

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* and Feminism

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For *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, the first-ever museum exhibit of feminist art, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A., O'Grady was asked to record an audio statement for the cell-phone tour to explain how her piece related to the show's theme.

Q: How does the work *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* relate to art and the feminist revolution?

A: "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire" is French for Miss Black Bourgeoise. The back story I created for her was that she'd won the title in a worldwide event held in Cayenne, the capital of French Guiana. Cayenne may have been a backwater, but the black bourgeois condition was international! In 1955, the year she won her crown, all around the world, in London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Washington, DC, there were young women just like her.

MBN was a critical piece, located at the nexus of race, class, and gender. In 1980, when I created it, there were no role models in white feminist art for a tri-partite critique, or at least none that I was aware of. That era's feminism seemed concerned exclusively with gender. Second-wave feminism was basically a white bourgeois construction that seemed to operate as though unconscious either that it was white or that it was middle-class. It was a time when white feminists could still believe that their definitions of sexual liberation and professional advancement applied identically to all women... and that they could speak for all women. In that era, even though black feminists may have admired the energy, even the delirium, of white feminist rhetoric, not to mention the bravery of many of its actions, they still felt alienated by and even a bit derisive toward it.

Still, the fact is, black feminism was itself a middle-class construction. But the middle-class it derived from was one in which women, however well-educated, did not have the luxury of a Betty Friedan-style *feminine mystique*. Even black Ivy League women married to doctors had to, or chose to, work. Since the end of slavery... given that blacks for the most part earned half of what whites did... middle-class lifestyles had been supported by families with two jobs. Black women were post-modernist *avant la lettre*.

It's true that black bourgeois women worldwide were sexually repressed in this era. What else could they be when they were defined by their surrounding cultures as the universal prostitute? They were desperate for respect. In 1980, black avant-garde art, another middle-class construction, was equally repressed. THAT's why Mlle Bourgeoise Noire covered herself in white gloves, a symbol of internal repression. THAT's why she took up the whip-that-made-plantations-move, the sign of external oppression, and beat herself with it. Drop that lady-like mask! Forget that self-controlled abstract art! Stop trying to be acceptable so you'll get an invitation to the party!

The key moment of MBN's guerrilla invasions of art galleries was when she would throw down the whip and shout out her poems. They had punch lines like, on the one hand, "BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!" And on the other, "NOW IS THE TIME FOR AN INVASION!"

But Mlle Bourgeoise Noire was a kamikaze performance, really. In 1980-81, noone was listening. It wouldn't be until 1988-89 that black artists were finally invited to the party... when Adrian Piper and David Hammons received their first mainstream exhibits. And a few years after that, second-wave feminism would start becoming third-wave. Oh, well.

* Statement recorded for the "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" cell phone tour, February 2007. Transcript later published in *Artlies 54*, Summer 2007.