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.

The Poem Will Resemble You
“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...”

“...the agtoproof effect of these appearances was highly contingent. This realization led to the creation of deeply personal, staged reflections, more like making ‘nar-...”

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“...The poem will resemble you," Tristan Tzara warns in his step-by-step instructions for creating a Dada poem. But unlike similar experiments in mak..."
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 golden frame; its monstrous titles collide like two walls on the float’s base. Art I ... Framing the bright afternoon, building facades, spectators, stains, streets, seats, and balloons as it traveled the parade route, the float carried a festive squad of men and women dressed in white, each carrying a golden frame of his or her own. Gambling from the float into the street and toward the spectators, the performers danced through the crowd, building up layers to mothers, portraits, accelerations, groupings, fleeting poses, children, exhalations, and others of the last ring in closing itself off as a golden frame registered as the “big picture.” An intricate crisscross of art and 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 in its own precise shape forms of visibility that redefine the way in which practices, manners of being and modes of feeling and seeing are interwoven.

For notes, see page 264.

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.