

Cutting Out the New York Times (1977) by Lorraine O'Grady

Summary

Cutting Out The New York Times is a series of 26 “cut-out” or “found” newspaper poems made by O'Grady on successive Sundays, from June 5 to November 20, 1977. They were first exhibited to the public at Daniel Reich Temp. at the Chelsea Hotel, in March 2006 at the urging of curator Nick Mauss. The slideshow here contains four of the poems in their entirety.

After graduating from college in the late 50s with a major in economics, O'Grady worked for five years as a young intelligence officer for the Departments of Labor and State, first on African and then on Latin American affairs. During that period, she was forced to read 10 national and international newspapers a day and — in the lead up to the Cuban Missile Crisis — three complete daily transcripts in Spanish of Cuban radio stations, as well as the endless overnight classified reports from agents in the field. It was a time, she's written, when language “collapsed” for her, “melted into a gelatinous pool.” She soon quit her job as an intelligence analyst and began a roundabout journey into art.

1977 found her at SVA in New York, where her course in “Futurist, Dada and Surrealist Literature” attracted such students as John Sex, né John McLaughlin, Keith Haring, Kembra Pfahler, Luis Stand, and others. *Cutting Out The New York Times* was done in a moment of combined psychological and physical trauma (she'd just had a biopsy on her right breast which proved negative) and was accidentally begun while browsing the Sunday Times to make a thank-you collage for her doctor. She'd involuntarily wondered: what if, unlike Tzara and Breton's random newspaper poems, she forced randomness back to meaning, rescued a personal sensibility from the public language that had swamped it, might she not get — rather than Plath and Sexton's confessional poetry which made the private public — a “counter-confessional” poetry that could make the public private again? But with the rescue act accomplished, she forgot about the cutouts until Nick Mauss's studio visit 30 years later.