

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

- [About](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Contact](#)

In and Out of Frame: Lorraine O'Grady's "Art Is..."

by [Louis Bury](#) on [September 5, 2015](#)



Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is... (Cop Framed)" (1983/2009), chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 inches (all images courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Like a Choose Your Own Adventure story or a game of Mad Libs, the elliptical title of Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 performance piece, "Art Is..." creates space, playful and inviting, for structured audience participation. *You fill in the blank*, the title says, in a demotic spirit, *Art can be whatever you want it to be*. But ellipses do not simply, or even primarily, denote open space, a "to be continued" awaiting information; they also denote omission, something left out, perhaps suppressed. Both functions of the ellipsis — invitation and suppression — are at play throughout the piece, and I don't mean "at play" metaphorically. O'Grady and her audience had a damned good time making art about something — African-American subjectivity — that is often missing from art. Their joy, thirty years on,

is still infectious.

For the performance, O'Grady entered a float into that year's African-American Day Parade, which ran, and still runs, up Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard in Harlem. On the side of the float, in big letters, were the words "ART IS..."; atop it, running lengthwise, was a massive 9'x15' gold picture frame. In character as "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire," a persona she had adopted, in the years prior, as a guise enabling her to crash art world events and draw attention to issues of racial underrepresentation, O'Grady and a troupe of 15 African-American and Latino performers, dressed all in white, walked around the float carrying empty gold picture frames. The empty frames were sometimes handed to onlookers, sometimes held in front of them, Vanna White-style, to encourage the mostly black audience to consider themselves as valid subjects, even makers, of art. Photographs taken by various people who witnessed these framings were then collected by O'Grady to document the performance. Forty of those images are currently on view in an eponymous exhibit of "Art Is..." at the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#). The results are smart and exuberant, a delightful Conceptualist triumph of both head and heart.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is... (Girlfriends Times Two)" (1983/2009), chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 inches

Take, for example, "Art Is... (Girlfriends Times Two)." Standing before a dense crowd of parade-goers are two separate pairs of girls, maybe eight or ten years of age, each pair holding an empty frame, with their faces scrunched together side-by-side inside it. Three of the girls smile with full-mouthed merriment while the fourth plants a playful kiss upon the cheek of her frame-mate. The picture is plain fun to admire, heart-warming, even, as cute and goofy pictures of children often are. At the same time, its many compositional doublings — two internal frames, two groupings of two girls, two distinct

halves to the image — bespeak the image's formal complexity and conceptual rigor. The image's doublings amplify the self-reflexivity that runs throughout all of "Art Is...": not only does the title signal that this is art about art, but each image in the show contains an actual picture frame, often multiple picture frames, within the larger "frame" of the photograph. Sometimes, even, there is a frame within a frame within a frame, or a frame overlapping a frame within a frame. Framing, in the piece, thus becomes method, content, and metaphor.

Idiomatically, to be framed means to have been unwittingly set up so that others perceive you as the perpetrator of a crime you didn't commit. O'Grady means nothing nearly so insidious with her framings — quite the contrary — but this usage points up the way in which framing, of whatever kind, always works through a process of selective inclusion and exclusion. If you've been framed for a crime, it means that others have been deceived about your actions; the truth about that crime lies outside the frame someone else has imposed upon you. Within an African-American context, choosing your frame or being subjected to it constitutes much more than an idle metaphor about art-making.

Questions about inclusion and exclusion are everywhere in "Art Is..." thanks to the beautiful and uncanny emptiness of the many frames contained therein. Ordinarily, frames mark the disjunct between inside and outside, the line of difference between image and museum wall, family portrait and mantelpiece. But because the frames of "Art Is..." contain no actual pictures, what we can see inside of them is always coextensive with what we can see outside of them, and thus the borders between inside and outside come to seem arbitrary. This donut hole effect not only divides up the visual space of the photographs in unusual and compelling ways, giving them an off-balance, Winograndian whimsy, but it also means that there's often as much going on outside the photograph's internal frame as in it.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is... (Woman with Man and Cop Watching)" (1983/2009), chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 inches

"Art Is... (Woman with Man and Cop Watching)" is representative in this regard. The center of the photograph consists of a performer holding up a small frame around herself and another woman; both their smiles are subdued, neutral. Outside that frame, behind and around the two women, is a panoply of expressive, in some cases troubling, men's faces. From left to right: a black man with a quizzical eyebrow; a black man snarling in the direction of the picture frame; a black man in sunglasses, oblivious to the scene, staring off into the distance; a white cop, arms crossed, detachedly observing the women, his expression something between a snigger and a sneer. This multitude of mixed expressions, and not the face of the titular framed woman, is where most of the photo's action actually takes place.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is... (Girl Pointing)"
(1983/2009), chromogenic color print, 20 × 16 inches
(click to enlarge)

The centrality of side action is key to O'Grady's method (which turns the spectators, rather than the parade itself, into the performance's focus). This focus is also an implicit critique of the marginalization of African-Americans' experiences. Two of the more anomalous photographs in the series illustrate this principle by virtue of what is missing from them. "Art Is... (Cross Street)" is the lone photograph in which a swath of empty space, rather than a person or a building, gets framed: just a deep, V-shaped wedge of sky, cut from the buildings on either side of the street, with a row of distant human heads peeking up over the bottom of the float's frame. The absence of the richly detailed humanity captured elsewhere makes you realize just how vibrant and visually full the other images are.

Likewise "Art Is... (Cop Framed)," in which a woman performer presses up close against a white male cop, his hands knitted and forcing a smile, to frame his face. While most of the other photographs featuring people are taken from quite close up, often right up against the press of the crowd, leaving no distinct background to the shot, here the performer and the cop stand a distance from the camera, allowing for an unobstructed longways view of Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and the police barricades that line it, delimiting the crowds. Police barricades are visible in a number of the other photographs — and, like the frames, can be read as form, content, and even metaphor — but this distant view of them more starkly reminds us of their territorial function and its insidious, punitive undertones. In the close-up shots, by contrast, the barricades make for a surprisingly porous boundary marker, as spectators routinely cross over onto the parade side of them to pose for the camera or just to get a little closer to the action.

Of all the anomalies in the photographic series, of all the things that are outside the performative frame of parade conviviality, the subtle police presence is perhaps the most telling. Of course, the presence of police barricades indicates that the police aren't, in one sense, anomalies at all: for better and for worse, they are part of the very structure and design of the parade and of the larger Harlem community (then as now). But within the visual universe of "Art Is..." the police officers, all white, stand out for their discomfort as contextual minorities and, especially, by their role as strait-laced authority figures implicitly restraining the performative merrymaking.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Art is. . . (Framing Cop)" (1983/2009), chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 inches

Four cops appear across the forty images; only one shares the spectators' gaiety. In that lone image, "Art Is... (Framing Cop)," the framing dynamics are again complex and evocative. On the right, a woman performer stands in profile, facing center, with a tight-lipped and faintly mischievous smile, holding an empty frame close to her face. On the left, a male cop stands facing her, two or three feet away, hand relaxed on his hip, with an easygoing smile. Because the frame, too, is in profile, its empty interior is for once not visible to us; all we can see of the frame is its side. Though the performer, by holding the frame up to her own face, is the ostensible "canvas" here, with the cop as the viewer, her wide and searching eyes suggest, as the picture's title implies, that she is the one doing the looking, and it is the cop who is on display. Her look puts the question to the cop, tests him: *Do you really see me? Can you see that I can see you, too?* It is not an easy question — far easier to flinch away or ignore it — but the cop's naturalness, his obvious pleasure at her performance, suggests that he can indeed see her as a subject with her own agency and lifeblood and not just as an art object — or worse.

Another way to say it: whereas frames that are filled with a picture establish a hierarchy between viewer and viewed, an empty frame frames things in two simultaneous directions, making each viewer also the viewed, potentially eliminating the hierarchy. Hanging by itself, the exhibition's fortieth and final image, "Art Is... (Girl Pointing)," puts the question to the museum-goer. From off-camera, a black hand holds up an empty rectangular frame in front of a peopled Harlem sidewalk. Front and center in the frame, playfully smiling and pointing at the camera, we see a black girl of about ten or eleven. Her gesture, posed but unforced, implicates the viewer in a teasing way, as if to say, *I can see you, too, or, I'm throwing it back to you now*. It is a gesture of mutual recognition, a gesture of warmth. Behind her, towards the bottom edge of the frame, are rectangular slices of police barricades, Mondrian-esque streaks of blue. Turn up the corners of your mouth, dear Viewer — dear Viewed — and point back at the joy that refuses to be contained by the frames that bind it.

Lorraine O' Grady: Art Is... *continues at the Studio Museum in Harlem (144 West 125th Street, Harlem, Manhattan) through October 25.*

Lorraine O'Grady[Studio Museum](#)[Studio Museum in Harlem](#)