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WACK! Feminist art strikes back

by KEVIN GRIFFIN. 2008

Feature article with photo describes O'Grady presenting her work on the artist gallery tour during the opening of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Vancouver Art Gallery on October 5.

Photo: Mlle Bourgeoisie Noire, an evening dress made out of 180 pairs of gloves, is one of the pieces on display at the WACK! exhibition at the VAG. Credit: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun

After the French artist Orlan spritzed the crowd with perfume, American artist Lorraine O'Grady took the microphone. She was standing beside Mlle Bourgeoisie Noire, an evening dress made out of 180 pairs of white gloves that she wore for a performance-art work in 1980 in Manhattan.

Dressed in black, O'Grady said while she liked WACK! Art and the Feminism Revolution, she had one criticism of the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition, which focuses on the convergence of feminism and art in the late 1960s and 1970s. She thought the exhibition signage lacked context. So she provided what was missing.

O'Grady talked about how her performance as Miss Black Middleclass included beating herself with a cat-o'-nine-tails made out of white rope and covered with 36 white chrysanthemums.

Her performance was meant to criticize the racial apartheid that characterized the mainstream art world in New York. It also had another target. She was going after African-American artists for being too timid with their "genteel abstraction" and not

challenging the dominant values of private and public art institutions.

O'Grady said that "this did not endear me," either to other African-American artists or to the art world establishment.

O'Grady finished by adding something personal. She got a hearty laugh from the crowd gathered around her when she looked at the dress that she wore nearly 30 years ago and said: "I could still fit into it."

O'Grady's presentation took place before about 100 people at the VAG last Sunday during what was called the Revolutionary Tour. Instead of having a single curator or artist defining the exhibition, the Revolutionary Tour opened up the show by having about a dozen artists including Orlan and O'Grady speak about their works.

It is one of many ways the VAG is opening up WACK! to other other voices. Over the coming weeks, the gallery has scheduled several lectures, talks and presentations about the exhibition. Events at the VAG include Jeanne Randolph, author of the *Ethics of Luxury*, at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 16; a discussion called *A Question of Difference: Vancouver and its Feminisms* from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 25, with moderators Lorna Brown and Marian Roy, and guests Jin Me-Yoon, Marian Penner Bancroft and Jacqueline Levitin; sex educator Meg Hickling will explore how a parent talks about naked people to children in *That Lady is Naked!* on Sunday, Oct. 26, at 1 p.m.; and Judy Chicago will talk about her life and *The Dinner Party*, one of the most influential American feminist works of the 20th century, on Monday, Oct. 27, at 7 p.m.

WACK! continues to Jan. 11, 2009.

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