

Rivers, First Draft (1982)

by Lorraine O'Grady

Summary

Rivers, First Draft was a one-time only performance created by O'Grady for "Art Across the Park," curated by Gilbert Coker and Horace Brockington. It was performed in the Loch, a northern section of Central Park, on August 18, 1982 and was a "collage-in-space," with different actions taking place simultaneously on two sides of the stream and further up the hill. The narratives that competed for attention were about uniting two different heritages, the Caribbean and New England, and three different ages and aspects of the self, a young girl, a teenager, and an adult woman. It was a three-ring circus of movement and sound that, unlike the random-ness of Futurists attempting to shout each other down, played more like a unitary dream.

The emotional effect of *Rivers, First Draft* was more positive and hopeful than that of O'Grady's previous performance, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, which was about failure to effect reconciliation with the dead, even about failure to perform, with its final image of the artist trying but being unable to straddle two tubs of sand. The pivotal moment of *Rivers, First Draft* occurs after the Woman in Red has been ejected by the Black Male Artists from their closed studio: she descends to the stream bank where she sees a white stove and claims it by painting it red. O'Grady's most personal and feminist piece to date, the performance ends in an image of acceptance and reconciliation as the Little Girl in a Pink Sash, the Teenager in Magenta, and the Woman in Red help each other exit down the Loch stream. Perhaps not so contradictorily, the figures are actively guided by the male New England figure, the Nantucket Memorial statue, while the female Caribbean figure, the Woman in White, continues to endlessly grate coconut, calmly indifferent to the scene unfolding below.

The performance was seen by a small invited audience, mostly friends from Just Above Midtown, and occasional pedestrians walking through the seldom visited Loch.