

ARTS Magazine, April 1991

New York in Review

A review of O'Grady's first solo exhibit at INTAR Gallery, NYC, that focuses on her work in performance. Selected from Gretchen Faust's column, "New York in Review," *ARTS Magazine*, vol 65, no 8, April 1991, p 98.

It is always a little frustrating to write reviews in a short format, as it only allows one to touch on issues and highlight aspects of the work discussed. Though valuable, every once and awhile I come across a show that really demands more time and space consideration. The first solo show of **Lorraine O'Grady's** photomontages (INTAR, January 21–February 22) is just such a show. O'Grady couples her wide-angle art awareness with a keen sociopolitical consciousness. The gallery is divided into four sections; each has a different "theme" relative to her two overall queries: *What should we do?* countered by *What is there time for?* As stated in the press release, the four rooms reflect, in order: 1) cultural criticism, 2) autobiography, 3) black female reclamation, and 4) work in and for the community. Each of the rooms contains photomontages exploring, through manipulated imagery, the assigned theme. Cultural criticism includes documentation of O'Grady's best known and most acclaimed performance work, *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire*. In this performance, O'Grady takes on an assumed and striking character, who dresses in a formal gown and cape fashioned from literally hundreds of white gloves. It is in this guise that O'Grady has appeared, unannounced and uninvited, at art openings as a virtual apparition/voice of conscience that "denounces Black artists' political passivity in the face of curatorial and critical apartheid" and attacks "Black aesthetic timidity" (as stated in Judith Wilson's catalogue essay, entitled *Lorraine O'Grady: Critical Interventions*). The second room explores autobiography

and includes photographs documenting a metaphorical coming-of-age ritual/performance entitled *Rivers: First Draft*, involving several multi-racial players, which took place in Central Park in 1982. A compare-and-contrast collage that pairs images of the artist's sister with those of Nefertiti is featured in the third room, and the fourth focuses on the documentation of a collaborative project, including the artists George Mingo and Richard DeGussi, which consisted of a large float, part of the 1983 Afro-American Day parade in Harlem. The float, *Art is. . .*, sported open gilt frames that were held out over the crowds, thus implying that anything caught within their boundaries was deemed art. In this piece O'Grady engages the relationship between contextualization and content in a joyous event, available and interesting to all. It is this ability to be direct and effective on a level that is both internally complex and essentially based in realism that distinguishes this work by an artist out on the bridge that seems to span the gap between art and life.

Gretchen Faust
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