

Won't you help me lighten my heavy bouquet?

Connie Butler chats with artist Lorraine O'Grady in the Art Radio WPS1.org broadcast studios*

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Photo: "Lorraine O'Grady,"
from the artwork *Trappings*, 2006
by Two Girls Working: Tiffany Ludwig & Renee Piechocki

Connie Butler: Thinking back on this past year, there have been so many exhibitions, projects and activities based around feminist art. Lorraine, you were able to go to Los Angeles where WACK! debuted. 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 surprised at how big that opening was. It really kind of took me aback.

CB: We all were.

LOG: 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. 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

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place, they were doing it reluctantly. Still, they had come into art for the old reasons; they wanted to make meaningful work, yet they were starved for meaning and the opening to express meaning. So, I suppose it's not such a shock that what they saw in that show answered some rather deep need. It must have been very exciting for them to see work that operated from another basis of art-making but was also legendary; works they had only heard about and have never had the opportunity to engage with in a visual tactile way. They had it all in one place and at hand.

CB: 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 theirs 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, seeing it in the real was quite a powerful thing. Can you talk about your project included in the exhibition?

LOG: In the early 1980s I did a guerilla performance called *Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire*, which is French for "Ms. Black Bourgeoise." She wore a gown and a cape made of 180 pairs of white gloves. 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 roles. But then once the flowers were gone, she was left there with the whip, and 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.

CB: You actually first did the performance at Just Above Midtown Gallery in response, as I remember, to a Black Abstraction exhibition at P.S.1.

LOG: I've always called *Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire* an equal-opportunity critic or castigator because the first time that she came out was to protest a sort of mind set 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. One of the ways they make themselves acceptable is to make very controlled and beautiful, but very safe, abstract art. 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 at 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, who were my friends, and who are still my friends—was “BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!”

I do feel that the WACK! installation is important. There were thirteen still photographs on the wall, which gave a sense of movement to the performance from its start. It had a narrative—it began, it went through certain motions and activities, and then it ended. Actually, it ended in a restaurant with a celebration with my friends. But the images are so focused. The one of me beating myself with the whip and the other one where I shout 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 the personal gratification that's being realized with the show, I'm extremely happy for the form given to this piece that allows it to be fully understood.