

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (1980–83) by Lorraine O’Grady

Summary

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, O’Grady’s first public performance, remains the artist’s best known work. The persona first appeared in 1980 under the Futurist dictum that art has the power to change the world and was in part created as a critique of the racial apartheid still prevailing in the mainstream art world.

Wearing a costume made of 180 pairs of white gloves from Manhattan thrift shops and carrying a white cat-o-nine-tails made of sail rope from a seaport store and studded with white chrysanthemums, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle-Class) 1955 was an equal-opportunity critic. She gave timid black artists and thoughtless white institutions each a “piece of her mind.” Her first invasion of an art opening unannounced was of Just Above Midtown, the black avant-garde gallery. Her second was of the recently opened New Museum of Contemporary Art.

But beyond her guerrilla invasions of art spaces, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire was a state of mind. Even when not in costume and when using her own name, the political aspect of O’Grady’s art would be under her inspiration for a four-year period. MBN “events” were surreptitiously indicated when O’Grady pinned white gloves to her clothing.

Though the performances were a “failure” — the art world would not become meaningfully integrated until the Adrian Piper and David Hammons exhibits of 1988-89 — *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* had a mythic aftermath. Two images, of her beating herself with the whip and of her shouting the poem, were widely reproduced without an explanatory context, becoming empty signifiers that added to the mystification and misunderstanding surrounding the work. But then in the mid-90s, the costume was purchased by Peter and Eileen Norton. And finally, in 2007, it was positioned as an entry point to *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, the first-ever museum exhibit of the originating period of feminist art.