



Lorraine O'Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, 1980–83. Performance view, New Museum, New York, September 1981. Photo: Coreen Simpson.

## The Poem Will Resemble You

### WHEN LORRAINE O'GRADY

would burst into art openings during the early 1980s in the character of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, she sought to bring aesthetic issues to life—and, more specifically, to challenge both the art world's entrenched (and often overlooked) conservatism and its presumptive avant-gardism.

Ever since, O'Grady has forged a multidisciplinary mode of disruption and criticality, working on a broad social stage while hewing to an intensely personal vision. In these pages, artist **NICK MAUSS** looks closely at this history that is, he says, “both concussive and elegant”; and O'Grady herself, reflecting on this same history in context, reprises

“The Black and White Show,” which she organized as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire in 1983. Conceived as an artwork that deployed curating as medium, the exhibition took place at Kenkeleba House—a gallery in the burned-out precincts of the East Village in New York—and featured twenty-eight artists, of whom half were black, half white. (The precise balance bluntly underscored the absence of such parity elsewhere in art.)

In both physical location and critical orientation, the show situated itself outside the ambit of the mainstream art world. Revisiting it now and superimposing present-day reflections on the works she gathered together then, O'Grady offers counterhistory as visual and textual palimpsest.

**I HAVE NEVER SEEN A PERFORMANCE BY LORRAINE O'GRADY.** Yet even their documentation communicates a moment in time that was and still is a severe interruption. I can't claim to fully understand what I'm looking at. The continual internal refraction in O'Grady's work forbids assimilation, yet the struggle to come to terms with the work's implications—the inability to fix O'Grady's art in a framework that is already known—strikes at the core of her major artistic contribution.

O'Grady, who first gained visibility in the art world in the early 1980s through her invasions of openings at venues such as the then-new New Museum and the black avant-garde gallery Just Above Midtown, insisted that there could be a complex subjectivity outside “whiteness” and “blackness.” In *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, 1980–83, O'Grady embodied her alter ego, a debutante from Cayenne, French Guiana, dressed in a cape and gown made from 180 pairs of debutante's white gloves. She carried a cat-o'-nine-tails spiked with chrysanthemums and whipped herself while shouting vituperative poems. At Just Above Midtown, she railed:

THAT'S ENOUGH!  
No more boot-licking . . .  
No more ass-kissing . . .  
No more buttering-up . . .  
No more pos . . . turing  
of super-ass . . . imitates . . .  
BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!

And at the New Museum, she jeered:

WAIT  
wait in your alternate/alternate spaces  
spitted on fish hooks of hope [. . .]  
THAT'S ENOUGH don't you know  
sleeping beauty needs  
more than a kiss to awake  
now is the time for an INVASION!

Within the safe zones of these restricted communities, “Miss Black Middle Class” inserted hybridity and disagreement into social situations that were meant to protect and continue the production of consensus.

By now, this performance is justifiably iconic and has become O'Grady's best-known artwork. It is also her most aggressive, but its subtleties and symbolic opulence can easily be drowned out by overemphasizing its badass attitude. Even though it appeared to have emerged out of nowhere, it has a long but decidedly *not* art-historical genesis.

O'Grady's peripatetic biography and uncommonly varied occupations leading up to her artistic debut included studying economics and Spanish literature at Wellesley and a stint at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, jobs at the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and the State Department in Washington, an attempt at writing a novel, a successful career as a rock critic for the *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*, and extended teaching at New York's School of Visual Arts on subjects ranging from Dada to Catullus. But it was at the end of a hospital stay in 1977 that O'Grady began shifting from conventional aspirations as a writer to constructing poems that make spacious, looping fields of words out of phrases clipped from the Sunday *New York Times*. Headlines and ad copy glued in spare, dynamic arrangements on blank sheets of paper look less like ransom notes than like Mallarmé's experimental typography. “At the time, two things had happened simultaneously,” she recalls.



“I began to think that psychoanalysis might not be a bad idea; and I had to have a biopsy on my right breast. I took some books by André Breton to the hospital to help take my mind off it. *Nadja* and the *Manifestos* may have got mixed up with coming out of the general anesthetic.”<sup>1</sup>

Transforming Faces  
THE WOMAN AS ARTIST  
COSMETIC LIB FOR MEN  
Years Ago it Was a  
LANDSCAPE OF THE BODY  
An Escorted Tour

Around Chicago  
Birthplace of the Skyscraper<sup>2</sup>

“The poem will resemble you,” Tristan Tzara warns in his step-by-step instructions for creating a Dada poem. But unlike similar experiments in making the familiar strange, O’Grady’s poems make the familiar deeply personal, refusing the generation of accidental meaning and the thrill of nonsense that are the prerogative and legacy of the white male avant-garde. These poems know that to mean something is difficult enough. Though the disunity of the poems’ parts is camouflaged by the congenial tone of the newspaper from which they

are cut, the cloak of language quivers against what it is being made to say. Turning the technique in on itself, O’Grady finds herself everywhere and re-collects herself in a process meant to generate randomness. Predating by three years *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, these poems crystallize an aesthetic that demands critique be both concussive and elegant.

The modern artist,  
finding himself with  
no shared  
foundation, has  
begun to build on  
Reckless Storytelling  
STAR WORDS  
and  
The Deluxe Almost-Everything-Included  
WORK OF ART  
This could be  
The Permanent Rebellion  
that lasts a lifetime.  
Calling a Halt  
To the Universe  
BECAUSE LIFE DOESN’T WAIT  
THE SAVAGE IS LOOSE  
where we are<sup>3</sup>

“Calling a Halt To the Universe”—this is what O’Grady did as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*. But when she was later actually invited to perform, O’Grady found that the agitprop effect of these appearances was highly contingent. This realization led to the creation of deeply personal, staged reflections, more like making “narratives in space as well as in time.”<sup>4</sup>

*Rivers, First Draft*, which O’Grady considers to be her most autobiographical and feminist piece, can be seen as a multilevel *Trauerspiel* allegorizing the subjectivity of the artist, represented by the character of the Woman in Red. It was performed only once, on August 18, 1982, in the wooded Loch section at the north end of Central Park. In documentation, the piece has the sense of a Surrealist dream transposed onto reality, though in reality it was probably more like several dreams occurring side by side. A multitude of characters, reminiscent of New Wave cinema or religious paintings, describe in *tableaux vivants* the arc of O’Grady’s becoming-an-artist as the simultaneous and incompatible experiences that actually constitute a life coming into focus.

The Woman in the White Kitchen, reduced by the deep synthesis of O’Grady’s memory to her most evocative characteristics, sits within the schematic frame of a house. Described in the script as “a brown-skinned woman wearing a white halter dress and white wedgies, with a 40s hair style,” she has been grating coconut at her white table for so long that the floor of the house is already a carpet of shavings.<sup>5</sup> The sounds of a West Indian radio broadcast and the cartoon of a palm tree beside the house indicate the faraway zone that she mentally inhabits—though

in the setting of an urban park, everyone is out of context. A gray door standing amid the trees marks the entrance to the club of the Black Male Artists in Yellow, who are endlessly absorbed in their work and their admiration and support for one another. Alongside these persistent archetypes, the drama of a tryst unfolds between the Girl in Magenta and the Young Man in Green. Some of the “still images” speak, like the Young Girl in White “memorizing lessons” through a megaphone while sitting on a rock, dressed in her Sunday best. Her idealism is symbolized by a sun hat fashioned into the helmet of Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom. Further up the hill, two Art Snobs in motorcycle goggles engage in circular rants, striking cool, dismissive poses and making the Woman in Red “feel out of it.” Figures of exclusion, the characters in this landscape are consumed with themselves and their own realities. Only the coterie of the Debauchees offers the Woman in Red a temporary feeling of participation, of moving between worlds. Their dancing sound track—Tom Tom Club’s “Wordy Rappinghood” and John Foxx’s “Metal Beat”—adds to the confounding mesh of sounds and voices, resulting in the counterpoint of a *poème simultané*. When the young girl has finished her dutiful memorization, she recites the following poem:

Back home deep in the woods of Vermont,  
I dropped the first atomic bomb [ . . . ]

Come to our place for Thanksgiving.



From top: Lorraine O’Grady, *The Renaissance Man Is Back in Business*, 1977, collage on paper, eleven parts, each 11 x 8½”. From the series “Cutting Out the New York Times,” 1977. Lorraine O’Grady, *Rivers, First Draft*, 1982. Performance views, Central Park, New York, August 18, 1982.

We'll serve you the Carribbean with all the trimmings.

Come to Jamaica—all we have to offer is three days on an island where dance is a way of life

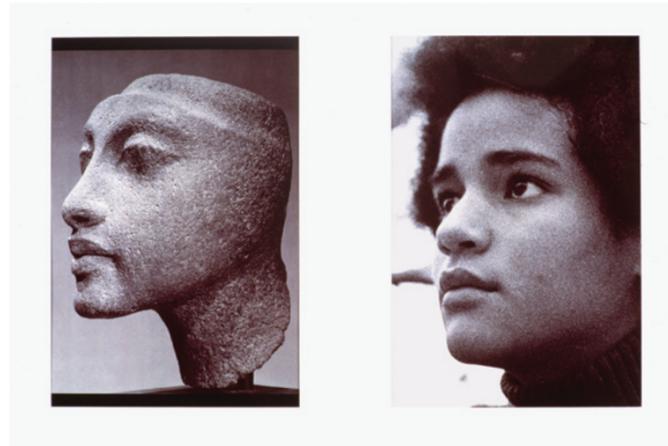
Isn't it time you took a vacation?

It's no coincidence that when people speak in O'Grady's performances, they speak symbolically, in poems or supersaturated streams of language. While the artist herself has said that *Rivers, First Draft* is among her most overdetermined works, its perplexity is a result of O'Grady's desire to say what she has to say completely, touching on every level of meaning. Even the refined economy that characterizes her aesthetic can't rein in the sense of urgency that so often makes her work seem to be bursting, overloaded, or going beyond the limits of what can be expected of an audience. "I'm not interested in meaning or significance, or importance," says the naked man who emerges from a stream onto a bridge made from a bed on which the Woman in Red lies dreaming or watching television. "And what about the Bomb?" ask the production assistants. "Will anything last?"

One turbulent climax of *Rivers, First Draft* comes when the Woman in Red is rejected by the Male Artists in their studio, is jostled and assaulted by the Debauchees, and, leaving them all behind, makes her way to the "castle kitchen," where she creates her first artwork by spraying a stove with red spray paint. Ultimately, though, it is the reunion with her former selves, the Girl in White and the Girl in Magenta, that draws her out of the oppressive cacophony, "the stuff that goes on constantly as we lead our private, inner lives." For O'Grady, *Rivers, First Draft* explores a new psychological terrain in which political agency bravely includes the right to expose vulnerability in public: "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."<sup>6</sup>

This splitting finds its most poignant realization in the sixteen-part photo installation *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994, a piece that actually traces its origins to an earlier performance. One month after Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's invasion of Just Above Midtown, O'Grady was invited by the gallery's founder-director, Linda Goode Bryant, to participate in a performance showcase called "Dialogues." O'Grady's contribution, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, 1980, juxtaposed the

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story of her relationship to her estranged sister, Devonia, with a chronicle of Nefertiti's relationship to her younger sister, Mutnedjmet. The first part of the performance consisted of side-by-side projections of slides of Nefertiti and Devonia and their families, set to a sound track that narrated the stories of the women's lives, one from a historical point of view, the other from the point of view of the little sister (O'Grady). The progression of slide pairings activated a flickering of resemblance and dissemblance, thanks to the often uncanny similitude between the projected faces or the noble poses and the contrast or correlation between the trajectories of the title characters' lives. "They die at the ages of thirty-seven and thirty-eight respectively," O'Grady later explained, "Nefertiti in 1344 BC after a banishment of six years, and Devonia in 1962 from the complications of an illegal abortion. The screens contain sarcophagi with lifted lids."

In the second part of the performance, O'Grady herself came onstage wearing a red caftan and attempted to enact the narrator's directions for the ancient-Egyptian Opening of the Mouth ceremony, the last ritual before burial, whose function was to free the deceased for a full afterlife. O'Grady's demonstrative struggle and failure to fulfill the commands of the tape-recorded voice pronounced the hope for and ultimate ineffectuality of reconciliation through art. As images of the two "sisters" reappeared on the screen, O'Grady approached the projected faces and struck their mouths with an adze as the tape proclaimed, "Hail, Osiris! I have opened your mouth for you. I have opened your two eyes for you." If, as O'Grady recounts, many members of the audience perceived the juxtaposition of her own middle-class family with ancient-Egyptian royalty as arrogant, their verdict missed the greater provocation of her conceptual linking. In an interview with Linda Montano, O'Grady states, "Putting a picture of Nefertiti beside my sister was a political action." *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* enacted legitimate pain in a complicated work of mourning, triangulating between the present and two irretrievable pasts. In the installation of photographic diptychs that developed fourteen years after the

performance, O'Grady gave form to the concept of a miscegenated family album by framing a selection of the double images she had first projected as slides. The counterintuitive pairing of interdynastic "siblings" creates a third temporal image, a bridge that is neither visual nor textual, a space of not knowing. While *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* articulated the struggle to mend loss and division, the juxtaposed images that constitute *Miscegenated Family Album* brilliantly illuminate one another, creating what O'Grady calls "a novel in space." Nefertiti, by her proximity to Devonia, is lifted into the present, and her own idealized bearing restores something like dignity to Devonia. "With the diptych, there's no being saved, no before and after, no either/or," O'Grady writes. "It's both/and, at the same time. With no resolution, you just have to stand there and deal."<sup>7</sup>



Opposite page: Lorraine O'Grady, *Sisters III*, 1980/1994, color photographs, 26 x 37". From *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994. This page: Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . .*, 1983. Performance views, Harlem, New York, September 11, 1983.

In September 1983, O'Grady initiated yet another invasion in the form of a float for Harlem's African-American Day Parade. Conceived as an artwork expressly *not* for the art world, the float featured an enormous empty golden frame; its message was its title, spelled out in large block letters on the float's base: ART IS . . . Framing the bright afternoon, building facades, spectators, street signs, birds, and balloons as it traveled the parade route, the float also carried a festive squad of men and women dressed in airy white, each carrying a golden frame of his or her own. Gamboling from the float into the street and toward the spectators, the performers danced through the crowd, holding up frames to mothers, gestures, policemen, accidental groupings, fleeting poses, children, exclamations, and clusters of friends, "framing" in close-up what the float itself only registered as the "big picture." An intricate crisscross of art and activism, *Art Is . . .* spectacularizes O'Grady's ongoing condition of being both part of and not part of, inside and outside, a society that relies on coeternal binary opposition. Simultaneously proposing to answer and question what avant-garde art has to do with lived experience, *Art Is . . .* frames life as a time-based medium. As in all of O'Grady's work, the "political" is approached as a question of visibility and sensation. As Jacques Rancière has said of art: "It is

political insofar as it frames not only works or monuments, but also a specific space-time sensorium, as this sensorium defines ways of being together or being apart, of being inside or outside, in front of or in the middle of, etc. It is political as its own practices shape forms of visibility that reframe the way in which practices, manners of being and modes of feeling and saying are interwoven."<sup>8</sup>

O'Grady's work denies the impoverishment of art as a delimited zone, maintaining instead that it is contiguous with the real world. There is no escape. Certainly, such honesty risks neglect by those who are invested in the maintenance of the illusion that the art world is "the best of all possible worlds." As a friend recently wondered about "our" current petit bourgeois iteration of the New Museum, "Imagine what would happen if Mlle Bourgeoise Noire were to invade one of those overstuffed openings. Would it be something, or would it be nothing?"

You're the artist  
Have we found the  
beginning of existence—  
or the end of it? □

NICK MAUSS IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

For notes, see page 264.