

Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline, by Lorraine O'Grady

© College Art Association 1997*

In this article for *Art Journal*, Winter 1997, the special issue on performance edited by Martha Wilson, O'Grady focuses first on *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, then discusses its relationship to *Miscegenated Family Album*, alluding to the advantages and disadvantages of the move from performance to photo installation.

Abstract: A performance artist relates her creation of a piece called *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*. The work juxtaposes the image of the artist's deceased older sister and an ancient Egyptian queen. It parallels the artist's troubled relationship with her sister and Nefertiti's troubled relationship with the queen's younger sister. The work attempts to make a statement regarding the nature of sibling relations and the limits of art as a vehicle for reconciliation.

In 1980, when I first began performing, I was a purist - or perhaps I was simply naive. My performance ideal at that time was "hit-and-run," the guerilla-like disruption of an event-in-progress, an electric jolt that would bring a strong response, positive or negative. But whether I was doing *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* at a downtown opening or *Art Is . . .* before a million people in Harlem's Afro-American Day parade, as the initiator, I was free: I did not have an "audience" to please.

The first time I was asked to perform for an audience who would actually pay (at Just Above Midtown Gallery, New York, in the *Dialogues*

* Published in *Art Journal*, Winter 1997, v56 n4 p64-65. Special issue on performance.

series, 1980) - I was non-plused. I was not an entertainer! The performance ethos of the time was equally naive: entertaining the audience was not a primary concern. After all, wasn't it about contributing to the dialogue of art and not about building a career? I prepared *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* in expectation of a one-night stand before about fifty cognoscenti and friends. It was a chance to experiment and explore. Performance's advantage over fiction was its ability to combine linear storytelling with nonlinear visuals. You could make narratives in space as well as in time, and that was a boon for the story I had to tell.

My older sister, Devonia, had died just weeks after we'd got back together, following years of anger and not speaking. Two years after her unanticipated death, I was in Egypt. It was an old habit of mine, hopping boats and planes. But this escape had turned out unexpectedly. In Cairo in my twenties, I found myself surrounded for the first time by people who looked like me. This is something most people may take for granted, but it hadn't happened to me earlier, in either Boston or Harlem. Here on the streets of Cairo, the loss of my only sibling was being confounded with the image of a larger family gained. When I returned to the States, I began painstakingly researching Ancient Egypt, especially the Amarna period of Nefertiti and Akhenaton. I had always thought Devonia looked like Nefertiti, but as I read and looked, I found narrative and visual resemblances throughout both families.

Though the invitation to perform before a seated audience at Just Above Midtown was initially disconcerting, I soon converted it into a chance to objectify my relationship to Dee by comparing it to one I could imagine as equally troubled: that of Nefertiti and her younger sister, Mutnedjmet. No doubt this was a personal endeavor, I was seeking a catharsis. The piece interwove partly subjective spoken narrative with double slide-projections of the two families. To the degree that the audience entered my consideration, I hoped to say something about the persistent nature of sibling relations and the limits of art as a means of reconciliation. There would be subsidiary points as well: on hybridism, elegance in black art and Egyptology's continued racism.

Some people found the performance beautiful. But to tell the truth, few were sure of what I was up to. Nineteen eighty was seven years before the publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, and a decade before "museumology" and "appropriation" reached their apex. As one

critic later said to me, in 1980 I was the only one who could vouch for my images. I will always be grateful to performance for providing me the freedom and safety to work through my ideas; I had the advantage of being able to look forward, instead of glancing over my shoulder at the audience, the critics, or even art history.

Performance would soon become institutionalized, with pressure on artists to have a repertoire of pieces that could be repeated and advertised. I would perform Nefertiti several more times before retiring it in 1989. And in 1994, now subject to the exigencies of a market that required objects, I took about one-fifth of the original 65 diptychs and created a wall installation of framed Cibachromes. Oddly, rather than traducing the original performance idea, *Miscegenated Family Album* seemed to carry it to a new and inevitable form, one that I call "spatial narrative." With the passage of time, the piece has found a broad and comprehending audience.

The translation to the wall did involve a sacrifice. Now *Miscegenated Family Album*, an installation in which each diptych must contribute to the whole, faces a new set of problems, those of the gallery exhibit career. The installation is a total experience. But whenever diptychs are shown or reproduced separately, as they often must be, it is difficult to maintain and convey the narrative, or performance, idea. As someone whom performance permitted to become a writer in space, that feels like a loss to me.