

The 1980s: An Internet Conference
moderated by Maurice Berger
Oct 31–Nov 13, 2005*

Lorraine O'Grady's posts

O'Grady's replies to Berger's questions, both reproduced here, were extensive. The conference, with 30 posters and hosted on the Georgia O'Keefe Museum website, provided an opportune moment to re-think her 80s work in its larger historical context.

Excerpts

31 October - 1 November: Introduction

Maurice Berger:

I would like to welcome everyone to "The 1980s: An Internet Conference."

The conference will be organized into two-day sessions, each of these devoted to a particular topic. I would like to dedicate the first session to the general question of the "legacy" of the "The 1980s"--the issues and events that matter most about it, then and now. . . .

As a means of introduction, I would like each of you to speak to the issue of legacy: What issues or events of the period matter most to you now? What of that time--whether in the context of art and culture or of society in general--have the greatest implications for the present day? Feel free to select a single issue, problem, or event or several. Be as general or specific as you like; we will have time to explore these issues over the next two weeks.

Lorraine O'Grady post:

a grand word for the vague memories I have, more a string of minute details, not necessarily sequential. I spent the first years of the '80s doing performances and shows railing against exclusion but the last years were spent hardly knowing who the President was, in a kind of sympathetic dementia with a mother in the last stages of Alzheimer's. Most of what I do remember about the art world in the '80s has to do with being an "insider-outsider" for the first time in my life—as opposed to the "outsider-insider" I'd been before. In June 1980, I arrived at the doorstep of the downtown black art world (how many people then or now know what that phrase means?). I'd spent my entire previous life in a succession of virtually all-white worlds: the all-white Ivy League world of the '50s; the all-white elite U.S. Government world of the early '60s; the all-white rock criticism and record company world of the '70s. I would still have an extreme case of "double-consciousness" (viz W.E.B. DuBois), but it was a huge relief that the terms were finally reversed. Finding Just Above Midtown, the black avant-garde gallery that Linda Good-Bryant had just relocated from 57th Street to Franklin Street in Tribeca, felt like entering nirvana.

Drinking beer or chablis outdoors at Riverrun, the restaurant-bar next door, conversing about art with David Hammons, Fred Wilson, Dawoud Bey, Janet Henry, Sandra Payne, Senga Nengudi, among others, finding myself at home with people like myself, it was all I could hope for for a couple of months. Then the old double-consciousness kicked in, the awareness that there was another world that this one was not, and could not yet be part of—certainly not routinely. And not without feeling that a rare and condescending exception was being made. I mean, Artists Space, the hot, white alternative arts organization, was around the corner for Christ's sake, and we didn't get invited to show there. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire was born. After trying out her critique of "safe" black art at the opening of JAM, her next invasion was of an opening at the New Museum, shouting a poem with the punchline "Now is the time for an invasion!" Nobody listened to her, of course. She wondered if the time would ever come when black artists could act with agency—as originators, not recipients. By the end of the decade, when two black artists, David Hammons and Adrian Piper, were "approved for admission" and the mainstream art world entered a new phase of amnesiac self-congratulation, while yet another white-feminist movement met with modest success, it all began to seem like the samo samo. Even the old gatekeeping system stretching back to Frederick Douglass

But of course, nothing ever remains quite the same. Some things get worse. For a former government insider, watching a safety net built patiently over 50 years, telephone extension by telephone extension, desk by desk, hire by hire, being hacked at by those with a better idea, was a horror. I didn't think it could get any worse, but it did. Strange now to think of Reagan as benign because he was motivated by a philosophic ideal as opposed to a self-righteous fundamentalism. On the other hand, some things get better. The worst excesses of academic theory seem to be marginally dissipating. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire will never forgive all the talentless, apolitical epigones of socially committed theorists for making the world safe for reaction through the irresponsible promotion of irony. Good riddance. But she's thankful for what she thinks might remain of their legacy: the ability to think post-colonially in a world still ruled by colonialism.

Looking forward to learning more through this opportunity to listen and to force ideas into more coherent shape. Thanks, Maurice!

2-3 November: Reagan and the Politics of Culture

Maurice Berger:

This session. . . will deal with the relationship between the Reagan Revolution and the art and culture of the period: How did the social space of the "Age of Reagan" influence, transform, and impact the art and culture of the time? And what of the "Culture Wars," what of its origins and meaning then and its continued implications for today?

Lorraine O'Grady post:

Another day of not knowing quite what to say. I'm really feeling out of synch here. I just did a page-search of the posts to date and couldn't find Richard Nixon's name anywhere. Tricky Dick is the reason I can't see Reagan as a beginning, only as a culmination.

I loved Catherine's remark: "I'm hoping that, on top of every other

ways that remembering, or excavating, or inventing, any one thing means forgetting, or burying, or erasing, other things."

But before I get to theory (and I might never get to it), I have to begin with the anecdotal. My art resume starts in 1980, but my full CV stretches back to the late '50s, to my first job after graduation—as a low-level research economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. When I was leaving, my professors said: "You're lucky, Lorraine. The BLS is one of the best-regarded institutions in government!" For those who may not know, the BLS collects the data on which almost every economic decision of the government, including the COLA, is based. It's as politics-free as government ever gets. And it was as boring as it sounds. One of my office mates would end every paragraph with an undigested quote from Nietzsche, while another was a "Baconian" and spent his spare time trying to convince us that Bacon had written all of Shakespeare. We would argue for hours over the meaning of figures to the third decimal point—to get it right, to defend ourselves to the Assistant Commissioner. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

Fast-forward a decade, to 1971. A hangover from the '60s, I am deep into my rock-and-roll life when the phone rings. A voice from the mist, but I know it's "Nietzsche".

"Turn on the TV! You won't believe this"! When the image comes up on the black-and-white TV, I squint. He's older, but eventually I recognize Mr. Invisible. Mr. Incorruptible. Back on the phone, I ask why the Assistant Commissioner is having a press conference. "Nietzsche" is unexpectedly subdued. "These people stop at nothing. They told him to lie, to change his interpretation of the unemployment figure. He's refused." A few months later, the AC was gone, and the world had turned permanently for those who believed the employment stats were too sacred to mess with.

Luckily, Tricky Dick had five-o'clock shadow. That aroused suspicion. It was awe-inspiring to watch Reagan lie on TV, his makeup was perfect. The show he put on was so good even the "spin control" Alexander Alberro referred to seemed superfluous. I certainly agree with Maurice that Reagan's was "the greatest, ongoing performance piece of the past fifty years." But the script was not a revolution.

4-5 November: Disciplines, Borders, and Boundaries

Maurice Berger:

I would like to devote this session to the issue of disciplines, borders, and boundaries. Why was the blurring of disciplinary boundaries so important in the 1980s? How did this sensibility manifest itself in art or in other disciplines, like dance, film, literature, and music? What cultural or ideological shifts did it signify? To what extent were traditional art forms--like painting and sculpture--being challenged? Why had art become so performative?

Lorraine O'Grady post:

George Baker's post states that Craig Owens was able to develop his vision of collapsed disciplinary boundaries in reference to the work of the 1960s and '70s, but that the project itself became possible only in the '80s, when it was almost immediately expelled by the closing down of non-market-driven possibilities. This would leave a window of about five years, roughly 1980-85, when the boundaries could be collapsed effectively.

If Owens developed his vision based on the work of the 1960s and '70s, then my work, which began in 1980 and was based on the vision which had made *that* work possible, i.e. the movements of the 1910s and 20s, was either prescient or hopelessly retardataire. I'd been teaching the Futurists, Dadas, and Surrealists for years, but there was a desperation in black art's situation in 1980 that made me "come out" then. And it seemed, with the NEA and the alternative art spaces which depended on public funding still in place, that the work of "collapsed boundaries" might be viable.

I was hardly an artist per se as each of my performances from *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* on was using gallery space or visual art funding to *write*. My use of visual imagery was opportune. At that time and in that place, visual methodologies seemed suited to the work of cultural, as opposed to political, critique. But the last thing I cared about was visual consistency—the idea of the signature image trotting sequentially around wall after wall. Each of my performances differed radically, in a kind of kamikaze mating of

necessary." I'm sometimes startled when I look back and see how good some of my visual images were, for that was not the point. I should also say that the use of my body probably had more to do with the insertion of the forbidden race than the forbidden gender (though Rivers, First Draft, a performance I did in Central Park in 1982, spoke to the male chauvinism of the black art world).

Wendy Perron makes an excellent point about the work of the '60s, that it had less irony than that of the '80s, in that "it harked back to Dadaism in its grave absurdity." I guess my work had more to do with that of the '60s than the '80s since I did not believe that unmodulated irony could do the heavy-lifting of cultural change. I feel sadly confirmed in that I agree with Simon's second post: "Much of the challenges waged against disciplinary knowledge or hegemonic modernism in intellectual life or art practice was in fact directed toward something we thought was going to be around, but are now seriously under threat. Much of the poststructural philosophy and political theory of import, and much of the postmodern art we value as emblematic of the age, were *anti*-humanist— critical of the transcendental/universal enlightenment autonomous subject, etc., but what we are being faced with, as Karen points out, "is a threat to the autonomous subject, however 'fictional,' as such." It would be interesting to know to what extent the untrammled irony set loose by half-digested deconstruction enabled the market's virulent return.

It saddens me to correct the factual error in Elizabeth Alexander's post, for I can understand how it occurred. The work she mentions by black artists as having been of influence in the '80 was not in fact made until the '90s. Adrian Piper's *Pretend Not To Know What You Know* was made in 1990; and for all the brilliant work she'd done for 20 years previously, her contribution to the mainstream art world was not made secure until her 1988 retrospective at the Alternative Museum. Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems may have had interesting student careers in the late '80s, but their presence in the mainstream art world was announced with their first New York shows, Simpson's *Guarded Conditions* in 1989 and Weems's "Kitchen Table Series" in 1990. It's painful to realize that we weren't part of the mainstream '80s. . . but we weren't, however much we try to project ourselves into it. Had we had been there, there would have been no reason for my work.

I'd like to reprise the brilliant guest statement by Jack Waters from

conquer strategy developed by the conservative right was implemented well before the recognition of a Culture War by the academic milieu, or the alternative space movement. This strategy of separation continues to be fostered by a social structure whereby conditions of race, gender and economic disparity are reinforced by a sense-driven value system that overrides rational analysis by virtue of the unchallenged givens that are reinforced by the failure to address unresolved issues like the institution of slavery that is the basis on which the interrelated imbalance of gender disparity, homophobia, misogyny, and racism are perpetuated."

6-7 November: Geography, Institutions & Markets

Maurice Berger:

In this session, I would like us to examine the issues of "Geography, Institutions, and Markets." To what extent were these geographical and institutional shifts market driven? How and why did former industrial or residential areas, like Soho and the East Village, emerge as art centers? What impact on art did these geographical shifts have and vice versa? What did the East Village scene mean for American art and culture in the 1980s? To what extent did collectors, dealers, and even corporations begin to eclipse critics and curators as the principal arbiters of art world taste and value? And what of the issues of gentrification, "alternative spaces," and globalism: what cultural forces and changes did they represent in the 1980s and what is their legacy today?

Once again, please be as general or specific as you like. Tackle one question or a few.

Lorraine O'Grady post:

The starting point. A quote from Catherine: "Another note about the 1980s. Silvia's late 1984 *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* as I remember, included no gay or lesbian artists and one non-white artist. In other words, halfway into the decade, it

ignored differences." OK, bracket that.

The location. Not just a micro-geography, i.e., the East Village, but a micro-micro-geography—East 2nd Street between Avenues B and C. To name this location, I have to adapt the phrase "Off-Off Broadway." Kenkeleba Gallery, a black-owned-and-run not-for-profit, was Off-Off-East Village. The phrase "artists make real estate" still seemed an impossible dream. The East Village people are discussing here was mostly between 8th and 10th Streets.

The background. It's the end of the '70s, and I'm teaching at the School of Visual Arts. My teacher's pet is a mousy boy with limp brown hair, but sweet, named John McLaughlin. He's been enrolling with me from class to class. When I announce a new course on the Surrealists, he says, "You can't just do the Surrealists, you've got to do the Dadas, I like their design." That means doing the Futurists. John helps me plan the course and brings his friends. There are more kids auditing than taking it. That's how I meet Keith Haring. A few months later, posters for a new club appear in the halls and stairwells. I recognize John's design but it takes a while for the name to sink in: John Sex. I laugh. The skits at Club 57 feel like the Cabaret Voltaire we did in class.

When Keith drops by to say he's curating the first-ever graffiti show above the Mudd Club, I laugh again. These kids' ambitions know no bounds. But the opening has an ineffable sadness. The white woman artist I am with sighs enviously at the 18-year-old Latinas who've come with the Uptown graffiti kids. Having this much life at an art world event feels weird. I'm convinced John and Keith have a future (who could predict how short it will be with AIDS?), and maybe Fab Five Freddy, but, I say, these clueless Latino graffiti kids will be disposed of shortly, that's the way it is. She doesn't believe me, so I drop it.

A quote, from Dan Cameron. "Something that many members of the art community continue to downplay about the graffiti movement (I suspect because it too easily explains why the artists themselves were so rapidly seduced and abandoned by the establishment) is that it was by far the most racially integrated art movement New York has ever seen."

The main event. A few years later (it's 1983), I'm out there "collapsing boundaries," as I learn to call it later. Then, the only time I try to figure out what they're doing is when I apply for a grant

argument with the means at hand. When Joe Overstreet and Corinne Jennings, the owners of Kenkeleba, have an unexpected opening in their schedule, it's a chance to write by curating a show. The location seems a plus, the East Village is happening and, who knows, it could spill over by a few blocks. The neighborhood would be a stretch for the white folks, of course—East 2nd between B and C is still the biggest drug supermarket in Manhattan, with competing hawkers shouting "Toilet" and "3-5-7" around the clock. But an even bigger stretch is my idea for the show: 14 black artists and 14 white artists doing work in black and white. A bit naive, and even worse is the fact that it's still needed. I start *The Black and White Show* with a call to Keith, asking him to introduce me to Basquiat. With the two of them, I can get something going.

Now un-bracket that quote from Catherine. "Silvia's late 1984 *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, as I remember, included no gay or lesbian artists and one non-white artist. In other words, halfway into the decade, it was possible to mount a high profile show on "difference" that ignored "differences." And in the '80s, it was also possible to mount a show dealing with difference that gets more than ignored, that achieves the timeworn fate of being co-opted. From an unpublished letter to *Art in America*, dated October 22, 1984:

"Dear Elizabeth Baker:

I would like to set the record straight. An image of the mural *Toxic Junkie*, which you use as the lead photo for *Art in America's* Slouching Towards Avenue D "Report on the East Village" (Summer 1984) by Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, did not appear miraculously and spontaneously on East 2nd Street between Avenues B and C. It was specifically commissioned by me from John Fekner for *The Black and White Show*, which I curated at Kenkeleba Gallery on that block in April 1983. The mural was created in time for the show's opening, and even its colors were stipulated by me. My intention in commissioning it was to expand the political content of the show (black-and-white work by black and white artists) through connecting the art inside the gallery with what was happening outside on the street....

I'm not at all implying that *The Black and White Show* should be mentioned whenever *Toxic Junkie* is printed, for the mural now

However, I do think your editorial decision not to send a critic to look at *The Black and White Show* raises questions both about your attitude toward black curators and gallery owners, and toward not-for-profit spaces.

By any standard, *The Black and White Show* was a major event—a complex and subtle grouping of such disparate artists as Jack Whitten and Keith Haring, Lauren Ewing and Nancy Spero, Randy Williams and Stephen Lack, Adrian Piper and John Fekner, Gerald Jackson and Judy Blum, and Lynne Augeri and Louis Renzoni. Perhaps I should say, it was a major show by any standard other than that the curator and gallery owners were black. Hung magnificently, it was praised by such non-participants as Leon Golub and Anton van Dalen as 'better than the Whitney Biennial' of that year.

But *Art in America* wasn't alone in passing up *The Black and White Show*. It was ignored by virtually the entire art press, and noted only briefly by *The East Village Eye*.

.... Within limits, I have always respected *Art in America*, so it was quite shocking to find your magazine in this new article actually rewriting history in the service of trendiness. For example, Patti Astor was not the first person to open a gallery in the East Village in the past three or four years. What about 301 Houston, and the Second Avenue Photo Gallery, both run by ex-students from SVA?

But the most ahistorical aspect of your "Report 84" was its art-commercial bias. By effectively denying the role of such not-for-profit spaces as ABC No Rio and Kenkeleba, you distorted the nature and history of avant-garde art in the contemporary East Village. I am not writing this to promote either ABC No Rio or Kenkeleba (the latter is a gallery whose curatorial policies for the most part I seriously disagree with), but to point out that by ignoring them, *Art in America* failed in its responsibilities as a magazine of record, and that in the case of Kenkeleba, the omission contributed a blatant and unnecessary example of racism to the art world.

This is hardly the place for detailing the ways in which not-for-profit spaces like ABC No Rio and Kenkeleba contribute to the East Village art scene. But I must say that I felt both personally and racially affronted on finding in your "Report 84" a picture of *Toxic Junkie*, as well as two pictures of work by Louis Renzoni (Renzoni's works were first exhibited in New York in *The Black and White*

them), illustrating an article that dismissed Kenkeleba, and thus indirectly my show, as irrelevant....

(signed) Mlle Bourgeoise Noire"

Return to the present. In the many pendulum-like movements between the '80s, '90s and '00s, nothing has gone back to exactly where it was before—in that, I agree with Olu Oguibe. And yet, there does seem a bit of the old more things change...more they stay the same. For all its current grinning whimsy, the world of visual art and the market it serves remain solidly outside the world of popular culture. And the same old questions continue to plague "high" art. The most personally bothersome to me is: "How original and originating will the work of 'others' be permitted to be?" As long as the word "permitted" fits comfortably in that sentence, I remain less than hopeful.

I'd also like to clarify something, re: a quote from George Baker: "The East Village was the first example of a new market logic that the 1980s put in place and is still with us today: First the Village, then Soho, then Chelsea, then Williamsburg...." I don't know if I've understood George correctly, but Soho was in place before the East Village, both ran concurrently, but Soho survived the EV. The locus of power was always clear. Basquiat, aware that he was considered the art world's black mascot, was the only artist to withdraw from *The Black and White Show*. At the time, he was negotiating representation with Mary Boone in Soho, one of the two or three most prestigious galleries in Soho, and was being advised that it wouldn't do to exhibit further in East Village shows.

8-9 November: "Multiculturalism"

Maurice Berger:

There is no question that "multiculturalism" is a child of the 1980s—a key ideology and sensibility of the time. I would like to devote this session to its meaning and import, both then and now. What were the origins of the "multicultural" ethos? What were its causes and effects in the period? And what of its aspirations and

"multiculturalism" impacted American society and culture?

Lorraine O'Grady post:

I'm feeling so frustrated. After my first two posts, I was unable to post for a week. I've been adding posts thanks to Maurice's willingness to post me into already closed threads. While I'm aware that my timing makes it impossible for me to really be part of the discussion, it's important to me to be part of this, if only in the archived afterlife of the conference. With this "multicultural" session, I've come up against a wall. I am hoping that I've said enough in my previous posts for panelists and others to understand why the term is a compromised one for me.

Given what I experienced as a period of almost total exclusion of black artists from the mainstream '80s art world, I can't help wonder why so many of the African Americans invited to take part in this discussion on the '80s have not had more to say. Is it because there is not much more to be said?

It's rather a truism that the art of "others" is most likely to break through to majority consciousness during times of economic recession. The recession of '87 combined with the discourses of multiculturalism to make continued exclusion untenable. This made possible the reception of Adrian Piper and David Hammons's shows in 1988. And a few squeezed through the door. But not so many as to cause a new kind of thought. Not so many that they couldn't be immediately converted to tools for self-congratulation. And not so many that it couldn't be business as usual at the next market upswing.

A black male friend described an opening he attended in Chelsea just last month of a show by a relatively highly-regarded black artist. For the space of an hour, he said, his white partner and a gallery worker were the only non-blacks in attendance. The gallery had acquired the reputation of being a "black" gallery and didn't attract those who wanted to socialize at openings. Yes, a few whites would show up at the dinner afterwards, where some business could be done, but that was it.

Some things have changed since the events of the '80s, but other than a few black artists who've slipped under the radar to earn a living from their art, and an even smaller number who have landed

precision what those things are. More difficult still to be hopeful.

I've been struck by certain comments here. First, the distinction Mary Kelly drew between the lag-effect in dealing with gender and what happened with race: "When race was posed as a question of difference, it didn't produce a lag-effect, it was something more like a blind spot." I agree and would have to add: even among the "gendered." This came home to me most forcefully when, as one of less than a handful of non-white women active in WAC (Women's Action Coalition), the feminist organization that had a brief but fervid existence among New York women artists in 1992, and as one of two non-whites in the group's 30-woman Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, I experienced a shock to my system on discovering that most of the other 28 had assumed that "diversity" meant lesbians.

When Maurice writes, "To some extent, the art world has opened up to such cross-cultural possibilities, but these gestures still feel to me like multiculturalism without teeth. Crumbs thrown by the guilty to the formerly insulted and ignored. One more Kara Walker exhibition is not going to convince me that things have changed on a deeper, more formative level," my heartfelt response is "Right on!" It's not very theoretical.

While I felt saddened by Oliver Wasow's hesitation to speak, for fear of speaking "politically incorrectly," and agree that it is a fear that comes from a place that is basically without politics, I still can't help at least partly agreeing with his analysis:

"What I meant to suggest was that to fight for inclusion into those institutions that are so tied to a market that is unavailable and unfriendly to the disenfranchised, seems like the old, proverbial, going to the hardware store for oranges. The notion of 'subverting from within,' central, as long as we're talking about the '80s, to much of that decades deconstructive strategies, is perhaps too easily co-opted and neutralized. Rather than try to change those institutions, an impossibility it seems to me in a market-driven economy, I think political energy should be directed towards more classic, old school, New-Deal, socialist, government-funded solutions—which, I realize, brings us back to the culture wars. So, I don't know."

If I'm honest, I have to admit that the death of the NEA, and

totally compromised me as an art-maker. And I'm not as optimistic as Wasow is about the Internet as a tool of inclusion, though it's better than nothing.

I am trying but can't muster wholehearted belief in Karen's proposal that "The alternative to multiculturalism is not separatism and segregation. It is Critical Race Theory, the real and viable legacy of the civil rights movement. It calls for legal, structural change, and questions the parameters of the law as it demands a reformulation of society." I was born and raised in Boston, where the laws of the '60s didn't manage to reformulate much of anything (we were always able to sit at a lunch counter). And I've just come back from a brief trip to Pittsburgh where, after a couple of days of lecturing at local universities, I had to ask, "Where are all the black people?" It's not very theoretical.

10-11 November: Writing, Discourse, and Methods

Maurice Berger:

What of the vital changes in discourse that took place in the 1980s? To what extent did art, culture, and politics engender these shifts? How did "critical theory" impact the art and writing of the period? What was the role of academia, as well as, journals in encouraging or dissuading the application of new methodologies and theories to the study of culture? To what extent--as Homi Bhabha wondered at decade's end--was the "commitment to theory" antithetical to activism and social change? (Bhabha's answer was a qualified, no.) What is the legacy of these methods on contemporary writing on art and culture?

Lorraine O'Grady post:

Maurice, your questions seem so timeless to me that I'm not sure how to answer them with respect specifically to the '80s. Except to say that the late '80s seemed a moment when writers and academics finally caught up, when they could at last comfortably "talk the talk," or at least pretend. (I'll be addressing less the "theory" questions in your first post here, than the questions on

This may be speaking out of turn, but what the hell... One of the funnier activities, beginning in the mid-'60s in the U.S., was to see a seemingly endless crazy-komic procession of intellectuals trying to look cool as they were re-tooling. When I was studying at the Iowa Writers Workshop, a professor in the English Department wrote a book on structuralism for the main purpose of deciphering its vocabulary; it would be the first of many such books. For as soon as one syllabary was mastered, another had to be figured out. First structuralism, then post-structuralism, then deconstruction, then Foucault-ism, and then all the branches and offshoots: feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and queer theory (I hope I've got that order right). Translation from French mindsets to what could be thought in English seemed the least of it. Added conversions had to be made across disciplines—from the structuralism based in anthropology and linguistics, to the post-structuralism based in literature, to the deconstruction based in philosophy... By 1991, the College Art Association's Art Bulletin, ever foresighted, was featuring a book-length article by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson to teach art historians how to apply semiotics to the field. No surprise that the art writing of the period was mind-numbingly turgid. Even reading *Artforum* in the '80s was a hoot, as writers struggled to string words together like foreign, sculptural objects, or at best, like expressionist brushstrokes.

I think you're right (at least I hope so) in saying that contemporary writing is getting better, especially among younger critical theorists. For, despite the awe they roused in poor Anglo-Saxons, those originating theorists were, almost to the one, writing in a "personal" voice. Levi-Strauss, Derrida, Foucault... let's not kid ourselves... the lives they lived were, to one degree or another, in their words. Even Stuart Hall's articles have the pleasures of the personal essay. (One wonders how much time a gifted essayist like James Baldwin, had he been born in the age of critical theory, would have spent writing novels.) Like you, I hope that younger theorists, like some of those here, can get us past the scratchy period of translators and epigones.

Adorno argued that "difficulty" was the price of thought, by which I think he meant sentences that begin with the end nowhere in view. But I don't agree. It's true that beautiful writing has to leave out a lot. But I would prefer to write "stupid" than to write ugly, because incompleteness, even at times inaccuracy, seem small prices

the backward swing of writing in the '80s and '90s will prove worth it if it enables the vision you posit here, which I quote:

"Increasingly, I'm noticing a refreshing communication of powerful (and empowering) critical methods through writing that is, itself, agile, eloquent, and persuasive. I hope this is a trend and not just in academia. Progressive culture, in general, needs to speak in voices that can inspire and move people. Our future—and the future of this country—will, in part, depend on just this kind of talent." Let the congregation say Amen.

12-13 November: Conclusion--Rethinking the 1980s

Maurice Berger:

I would like to devote the next two-day session to concluding statements from conference panelists. I ask that you try to address the following question: What insights have you gained from the conference and how have they impacted on or altered your thinking? Please feel free to address any issue you feel is relevant to your concluding remarks, including the way in which the online environment itself shaped our discussion.

Lorraine O'Grady post:

Two hundred and two posts and counting. Perhaps I read and think more slowly than others (and there was that week I was gone), but it's going to take me a long time to digest them.

I don't usually think about decades the way we have these past two weeks. Examining the '80s has made me think back to the '60s (like Wendy, I think it's a more natural candidate) and forward to the 00s (we *know* it's a candidate, Twin Towers, Osama and George, etc.). But mostly it's whetted my appetite for the '70s and '90s, decades where nothing much happened.

My response to the conference-ing has been as much physical and emotional as intellectual. As some one who writes late at night, in the beginning I struggled with deadlines. Then, after being away from the Internet, I had to literally post *ex post facto*. It was hard

shouting messages over the din to the '00s. Though I was reading and responding to everyone on a given thread, I couldn't expect anyone to respond to me. In a way, this virtuo-physicality was a sad but exact corollary to my emotional state. I was only too aware of having to witness, to give a testimony that was not able to be heard/understood at the time. There wasn't enough space to work out the detached observer voice I might be capable of, to calibrate the back-and-forth segues between the insider-outsider and outsider-insider I had variously been. I had, after all, begun the decade in 1980 as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, beating myself with a whip and shouting out guerrilla poems, and had ended it in 1990 by creating a translation business to convert those same ATM screens into a dozen languages, doing my bit for global capitalism.

On the other hand, I disagreed with those of my fellow panelists who seemed nostalgic for the outsider voice imagined as someone too young to have been there at all (someone born after 1980?). The outsider voices I longed to hear more from were the Irving Sandler, but from differing points of view. It was an odd gift to get from the process, to realize that I love the sound of the cut-to-the-chase, no-time-for-bullshit voice of the wise but old.

I wish my participation had been more interactive, but I also wish there had been more time. There were many questions I had. I wanted to ask Wendy Perron: Are black choreographers widely accepted as "originators" in dance? How do you account for that? I'd like to understand more how this can/can't be applied to other fields. To ask Mary Kelly: How do you parse the differences between race and gender? How do you theorize the differences you referred to between the "lag-effect" and the "blind spot?" Etc.. Etc..

It was an interesting experience, Maurice. I'll be working it out for a while.

* *The 1980s: An Internet Conference* was conducted online for two weeks and was organized in seven sections or topics, with topics changing every two days. The participants were: Alexander Alberro, Elizabeth Alexander, George Baker, Judith Barry, Max Becher and Andrea Robbins, Dan Cameron, Ondine Chavoya, Thomas Crow, Dorit Cypis, Karen Mary Davalos, RoseLee Goldberg, Mary Kelly, Christine Kim, George King, Wayne Koestenbaum, Simon Leung, Catherine Lord, Barbara Buhler

Lynes, Kathy O'Dell, Lorraine O'Grady, Olu Oguibe, Wendy Perron, David A. Ross, Irving Sandler, Carolee Schneemann, Lowery Stoke Sims, Franklin Sirmans, Carol Squiers, Michele Wallace, Oliver Wasow, Jonathan Weinberg, and Linda Yablonsky.

Excerpted here are the questions posed by Berger to the conference and Lorraine O'Grady's answers to them. A publication of the conference is scheduled as: Maurice Berger, ed. *The 1980s: An Internet Conference*. Issues in Cultural Theory 10. Santa Fe: Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center; and Baltimore: Center for Art and Visual Culture, 2007. The full conference may be found online at: <http://www.okeeffemuseum.org/center/2005onlinesymposium.php>