

Lorraine O'Grady*

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Rondeau, guest curator of New Works 07.2, Artpace San Antonio, 2007, analyzes O'Grady's residency project, the 6-channel video installation *Persistent*, memorializing a local multi-ethnic dance club controversially shut down.

Lorraine O'Grady's primary artistic vehicles have been performance, photography, lectures, and critical writing. However, she goes where her work takes her, and recent projects have included the ambitious use of video. A first-generation African American of African-Caribbean-Irish descent, O'Grady has focused her concerns mainly on representations of black female subjectivity, often through the lens of family, literary, and art-historical narratives. These commitments extend beyond her own subjectivity. All her work—intellectual and creative—combats the erasure and invisibility of difference across a spectrum of social concerns.

O'Grady centered her experience in San Antonio on individuals, their memory of place, and the implications of their story within a discussion of race, class, and contemporary urban life. The conceptual locus for these dialogues is a recently closed bar and dance club called the Davenport Lounge. By all accounts, the Davenport was a wildly successful experiment conducted in the heart of San Antonio's downtown historic district—a neighborhood that is struggling toward commercial renewal. Originally reflecting upscale aspirations, the Davenport was designed to attract an older, affluent crowd—a demographic readily associated with the symphony and theater on the same city block. The lounge did not thrive in this incarnation. After a group of enterprising local DJs took over the basement, however, the place quickly became a sensation, drawing a vibrant, young, multiethnic crowd from all across the city. For a short time, the Davenport fostered a sense of community and, for much of the staff

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and patrons, a family-like structure. Near the end of its run, long lines wrapped around the block. The club took on a life of its own, serving as a kind of crucible that made it larger than the sum of its parts. The narrative of its demise is a familiar one in which countercultural forces run up against, and are ultimately stifled by, dominant commercial interests. Presumably in San Antonio, the late-night evidence of diversity was perceived to threaten development interests, specifically the sale of high-end condominiums. The owners closed the Davenport, and the staff was subjected to an eviction supervised by the San Antonio police. The culture that had grown up around the club was displaced. In an effort to sustain the memory of the Davenport, many of the young people salvaged pieces of furniture from the club themselves.

O'Grady's project for Artpace gives form and voice to this story. The artist connected to debates surrounding the shuttering of the club through serendipity and coincidence. Initially, she had considered a range of other possible projects based on local history or contemporary life, including some sort of interface with the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. O'Grady had once married a man who was descended from one of the families connected to the Republic, a fact that, she felt assured, would be surprising to many. She also considered a collaboration with a renowned African-American maker of cowboy boots in San Antonio. While researching the city on the Internet, the artist came across an open letter to the owners of the Davenport written by one of the club's former DJs. Moved by the account, O'Grady sought out the author. She was startled to learn that she had already been talking to him. JJ Lopez, one of the principal forces behind the success of the Davenport, works at Artpace in visitor relations.

The connection between Lopez and O'Grady proved catalytic. Through him and others, she met many of the club's dancers. Convinced of her subject, O'Grady was at first uncertain of how best to pay tribute to it. One early thought was to recreate the space itself in her Artpace studio. Visiting the defunct site, however, she could see and feel none of the raucous power of what it had been. Seeing only her own reflection in the windows proved to be an epiphany. O'Grady realized that her work, rather than replicating experiences that were not her own, would have to be about the very absence of direct experience—for her and, now, for, the community. Her project is about looking for the Davenport and not being able to find it, and all that such a futile search implies.

Persistent is a surrogate site, the representation or distillation of the energy of a place the artist knew only through others. The artwork, encountered as a sculpture in the studio-turned-gallery space, stages a life-sized facsimile of the storefront façade of the club (substituting smoked glass for the original clear glazing). The pulsing beat of dance music emanates from within—muffled, as it would be from the street, but distinctly audible. In a lovely nod to verisimilitude, the sound periodically intensifies for a moment, as if the door to the busy club were opening and closing to allow for comings and goings. However, O’Grady’s work is experienced, appropriately, at a remove, as viewed through the tinted windows. Inside, the silhouettes of furniture slowly come into focus—Art Deco pieces and eponymous “Davenport” lounges, now talismanic, on loan from the former owners of the club. Six channels of digital video, changing every 10 minutes, are projected on three walls, rendering life-sized portraits of individual dancers, most in their early 20s, variously interpreting the sounds of hip-hop, funk, and house music. There are six hours of footage on view. Like ghosts—or figures from the frieze of an ancient Egyptian tomb—the images hover above the dance floor. The effect is mesmerizing.

Equal parts catharsis and eulogy, *Persistent* succeeds where so many works of art in this genre fail. It is a rare accomplishment for an artist to come from outside a given community to make work anchored in and about that community in a way that gives voice to others, and, at the same time, that connects to issues of real consequence. O’Grady managed to do just that, in a relatively short time, with integrity, intelligence, clarity, and vision. The artist—years ago a rock critic herself—is perhaps memorializing both the Davenport and aspects of her own past. There is no doubt that O’Grady knows the alluring pleasure and subversive, self-expressive power of dance. Her understanding is presented here in ways that are both specific to San Antonio and, powerfully, collective.

James Rondeau is Curator and Frances and Thomas Dittmer Chair of the Department of Contemporary Art at The Art Institute of Chicago

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