

## **LORRAINE O'GRADY\***

Contributor Text, Paris Triennale, 2012

Written to replace a curatorial text on the Triennale's English website, the text describes the effect of O'Grady's hybrid background on content and form in her work, elaborating this with respect to *Miscegenated Family Album*, her "novel in space" in the Triennale.

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### **LORRAINE O'GRADY**

Born in 1934, Boston, United States

Lives in New York, United States

Conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady uses performance, photo installation and video as well as written texts to explore hybridity, diaspora and black female subjectivity. Born in Boston to Jamaican immigrant parents, O'Grady was strongly marked by a mixed New England–Caribbean upbringing which left her an insider and outsider to both cultures. She has said, "Wherever I stand, I must build a bridge to some other place."

O'Grady came to art late following several successful careers — as an intelligence analyst for the Departments of Labor and State, a commercial translator with her own company, and even as a rock critic for *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice*. Her first public art work, the well-known performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980-83), which critiqued the segregated art world of the time, was done initially at the age of 45. This broad background accounts, in part, for her distanced, critical view of the art world and for her eclectic attitude as an art maker. Ideas come first, then the medium to best execute them. However, the work's apparently different surfaces are characterized by their unique amalgam of rigorous political content and formal elegance and

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beauty. Beneath the surface, there is often a unifying concern with hybrid identity.

The pejorative word “miscegenation,” coined in 1863 and then used for the post-Civil War laws making interracial marriage illegal — laws not struck down by the Supreme Court until 1967 — has been recuperated in O’Grady’s photo-installation title *Miscegenated Family Album* (1994). In this strongly feminist “novel in space,” O’Grady attempts to resolve a troubled relationship with her only sister Devonia, who died early and unexpectedly, by inserting their story into that of Nefertiti and her younger sister Mutnedjmet. Building on remarkable physical resemblances, the paired images span the coeval distance between sibling rivalry and hero worship through “chapters” on such topics as motherhood, ceremonial occasions, husbands and aging. At the same time, in O’Grady’s view of Ancient Egypt as a “bridge” country, the cultural and racial amalgamation of Africa and the Middle East which flourished only after its northern and southern halves were united in 3000 BC, both families, one ancient and royal, the other modern and descended from slaves, are seen to be products of nearly identical historic forces.