

## **This Will Have Been, 2012**

LORRAINE O'GRADY, *Art Is...*, 1983/2009\*

Analysis of O'Grady's 1983 Afro-American Day Parade, Harlem, performance *Art Is...*, in the groundbreaking exhibit *This Will Have Been: Art, Love and Politics in the 1980s*, curated by Helen Molesworth. Essay by Jordan Troeller.

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In September 1983, Harlem's annual African American Day Parade, the self-proclaimed "largest black parade in America," offered spectators its yearly carnivalesque celebration of African American music, customs, and history. It also contained a work of performance art. The proposition was simple: a float making its way along the route lacked the usual festive paraphernalia in comparison with the others. Atop its unadorned stage and simple gold-skirts base stood a single nine-by-fifteen-foot ornately carved frame, placed upright, so that, as the platform slowly moved by, the frame momentarily captured the activity around it: the passing building facades; the smiling upturned faces of the flanking spectators; and the bright-colored balloons, confetti, and costumes of the festival. A cadre of fifteen men and women bounced alongside it, each carrying their own, much smaller gold frame with which they approached children, adults, and police officers standing nearby, holding it up so that it too produced a multitude of living portraits. In bold lettering on the base of the platform, the words "ART IS" suggested that a more democratized version of art might be found, if only briefly, in the practices of ritualized daily life and in particular within the contingent and public character of the urban street.

Whether Lorraine O'Grady's (American, born 1934) piece smuggled so-called high art into the realm of the popular, and

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\* In Helen Molesworth, ed., *This Will Have Been: Art, Love and Politics in the 1980s*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and Yale University Press, 2012, pp. 212-213.

whether the necessarily popular conditions of *Art Is...* (1983/2009) excluded it from the category of Art altogether is exactly the two provocations the work offers for consideration. In 1988, Lucy Lippard called *Art Is* “one of the most effectively Janus-faced works of the last few years.”<sup>1</sup> By displacing art onto the street, the work flirts with its own potential illegibility within a museum context. Engaging questions long held dear by the avant-gardes of the early twentieth-century, *Art Is* inverts the terms of the Duchampian ready-made. Instead of questioning the extent to which the institutional conditions of exhibition determine the designation of an object (as Art or non-Art), O’Grady turns Duchamp’s challenge on its head and asks: To what degree can the public sphere—whose viability in the 1980s in New York was increasingly under pressure—sustain artistic production?

O’Grady situated this challenge within Harlem, a traditionally African American neighborhood identified with economic and racial marginalization in the postwar period, especially in the 1970s, when more than sixty percent of the buildings were abandoned or in severe disrepair. The African American Day Parade, established in 1968, emerged as an oppositional response to the economic and political marginalization of New York’s black communities, while also serving as a unifying event. By intervening in a space that signifies a gesture of solidarity, O’Grady transfers the avant-garde’s self-reflexive critique onto a popular form of artistic production whose role becomes one of consolidation rather than discord.

*Art Is* came on the heels of O’Grady’s better-known performance in the early eighties, in which she staged guerrilla-like interventions at the exhibition openings of New York art venues, such as the Just Above Midtown gallery and the New Museum of Contemporary Art. As if in drag, O’Grady would arrive as her alter ego, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980-83), dressed in an elegant gown comprised of hundreds of white gloves. Her elaborate costume evoked not only the ostentatious trappings of bourgeois wealth but also the white gloves that are part of a maid’s uniform, both of which alluded to metaphorical associations with the color white and racial “purity.” Performing a

histrionic stereotype of the multi-inscribed black female subject, O'Grady foregrounded inequalities of class, race, and gender that otherwise went unacknowledged in such spaces, but were nonetheless constitutive of implicit claims made for art as a supposedly progressive liberal sphere. As compared to the provocation of the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* performances, *Art Is's* attitude toward its public is conciliatory rather than confrontational. It attempts a more productive and generative relationship between object and viewer than that proffered by the gallery, wherein formal self-reflexivity obscures issues of inequality and allows the spectator to imagine herself to have transcended such concerns.

Jordan Troeller

1 Lucy Lippard, "Art Is...," *Z Magazine*, July-August 1988, 102.