

Statement for Moira Roth re *Art Is . . .*

Unpublished email exchange, 2007

During an e-mail exchange in which they were sharing ideas and work, O'Grady sent Roth a copy of Lucy Lippard's review of *Art Is. . .*. Roth's questions prompted O'Grady to elaborate on the making and meaning of the performance.

070427

Dear Moira,

Besides working on the piece for Artpace, every day I am trying to do at least one thing for the website. Last night, I typed out the piece Lucy Lippard wrote in 1988 in Z Magazine on *Art Is. . .*, a performance I did in the Harlem parade (FYI, see the Word document attached). Reading back through 20 years of an archive is like passing yourself on a train going in the opposite direction.

Lorraine

070429

Dear Lorraine,

This is a piece (would you call it a performance? or?) that I know of, albeit mainly as a single image... so it is a pleasure to see the admirably complex reading of it by LL. Could you tell me a little more about the history of "Art Is..."?

How and why did you come up with the idea? Were you living in New York? In Manhattan or Harlem or? What artists did you

know, feel close to at the time? Writers? Critics? Historians? Activists? And/or...? Who else had written about your work at this time?

Moira

070429

Dear Moira,

I'm not surprised when people don't know much about *Art Is*. . . I did it during my "Duchamp" years. At the time, I was teaching the Dadas and the Futurists at SVA and thinking of myself as a purist. Because the piece wasn't addressed to the art world, I didn't advertise it. I've changed a lot since then! The answers to your questions are fairly intertwined.

When I did the piece I was living in the West Village, in the same building I'd been living since arriving in New York via Chicago in '72. . . . I'm definitely a "downtown" type and had dreamt of being in the Village since I was 10 years old. When I was a teenager in the late 40s growing up in Boston, I would devour magazines with pictures of girls in long black skirts, black turtlenecks and black berets, drinking expresso and puffing on cigarettes in 4th Street cafes.

By late 1982, I'd been "out" as an artist for more than two years and had been invited by the Heresies collective, not to join the mother collective but to work on issue #13 of their journal, the one that was named "Racism Is the Issue." The "issue" collective was a mixed group of artists and non-artists that included Ana Mendieta, Cindy Carr, Carole Gregory, Lucy and many others. It was a fractious group. One of the women in it was a black social worker whose name I don't recall. I only remember that one evening at a meeting she said to me scathingly: "Avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people!" I didn't know how to answer her, but I wanted to prove she was wrong.

Her comment stayed with me. But where would I find the "black people" to answer her? Perhaps because I am West Indian and a

great believer in Carnival, the idea of putting avant-garde art into a parade came to me. But I knew instinctively that I couldn't put it into the West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn. There was so much real art in that parade it would drown out the avant-garde! So I decided on the African American Day Parade in Harlem, which was comparatively tame and commercial — you know, oompa-oompa marching bands and beer company adverts. My first idea was to mount several pieces on a parade float and just march it up 7th Avenue. But when I went to rent a flatbed from the company in New Jersey that supplies them, the owner told me: "You know, you have a maximum of three minutes, from the time a float comes into view on the horizon, stops-and-starts, then is out of sight at the other end." That shook me. So I switched, from putting art into the parade to trying to create an art experience for the viewers. I asked the artists George Mingo and Richard DeGussi to help me. They built a 9 x 15 foot antique-styled, empty gold frame on the flatbed, which we covered with a gold metallic-paper skirt that had "Art Is. . ." in big, black letters on both sides. Then I put an ad in Billboard and hired 15 gorgeous young black actors and dancers, male and female, dressed them in white, and gave them gold picture frames of various styles and told them to frame viewers along the parade route. They did this while hopping on and off the parade float, according to how fast it was moving or whether it was stalled.

The piece was done in 1983, with a grant from the NY State Council on the Arts, but as I said, it was done during my "Duchamp" years. Hahaha. I told the people at Just Above Midtown, the black avant-garde gallery I showed with, and the women in the Heresies racism collective knew about it, but almost noone else. The only person I gave slides to was Lucy Lippard, who was in both the Heresies mother and issue collectives and wrote about the piece five years later in *Z*. Lucy later printed two images in her book *Mixed Blessings*. But nothing else happened with that piece. I was shocked when, a few years ago, Johanna Drucker asked me for slides for a book she was writing. I thought noone had noticed.

It's funny. The organizers of the parade were totally mystified by me and by the performance. The announcer made fun of the float

as it passed the reviewing stand: "They tell me this is art, but you know the Studio Museum? I don't understand that stuff."

But 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.

Lorraine