



Round Up: The Best of Prospect.2 New Orleans: Part 1



Photograph from Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 performance *Art Is...* on view at the New Orleans African American Museum as part of Prospect.2 New Orleans. Courtesy the artist.

BY Lauren Scarpello & Tori Bush
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Sophie Calle
1850 House
523 Saint Ann Street
October 22, 2011-January 29, 2012

Imagine 19th-century Baroness Micaela Pontalba meeting modern-day conceptual artist Sophie Calle: the two might sit together in a quiet French Quarter courtyard, sipping drinks and sharing tales of love and loss. In such an intimate setting, the Baroness might be inclined to divulge the details of her dramatic life. Calle, on the other hand, has made a career out of exposing her own. The two women's stories now intermingle in the site-specific installation at Pontalba's 1850 House, a historic re-creation that is part of the Louisiana State Museum.

The installation consists of pink placards containing Calle's succinct, matter-of-fact autobiographical anecdotes. Displayed in balcony windows and the doorways of several rooms, the placards playfully juxtapose the existing explanatory texts that guide viewers through the period museum. Each of Calle's stories is numbered and corresponds to a labeled object placed strategically among the room's furnishings, imbuing the house with fresh energy. One starts to envision Calle having lived out her tales within its walls: for example, a single red shoe left haphazardly on the floor of a bedroom signals the young artist's inclination for shoplifting. Clothing, letters, photographs, the totems of childhood, love, lust, marriage, and everything in between are strewn about—the most precious and personal details of memory.

The work is not entirely new; Calle started her *True Stories* series in 1988 and many of the stories in the installation recently appeared with accompanying photographs in a 2011 exhibition and book in conjunction with her Hasselblad Award. Now paired with artifacts and re-imagined within the context of the 1850 House, they feel transformed, blurring further the lines of fact and fiction, as Calle's confessional fantasy collides with the antiquated world of Baroness Pontalba, as well as the preconceptions of the viewer.

—Lauren Scarpello

Lorraine O'Grady
New Orleans African American Museum
1418 Governor Nicholls Street
October 22, 2011-January 29, 2012

“Avant garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people.” This statement made by one of Lorraine O'Grady's acquaintances was the impetus for the artist's 1983 performance piece *Art Is...*, which emphatically proclaimed that avant-garde art is black people, black neighborhoods, black culture, and black issues. The photographic documents of this performance are now on view at the New Orleans African American Museum as part of Prospect.2. They show O'Grady and 14 other African-American artists and dancers riding through Harlem's African American Day Parade on a float resembling an ornate, gilded frame with bold black letters bearing the open-ended phrase “Art Is...” Participants on the float carried smaller frames, which they held up to the audience members as they passed along Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. O'Grady wrote years later in an email to art historian Moira Roth, “The people on the parade route got it. Everywhere there were shouts of: ‘That's right. That's what art is. We're the art!’ And, ‘Frame ME, make ME art!’ It was amazing.”

A harbinger of identity politics in art, O'Grady's use of the frame not only asked, “What is art?” but also, “Who chooses what is represented and how is it perceived by different viewers?” By putting black artists in charge of framing a predominantly black audience, the power of who makes art, who is art, and who perceives art is decided by the black community. In the history of western art, African Americans have been invariably depicted either as the other or not depicted at all. From the maid portrayed in Manet's *Olympia* to the exclusion of black Abstract Expressionists from the famous photo of “The Irascibles” in 1950, the indelible lack of African Americans in the art historical canon is what gives credence to O'Grady's performance. Years later, O'Grady would write, “[black bodies] function continues to be, by their chiaroscuro, to cast the difference of white men and white women into sharper relief.” By disallowing this fundamental contrast on that September day in Harlem, *Art Is...* redefined the relationship of African Americans both to and in art, allowing those present to celebrate themselves as works of art.

—Tori Bush