." (*She laughs*)

**The personal revolutions of many of the artists in the exhibition are fascinating. It's a whole other book to be written about the transformations from writer and mother and lover and girlfriend to, you know, self-sufficient artists and what it means to be an artist.**

Oh, absolutely. But to answer your question, I think most, well, more than most women artists were working around the issues of feminism. It was almost an institutional feminist art, a way, or approach, toward making art that, in a way, codified feminism. Whereas, among the black women artists, I think it was far more diverse. I was making art that is feminist but from a very much more personal point of view. I think that Howardena was making art that was from a much more political point of view. Adrian was making art in a feminist way that was almost involuntary.

**There, of course, was also Faith Ringgold, a member of "Where We At?" the black women artists collective and then moved away from that so as not to be sort of ghettoized as a black artist, I think, within the feminist movement but was very active within the feminist movement by herself in dealing with an entirely different visual vocabulary than any of the other artists used.**

Yeah, I think that Faith's work was very strongly based in Africanist motifs and this, frankly, within the milieu of the black art world that I was working in where the problem was excessive abstraction, you know refinement and so forth, even aesthetically, there were so many different worlds.

**And that was certainly true of the white artists and others as well as there was a very often rigorous and often rigid "academy" of feminist art. I know many artists that felt kind of oppressed by it and wanted to kind of work outside of it even if they dealt with issues of gender.**

Well, Connie, I think one of the most wonderful things about the show that you've produced is that it showed how many different vocabularies were engaged and viable at the same time. That you could have work as rarified as Mary Kelly and Adrian Piper on

one wall and as visceral as Joan Semmel on another wall, there were so many different vocabularies that it really puts the lie to a "way" of being feminist or a "way" of making art.

**That was really important to me to dispel those kinds of ideas, and even issues of, sort of, quality that have been used to address all sorts of artists and practices. There's this idea that feminist art is "bad," and what do you do with all the "bad art?" There are, in fact, many other ways to define that. You were talking about Faith Ringgold and her, sort of, dealing with African heritage. It reminded me of some other works that you had done in the early-'80s dealing with other kinds of goddess-figures, Nefertiti, for example. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.**

Well that's interesting. I have to say that when I saw that I was in the section of the show called "Goddess," I was really p.o.'ed. *(Laughing)* I mean, I am so overly intellectual and, you know, at the time, I cringed when I looked at that. That goddess work just turned me off so badly, but now I'm here.

It's like everything, you know, when someone else shines the light on you and from a different angle, you start seeing things that you didn't. And I thought, "Yes! I was a goddess!" I mean, I didn't think of myself in that way, but, yeah, hey, that's what *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire* was. And the work that I was doing with Nefertiti and my sister, yes, I thought of them as goddesses but I wasn't thinking of it because, at the time, goddess meant, you know, earth mounds, and stuff like that. Goddess, to me, was sort of a matriarchal religious sort of thing and I was not there at all.

**Well, and, to me, it was sort of the category, the theme, that I had the most trouble with for many of the same reasons. But at the same time, you know, I had to deal with it. It was this major feminist theme and impulse and yet, how could I do it other than by redefining it and put it sort of upfront and center which is what we did.**

You did a great job, lady! I'm always sort of with Orlan, you know, because of the alphabet. O'Grady, Orlan...but to see my

work beside hers was, like, very fascinating. She's in the goddess section too.

**Yes, she is. And also, Ulriche Rosenbach, who's a wonderful and not so well-known in this country German artist and she was taking these kind of goddess figures from art history and projecting them and then performing in front of those so she's sort of dealing with art history in a way that she wouldn't consider "Goddess" either.**

Well, I have to say, I'm speaking at a bit of a disadvantage. I went to two openings. I went to the one in L.A. and then I went to the one in Washington but I have still not really seen the show.

**Right.**

You know, it's just so large and so big and I'm waiting for it to come to P.S. 1 so that I can, you know, sort of leisurely go back and see these things that I know you did but I wasn't quite aware of.

**One of the things that I'm looking forward about that P.S. 1 show is because of how the space is and how the space is divided and with many different galleries and with many different sizes and shapes of galleries and it will be less of a narrative and more about individual artists and that is, over time, how I've come to see the exhibition. It's more about the different techniques and styles that come to intersect with feminism in various ways—different feminisms really.**

I hope that, here in New York, there will be a sophisticated response to the aesthetics that you've put into the show. I think that, because of the weight of canonization that has already occurred around feminism and feminist art, it's very hard for art critics to see beyond the canonical names. I've noticed that in the writing about the show to date, it's still been far more limited than the show is in this regard. I'm hoping, because there's so much in this show that puts the lie to myths of origin that we have been overwhelmed with in feminism.

**There are so many wonderful things that—I mean, the show is international—and early on, I realized that that was the only way I wanted to do it and the way the artists want their work to be seen. A very different show could be put on involving art history and feminist art in New York City, or the West Coast, or America, for example, and you know, that’s a show I hope happens. But over a decade now, hope people will understand the sort of, simultaneity of these different movements and impulses. It’s the only really interesting way to look at it.**

Something that I have to remark about is the incredible way this show looked in the two venues that I’ve seen. At MOCA, in this airplane hanger, it just looked so hip and so modern...the work I mean...and then you get to the National Museum and it’s this Italianate marble...it looked like every old fashion Museum...The work just changed.

**It changes so much, and in some ways, I think the opportunity in Washington was to see a lot of the work that requires a more intimate kind of attention. It looked great, and, actually, better there. Certainly, I like the more free-spirited nature of what happened in Los Angeles, but its been great.**

It’ll be fascinating to see it at P.S. 1.

**And also, the New York audience will be tougher on it, in a way and, you know, many of the women who are not in it are here and have genuine gripes and complaints about the exhibition and I hope that all gets articulated in an interesting way too.**

I do know that it energized a lot of people and made people want to take advantage of it. One of the reasons I’m so tired today is because I’m working on something that I should have done ten years ago and its because of your show. I’m doing a major website of my work. Up until now, my work is basically unteachable in its present form and I want to remedy that,

hopefully in time for the opening but I know that other people have been doing things.

One of the things that happened was a conversation with Holland Cotter about the need for academia to begin to really make serious investigations of these artists, to interview these women who may not be here that much longer and to get their archives and so forth.

When you asked us to be in your show, how would we know what the response would be? But there was this response. Taking the work seriously and the future of the work seriously has become a much bigger issue than it was for us before. It's certainly put me in a different relationship with my work.

**Yeah, I must say that the response has been overwhelming to all of us; just beyond anything that anyone, sort of, thought it would be. You know, I learned over the weekend that it's on Time Magazine's website as one of the top-ten exhibitions of the year. Now, in a way, it doesn't mean anything, it just means that a reviewer from Time Magazine happened to see it and like it, but is there something going on, you know, more broadly in the culture that enables this to be the year of the first woman presidential nominee, potentially, and this overwhelming response. I find myself being sort of cynical and guarded about it. I don't actually trust the art world to absorb this much feminist art and this many women. How little play out will there be as a result of, not just this show, but all these exhibitions that have happened this year? Will there be more representation of women in commercial galleries next year? Three years from now? Will it play out in some way? Will there be major museum exhibitions? One person exhibitions with major catalogues. Real estate in the major institutions is a major indicator of success.**

Well, when I knew I was going to be coming into to talk about these issues with you, I actually had this very strange thought which was that one of the best things for feminism is the downturn in the economy.

## **How so?**

I'm almost a hundred percent sure it's the same for women artists as it is for black artists. They make their bread and butter during times of economic downturn. That's when the whole present generation of mainstream black artists made it, during the recession in the late-80s. If there is a recession, this thing that I was noticing when I was teaching, will have an opportunity to be expressed.

What happens when there is an economic downturn is that values become relativized, or, I should say, that people become less confident in the materialistic values and so they begin to enter this sort of self-questioning and doubt and that is the moment when meaning can emerge as a sort of preoccupation. Sometimes people will explain the arrival of minority artists at the moment of economic downturn as due to the fact that their work is cheaper. Well, that may be part of it, but I do think that the openness to meaning and different forms of meaning makes it possible to see that a black artist might be a good artist or has something else to say. I think this might happen for women. The market has been something that I no longer comprehend that I can't even imagine how much the economy would have to fall before the present crazyness gets out of line.

**But it has occurred to me too, and there's certainly the economic factor, recession that you speak about, but also the general conditions in the world, being in this horrible war that was unnecessary and a necessity for certain kinds of activism and a craving for meaning, as you say, that, at least within the art world, sort of leads you towards and sort of indulges you in this period where there was something so radical and immediate about the art that was being made. And change did happen as a result of that. There's yearning, I think, for that kind of time and moment because it's so radically different from our own.**

Change happened via feminist art, aesthetically. The multiplicity of aesthetics was really achieved in this particular moment. When you go into your show and you see this art, you ask: "how could

these two people have been making art at the same time about the same issues?" And all have had almost the same public? That's the really strange thing about feminist art is that the same people were enjoying and appreciating and understand Mary Kelly that were understanding and appreciating Faith Ringgold. So this diversity of aesthetic form and content and of the materials being used, all of this, I think, has affected the art world in addition to the "thirst for meaning" that will make this work, you know, become more viable. I think New York's opportunity to see it all in one place and have this lesson retaught will make people understand where Mike Kelly and Mathew Barney and all of the others come from. We hope.

**Let's hope.**