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Animating the Archive: Black Performance Art's Radical Presence

by [Alexis Clements](#) on October 10, 2013



A visitor makes up his own game using Benjamin Patterson's "*Pond* (1962)," at the Grey Art Gallery exhibition "Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art." (all photos by author for Hyperallergic)

Documenting performance art has always been tricky. There have been tons of panels and talks in the past year or two about the challenges and benefits of different methods of archiving. Martha Wilson, founder of [Franklin Furnace](#), is developing a [searchable database](#) of work that her organization has hosted or supported over the years. The [Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics](#) has mounted a free online [digital video library](#) that allows viewers to see a wide range of work by artists from across the Americas. And the recent [re.act.feminism](#) project brought together new performance with re-performance of old works, a web-based archive, exhibits of documentation and ephemera, and lectures.

But many of the issues surrounding documentation and re-performance boil down to one simple fact: there's no way to fully capture what it feels like to be there during the original performance. Not only is it impossible to capture things like the smell or psychic energy flowing between a performer and their audience, you can't re-create the political and social milieu in which the work was made.

For this reason, one of pieces that struck me right off the bat when I entered the exhibition [Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art](#) at New York University's Grey Art Gallery was Lorraine O'Grady's "Mille Bourgeoise Noire" (1980–83). In the gallery, the work is represented by a series of 12 black-and-white photographs from her 1981 performance "Mille Bourgeois Noire goes to the New Museum." What makes the images so striking is not just O'Grady's use of the iconography of the beauty queen, with her broad smile and long gown (in this case made entirely of white gloves purchased from thrift stores), but also the fact that you can see the reactions of people witnessing the performance. You can begin to read things like confusion, curiosity, discomfort, amusement, and distance in their facial expressions and body language.

According to [O'Grady's website](#), these performances were intended as invasions of established art institutions — both the many spaces that were exhibiting work exclusively by white artists and black art spaces like [Just Above Midtown](#). Given her use of surprise and confrontation, the photos offer tiny glimpses of the effect that she might have been having on unsuspecting partygoers, whipping herself and shouting through glossy lipstick: "WAIT wait in your alternate / alternate spaces / spitted on fish hooks of hope / be polite wait to be discovered ... THAT'S ENOUGH don't you know / sleeping beauty needs / more than a kiss to awake / now is the time for an INVASION!" (View the full set of images [here](#).)

As the scholar [Thomas DeFrantz](#) said in a [panel organized in conjunction with the exhibit](#), "Performance that is improper can shift the air."



Installation view, "Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art" at the Grey Art Gallery

One of the great things about performance, because it happens in real time, in real life, and often in front of other people, is that you have to negotiate whatever you're feeling in public. Who knows what people were feeling when they showed up that night in 1981 to

the opening at the New Museum, then still a relatively new space in the city? Whatever it was, there's no doubt that for many of them, O'Grady's unexpected presence changed it, even if only briefly.

In the ninth photograph in the series, she speaks to the crowd that had cleared to give her space and attention. Her escort stands nearby holding her cape and behind him, along a wall, are a number of onlookers. There are folded arms, hands in pockets, furrowed brows; one woman leans in to whisper to another; two others stand on tip toes to see over the escort's shoulder. It's a collage of uncertainty in the face of O'Grady's knowing act.

Another artist in the exhibition whose performance work is shown through photographs that include the reactions of the audience is Clifford Owens. Among the large color images from his [Anthology series](#), there's a subset of five in which you see him kissing and pressing his body up against both men and women. That particular performance was inspired by a performance score written for him by the artist [Kara Walker](#), a [later iteration](#) of which generated some controversy. Even if you weren't one of the ones he touched directly in the performance, Owens is forcing all those witnessing his actions to grapple with them. Does this make you uncomfortable? Why? Does it turn you on? How does his black male body shift the narrative of what's happening? Does it matter that he's pressed against a white woman here, and a white man over there? It's all well and good to intellectualize the response when looking at the photograph, but in a live performance you can't really get away from your feelings and the feelings of the other people in the room; it's all part of the experience.

Performers are invested in sculpting, enlivening, challenging, and transforming spaces. A huge part of that involves the expectations of the audience. On the panel, DeFrantz also spoke about how different contexts can have a huge impact on a performance, and any performer knows this all too well. Being in a bright, open gallery space where people can freely come and go is worlds apart from being in a theater where people are essentially trapped with you for some period of time, or even from being out of the street, where you're one of hundreds of possible distractions and people's expectations of safety and purpose are very different than they are in an arts venue. For DeFrantz, questions also arise about how values shift around "the performance of blackness within a context of majority whiteness."



Side view of Satch Hoyt's "Say It Loud!" (2004) (click to enlarge)

Walking through an exhibition surveying a selection of performance art by black artists, it was impossible not to wonder what constitutes blackness and who fits within that category. And given one of the summer's most talked about art world spectacles, Jay Z's ["Picasso Baby" performance](#) at Pace Gallery, it was also impossible not to think about the way in which blackness does or doesn't fit into popular conceptions of what performance art is, despite a long history of artists of color making work.

Jay Z's performance and [video](#) also seemed to come to mind for the panelists, all of whom mentioned it in their talks. Moderator [Tavia Nyong'o](#), a professor of Performance Studies at NYU, actually started the evening by showing a clip in which the

artist Jacolby Satterwhite [seems to briefly disrupt](#) Jay Z's own expectations for what his performance should be.

Panelist [Malik Gaines](#), a performer and scholar, started by affirming that this exhibit is part of a growing field and history of performance that's becoming more complete and nuanced as scholarship and documentation increasingly highlight the work of artists of color, among others. But he questioned what was included and what got left out of the show by looking at his own performance work with the group [My Barbarian](#), which wasn't included in the exhibit. Was it omitted because the work is more theatrical and less strictly based in his own body? Because the group he works with includes artists who aren't black? His questioning seemed less an accusation or confrontation with the show's curator, Valerie Cassel Oliver, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, than a way to explore some of the limits inherent in any identity-based show.

Fellow scholar [Daphne Brooks](#) offered what might be an alternative to asking who gets included, and even an alternative to focusing on how performance impacts the audience, by suggesting that for "the inheritors of black critique, performance gives us the chance to capture ourselves." She also drew on her recent teaching on the 50th anniversary of the [March on Washington](#) and reflections on both the [Trayvon Martin court case](#) and the effect of the [Shelby County v. Holder Supreme Court decision](#) on the Voting Rights Act. Brooks said she was interested in the way that "activists inhabit, re-inhabit, and relearn protest, civil disobedience and protest performance."



The standing-room-only crowd at the Sept. 26 panel discussion "Radical Presence: Black Study and Black Performance" at NYU. On the panel, from left to right: Tavia Nyong'o, Thomas DeFrantz, Daphne Brooks, and Malik Gaines.

Hearing such different reactions and thoughts by these scholars reinforced the fact that performance operates simultaneously on many levels. Everything happening in the space and in the larger culture is at play in the moments when the work is realized. And each viewer, along with each performer, has their own nuanced experience of the work.

Radical Presence gives a great taste of some of the work done by black artists working in performance over the past five decades. And one of the best things about it is that it's not just a static archive. So, don't let your experience be only an encounter with objects in a gallery. See the exhibition (a second part of which will open at the Studio Museum in Harlem next month), but also see one of the [many live performances or talks](#) that run into February. Don't let this exhibit be just an intellectual experience; let yourself be surprised, amused, confused, made uncomfortable, drawn in. As Audre Lorde said, "Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge."

Part I of [Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art](#) continues at Grey Art Gallery (100 Washington Square East,

Greenwich Village, Manhattan) through December 7. Part II opens at the Studio Museum in Harlem (144 West 125th Street, Central Harlem, Manhattan) on November 14.