

## **Art Is. . . (1983)**

### **by Lorraine O'Grady**

#### Summary

*Art Is. . .*, a joyful performance in Harlem's African-American Day Parade, September 1983, was, from the point of view of the work's connection with its audience, O'Grady's most immediately successful piece. It's impetus had been to answer the challenge of a non-artist acquaintance that "avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people." O'Grady's response was to put avant-garde art into the largest black space she could think of, the million-plus viewers of the parade, to prove her friend wrong. It was a risk, since there was no guarantee the move would actually work. As a black Boston Brahman cum Greenwich Village bohemian, with roots in West Indian carnival, for O'Grady the Harlem marching-band parade was alien territory. But the performance was undertaken in a spirit of elation which carried over on the day. Unlike the disappointment she'd felt with *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* and *The Black and White Show*, this piece was to be about art, not about the art world. . . rather than an invasion, it was more a crashing of the party.

Although she had received a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to do the piece, she decided not to broadcast it to the art world. She wanted it to be a pure gesture, she told friends, in the style of Duchamps (whose work she had been teaching at SVA for several years). But this may also have been insulation against further frustration, a way to strengthen the sense of freedom.

The 9 x 15 ft. antique-styled gold frame mounted on the gold-skirted float moved slowly up Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, framing everything it passed as art, and the 15 young actors and dancers dressed in white framed viewers with empty gold picture frames to shouts of "Frame me, make me art!" and "That's right, that's what art is, WE're the art!" O'Grady's decision was affirmed. With her mother Lena now in the later stages of Alzheimer's, she would withdraw from the art world and not make art for the next five years.