

Thoughts about myself, when seen as a political performance artist

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O'Grady early on felt the need, and was asked, to explain herself —as in this reply to a request by Lucy Lippard on politics in art. Lippard, curating "ACTING OUT: The first political performance art series," had invited her to perform. The letter dated 1.1.81 addressed practical and other issues and became her first statement on performance art.

You've asked about my political concerns. . . . I guess I experience art as a way of discovering what I really think and feel. In an odd way, I also look to art to help me define my political beliefs. I find it so much easier to know what I'm *against* (monopoly capitalism, personal and social cruelties of every kind) than to know what I'm *for*. But the achieving of aesthetic form frequently gives me something in which I can believe, about which I can feel, "This is true." And because, more often than not the aesthetic process is set in motion by an angry response to a political perception, the result has frankly political implications.

As an advantaged member of a disadvantaged group, I've lived my life on the rim — a dialectically privileged location that's helped keep my political awareness acute. But the main reason my art is "political" is probably that anger is my most productive emotion. I think that, for me, politics will always be more a matter of emotion than ideology — and I say that in spite of the fact that I was trained in the social sciences (for several years I was a career officer with the U.S. Departments of Labor and State). . . .

But certainly no one is going to go out and man the barricades after seeing a piece by me (at least, none that I've produced so far). My work is too complex for that kind of response. And where the critique gets most specific, the audience

is often most limited (as in *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's* criticism of black art that doesn't take risks). Performance is the art form with the most limited audience, and my part of it is even more so. To believe that a performance piece, or even Performance, can have a political effect is like having a Great Man theory of history. The most I really expect my work can accomplish politically is a small contribution to the task of creating a climate of questioning and refusal.

The reasons I go on with Performance are two: first, because I'm stuck with it. It's the only art form I feel capable of both mastering and expanding aesthetically. And second, because I believe it is an acceptable political option. I'm convinced the struggle for a just society is a kaleidoscopic one that has to be fought in all shapes and colors simultaneously. An upper-middle-class black woman, making art that insists on cultural equality, performs just one necessary political function.

I confess, in my work I keep trying to yoke together my underlying concerns as a member of the human species with my concerns as a woman and black in America. It's hard, and sometimes the work splits in two — within a single piece, or between pieces. But I keep trying, because I don't see how history can be divorced from ontogeny and still produce meaningful political solutions (I'm referring to the long-range result of the work, of course, not to what I actually do).

. . . . As I said, I'm sure my art will always be political because of who and what I am. And I seem to get my best political ideas when looking for aesthetic solutions.