

Art Is... Interview with
Lorraine O'Grady
by Amanda Hunt,
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In April 2015, Assistant Curator Amanda Hunt sat down with conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady to discuss her 1983 performance Art Is..., the subject of this summer's exhibition of photographs at the Studio Museum. For the performance, O'Grady and a group of fifteen men and women dressed in white rode up Seventh Avenue in Harlem on a float in the African-American Day Parade decorated with the words "Art Is..." O'Grady and her collaborators jumped on and off the float at different points during the procession, and held up gold picture frames of various sizes to onlookers

of the parade. The performance, in effect, made portraits of the people and landscapes of Harlem. Art Is... raised a number of questions about representation and framing as it joyfully declared its local subjects “art.” More than three decades later, the Studio Museum presents the full series of photos documenting the performance to bring the work back to its local origins.

Amanda Hunt: Lorraine, we began talking about the photographic documentation of your performance Art Is..., and about the potential configuration of images we would present at the Studio Museum, and we came to something really interesting. You touched on the idea of the “greatest hits” — the images that people have been most drawn to in this series —

and how over the course of more than thirty years, there are some more anomalous moments that have stuck with you for other reasons.

Lorraine O'Grady: I think that what I'm really talking about is the issue of ambiguity—a question of “What is it?” I mentioned to you that in one of the images there is a large apartment building caught in the large frame on the float that didn't have any distinguishing aspects to it. People weren't sitting out on the steps of the building the way they had been in other parts of the parade. There was a blankness to its architecture, so it was impossible to get a mental or emotional grip on it. There was something about not being able to imagine the life behind the blank windows, or even beyond the strange fluorescent

lights in the long entrance leading to an inner courtyard—not being able to see anything, really. Whenever I look at that building, it still has this impenetrable mystery that fascinates me. And then there is the only vertical image in the series, the one I call Girl Pointing. It's of a young girl, but now I find it's hard to say exactly how old she was. As the frame approaches her, she points at it—she has this sort of smile on her face—and you can't tell whether she is smiling at you or with you. You don't know what she's actually feeling. I can never settle on a feeling for her.

AH: Was there a feeling that she was being confrontational?

LO: I had the feeling that it was not so much confrontational as

conversational, a level of equality that you don't always get from the subject of a photograph.

AH: How did you collect these images?

LO: I'd hired a couple of friends to help me document. They each gave me two rolls, I think, which I had developed. And whenever I saw people taking photos, I got their phone numbers. Later, when I met them, they gave me slides that they didn't want, that didn't have their friends in them. I got a lot of that. A couple of people gave me slide rolls that I processed. One woman sent me black-and-white prints, but I couldn't use them.

AH: As background and context to this moment, there was also

the issue of the impending crack epidemic in Harlem.

LO: Yes, 1983 was really one of the last moments that these photographs could have been taken, with a whole population so open to the camera. The business of framing is really problematic now, as you know. I don't think this piece could have worked now, in 2015. Just this past fall, we did a shoot at the Brooklyn Parade for a video I was doing on Carnival. Before and during the parade—just talking to people and trying to take their pictures with a still camera, or interview them on video—they wouldn't cooperate. Nobody would talk to you!

AH: So what brought you to Harlem? How did you get into this idea of participating in something as spectacular

as a parade?

LO: Parades were big entertainment for us as kids, perhaps because my family is from the West Indies. We never missed a single one! The parade idea came from wanting to expose the avant-garde to the largest number of black people I could find at one time—that was it. My first thought was to just put artworks on the float and let people LOOK at art. A woman had recently said to me that avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people. That was so infuriating to me. It's where the whole idea for the piece came from—to do something that would prove this woman wrong, a piece about art in front of a million people. Of course it didn't end up with them looking at art. They were more making the

art themselves.

I didn't live in Harlem, so I was going to an alien territory. I did not know how this piece was going to work. I mean, the only instructions I could give people on the parade route were the words on the sides of the float—"Art Is..."—right? I didn't know what would happen. Would they get it? Would they do anything? It could have been something or it could have been nothing, and I had no idea which, so it was scary for me. But then when I heard people calling the photographers over to them, it was like "Wow!" They wanted to be on camera! Everybody wanted to be on camera, you know. I guess I didn't realize how much people wanted to be on camera.

AH: Who were your performers?
How did you assemble them?

LO: I advertised in the back pages of some dailies or weeklies. I can't remember, but I think they were called Stage Door and Billboard. They had ads for actresses and dancers, that sort of thing. I got a mix of people, of dancers and actors. They were beautiful and they were up for it—really, really up for it. You can see how the people on the parade route liked being in photographs, and you can see how these performers liked framing them for the photos. It was wonderful, just wonderful.

What I learned in the process of the parade is that a parade is not a continuous motion. In a parade there are moments when you are just standing still and not getting anywhere, and then there are moments you are rushing to catch up. To me, a film was

going on behind that big frame, like
a moving proscenium on the float.
But as if it were in an old Moviola editing
machine . . . it started and stopped
. . . started and stopped

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