

“Lorraine O’Grady,” WACK! catalogue essay*

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Catalogue essay by Linda Theung for *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, then traveled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; MOMA/PS1, Long Island City, NY; and the Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia.

Lorraine O’Grady

b. 1934, Boston

Lives and works in New York

Born in Boston into a family of Jamaican immigrants, Lorraine O’Grady was raised with “middle- and upper-class British colonial values” that conflicted with her awareness of and exposure to the “neighboring black working-class culture.”¹ The contrast between her own background and that of her African-American peers informed her rebellion “against the conflicting values instilled in [her].”² Drawing on her own complex relationship to issues of race as a springboard for her work, O’Grady set out to prove Toni Morrison’s dictum that “art can be both socially responsible and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.”³

After graduating from Wellesley College, where she majored in economics and minored in Spanish literature, and pursuing an MFA in fiction from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, O’Grady relocated to New York to develop her art practice. By the mid-1970s, New York was the epicenter of a thriving African-American art scene;

* *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 2007, p. 274-275.

¹ Lorraine O’Grady, “The Space Between,” in *Lorraine O’Grady / MATRIX 127*, exh. brochure (Hartford, Connecticut: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1995), 8.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 9.

however, the mainstream art world would remain largely segregated until the breakthrough shows of David Hammons and Adrian Piper in 1988–89, with institutions in New York often only recognizing African-American artists whose work was abstract and minimalist. O’Grady reacted with anger—which she regards as her “most productive emotion”⁴—to works she viewed as containing no references to the identity and experiences of their makers so as to be easily subsumed by the white art world. However, her ire was not exclusively reserved for members of the art establishment; O’Grady was equally critical of emerging African-American artists who compromised themselves to gain acceptance.

In response to the series of works and performances by Eleanor Antin in which Antin assumed the fictional persona of an African-American ballerina named Eleanora Antinova (1979–89), O’Grady invented her own persona—that of raging beauty queen *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*. *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* was first performed in 1980 at Just Above Midtown Gallery, New York, as a response to “Afro-American Abstraction,” an exhibition of that same year at P.S.1 that featured non-figurative work by nineteen African-American artists. O’Grady wore an evening gown constructed entirely out of 180 white dinner gloves, representing the internalized repression of those African-American artists exhibiting across town who were being rewarded for “creating art with white gloves on.” Shouting loud protest poems and whipping herself, she railed against the self-oppression of those black artists. The work’s second performance was at the opening of “Persona,” a 1981 exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, featuring artists who use invented surrogates. This time O’Grady hijacked the opening with an unscheduled and unanticipated performance to protest the selection of solely white artists by the white curators of the exhibition.

O’Grady continued to explore race in works that followed the *Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire* performances. Her liberal arts education—which included language, history, and social science—influenced her understanding of art and helped fuel her interest in the notion of hybrid identities. In the early 1980s, O’Grady began to work with collected photographs, juxtaposing family portraits with images of

⁴ O’Grady, in an unpublished artist’s statement prepared 1 January 1981 for Lucy Lippard’s “Acting Out: The First Political Performance Art Series,” cited in *ibid.*, 4.

the ancient Egyptians. The performance *Nerfertiti/Devonia Evangeline* (1980) initiated the series *Miscegenated Family Album* (1980–88), in which O’Grady studied the parallels between her background as an African American of mixed descent and the heterogeneous genealogy of the Egyptians. “The word ‘miscegenated,’” according to O’Grady, “refers both to the album’s aesthetic and to the process of racial hybridization by which each family was founded.” The collection of sixteen photographic diptychs observes the complexities within O’Grady’s own personal narratives—specifically her relationship to her sister—along with the political, social, and economic histories relating to African diaspora. In *Rivers, First Draft*, 1982, a performance with a large cast that took place in Central Park, O’Grady explored the subjectivity of a black female artist negotiating multiple black and white cultural identities while located within a male-dominated black art world. *Art Is...* (1983), performed in the Afro-American Day Parade in Harlem, examined the relationship between African American avant-garde art and the wider black community.

Throughout the 1980s, O’Grady was active within the alternative New York art world, lending a voice to the new wave of feminism that took into account perspectives that were underrepresented during the feminist movements of the 1970s. Concerned with the lack of African-American representation in the Women’s Action Coalition, she critiqued its continuation of the early feminist movement’s inability to “make itself meaningful to working-class white women and to nonwhite women of all classes.”⁵ She was also involved in the collective that published the journal *Heresies*, contributing to the edition titled “Racism Is the Issue” (1982).

More recently, O’Grady has produced works that continue to explore themes of miscegenation, including *Flowers of Evil and Good* (1998), based on the relationship between Charles Baudelaire, his Haitian mistress Jeanne Duval, and O’Grady’s own mother. O’Grady has maintained an ongoing commitment to articulating “hybrid” subjective positions that span a range of races, classes, and social identities: “In attempting to establish black female agency, I try to

⁵ O’Grady, “Dada Meets Mama: Lorraine O’Grady on WAC,” *Artforum* 31, no. 2 (October 1992): 11–12.

focus on that complex point where the personal *intersects* with the historic and cultural.”⁶

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SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

“Lorraine O’Grady: Critical Interventions/Photomontages,” INTAR Gallery, New York, 1991 (exh. cat.)

“Outside the Frame: Performance & the Object,” Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994 (exh. cat.)

“New Histories,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1996 (exh. cat.)

“Lorraine O’Grady: Flowers of Evil and Good,” Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, 1998

“Between the Lines,” Daniel Reich Gallery Temporary Space, New York, 2006

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Drucker, Johanna. “Lorraine O’Grady’s *Art Is...*” In *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, 82–84, 88. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

O’Grady, Lorraine. “A Day At the Races: Basquiat and the Black Art World.” *Artforum* 31, no. 8 (April 1993): 10–12.

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⁶ O’Grady, “Thoughts on Diaspora and Hybridism” (1994), unpublished lecture quoted in Andrea Miller-Keller, “Lorraine O’Grady: The Space Between MATRIX 127,” in *Lorraine O’Grady / MATRIX 127*, 3.