

Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline (1980)

by Lorraine O'Grady

Summary

Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline, O'Grady's second performance, premiered at Just Above Midtown Gallery on October 31, 1980. In an unexpected turn of events, just one month after *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*'s invasion of the avant-garde gallery protesting the timidity of its artists, Linda Goode Bryant, the gallery's visionary founder-director, had invited O'Grady to represent JAM in *Dialogues*, an exhibit she was creating to showcase nearly a dozen downtown alternative art spaces. The exhibit would feature a performance series.

O'Grady accepted JAM's invitation, but the new occasion was fundamentally different than *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, the performance announcing her to the art world, and felt a bit alien to her more radical Dadaist intentions. Rather than a self-motivated, unexpected guerrilla invasion, the new piece would be commissioned for a paying audience seated expectantly in chairs. Interestingly, her response to such situations would be similar throughout her career, an increased emphasis on the personal over the political element, though both would always be there. In this case, unlike the joyful anger motivating *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, the new work would be characterized by somber but still critical mourning in a memorial to her deceased older sister, Devonia Evangeline.

The new performance examined the difficult relationship of O'Grady and her sibling via historic comparison to similarly troubled sisters, Nefertiti and the younger Mutnedjmet. Through subject matter that was intensely personal, she also addressed political targets such as doomed attempts to identify with "African" cultures and to resurrect their rituals then current in certain strains of African-American art. At the same time, she also critiqued the undoubted racism of Egyptology as a discipline. O'Grady was hardly a trained actress or dramatist, but the period's open performance aesthetic enabled her "writing in space" to express ideas she would otherwise not attain.