

LORRAINE O'GRADY: *Critical Interventions*

by JUDITH WILSON. 1991

Catalogue essay written for O'Grady's first gallery solo exhibition, "Lorraine O'Grady," INTAR Gallery, 420 W 42nd Street, New York City, January 21 – February 22, 1991.

*I feel the battle I face. . . as artist and critic is the same as it ever was: to have black genius accepted without condescension.*¹

In a series of performances since 1980, Lorraine O'Grady has subjected standard ideas of race, class and gender to a kind of poetic dislocation and visceral scrutiny. Her goal has been to act as critic as much as artist: to produce creative arguments against existing definitions that herd Black and other Third World artists into such categories as "primitive" or "derivative," to expose the masochism of Black bourgeois values and their translation into tame aesthetics, and to "establish the Black female body as a subject rather than an object field."² A central figure among a doubly obscure group of artists — African-Americans who make performance art — ,³ O'Grady has constructed an art at once of ideas and of fugitive, yet powerful, images. This installation of photodocumentation and photomontages is her first solo exhibition in New York; it expands and synthesizes the concerns of her performance work.

With each of the four rooms of the present display, O'Grady explores a different set of answers to the question "What should we do?" and its correlate, "What is there time for?" Her language here uncannily echoes, yet subverts, the mythic aspirations of Paul Gauguin's famous title, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* — which designates a work that has been described as "a self-conscious masterpiece," an attempt "to

embody a total philosophy of life, civilization, and sexuality.”⁴ The Gauguin work was prominently hung in Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, which O’Grady visited on school field trips as a young girl.⁵

The cheekiness with which she yokes the earnest “What should we do?” to the mundane “What is there time for?” however, belies the production of masterpieces and “total” philosophies. In a text piece created at the time of the present exhibit, she vowed: “I’m keeping my options open for the Millenium.”

The four rooms of the present display focus on recurrent themes of O’Grady’s career:

1. cultural criticism,
2. autobiography,
3. Black female self-reclamation,
4. work in and/or for the community

Each illuminates this artist’s function as an “anti-Gauguin” — that is to say, an antithesis to the Frenchman’s ethno-cultural voyeurism, self-mystification⁶, exploitation of women of color⁷, and romantic individualism.⁸ A survey of O’Grady’s development reveals the intricate weaving of these concerns into the fabric of her art.

Prelude: Antecedents & Excursions

Like Alice’s tumble down the rabbit hole, Lorraine O’Grady arrived in the artworld by an improbable route. The younger of two daughters of status conscious and highly ambitious Jamaican immigrants, she grew up in the hothouse of 1940s/50s Boston’s black elite, studying Latin and ancient history at Girls Latin School, then majoring in economics at Wellesley. An early marriage and the birth of a son had propelled a switch from literature to a more practical major, and ended with her departure after college for Washington, D.C., where a stint as a research economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics was followed by a period at the State Department. Eventually, a sort

of vocational identity crisis would send her to Europe on a mission of self-discovery meant to produce a novel. When that didn't work, she enrolled in the University of Iowa's highly regarded writing program. There she worked toward the M.F.A. in fiction that would thrust her into the New York artworld, but initially place her at an odd angle to it.

In between, there were a second marriage, a Chicago-based translation business, and shortly after her move to Manhattan, rock criticism for the *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone* during the early 1970s. Next, in what O'Grady has called "one of the luckiest accidents of my life," she took over an English class at the School of Visual Arts for a stressed-out friend.

Jump-started by "the incredible energy" she found at SVA in 1973, O'Grady plunged into a self-education in the visual arts. An initial excursion to the 8th Street Bookstore netted a copy of Lucy Lippard's history of the rise of conceptual art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. The first art book O'Grady had ever read from cover to cover, *Six Years* acquainted her with such recent developments as performance, body art, and earthworks, and led to the realization "I can do *that!*" About this time, she also learned that Vito Acconci — the artist said to have coined the term "performance" as a description of his own work — had once taught the same freshman English class she was now leading. Acconci's successful shift from English professor to artist clearly licensed O'Grady to do the same.

A further stimulus was the work of Adrian Piper, a late 60s SVA alumna who in 1970 had begun a series of oddly hermetic performances that aimed to disrupt the ways certain space of everyday life are "normally" experienced. A lone Black presence on the early 70s New York conceptual / performance art scene, Piper had been one of the artists included in Lippard's *Six Years* and her "Catalysis" pieces struck O'Grady as "the most radical art project of which I could conceive." The fact of their shared ethnicity was unknown to O'Grady, however, until 1980 when she came across Piper's "Political Self-Portrait #2: Race" in an issue of the feminist art journal, *Heresies*.⁹

In 1979, the SVA English teacher had not yet sprouted the wings of the performance artist. But that year she wrote a screenplay whose lead character was, prophetically, a Black woman engaged in performance art. For her heroine, she scripted a two-part performance, *The Dual Soul*, that forecast her own impending transformation. The divided soul of the title hinted at enduring bifurcations in O'Grady's thought.

Cultural Criticism: *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*

"'Performance,' as I conceive it . . . has nothing to do with a simple multiplication of media. In its most profound sense, 'performance' is a matter of artists shifting *dimensions*, putting themselves at risk by changing their accustomed relation to space/time."¹⁰

The February 17, 1980 opening at P.S. 1 of the exhibition "Afro-American Abstraction" was a watershed for O'Grady.¹¹ "When I got there I was blown away," she has said. "The galleries and corridors were filled with black people . . . who were interested in advanced art." Ultimately, though, she was disappointed: "I felt that the art on exhibit, as opposed to the people, had been too cautious . . . that it had been art 'with white gloves on'."¹²

It did not escape O'Grady, however, that several of the most venturesome artists in the show — Houston Conwill, David Hammons, Maren Hassenger, Senga Nengudi, and Howardena Pindell — were represented by a single dealer, Linda Goode-Bryant. The first and only Black gallery owner on 57th Street, Bryant had brought a bold, multi-cultural vision to the toney midtown Manhattan art scene during the mid- to late 70s. By 1980, the swelling real estate monster forced the young dealer to head for the New York artworld's southernmost frontier, Tribeca. It was there that O'Grady began rubbing shoulders with members of the Black visual art vanguard in her capacity of volunteer at the relocated Just Above Midtown (JAM) — now officially "Just Above Midtown/Downtown" — Gallery.

JAM christened its new space with an exhibition called “Outlaw Aesthetics” that featured installations and performances by various artists. An opening night benefit offered paying guests edible art, a basement disco, and other “experiential happenings”.¹³ To an unusual degree, the event itself, rather than the art it celebrated, is what sticks in the mind ten years later.

There was an intoxicating sense that we, the buzzing throng of Black, White, and Brown bodies packing the room as tight as a rush-hour subway, were participants in something new, something meaningful in ways none of us could name yet — a sense that, in retrospect, was not uncommon at those art-related gatherings of the early 1980s at which the crowds were mostly young and the sites were previously unglamorous ones like the East Village or the territory south of Canal Street. As for the art at JAM that night, only one artist’s work permanently stamped itself on my brain.

At 9 p.m., when a light beige woman with cinnamon-colored hair entered the room wearing a rhinestone and seedpearl tiara, a floor-length gown and cape made of 180 pairs of white gloves, and a broad, beauty-pageant sash that proclaimed the bearer “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire 1955”, Lorraine O’Grady made her debut as a performance artist. Moving slowly through the crowd with her tuxedoed male escort, she flashed a glittering smile and asked assorted on-lookers “Won’t you help me lighten my heavy bouquet?” while proffering one of the 27 white chrysanthemums she clutched. As the flowers dwindled, it became evident that a white cat-o-nine-tails formed the core of the bouquet.

When the last bloom was distributed, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire handed her cape to her escort, who then offered a pair of over-the-elbow white gloves, which she carefully donned. Thus attired, she now began pacing the floor like a caged animal and lashing herself with the whip. Suddenly, at the height of her frenzy, she abruptly came to a halt, dropped the lash, and shrielled:

THAT’S ENOUGH!
No more boot-licking . . .

No more ass-kissing . . .
No more pos . . . turing . . .
of super ass . . . imitates . . .
BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!¹⁴

Then this mysterious apparition swept through the hushed crowd and out into the night.

Further Adventures: From the Nile Valley to 125th Street. . . and Back Again. . .

Four months later, when O'Grady performed next at JAM, she unveiled a work completely unlike the one in which she had made her debut. *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* was a departure in almost every conceivable way. Where the tone of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* had been caustically satirical, the new piece was elegiac. Where the first work had lampooned Black aesthetics in the 1980s by linking them with social conventions of the 1950s, the new work lamented the tragic fates of an ancient Egyptian queen and a modern African-American "princess." Where the earlier piece had smudged the line between life and art by utilizing "real" space/time and inviting a degree of audience participation, the new performance operated in the symbolic arena and mythic time of ritual, and re-established conventional boundaries between the artist/performer and her spectators.

But even more than *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* — with its Caribbean beauty contest (a reference to O'Grady's West Indian ancestry) and its send-up of Black bourgeois proprieties —, the current piece contained autobiographical elements. Devonia Evangeline was the artist's elder sister, a woman whose fairy tale life came to a shockingly sudden end at age 38. The performance consisted of images of the artist's late sibling and other family members, which were projected alongside images of the Egyptian queen who had died at age 37 and members of *her* family, while O'Grady's taped voice delivered an elliptical account of both women's lives. Finally, stationed in front of the giant heads of

Nefertiti and Devonia Evangeline that were being beamed on the wall, O'Grady enacted a ritual prescribed by the Egyptian Book of the Dead. "Hail, Osiris! I have opened your mouth for you, I have opened your two eyes for you,\" the artist chanted.¹⁵ With these words, she donned a mantle even denser with symbolism than Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's white-glove-laden cape.

On the one hand, while the ritual she invoked was meant to insure the deceased's immortality,¹⁶ her rendition underscored the futility of such gestures.¹⁷ On the other, by drawing the viewer's attention to the uncanny parallels between the facial features and poses of O'Grady's relatives and ancient Egyptian royalty, the artist simultaneously drove several controversial points home. Ancient Egypt's African heritage, Black America's multi-racial ancestry, and the existence of a pre-*Cosby* era African-American aristocracy were all visibly evidenced by the juxtaposed photographic imagery. Thus, while she failed to restore her lost sister to sight and breath, O'Grady succeeded in giving voice to the stifled history of a great civilization,¹⁸ and opening our eyes to a seldom seen aspect of a people, as well as a virtually unknown social class.

A further component of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* and an especially crucial one was its frank exposure of the highly volatile and visceral attachments between female relatives — sisters, mothers and daughters. In some ways, the work can be seen as the artist's attempt to resolve conflicts left suspended in the wake of her sister's sudden death. But insofar as *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* blends female autobiography with ceremony and history, it can be seen as a step in the direction of her next major theme — what she has called "Black female self-reclamation."

Between performances of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* first at JAM in fall 1980, then at a spring 1981 benefit for a Manhattan high school, and at the New York Feminist Art Institute in the fall, then at Oberlin College's Allen Memorial Art Museum the following spring, O'Grady felt obliged to send Mlle Bourgeoise Noire to another art opening. The exhibition "Personae," which premiered at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in September 1981, featured nine white performance artists.

Unannounced and uninvited, O'Grady / Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's appearance single-handedly integrated the show (illus. 9). For the occasion, she altered the text of her climactic statement:

WAIT
wait in your alternate/alternate spaces
spitted on fish hooks of hope
be polite
wait to be discovered
be proud
be independent
tongues cauterized at openings no one attends
stay in your place
after all, art is only for art's sake
THAT'S ENOUGH!
don't you know
sleeping beauty needs more than a kiss to awake
now is the time for an INVASION!¹⁹

With this new incarnation of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, O'Grady subtly revised her cultural criticism, shifting from an attack on Black *aesthetic* timidity to a scathing denunciation of Black artists' *political* passivity in the face of curatorial and critical apartheid. By summer 82, however, she had returned to autobiographical themes first broached in *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*. Created for "Art Across the Park," a display of site specific works in Manhattan's Central Park that was co-curated by Gylbert Coker and Horace Brockington, *Rivers, First Draft* marked O'Grady's first attempt at what she has called "Black female reclamation." In its concern with "uniting two heritages, [those of] the West Indies and New England"²⁰ — an ambition symbolized by her botanical conceit, the "fir-palm" (illus. 1) — the piece sprang from autobiographical sources. Yet, through the use of a non-linear, loosely associative dramatic structure akin to dreams, Surrealist artworks and the imagistic theater of Robert Wilson,²¹ she aimed at a kind of mythopoetic evocation of Black female experience that managed to be both archetypal and highly specific.

Her most ambitious work so far, *Rivers, First Draft* employed a multi-racial cast of over a dozen performers. The action took place in the vicinity of a shallow stream — in the water, on the banks, over a string of stepping stones that linked the streambed to the shore, and in the surrounding woods. It also spanned three phases — childhood, youth and maturity — of Black female life.

A series of tableau-like scenes was framed by the image of a beautiful Black woman, dressed in traditional head-tied and flounce-skirted Caribbean garb — all in white —, who sat silently grating coconut and listening to a radio that broadcast news from the West Indies throughout the performance. A sea of white coconut shavings surrounded the table at which she was seated, as if her task were a perpetual one. The giant white rectangular frame that stood several feet in front of her made the entire scene register as a snapshot of a memory or a dream.

Seated on a nearby rock, a little Black girl in a frilly white dress removed a Minerva helmet-mask and held up a megaphone in order to recite Latin verbs and a text on the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, then shout an acerbic, Césaire-like parody of Caribbean vacation slogans. This was followed by a romantic encounter between “the Young Man in Green” and “the Girl in Magenta,” leaving an adolescent female obsessed and mournful. Meanwhile, an actor in fisherman’s garb, whose costume included a miniaturized rendition of a boat, stood in the stream impersonating the Nantucket Memorial statue, while a small fall sent ribbons of water cascading a few yards away (illus. 5). In the nearby woods, several “Art Snobs” circulated carrying megaphones through which they blithely denounced “the contemporary art world”, as a line of “Debauchees,” accompanied by “the Woman in Red,” came dancing down a hill.

Played by the artist herself, the Woman in Red is an obviously autobiographical character. As we witness her futile attempts to interact with the Debauchees, her subsequent rejection by “the Black artists” (whose representatives are exclusively male) and eventual rape by the Debauchees, it becomes evident that *Rivers, First Draft* is “about” the particular dilemmas faced by a Black woman artist of a certain age, class

background and aesthetic orientation. This makes *Rivers*, along with Adrienne Kennedy's Obie-award winning 1962 play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and the character "Beneatha" in Lorraine Hansberry's 1961 *A Raisin in the Sun*, one of the rare representations of the distaff side of Black bohemianism — itself a marginalized chapter of Black intellectual and social history, with roots in the Harlem Renaissance that only began to flourish in the 1950s and 60s.²²

Ultimately, it is through a conscious act of self-appraisal and reclamation of her contradictory, New England and Caribbean, origins that the protagonist of *Rivers* gains psychic integration. The performance ends with her three personae — the child, the teenager and the adult — entering the stream arm-in-arm, led by the Nantucket Memorial, while the Woman in White remains on shore silently grating coconut.²³

Returning to a kind of cultural criticism, O'Grady temporarily shed her role as an artist to don that of curator, organizing "The Black and White Show," which opened at the Kenkeleba Gallery in the East Village in April 1983. A show of works in black and white by 28 Black and White artists, the participants included established figures like Ed Clark, Adrian Piper and Nancy Spero, as well as such relative newcomers as Keith Haring, Stephen Lack and Coreen Simpson.²⁴ On her resume, O'Grady lists "The Black and White Show" as "a Mlle Bourgeoise Noire event" — a designation that seems to signal the artist operating in her critical mode. Indeed, it was her annoyance at Black artists' exclusion from or underrepresentation in most shows of the period that led her to concoct the exhibition.

Typically, with the lone exception of a brief notice in the *East Village Eye*, the show was ignored by the art press. Particularly galling was *Art in America's* failure to mention either the show or its location, the Black-owned and operated Kenkeleba Gallery — one of the East Village's pioneer alternative spaces —, in a 28-page "Report from the East Village" that opened with a photograph of John Fekner's *Toxic Junkie* mural.²⁵ As an unpublished letter from O'Grady to the magazine's editor pointed out, the mural had been created, at her request, for the

show as a means of “connecting the art inside the gallery with what was happening on the street.”²⁶

The latter preoccupation would be central to O’Grady’s next Mlle Bourgeoise Noire event. While working on an issue of the feminist art journal *Heresies* devoted to the question of racism she had been piqued by a Black woman poet’s assertion that “Black people don’t relate to avant-garde art.”²⁷ With funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, O’Grady collaborated with artists George Mingo and Richard DeGussi in the creation of a float and accompanying performance for Harlem’s fall 1983 Afro-American Day Parade (illus. 6, 7).

Entitled *Art Is . . .*, the float consisted of a giant gilt frame mounted upright on a gold fabric-covered float bed, pulled by a pickup truck. The float’s title was inscribed on the side of this bed. Flanking the float, as it advanced, were teams of white garbed assistants who held smaller, empty frames up to the faces of some of the estimated half million or so on-lookers lining 125th Street. The piece was enthusiastically received by its audience, who offered spontaneous shouts of approval (“That’s right, that’s what art is! WE’re the art”) and competing pleas (“Frame me! Make ME art!”).

As O’Grady has noted, the parade format — with its ties to the rich array of Afro/Latino carnival traditions — is one that has particular cultural resonance for her as an African-American of West Indian descent.²⁸ In exploiting this pop cultural mode, she “is one of the few artworld artists to have availed herself of such festive opportunities to escape ‘cultural confinement’ in the [artworld’s] ivory-walled towers,” critic Lucy Lippard has written.²⁹ Here, for the first time, O’Grady extended her role as cultural critic to embrace the larger Black community, normally abandoned by both White and Black artists in their pursuit of esoteric aesthetic discourses.

The sense of triumphant generosity conveyed by the social breadth and exuberance of *Art Is . . .* (illus. 6, 7) probably reflects O’Grady’s having won two prestigious grants that year — a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and a CAPS fellowship award. Despite these important affirmations of her

talent, 1983 closed on a grim note for the artist, who learned in December that her mother was afflicted with Alzheimer's Disease. Her artistic career came to a halt while she devoted the next four and a half years to her mother's care.

Finally forced to place her declining parent in a nursing home, O'Grady resumed activity in 1988 when she received an invitation to participate in the exhibition *Art As A Verb*. For that show, she had eight slides from *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* made into four Cibachrome diptychs. The new work, called simply *Sisters I, II, III, IV*, juxtaposed images of her sister (Devonia Evangeline) and the Ancient Egyptian queen, Nefertiti, with images of herself and Nefertiti's younger sister, Mutnedjmet, followed by images of Devonia Evangeline's two daughters with images of Nefertiti's daughters. Stripped of the tragic details of the earlier work, the new piece zeroed in on Black female family ties, an ancestral legacy that includes the civilizations of the Nile Valley, and the "mulatto" cultures of both ancient Egypt and contemporary America. The following spring, O'Grady gave one last performance of the original *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* at the Maryland Art Institute in Baltimore.

Current Investigations: New Strategies of "High Cultural Warfare"

Artists should be terrorists, not masseurs.

— Hanif Kureishi³⁰

The present exhibition extends the shift from performance to photographic installations already demonstrated by *Sisters*. Yet, as should be apparent from my description of the latter work's thematic content, for all her new spareness of form, O'Grady has not surrendered an inch of cultural ground. Like many artists at this time of fundamentalist attacks on freedom of expression and last ditch efforts by a moribund elite to reimpose cultural mandarinism, she sees that she has no choice but to either maintain her embattled stance or lose all hope of creative enfranchisement.

In posing the questions "What should we do? What is there time for?" at the outset in the present show, however, she means to stress the necessity of doing *everything* — using every type of tool and technique at our command, refusing the intellectual and political stranglehold of single agendas and strategies, rejecting the aesthetic sterility of monocultural codes of value. Thus, in the rooms she has created here, she aims to underscore the diversity of her own past endeavors and present inclinations.

For example, while the works in the room labeled "Cultural Criticism" (illus. 2) tend to be blatantly inflammatory, the bulk of her work is less directly confrontational. But, given the effects of racism, sexism and class conflict on both the individual psyche and collective attitudes and behavior, there can be little wonder that the work in the rooms "Autobiography" (illus. 3, 10) and "Reclaiming the Black Woman" (illus 1, 4) frequently has political undertones. Similarly, "Work In And/Or For the Community" (illus. 5, 6, 7, 8) conveys O'Grady's ambivalence about the very term "community" and her preference for shuttling to and fro between notions of a general African-American community and a specific art community, both of which, at times, claim her attention with equal force.

Finally, there is what O'Grady has labeled "the Modernism / Postmodernism cusp" at which she locates her art. What's modernist about her work is its heavy investment in individual subjectivity, while its postmodernist character arises from her conception of that "subject (especially, the Black subject)" as "culturally fractured." Like the incessant jockeying of geological plates that produces both gradual changes of topography and sudden eruptions, the unresolved contest of old and new attitudes toward subjectivity to which she alludes is a sign of mental vitality, evidence that the artist's thought remains fluid, transitional.

—Judith Wilson ©1990
Virginia

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Judith Wilson, an art critic and assistant professor of art history at the University of Virginia, is the author of the visual art section of *Black Art Annual 1987/88* and *1988/89* (Garland, 1989 and 1990) and, for the past decade, has published numerous articles, reviews and interviews with artists in such publications as *Art in America*, *SF Camera Work*, *Third Text*, the *Village Voice* and *Women's Art Journal*. Her most recent catalog essays include contributions to *The Decade Show* (Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem) and *Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic* (Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art).

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¹ Lorraine O'Grady to Lucy Lippard, personal correspondence, February 25, 1990.

² O'Grady to author, personal correspondence, October 17, 1990. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotes from the artist come from this source.

³ O'Grady's centrality is indicated by Leslie King Hammond and Lowery Stokes Sims — co-curators of the landmark 1988/89 exhibition "Art As A Verb" — who include her among a putative "'first generation' . . . of Afro-American artists who have seriously explored video, performance and installation" during the past 10 to 20 years. Hammond and Sims, *Art As a Verb: The Evolving Continuum — Installations, Performances and Videos by 13 African-American Artists* (exhibition catalog), Baltimore, MD: Maryland Institute, College of Art, November 21, 1988 – January 8, 1989, n. pag.

⁴ Richard Brettell, "The Final Years: Tahiti and Hivaoa," in Brettell, *et al.*, *The Art of Paul Gauguin* (exhibition catalog), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1 May – 31 July, 1988; pp. 391-392.

⁵ O'Grady, phone conversation with the author, November 30, 1990.

⁶ For a discussion of Gauguin's largely fictional "autobiography" *Noa Noa*, see Charles F. Stuckey, "The First Tahitian Years," in Brettell, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-216.

⁷ Of course, the dual — artistic and sexual — nature of Gauguin's exploitation of women of color was nothing new in the history of art, as we are reminded by the fact that his "fantasies about non-European women were first expressed in a copy that he made. . . after one of Delacroix's portraits of a North African model." Stuckey, *op. cit.*, p. 212. Hugh Honour speculates that a diary entry in which Delacroix "referred. .

. to a model. . . with whom he had sexual intercourse” might be a reference to the subject of this portrait. Honour, *Vol. IV From the American Revolution to World War I, Part 2: Black Models and White Myths*, in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. by Ladislav Bugner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 36.

⁸ Gauguin’s “romantic individualism” is epitomized by his discussion of the 1988 self-portrait in which he depicted himself as Hugo’s heroic criminal Jean Valjean: “In endowing him with my own features I offer you — as well as an image of myself — a portrait of all wretched victims of society who avenge us by doing good.” Paul Gauguin to Vincent van Gogh, *Paul Gauguin: 45 Lettres a Vincent, Theo, et Jo van Gogh*, ed. by Douglas Cooper (Gravenhage and Lausanne, 1983), nos. 33.1–33.2, cited by Françoise Cachin, “Gauguin Portrayed by Himself and by Others,” in Brettell, *op. cit.*, XX.

⁹ O’Grady to Tony Whitfield, “Thinking Out Loud About Performance Art, My Place in It and in Art History,” personal correspondence, January 2, 1983.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Curated by critic April Kingsley, this groundbreaking show displayed work by nineteen artists, encompassing most of the leading practitioners of non-representational painting and sculpture.

¹² O’Grady, interviewed by Linda Montano, unpublished manuscript [1986?]

¹³ Invitation, “Outlaw Aesthetics” opening, New York: Just Above Midtown/Downtown, June 5 [1980].

¹⁴ O’Grady, “Lorraine O’Grady: Mlle Bourgeoise Noire 1955,” *High Performance*, Summer 1981, p. 56.

¹⁵ In the version of the Book of the Dead known as The Papyrus of Ani, the exact words are:

“Hail, Unas, the two gods have opened thy mouth. O Unas, the Eye of Horus hath been given unto thee, and Horus cometh thereunto; I is brought unto thee, and placed in thy mouth.”

The “Unas” referred to here was the last king of the fifth dynasty. Elsewhere in the text he is called “Osiris” or “Osiris Unas” because the god Osiris both personified the notion of immortality for the ancient Egyptians and served as a model of the physical regeneration that was thought to be a necessary condition of spiritual after-life. E.A. Wallis Budge, “Introduction,” *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani* (New York: Dover, 1967), lxix-lxx, cxiii-cxiv, cxi.

¹⁶ By unlocking the corpse’s jaws, the ancient practitioners of this ceremony believed they “enabled [the deceased] to partake of. . . meat and drink offerings.” The bestowal of “the eye of Horus,” referred to in the Papyrus of Ani version of the Book of the Dead, similarly equipped the deceased for the after-life. Because Horus was the sun god, his eye — the sun itself — was thought to be “that which gives vigour to the heart of the dead and leads him to the god [Osiris, judge of the dead].” *Ibid.*, xii, cxxxviii-cxi.

¹⁷ In a review of the performance, Patricia Jones described the sense of frustration O'Grady communicated: "The ultimate passivity of the dead seemed galling to the righteous determination of the living." Jones, "'Dialogues': Just Above Midtown Gallery (October)," *Live*, no. 5 (1981), p. 34.

¹⁸ O'Grady's interest in Egypt's African heritage predates her 1967 *The African Origins of Civilization* and the first volume of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, published in 1987. While in Cairo in 1964, she was struck by her own physical resemblance to modern-day Egyptians and subsequently began questioning contemporary Egyptologists' stubborn denial of ancient Egyptian ties to the rest of Africa. O'Grady, conversation with the author, September 22, 1989.

¹⁹ O'Grady, "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum to Remedy Being Omitted from the Nine-White Personae Show," unpublished typescript, n. pag.

²⁰ O'Grady, "Rivers, First Draft: A Performance by Lorraine O'Grady," (unpublished typescript), n. pag.

²¹ The work's kinship to Wilson and the Surrealists was no accident. O'Grady has written that Robert Wilson and Ping Chong provided her with especially useful models for "the treatment of dream-based material," adding that works like Wilson's "*Deafman Glance* gave *Rivers, First Draft* permission to be." Her interest in oneiric imagery extends to such early modernist forerunners of Wilson and Chong as the Italian Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists, as well as the French symbolist poets Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud — all subjects of the literature courses O'Grady has taught at the School of Visual Arts since 1973. O'Grady to Whitfield, *op. cit.*

²² See, for example, my discussion of this phenomenon with respect to the painter Bob Thompson in the catalog for the recent *Novae* exhibition. Judith Wilson, "Bob Thompson," *Novae: William H. Johnson and Bob Thompson* (exhibition catalog), Los Angeles, CA: California Afro-American Museum, May 4 – August 6, 1990; pp. 24-27.

²³ O'Grady, "Rivers, First Draft," *op. cit.*

²⁴ Although advertisements listed Jean Michel Basquiat among the participants, O'Grady reports that he failed to "come through" and was replaced by Richard Hambleton.

²⁵ Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, "Report from the East Village: Slouching Toward Avenue B," *Art in America*, Vol. 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984), pp. 134-161.

²⁶ O'Grady to Elizabeth C. Baker, unpublished letter, October 22, 1984.

²⁷ O'Grady, conversation with the author, *op. cit.*

²⁸ O'Grady, George Mingo, Richard DeGussi, "Art Is. . ." (unpublished typescript), n. pag.

²⁹ Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), p. 90.

³⁰ Kureishi quoted in a July 24, 1990 article in *The Washington Post*, cited by O'Grady in postcard to author, personal correspondence, October 24, 1990.