

The Black and White Show (1983)

by Lorraine O'Grady

Summary

The Black and White Show, an exhibition curated by O'Grady at the black-owned Kenkeleba Gallery on East 2nd Street, NYC, April 22 – May 22, 1983, was a conceptual art piece employing other artists' work to make its point. The exhibit returned to O'Grady's concerns in the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* performance at the New Museum of Contemporary Art a year and a half previously. Little had changed in the New York art world; it remained obdurately segregated. But now, rather than the "joyous anger" of the earlier performance, the new work attempted an appeal to reason. The title was direct. O'Grady invited 28 artists, 14 of whom were black and 14 white, to contribute work in black and white. She wanted equality to clearly emerge.

Though color had been eliminated as a differential element in the work, styles varied widely — from expressionist painting to conceptual text and installation. O'Grady's insistence on black-and-white work meant some artists were represented by untypical work. In some instances, work was modified. "Funk Lessons," a text piece by Adrian Piper, had been in black and gold, but Piper changed it to comply with the show's strictures. In other cases, artists were inspired to create new work, as in sculptor Randy Williams's installation on the "For Whites Only" and "For Colored Only" toilets of his childhood in the pre-Civil Rights south. One work specifically requested by O'Grady, *Toxic Junkie*, a text-mural by artist John Fekner on the street outside the gallery which functioned as a 24-hour drug supermarket, became the signature image of the burgeoning East Village art scene.

But despite the show's obvious quality — Leon Golub said it was better than the Whitney Biennial that year — it was not reviewed by any of the art magazines and received only a 3-line notice in the "East Village Eye," the local newspaper. In the end, its "appeal to reason" had as little effect as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*'s "joyous anger." The art world's complexion was the same.