

## Courtney Baker interviews Lorraine O'Grady

Unpublished email exchange, 1998\*

The most comprehensive and focused interview of O'Grady to date, this Q & A by a Duke University doctoral candidate benefited from the slowness of the email format, the African American feminist scholar's deep familiarity with O'Grady's work, and their personal friendship.

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*In November 1998, Courtney Baker interviewed O'Grady for a paper for a performance class with Kristine Stiles at Duke. The Stiles paper was to be the first of two papers: the second, for a symposium the following semester, would address O'Grady's more recent work. The current paper would contain basic research for the second and be limited to older work.*

**Baker: As a set up, the two pieces I want to focus on are *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* and *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, mostly because there is more written on those pieces and I feel I have a better handle on them. Do you think this is okay, or am I remiss in leaving out some of your other performance work?**

O'Grady: I understand why you'd know more about those two. *Art Is. . .*, the parade piece I did in Harlem, was intentionally less well known as I did it basically outside the art world. But *Rivers, First Draft*, a kind of "three ring" performance in Central Park, which only those who were there were able to see, has become more interesting to me as I look back. It's the most "feminist" piece I ever did. I know you minored in women's studies, and you might like to take a look at what's left of it, some photographs and a script.

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\* Baker's questions were sent on November 20, 1998, and O'Grady's answers were returned on November 26.

In *Rivers, First Draft*, there is a moment where—after playing around in the castle (up the hill), then leaving to find herself and her place; and after being raped by the Debauchees on her way down the hill—the Woman in Red goes into the Black Artists' room (a door placed on the hill, behind which three black male artists are standing and crouching). But when the Woman in Red enters, the black male artists toss her around and throw her out summarily and roughly. She looks around dazed, then instinctively descends further down the hill, still trying to find her way. There's a white stove at the bottom which, to her, echoes her mother's white kitchen on the other side of the stream. She paints it red in an attempt to make it her own.

These actions are a not-so-metaphoric description of what happened to me autobiographically: drifting in the losing battle to please unpleasable parents (the way abused kids do, because they have no perspective, see no alternative), then partying absently, without a self—nobody home. After a while (a long while), if you have any brains at all, you can see the emptiness of it, can tell that with your inevitably diminishing looks, you've crossed over from using to being used. You go in search of your self. There are missteps along the way. If you're a woman, there's always the temptation to play the men's game, by their rules.

At the time of the performance, I was still involved with Just Above Midtown. The gallery was dominated by what we "girls" used to call the "locker room boys"—David Hammons, Houston Conwill, etc., etc. A few of those guys actually played the "Black Artists" in the performance: George Mingo, Noah Jemison, and Lorenzo Pace. At JAM, the attitudes of the men were like those in the civil rights movement: women's place was prone or, at least, not talking too much, and if possible, typing out grant applications for them. Above all, women artists weren't supposed to be too successful, too good. When the JAM crowd came to the performance in the park, it was the moment where the Black Artists threw me out that they found most shocking, some told me later. I was saying what I thought, and they weren't used to that.

**Q: Re *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire*: You mentioned in the Linda Montano interview that the milieu at the Afro-American Abstraction show was inspiring, but the art was disappointing. What was the crowd like and how did you sense they were "more" than the art being shown?**

A: What I remember was how beautiful they were and the way they were dressed. While I could see that, in origin, they were mostly bourgeois, they didn't at all dress with those referents, with looks dictated by labels or misguided propriety. They had independent images of themselves; instead of following fashion-fascist magazines, they reflected their own aesthetic ideas. One man was dressed in white from head to foot, while some women were got up with wildly bright fabrics and feathers and eccentric makeup even though it was a late winter Sunday afternoon. I'd never seen anything like it before, whole rooms full of black people ignoring the dictates of class and their peers. I think that I was responding to their intelligence and independence even more than to their attractiveness,. For the first time, I felt socially NOT ALONE.

It's hard, of course, to remember a pure first impression. I later got to know many of those people as colleagues and, in some cases, close friends. I can't be sure if I sized up the work as bourgeois that same day, that is to say, as so much tamer than their personal style. But I think I did. Though I didn't know as much about art as I do now, it was hard not to see how repressed most of it was, how much on its best behavior. The big exception then, as now, was the installation by David Hammons. Even the "lynch fragments" of Mel Edwards, where he twists metal in memory of slavery's shackles and chains, felt to me inoffensive and without risk.

**Q: Why did MBN have to speak? (This is kind of a simplistic question, but I think your response would be interesting.)**

A: It's not simplistic, of course, and it's not something that I've really thought about before. MBN was crazy, wasn't she? crazy and uncool. At the same time, and not contradictorily, she was avant and ultra-hip. The thing about MBN is that, for me,

she's the place where the theoretical becomes uncomfortably personal.

But then, being crazy never stopped anyone from doing good work. One result of having been a disturbing intervention in my parents' well-organized lives was that it was bad enough that I was there, they didn't want actually to have to pay attention to me. I would ask questions and nobody would answer me. I would interrupt discussions to contribute something brilliant (even at the age of five!), and they would get annoyed and smack me. It drove me crazy, literally. But I never stopped, I kept on insisting on being heard, which would result in terminal anger being directed my way. You would think I'd have learned, but I didn't.

Later, in the world beyond the family, the silencing was in some ways worse. As a young person and then an adult who was always "the first black woman to. . ." I confronted a culture that seemed to feel I was lucky just to be there, that I should shut up and not try to be heard. But outside the family, I adopted a different technique: I mouthed off and then ran away, I wouldn't wait for the anger to come at me. By the time I entered the art world, I'd already done so much running away—from careers, from family, from relationships—I knew that if I shouted now, I would have to stand still.

In 1980 when I first did MBN, the situation for black avant-garde art was unbelievably static. For most people, the concept of black avant-garde art was an oxymoron. Here was a place where you ran up against the baldest confusions and denials about black class—not just on the part of whites but of blacks too. Avant-garde art is made by and for a middle-class (and more occasionally, an upper class); it's a product of visual training and refined intellectualization. So how could blacks fit into the equation? You have to remember that was still a time (mostly behind us now, thank God) of naiveté and unfluid definitions, where all blacks were assumed to be lower and under-class; and any who were not were considered to be inauthentic "oreos," the expression used then. The saddest part was how confused black artists themselves were, how seemingly incapable of theorizing their situation. They believed in what they were doing, but at the same time they were afraid to present it

for what it was. You had this weird spectacle of middle-class adult artists trying to pass as street kids. And always the pressure, that mainstream artists don't have to feel, to be "relevant" to the "community," whatever that is. No wonder the work and the artists themselves seemed stuck, waiting to be seen, to be recognized, to be let in. And no wonder, too, that so much of the work was cautious and fearful.

There was always hope, of course. Linda Bryant, the founder and director of JAM, had lost her space on 57th Street. After a year in limbo, she'd relocated to Franklin Street in Tribeca. The new gallery was down the street from Franklin Furnace, around the corner from Artists Space, and a few blocks up from Creative Time: Tribeca was alternative space central.

I wasn't aware of all that, though. I just knew that JAM had provided most of the artists for the Afro-American Abstraction show at PS 1, so I signed on as a volunteer. I wanted to be near those people. While others renovated the space, did the floors, raised the walls, etc., I worked on publicity. One phone call I made was to the New Yorker, to see if they would list the space's opening show, Outlaw Aesthetics. They had not listed JAM previously. I'll never forget the sarcasm in the voice of the woman who answered the phone.

She said: "She always puts titles on her shows, doesn't she?" Not good, I thought to myself. But I didn't tell Linda. The opening of the Outlaw Aesthetics show was when Mlle Bourgeoise Noire appeared for the first time.

I'd naively thought her response was just New Yorker snobbishness. Later I realized that the dismissive attitude was everywhere. MBN appeared at the New Museum in September 1981. That November, ARTnews Magazine had an 11-page article entitled "New Faces in Alternative Spaces." The pages were chock-full of photos and discussions of PS 1, Franklin Furnace, Artists Space, the Kitchen, the New Museum, and others. But not a single mention of Linda Bryant, JAM, or of any of the artists (David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, Howardena Pindell, Maren Hassenger, Houston Conwill, Al Loving, Randy Williams, Fred Wilson, etc., etc.) who'd showed there. Not one line. Not even in

passing. In spite of all the work Linda had done in helping to found the Downtown Consortium of alternate art spaces. In spite of her organizing and hosting the Dialogue exhibition and performance series, for which *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* was created.

Whatever hole black avant-garde (middle-class) art had fallen into, it was still there. And it would stay there until the season of 1988-89, when just as arbitrarily it would emerge, brought to light by the needs of the white art world.

MBN tried again, in 1983; not with a gown and a shouted-out poem, but this time by curating The Black and White Show at Kenkeleba. It was another shout that disappeared without being heard.

**Q: Do you think a black man could have pulled the MBN performance off? Personally, I could only envision a black queen doing it which I think speaks to a need in my mind for the voice that interrupts to be marginalized within the black (art) community/discourse.**

A: In an answer above, I tried to indicate how marginalized the black female voice was in the black art world at the time I did MBN. In a way, it was a situation somewhat like that of the earlier black literary era, when women's voices were dominated by the Richard Wrights, Ralph Ellisons and James Baldwins (of course, the latter was a black queen). Later, of course, the literary tables were turned by Morrison, Walker, Bambara, et al. I'm not sure I understand your question. Are you thinking of the current moment, when black women's voices like those of Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Adrian Piper seem to be similarly foregrounded in visual art?

I should say that, at the time, I had mixed support within the black art world for MBN. My closest friends, as well as David Hammons and even someone like Jean-Michel Basquiat (but he was an outsider), thought it was great. But many thought it was "too harsh"—that was one criticism I heard. And most people hated the idea of the costume, the way it focused on class issues.

Still, your idea of the black queen is an interesting one. I may be wrong, but I think a queen doing that performance today would have roughly the same impact of my doing it then—shock and dismay on the part of blacks (African American culture is still pretty homophobic), amusement and dismissal on the part of whites. I'd like to see it, though. If I hadn't sold the costume, I would certainly lend it to him (if it could fit).

**Q: What were you trying to evoke through your use of the costume, a costume that represented the trappings of the most quintessentially bourgeois practice in both white and black American culture? It seems clear that MBN was mocking the artists' bourgeois art, but at the same time, the irony of the hyper-bourgeois black \_woman\_ (the infinitely silent and compliant figure in art and Western civilization) making radical demands seems tremendously poignant.**

A: Poignant, Courtney? Don't you mean "suicidal"?

As for what I was trying to evoke, I think I was just trying to make the invisible visible. Trying to remind black artists of where they came from, to cut through the denial. And trying to make the white art world aware of the "authentic" basis of black avant-garde art, to illuminate the oxymoron.

I should ask *you*, Courtney: how much has the situation turned around in the last decade? At what level, and to what extent, do they know that we exist?

**Q: Why did you need to create an alternate persona?**

A: I think the answer to this question is implicit in the previous question you asked me. "The irony of the hyper-bourgeois black woman (the infinitely silent and compliant figure in art and Western civilization) making radical demands...." Of course I needed someone to blame it on. I didn't do it, SHE did it.

**Q: The guerrilla aspect of MBN's appearance is a significant part of the JAM and New Museum pieces. What**

## **do you make of her eventual invitation to events?**

A: This is something that I've resigned myself to. I think you're talking about the recognition she's received since then, the Wadsworth Atheneum show, the purchase by the Nortons, etc. At the time, there were a few invitations, but after the one for the Downtown Consortium, I refused them. She was about righting wrongs, not doing shows. The later recognition, that's something else.

It's funny. I always thought she was unsuccessful, because nothing she did changed anything. But then I discovered she had an afterlife as a myth. I'm not sure I know what exactly it consists of (it's probably way too soon to figure that out), but it's there. You are helping to write it, aren't you? The myth will never be what I intended, but it will be something else that's real.

Between the performance and its fruition in myth, though, there's been another moment with which I haven't been entirely thrilled. That's the period she's spent as an empty signifier, in which her existence was captured and conveyed by means of a single, iconic photo—you know the one I mean, the one of her shouting that was reprinted everywhere. In that image, I think the critique was reduced to one of class, and the subtleties of the critique of the art world got lost (the poems were seldom quoted). At the Atheneum, I had the costume under plexi, and images and texts from the performances on the wall, so they had the desired impact. But I've just seen the costume installed in the Norton's collection, and once again MBN seems removed from her original intentions to become an artifact, albeit a suggestive one. In the end, I don't know what to think. It's a come and go thing, really, one over which I have little control.

I have this feeling that beyond what I thought was the meaning, somewhere between the myth and what new audiences make of it, a new meaning is being created. And that's probably the way it should be. That's what art is, no?

**Q: Re: *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangelina*—In pairing images of Devonia with images of Queen Nefertiti were you trying to say something about class? You mentioned in an**



**interview that you were criticized (or feared being criticized) for equating your (sister's) family with royalty.**

A: Well, of course, I was. In the beginning, I was always trying to say something about class. In those days, pre-Jeffersons, pre-Cosby, it's hard to imagine how invisible the existence of class was. But luckily I was also talking about other things, or the images wouldn't continue to live. The deepest motivation for N/DE was my desire to say something about sibling rivalry and its obverse, hero worship, and the ways in which both are affected by death. Then there was my usual need to critique Western art history (here, sub-division: Egyptology). It was another of my overdetermined art pieces. But without those uncanny resemblances, I don't think I could/would have said anything.

At one level, I'd been as frustrated by the teacher pointing to the map of Africa and saying, "Children, this is Africa, all except this, and this is the Middle East," as the next black kid. So to that extent, the piece was Afrocentric.

But even the most cursory glance at Egyptian culture (the structure of kingship, religion, etc.) is enough to convince one of, at the least, an African substratum. The denial of this is on the level of white historians' refusal to entertain evidence for Thomas Jefferson fathering Sally Hemings' kids—you are not dealing with rationality here. Nevertheless, it was annoying to have my work lumped with simplistic Afrocentric arguments: i.e., lineage as some sort of ridiculous salvation rather than as a sign of complexity.

I have often thought that if I'd come across a family photo album in a flea market with equally remarkable resemblances to my own family, it would have sparked my imagination just as well.

But that itself raises a set of interesting questions: How might such a found album have come into being? Where might it have come from? What would the family's racial composition and class have been? If, as I believe, we do inhabit a world where hybridity is a norm, then the family setting off those

resemblances could as easily have been a white as a black one. But the class question is a bit more tricky. While it needn't have been royal or even aristocratic, I think it would have required a sophisticated family to produce responses so intense. Comparisons with a working-class or peasant family too easily might have become academic in the worst way.

**Q: Re: performance in general—If the performance art space was supposed to be liminal, did the appearance of a black female performance artist expose a latent hypocrisy in performance art in the 80s?**

A: Oops, Courtney. . . I may need you to clarify this question. My problem is with the word "liminal." I honestly don't remember what it means theoretically. I vaguely recall the sociologist Victor Turner (?) using it as a term meaning "interstitial" (I think)—a space outside and between, where things happen that change from one mode of being to another, sort of like carnival. But all of my dictionaries, including the old OED, still have it as meaning "of or pertaining to the threshold or incipient stage of a process"—which would mean the moment when things achieve enough density or intensity to become noticeable. So I really don't know what you mean here.

If I take the question to be what I intuit—that the performance art space was "outside" and therefore supposed to be "open" and "free"—then I wonder if the "latent hypocrisy" you refer to means all the reasons why there were no other black female performance artists, or no more than one or two officially recognized as existing by the performance field?

Since I came late, not doing my first performance until 1980 and being inserted almost immediately into the field (with Lucy Lippard's reviews in the *Village Voice*, inclusion in her book on activist art, *Get the Message*, and with descriptions of my work in *High Performance's* Artist Chronicle), though the insertion was to limited effect, because I was not part of a movement—I'm not sure I got to see or was a recipient of the hypocrisy in its pure state.

And Adrian Piper, who was there before me, was such an

anomalous case: initially, she functioned so exclusively in the white art world and her work was so exclusively made for that audience, that I don't know to what hypocrisy she may have been subject, or even to what extent she was considered black. Most black artists didn't know of her existence at the time. I was an exception, having learned about her work in the early 70s. . . though it was a while before I learned that she was black. David Hammons, for example, didn't meet her until 1988 when we were all in the Art As A Verb show. At the same time, I don't think she ever felt understood or valued by the white art world. In 1980, when I began corresponding with her, she complained of feeling isolated in every way, racially, artistically, etc.

I think the black artists who experienced the not-so-latent hypocrisy of the performance art world most immediately may have been those performing in Los Angeles in the late 70s as an addition to their more object-based art practice: Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, David Hammons, and Houston Conwill and the friends who performed with them.

This was the heyday of the Women's Building and of feminist performance art, but feminism didn't necessarily imply active encouragement of "others." When you look at the books recording the decade 1970-1980 in California performance art (and these began to appear almost immediately, with titles like *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art* and *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980*), you are struck immediately by their lily-whiteness. Not only did none of the black artists I mention appear in them, but no Latinos (and this was equally the heyday of community mural painting organized by the fine artist Judy Baca) and no Asian Americans. Nobody ever, except for Adrian Piper.

The editors of such publications were clearly politically progressive, so it makes you wonder why. Perhaps the "others" didn't have the know-how or acquaintances needed to get inserted into the record, I can't say. When *High Performance* published an index of its first years, I remember Senga calling me and saying wistfully: "At least you were in there." But I had sent them my photos and descriptions and worked hard to get

them to notice me, though I was on the East Coast. There may be more to it, I don't know. When Senga and I were installing our pieces in *NowHere* in Denmark, after she'd had her first show at Thomas Erben and was getting a little of her due, we touched on the old days in California. She said to me: "You know, we [she and Maren] always thought we were great, but they [the white feminists] didn't think we were too interesting." It seems inevitable to me that one set of interests and preoccupations drives another set out.

We are now in a period of a kind of historical revisionism. When a curator from LA MOCA called to ask me for a submission to *Out of Actions* then learned I hadn't performed until 1980 so couldn't be considered, I told her about Senga. In turn, Senga told them about Maren and Houston and David. They all had pieces in the show but, you know, still not reproduced or discussed in the catalogue. And there's only so much room. When you rectify one group of omissions, you seem to cause others. The show did a great job of inserting Asians and East Europeans who'd been absent from the Western record, yet I heard complaints that it hadn't given enough space to the Women's Building!

I haven't a clue how work rises up through the general din, or how it will all fall out. And I'm not sure what, if anything, it has to do with "latent hypocrisy." For the moment, I'm feeling a bit relieved that some of my old work seems to be becoming more, rather than less, interesting. But as soon as I start to feel that, then I get anxious about the new work. What's going to happen to it? Am I even going to be able to do it? You know how it is....