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In the Interstice

Lorraine O'Grady's Interruptive Performances and the Circuits of (Feminist) Reproduction

Beth Capper



[M]ost of what will interest me is occurring in the between-spaces.

—Lorraine O'Grady ([1992] 2003:183)

Symbolic power, like the genetic parent, begets symbolic power, takes pleasure in proliferation. Feminist discourse, to extend the figure, keeps talking, or reproducing itself, tending to do so in its own image.

—Hortense Spillers (1984:89)

In a presentation delivered at MOCA Los Angeles in 2007 for the retrospective *WACK! Art & the Feminist Revolution*, the performance artist Lorraine O'Grady highlighted the conceptual obscurity and crisis of meaning that accompanied the photographic reproduction, circulation, and reception of her persona Mlle Bourgeoise Noire:

There was this photo of a woman screaming, reproduced so often it had become an empty signifier. Almost no one got what she was doing. Why is she so agitated? She's obviously performing... she's wearing a costume... but what is that banner about? A body performance... but not about sex... who cares? (2007a:2)

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (or Miss Black Middle Class) staged her first invasion into the New York art world in 1980 at the black-owned independent gallery Just Above Midtown (JAM) in Tribeca. Clad in a formal gown constructed from 180 pairs of white gloves and lashing herself with “the-whip-that-made-plantations-move,” O’Grady read poems that at once *indicted* the racism that undergirded art institutions and *incited* black artists to “take more risks” (2007b:1). The following year O’Grady went on to disrupt the New Museum’s *Persona* show, which featured nine white artists who assumed alter egos as part of their practice. However, in the spirit of her self-proclaimed status as an “equal-opportunity critic,” her poem at JAM was directed at fellow black avant-garde artists (2015a:1):

THAT’S ENOUGH!
 No more boot-licking...
 No more ass-kissing...
 No more buttering-up...
 No more pos...turing
 of super-ass..imilates...
 BLACK ART MUST
 TAKE MORE RISKS!!!
 (2007b:2)

O’Grady’s interruptive performances in the early 1980s sought to disturb the structures of race, class, and gender that scaffolded the institutional arrangements of, and conditions of inclusion within, the mainstream art world. These same conditions, as her 2007 remarks at *WACK!* illuminate, had also contoured the institutionalization of Anglo-American feminist art since the 1970s. In particular, O’Grady’s



Figure 2. Lorraine O’Grady, *Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Shouts Out Her Poem)*, 1980–83/2009, Silver gelatin fiber print (50h × 40w in, 127h × 101.60w cm). (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2017 Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

Figure 1. (facing page) Lorraine O’Grady, *Untitled (Crowd Watches Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Whipping Herself)*, 1980–83/2009, Silver gelatin fiber print (40h × 50w in, 101.60h × 127w cm). (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2017 Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

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ventriloquizing of an art spectator perplexed with her screaming persona (“Why is she so agitated?” “what is that banner about?” “A body performance... but not about sex... who cares?”) signals how the dominant institutionalization of feminist aesthetics is authorized only on the condition of *muting* the force of this image. The institutional reproduction of the image is coincident with an illusory silencing of the insurgent scream that this photograph sounds even while, as the fabricated spectator makes clear, such codifying procedures are nevertheless interrupted by what Fred Moten (2003:197) might call the “phonic substance” of the photograph’s ongoing reverberations and resoundings. Although O’Grady expressed “guarded hope” that exhibitions like *WACK!* might finally create a context to redress her obscurity within histories of feminist performance, her longstanding interrogation of the terms of art-institutional incorporation also seem to unsettle such projects of redress and recuperation from the start. Indeed, while O’Grady’s practice has, over the years, been included within existing narratives of both feminist and contemporary art history, the force of her performances, which range from her official art practice to her critical writing and public speeches, can be found in their opposition to conventional art-institutional narratives and the premises upon which they depend.

Take O’Grady’s suggestion that her bodily performance was not “about sex.” On first glance, this statement underscores an aporia within histories of feminist bodily performance that have condensed sexual liberation under the sign of the naked body. On another register, however, such a statement complicates the very parameters of what it means for a bodily performance to be “about sex” as such. “Aboutness,” writes Kandice Chuh, is a supremely “instrumental analytic,” one that “functions as an assessment of *relevance*” through which particular bodies, histories, and practices can be rendered extraneous to whatever knowledge formation is designated by and through the “about” (2014:127, 130). In other words, “aboutness” names the ways that disciplinary and disciplining knowledge formations assert the seeming transparency of their objects of study and, in so doing, sustain and reproduce themselves by repudiating all that which cannot be assimilated to the governing terms of the “about.”¹ For O’Grady, aboutness functions simultaneously to circumscribe the (un)readability of the artist’s gendered performing body within received (white feminist) narratives of sexuality and performance and to delimit, more broadly, the representational and discursive parameters of black art within the mainstream art institution.²

The problem of “aboutness” is foregrounded by Hortense Spillers in her essay “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” first delivered at the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality and later anthologized in Carole S. Vance’s edited collection *Pleasure and Danger* (1984). For Spillers, “interstices” are missing words and absences within discursive formations that allow us “to speak *about*” and, indeed, enable us “to speak at all” (1984:77; emphasis added). In her essay, Spillers explores how black women’s sexual experiences are rendered interstitial within (white) feminist discourses on sexuality; they at once are absented and provide the structuring

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1. Jennifer Doyle has also drawn attention to the operations and limitations of the “about” in the context of the mainstream art institution in her recent meditation on Dana Schultz’s painting *Open Casket* (2016) at the Whitney Biennial, which reproduces the photograph of Emmett Till in his casket, circulated by Till’s mother in the aftermath of his lynching. Doyle writes: “Reading a work as ‘about’ race, racism, racial difference is no easy thing—what is that word ‘about’ about? What is blackness in this work? How does the artist’s identity and location matter? In the art world, presenting work as ‘about’ race is often done in such crude terms” (2017).
 2. O’Grady later underscored, again, the limitations of white feminist aesthetic grammars of sex and sexuality for understanding her work in her essay “On Being the Presence that Signals an Absence” (1993a). The essay was authored for the catalog that accompanied the 1993 exhibition *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-plicit Art by Women* at David Zwirner Gallery in New York, which included her diptych *The Clearing* (1991). In her essay, O’Grady describes how only the left half of the diptych ended up in the exhibition, thereby excluding the right half that explored sexual domination and racial slavery from the show’s narrative of “sexually explicit” art.

ground against which white feminist imaginations of women's collectivity emerge. Put differently, Spillers illuminates that white feminist discourses of sexuality reduce "the human universe of women" (78) to the image-discourses of white women. Spillers interrogates these relations of structural absence through the example of a now well-known work of feminist art: Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979). Noting that Chicago had set "a place at the table for the black female" in the guise of Sojourner Truth, Spillers continues:

[T]he female figures around Truth are imagined through ingenious variations on the vagina, [whereas] Truth's representation is inscribed by three faces. [...] By effacing her genitals, Chicago not only abrogates the disturbing sexuality of her subject, but might well suggest that her sexual being did not exist to be denied in the first place. (1984:77)

For Spillers, Truth's inclusion and negation within an installation that aimed to reclaim the symbolic power of cis-female genital imagery ultimately serves to sustain the gap between the installation's iconicity of the white gendered body and a black female presence whose sexual being is rendered vestibular to the cultural inscription of sexuality, gender, and the body.

I argue that the mediating terrain of the interstice—of that which enables us to speak "about," of that which allows us to speak "at all"—and the problem of how to give aesthetic form to this terrain are pivotal to O'Grady's performance practice. O'Grady's condemnation of the ways in which the institutionalization of white feminist art depended upon the structural invisibility *and* simultaneous inclusion of black women as supporting edifices was but one example of a much broader logic that she disclosed as vital to the reproduction of mainstream art institutions and representational practices. Likewise, in "Interstices" Spillers's focus on the racial economies of presence and absence that structure (feminist) grammars of sexuality and community offers a conception of the interstitial as the inhabitation of a condition of illegibility from the perspective of institutional discourses and procedures. Spillers explores this sense of the interstice more fully in an interview where she describes how her writing has been animated by the need for an account of what it is like "in the interstitial spaces where you fall between everyone who has a name, a category, a sponsor, an agenda, spokespersons, people looking out for them—but you don't have anybody" (2007:308). Spillers impresses how such "descriptive apparatus[es]" (1984:77) materialize as and through the (mal)distribution of institutional supports and resources. She makes clear that a feminist discourse of sexuality tethered to the symbolics of the white female body is itself reproductive of an (un)even inheritance of property and wealth, such that "discursive and iconic fortunes and misfortunes, facilities, abuses, or plain absences [...] travel from one generation of kinswomen to another, not unlike love and luck, or money and real estate" (1984:73).

Across her work, O'Grady has emphasized how institutional support from the mainstream art world and its broader financial and cultural infrastructures has often required a negation of the complexity of black aesthetics and the social worlds in which and from which such aesthetics emerge. Much of O'Grady's oeuvre has therefore taken the form of a critical engagement with and disavowal of the strategies of inclusion and exclusion that ultimately serve to maintain and reproduce white institutional form and power. From her first incendiary entrance into the New York gallery scene as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* at JAM, O'Grady invited—indeed, demanded—that black artists refuse the tokenistic forms of representation through which they were incorporated into museum exhibitions and collections. O'Grady thus compelled black artists to refuse that which they had already been refused, as Moten might put it, through decades of exclusion from the material resources and supporting infrastructures of major art institutions. In outlining her aims as a political performance artist, O'Grady wrote: "The most I really expect my work can accomplish politically is a small contribution to the task of creating a climate of questioning and refusal" (1981:2). Disrupting the toxic climate of racism and white supremacy that suffused and sustained the art institution—one location within what Christina Sharpe has described as the "total climate" of antiblackness (2016:104)—O'Grady's

performances sought the production and social reproduction of an other climate: a mood, feeling, and surround that would support and illuminate black aesthetic practice.³

Building upon Spillers's exploration of the interstice as a gap or absence within iconographic and discursive practices, within the context of O'Grady's work the interstice is reconfigured as a generative site of possibility where a black feminist aesthetic is constantly taking shape. Each of O'Grady's works that I consider—her debut performance at JAM in 1980, her later photo suite *Miscegenated Family Album* (1993), and her 1983 collaborative performance at the Harlem Day Parade—probes the grammar that delimits and circumscribes the representation and discursive production of race, gender, and sexuality. At the same time, these performances reveal how the frame is itself a reaction-formation that aims to capture the modes of black relationality that persist in spite of the frame and, in fact, outside of the frame altogether. Throughout her work O'Grady conceptually explores and performatively enacts forms of black (feminist) relation and social reproduction that persist in the between spaces of discursive-material practices. Her interruptive performances thus sought to render perceptible the already existing and speculative modes of blackness, and, particularly, black women's relationality, forged and sustained *in the interstice*.⁴

O'Grady has often written of how her black feminist avantgarde performance practice proved unreadable, unnamable, and unhearable to the universalist discourses of both art historical canonization and white feminist aesthetics. From the purview of the institution, her performances could only be apprehended as what O'Grady herself calls the kind of “stuttering that may be heard in a minoritized art's excess of accumulated, unexpressed meaning, which, having exceeded the space allotted to it by the history of expression, can now only explode or be repressed in a display of dark-glasses cool” (1994a). But this iterative stutter that breaks the smooth procession of speech and semantic closure, like the interruptive sounding echoed in Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's photographic (re)performance, registers the terrain of a black aesthetic practice that persists in the interstice, beside and beyond the frame.

The Space Between

The Institution and the Interstice

Contemporary considerations of black social life are galvanized by a certain refusal of institutions and institutionality. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's elaboration of the undercommons, for example, forwards a conception of black sociality as the “general antagonism” to a matrix of institutional locations and practices, from the university and the NGO to the regulatory mechanisms of policy and governance. “We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination,” they write in “Politics Surrounded” (2013:20). Likewise, Ashon T. Crawley's remarkable treatment of an aesthetic practice of black possibility proceeds from a parallel articulation of blackness as an interruption to institutional formations, particularly the disciplinary logics of disciplinarity itself (2016). And, in his analysis of a wide range of black feminist intellectual discourses, James Bliss concludes that “black feminist theorizing names the critical practice that operates, that invents at, the impossible limits of

3. My use of the word “surround” here is drawn from Harney and Moten's (2013:17–20) exploration of blackness as a “surround” that defends against settler and white supremacist enclosure and dispossession.

4. My title cites, and my engagement with O'Grady's interstitial praxis bears the trace of, Kara Keeling's (2003, 2007) treatment of “the interval” in her inspiring rereading of Fanon and the cinematic. For Keeling, “the temporality of the interval” (2007:40) refers, on the one hand, to the anticipated repetition of the same that accompanies the (re)production of the (black) image and, on the other, to “the unforeseeable, the unanticipatable...whole other reality...[that] opens up,” potentially, before and during the image's circulation. While the interstice might then appear to be the spatial counterpart to the temporal interval, within the interstice (as *Miscegenated Family Album* in particular makes clear) there also inheres a complex temporal expanse that Keeling (2007:37) similarly finds “in the interval.”

institutionality” (2016:729). Across these accounts, black sociality is understood as a mode of life that creates and plans in defiance of the ongoing performativity of institutional form.

O’Grady’s interruptive performances can be understood in relation to these antagonistic, yet entwined, operations of the institution and the social interstices. Her uninvited presence at New York gallery openings sought to foreground the black avantgarde as a disordering force in relation to the institutional practices of the white art world. These performances stemmed from an awareness of the uneven and constraining terms that had long circumscribed the incorporation of black artists and black images into white American art institutions.⁵ For O’Grady, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire was more of a “state of mind” rather than a specific persona, and she considers everything that she produced between the years 1981–83 to be a Mlle Bourgeoise Noire “production.”⁶ Across these various performances and events, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire’s message was directed at multiple audiences and communities. While her interruption of the all-white *Persona* show, for example, was an indictment of the racial exclusions of group exhibitions, her initial performance at JAM targeted a burgeoning community of black artists (and JAM as a black avantgarde institutional formation).

O’Grady conceived of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire after attending the opening of the 1980 exhibition *Afro-American Abstraction* at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1) in New York. She describes being initially buoyed by the presence of so many black avantgarde artists: “I’d never seen anything like it before, whole rooms full of black people ignoring the dictates of class and their peers. [...] For the first time, I felt socially NOT ALONE” (in Baker 1998:3). However, her enthusiasm waned once she viewed the art on display, work that seemed to her to be “art with white gloves on” (in Montano 2000:403). From the evidence at hand, the artists struck O’Grady as being caught between the need to confirm white ideologies of (and desires for) black “authenticity” and their own senses of bourgeois propriety. As she entered the gallery at JAM, she proceeded to hand out white chrysanthemums to perplexed onlookers, only to reveal a white cat-o’-nine-tails embedded within her bouquet, with which she then proceeded to whip herself. By lashing herself with “the-whip-that-made-plantations-move,” O’Grady performed a kind of strategic sado-masochism that impressed the masochistic relations of affective management that such modes of incorporation demanded of the black artist. “Drop that lady-like mask! Forget that self-controlled abstract art! Stop trying to be acceptable so you’ll get an invitation to the party!” she imagined herself telling them (2007c:2).

Nevertheless, O’Grady’s interruptive performances were neither solely nor even primarily geared towards the interruption of white institutional and discursive formations and their protocols of reproduction. It is significant that Mlle Bourgeoise Noire’s first performance was at JAM, one of only a handful of art spaces in New York at the time for the exhibition of black art, rather than at one of the city’s many mainstream (white-dominated) art galleries or museums. JAM was a short-lived project that founder Linda Goode-Bryant notes was created to “expand upon and build a stronger infrastructure within the black community” for avantgarde art (in Raverty 2008:46). As O’Grady herself recalls:

JAM was an *esprit* formed in exclusion. A kind of isolation that brings strength, brings weakness, brings freedom to explore and to fail [...] JAM was a place as much as a world, a place where people ate together, discussed and argued, drank and smoked together,

5. For a detailed account of this history, see Cahan (2016).

6. Among the myriad works credited to Mlle Bourgeoise Noire are a series of letters that O’Grady sent to fellow black artists, including Adrian Piper, Howardena Pindell, and Betye Saar, with a survey that requested their input on the experience of being black in the art world (1982); a 1983 exhibition curated by O’Grady titled the Black & White Show, at the black-owned Kenkeleba Gallery, featuring 14 black and 14 white artists, each of whom were invited to contribute artworks in black and white; and a festival float and collaborative performance at the 1983 Harlem Day Parade.

collaborated on work, slept together, pushed each other to go further, and partied 'til the cows came home. (2015b:4)

The project was forced to shutter its doors in 1986 due to heightened rent prices and an overall hostile atmosphere from both dominant white art institutions and the mainstream press, which O'Grady noted often refused to publicize or review JAM's exhibitions.⁷ Within this specific context of her address, what, then, does it mean for O'Grady to proclaim that "black art must take more risks" when black artists and art spaces already occupied a position of heightened exposure to economic risk and precarity? In other words, how are we to make sense of O'Grady's decision to mount her inaugural performance of incendiary institutional critique within an already sidelined institutional formation?

To answer these questions, we have to contend with O'Grady's exploration of interruption not only as a mode of critique and disruption, but simultaneously as an alternative form of social reproduction aimed at sustaining and supporting a radical black aesthetics. Read in this way, O'Grady's invasion of JAM was geared towards the preservation of autonomous social spaces for what she terms "advanced black art" (1993b) in order to ward against the use of black artistic spaces as incubators for the white art world. The performance was primed to generate a collective dialogue among the JAM community about the limits of incorporation for black artists within the context of historically antiblack institutions. Foregrounding the subversive risks of aesthetic radicalism, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's invasion proposed an alternative vision of black artistic autonomy. To do so was not to celebrate marginality or to call for black art and black artists to remain consigned to the edges of the mainstream white art world. To embrace marginality was to leave the white art world—which already welcomed the "bracketing" of black and minoritarian aesthetic practices—intact. Rather, O'Grady advanced the possibilities of a black avantgarde for remaking the art institution as such. In this vein, O'Grady participated in projects that sought to create support systems for black art, and particularly black feminist art, such as the organization Entitled: Black Women Artists, founded by Howardena Pindell and Carolyn Martin in the late 1990s. Entitled met once a month and produced a newsletter listing "job, grant, and exhibition opportunities, as well as the accomplishments of its members" (Schor et al. 1999:23). Kimberly Springer describes how such black feminist organizations have, since the late 1960s, forged an "interstitial politics," one produced "in the cracks" in order to account for the interstitial space that black women have occupied in relation to dominant black and feminist political visions (2005:2).

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's first performance equally marked the interstitial place of black feminist aesthetic practice within JAM itself. As O'Grady recalls in an interview with Courtney Baker: "At JAM, the attitudes of the men were like those in the civil rights movement: women's place was prone or, at least, not talking too much, and if possible, typing out grant applications for them. Above all, women artists weren't supposed to be too successful, too good" (in Baker 1998:2). Pushing back against this and the broader aesthetic contexts for understanding black feminist art, O'Grady cultivated an autonomous visual language for the black female performing body that foregrounded the inadequacy of existing critical frames for exploring black women's subjectivity. As Rebecca Schneider (1997) has chronicled, much feminist body art since the 1970s had been concerned with the "explicit" or "naked" body. O'Grady, by contrast, was more interested in exploring the contradictory desires and cultural fantasies that apparel black female embodiment in order to "remov[e] layers of culture" (1993a:2). Her overdressed appearance literalized the ways in which the black female body is often cloaked under the weight of a set of discourses and grammars that she neither wields nor controls. Her intricate cloak and gown,

7. O'Grady recalls, for example, that the *New Yorker* had never listed any of JAM's exhibitions or events, or those of other black galleries (2012:10). Dennis Raverty also traces this hostile atmosphere, citing Linda Goode-Bryant's recollections that "The other uptown galleries resented the presence of JAM [...] Talk about a hostile environment" (in Raverty 2008:46).

constructed from well-worn thrift store gloves, was a mobile archive that bore the trace of multiple histories of feminized propriety that, when played across O'Grady's body, were revealed to be entangled with racial slavery and violence. In both words and in practice, O'Grady performed Spillers's contention that "In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess in time, over time [...] and there await the marvels of my own inventiveness" (1987:65). Rather than literally "stripping" down to her naked body like many other feminist performance artists, O'Grady instead re-harnessed the surplus of these layers of "attenuated meanings" that contoured the black female body and remade these meanings anew.

O'Grady has continued to probe the cost of participation in the white art world for black artists across her long career. In her article on Jean-Michel Basquiat's first retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1993, for example, she explores the weight of art stardom for artists such as Basquiat and David Hammons:

They're looking for the one typical, quintessential black artist, so then they can say, "I've done it," and not do any more [...] Hammons tries to make art in which white people can't see themselves, but may not have reckoned on their seeing themselves in the power to name the trend. He keeps trying not to play the game, but they keep letting him win [...] For the Basquiat retrospective, Hammons provided an answer to the unspoken question: was the event a priority for the hegemonic market or for black culture? One thousand people a day went to the show, including two hundred of color, grateful to see themselves. At the opening, Hammons stood outside, watching, occasionally chatting, refusing to go in. (1993b)

For white people to not be able to "see themselves" in Hammons's art does not mean that whiteness and white supremacy are not implicated in his work. Rather, as I read O'Grady, this would mean that white audiences could find no recuperative or reparative outlet within the work. Yet as O'Grady here impresses, both Hammons and Basquiat are instead recuperated through the processes of institutional narrativization where they are named as singular black artists. While on the one hand this *naming* of Hammons and Basquiat as exemplary and "representative" black artists serves to narrow the frame through which black audiences can "see *themselves*"; on the other, the process of making these artists singular isolates them from the broader terrain of black aesthetic practice. In other words, by removing these artists from what O'Grady terms "their nonhegemonic original contexts" within the black art world, their practices are siphoned through the dominant grammars of white art institutions (1993b). This "will to discursive power," in Spillers's words, is central to the reproduction and maintenance of white institutional form (1984:78). To *see* (rather than see themselves in) Hammons's work would depend upon white people relinquishing the power "to name the trend," which would, in turn, entail the abolition of the grounds upon which the institution is founded and through which it coheres and reproduces itself.

Spillers illuminates how material-discursive practices of naming bear on the making and unmaking of bodies, spaces, and worlds. Invoking the language of theatre, she refers to the "actors," "scripts," "scenes," and "re-enactments" (1984:74) that (re)produce her article's stated "drama of words" in order to explore the black female social practices absented from the ongoing production of this discursive theatre, where "dominating mythologies" are performed night after night (79).⁸ Spillers's exploration of the invisible supports that undergird her discursive-material theatre finds critical kinship in Shannon Jackson's more recent consideration of performance through an examination of the supporting acts and processes that reproduce institutional

8. These allusions to theatre draw upon Kenneth Burke's paradigm of the dramatic pentad, a rhetorical grammar for exploring the motivations undergirding the performance of particular social structures, as well as how actions and actors make and are made by the contexts of their articulation (1969).

form. For Jackson, the “thingness” of the institution is, in fact, “dependent upon a heteronomous series of repeated actions”; however, the assumed solidity and stability of the institution dissimulates its reliance on collective performances and ensembles of bodies (2011:125). Yet while Jackson’s theory of performance is crucial in apprehending the practices that bolster and support institutional structures, the social and the institutional remain undifferentiated in her account in ways that elide their differences and their (potentially) antagonistic relations. Spillers’s account of the interstice, by contrast, can be understood as an exploration of the ways in which the institutional structures and discursive grammars of white civil society gain coherence through the expulsion of a form of blackness that cannot be spoken through or by the “dominative modes” of the institution.⁹

Through their strategic reperformance of the symbolic codes and structures of value and non-value that contour the appearance of the black body, and the black female body in particular, O’Grady’s improper performances sought to enact and invent a radical black aesthetics that provoked a crisis in the discursive practices of naming and canonization through which either black or feminist aesthetic practices were rendered legible within the art institution. If O’Grady’s invasion of JAM thus issued a call to black artists to render inoperative the mechanisms by which the art institution was reproduced through its trade in the reproductive labors of black artists, her performance simultaneously asked what aesthetic imaginations must be enclosed and effaced in exalting “the black artist” as a singular figure to be incorporated by the art world, namely those aesthetic social worlds in which the artist is embedded and through which her own practice is sustained.

Black Feminist Interruptions

In her photo series *Miscegenated Family Album* (1993) O’Grady continued her performance of interruption, this time by linking institutional critique with the survival and reproduction of black women’s kinship relations. She did so by turning her attention to figurations of the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti and their incorporation within Western narratives of art history and the imperialist discourse of Egyptology. Featuring 16 diptychs, *Miscegenated Family Album* (*MFA*) places photographs of O’Grady’s recently deceased sister Devonia (and her family members) side by side with images that depict stone busts and wall reliefs of Nefertiti (and her family members). In the context of the disciplinary textbook and its institutional doppelgänger, the museum, Nefertiti and her family have long been conscripted as iconic symbols of “world culture,” a title that, Claudia Breger underlines, operates as a metonymic cipher for Western culture (2006:282). Through her juxtapositional practice, O’Grady thus liberated these renderings and images of Nefertiti from such discursive chronologies and, by extension, from the context of their primitive accumulation by and display within Euro-American art museums.¹⁰ In *MFA*’s critical reinscription of Nefertiti’s sculptural busts, the terms of Nefertiti’s iconicity are displaced and thrown into crisis: first, through her transmutation to the “non-iconic” frame

9. Spillers’s essay offers an exploration of an unincorporable mode of black feminist performance through her account of the black female vocalist who articulates a black sexual presence that embodies a kind of “being-for-self” rather than a (non)being emplotted through and by the grammars of white feminist discourse. The black female vocalist, for Spillers, embodies an “eloquence of form that she both makes use of and brings into being,” resulting in an aesthetic practice that depends upon black women’s creativity and creation in the absence of a discourse through which her sexual and collective experiences can be articulated (1984:87). At the same time, this eloquence of form is also the expression of an already existing community and sexual being that has been rendered interstitial, and that is recorded by and passed on through its performance. See Williamson (2016) for a more detailed account of the centrality of the vocalist in “Interstices,” as well as for a broader discussion of the theory of black feminist community and communication that pulses throughout Spillers’s work.

10. On the imperial museum as an archive of racial knowledge extraction and primitive accumulation, see See (2016). The bust of Nefertiti with which O’Grady’s series begins, for example, is currently being held hostage by the Neues Museum in Berlin, despite repeated requests from Egyptian civil society to return the appropriated work.

of the family album; and, second, through the circuit of relation established between her and Devonia.¹¹

In her proximity to Devonia, Nefertiti is made to speak of and (back) to the very condition of (Western) history and its representation within the art museum—a history forged through the violent interruption of genealogical kinship and the regulation of black women’s reproduction fundamental to the slave mode of (re)production. The relation of intimacy established between Nefertiti and O’Grady’s sister does not simply extricate the Egyptian queen from her imperial consignment to the crypto-ethnonationalist exigencies of “world culture” as a proxy for “Western culture,” nor does it locate a genealogical line of descent wholly exogenous to this terrain. Rather, the form of kinship enacted in the exchanges between the women in *MFA* re-figures Nefertiti’s emplotment within and against Western civilization through her relation to Devonia.

In *MFA*, each diptych is composed of two photographs graphically and temporally beside one another. Four of the diptychs are also titled “Sisters,” placing the women pictured within an intragenerational frame. The nearness or proximity between the images is, however, occasioned by a prior gap or spacing between the women; the photos “touch” one another insofar as they both touch and are touched by the interstitial space between them. This space, as O’Grady notes in a statement authored for an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1995, is the focal point of the work: “Like many cross-cultural artists, I have been drawn to the diptych or multiple image, in which much of the important information occurs *in the space between*” (1995a:2). If with *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* O’Grady rendered perceptible all that which is made to fall away from—all that which is rendered interstitial to—the art institution, in her invented family album she directs our attention to the social and aesthetic life of the interstice itself, signaled through the space between the dual images comprising each diptych. This space is a performative zone of contact, citation, and surrogation where the relations between Devonia and Nefertiti that comprise this family album are materialized.

MFA developed out of O’Grady’s earlier performance *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, which debuted at JAM in 1980. In it she recited Egyptian burial rituals against projections of the diptychs, some of which would go on to comprise *MFA*. While *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* provided a forum for O’Grady to process her fractious relationship with her sister, this performance and its reincarnation as *MFA* also articulated O’Grady’s personal family history with a reimagination of black diasporic histories and the circumstances of their reproduction across

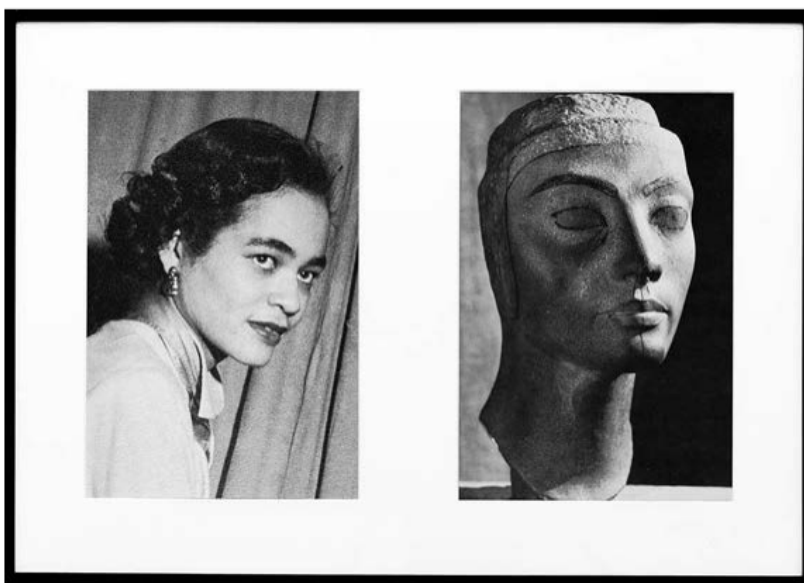


Figure 3. Lorraine O’Grady, *Miscegenated Family Album* (Progress of Queens). Left: Devonia, age 36; right: Nefertiti, age 36, 1980/1994, Cibachrome print (26h × 37w in, 66.04h × 93.98w cm). (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2017 Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

11. Nicole R. Fleetwood explores the potentiality of photographic practices that “render [...] black subjects in non-iconic modes” in contrast to the hegemonic deployment of the iconic and the spectacular for representing blackness (2011:34). These practices resist constructing one “singular narrative of black American life” (69).

time and space. O'Grady describes how the work was influenced by a trip she took to Egypt in the 1960s:

On the streets of Cairo, I'd been stunned to find myself surrounded by people who looked like me, and who thought I looked like them [...] I soon came to feel that many of Ancient Egypt's primary structures [...] were, in fact, refractions of typically African systems. (1994b:4)

Here, O'Grady amplifies the "African substratum" of Ancient Egypt erased by Eurocentric epistemic projects aimed at unthinking Egypt's relation to the African continent. However, as O'Grady contends—and as *MFA*'s iterative and chiasmatic practice brings into relief—hers is not a work motivated by an unproblematic claim to Egypt as origin in particular nor to the unity of origins in general, but instead one that, through the concurrent citation and displacement, invocation and substitution, of the original, explores the performance and sociality of lineage as the very "sign of complexity" (in Baker 1998:9).

In the place of a linear narrative inscribed by the family album that would extend progressively from Nefertiti to Devonia, *MFA* performs a cross-temporal presencing between the two women and their families, reinhabiting the form of the family album and unsettling its particular generational logic. The series of diptychs in *MFA* are constructed as a cycle that is ordered by number with the sequence beginning and ending, respectively, with diptychs of Nefertiti and her sister Mutnedjmet, on the one hand, and images that picture O'Grady and Devonia together at different ages on the other. The 14 works between these endpoints of the cycle are organized around shared poses and postures, as well as shared life events (such as childbirth and nuptials) that are disordered and disordering—not arranged according to the chronology of the normative life cycle. The position of each woman in the photo suite is similarly subject to consistent reversal, with some of the diptychs beginning on the left with the Egyptian sculptural busts and reliefs, while others place photographs of Devonia or another member of O'Grady's family on the left. Within the left-to-right lateral conventions of Latinate (though, importantly, not Egyptian hieroglyphic) notional systems, it is thus Devonia who, at times, comes first. The reversibility of the horizontal pairings hence formally exits a vertical logic of familial descent such that the topos of origin is subjected, in the words of Nahum Chandler, to an "originary displacement" (2000).

Between Nefertiti and Devonia is a zone of passage, a cut that marks the violence of their estrangement: "The similarities in the two women's physical and social attitudes didn't negate the fact that Nefertiti had been born a queen and Devonia's past included slavery," writes O'Grady (1994b:4). The passage from Nefertiti to Devonia through the space between their images visualizes "the sheer unrepresentability" (Hartman 1997:3) of organized sexual violence, coercion, and the expropriation of black women's reproduction announced by O'Grady's invocation of miscegenation. The transposition of Devonia from right to left, however, complicates any rendering of miscegenation in this family album as a fall from priority to deviation or a unidirectional movement from continent to diaspora. On the one hand, this reciprocal traversal of the interstice registers a severing of origin through the world-historical regimes of sexuality, property, and genealogy consolidated through the persistent regulation of black women's reproduction. On the other, this traversal simultaneously stages black women's resistance to such regulations in the substitutable circuits of surrogation and exchange between Devonia and Nefertiti.

To date, most critical treatments of *MFA* have nevertheless read the work solely through an account of the artist's bicultural heritage, at once conjuring and displacing the scene of miscegenation named in the work's title.¹² The art critic Nick Mauss, for example, notes that O'Grady's

12. As Jared Sexton has argued, contemporary efforts to valorize the "hybrid effects" of multiracialism over and against blackness "evinces [...] a stark resistance to discuss the sexual means and relations of (interracial) reproduction" (2008:38).

“pairing of interdynastic ‘siblings’ creates a third temporal image, a bridge that is neither visual nor textual, a space of not knowing” (2009:188). Mauss’s figuration of the interstice as a “third” space of non-knowledge can be understood as an insinuation of the unknown, out of frame, “event” of miscegenation. But far from a realm of non-knowledge, the work’s title, as well as the movement across the interstice that the work performs, unleashes an insurgent knowledge that Spillers locates as the terrain of a black female “social subject” and her “potential to ‘name’” (1987:80). If the racial and gendered “order of the New World” (Spillers 1987:67) is founded and reproduced through the violation of the “prohibition on miscegenation” (Cherniavsky 2006:26) and the simultaneous disavowal of these violations, *MFA* names the “black female, not as an object of history, but as a questioning subject” (O’Grady 1994b:6), one whose knowledge names and questions the entangled exigencies of race, sex, and reproduction.¹³ By embedding Nefertiti and Devonia within one another’s histories, *MFA* cites and stalls the logic of miscegenation understood as the temporal succession of racial fixity to a horizon of multiraciality and racial mixture (see Sexton 2008:81). O’Grady takes instead as her starting point the discontinuous continuities assembled and preserved in a global heterogeneity of blackness that comprises her family album. In the alternative organization of kinship and knowledge that *MFA* foregrounds and reinvents, interruption and relation, displacement and reproduction are therefore figured as irrevocably intertwined.

As I have already suggested, the circuitous relations established between these images and their convergent yet divergent histories is materialized through the form and function of the interstitial space between them. This space can be understood as a site of performance that reverberates between and beyond the frame of each image. In another exhibition statement from 1995, O’Grady elaborates:

The conceptual action of *MFA* takes place interstitially: in the wall spaces separating the diptychs, as well as in the white spaces within each image. This open-ended strategy aims at encouraging viewers to construct multiple connections, by negotiating their way between juxtaposed images that themselves negotiate past and present, art and life, history and politics, stone and flesh. By challenging viewers to read Nefertiti anew through Devonia, and vice versa, the installation hopes to emphasize equality, reciprocity, and shared experience. *MFA*’s interactive use of the past sets in motion a circularity of influence between varying points in time. Though the installation’s “hybridity” offers a model for thinking and living flexibly in a multicultural future, it shows not so paradoxically that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The “hybrid” method argues for instability, for fluidity, and not closure; it envisions an *ever-changing* same. (1995b:1)

For O’Grady, the interstice—the space between diptychs, as well as the spaces within and between each paired composite—is where the “conceptual action” (or performance) of the work is (re)enacted. This performance is achieved through a mimesis of posture and pose set in motion by the meeting of images within each diptych. While *MFA* provides a critical commentary on the work of the frame—or the frame *work*—of both the family album and the photographic reproduction of an artwork, the work’s circuitous photograph-to-photograph relation provokes the question of the temporal orientation of who it is that is miming whom, producing a shuttering movement where each image ineluctably refers back (and forth) to the other. If *MFA* probes the impossibility of a return to unbroken origins through a self-reflexive meditation on the relations of contact and distance that scaffold the interstice, it nevertheless impresses the absolute necessity of *return* in the antiphonic circuit of poses forwarded and

13. In her reading of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Eva Cherniavsky (2006:26) glosses that “the consensual Euro-American state forms itself in the act of countering the potential insurgency of the black female subject” and her knowledge of the “systematic violation under slavery of [the racial state’s] founding prohibition on miscegenation”—a knowledge that is also “*handed*,” in Spillers’s (1987:80) terms, to her progeny.

received, sent back and reproduced, between Devonia and Nefertiti. The “return” here is not a return to the original, but rather return as a durative practice of change and exchange that preserves the performance of black women’s relation in and through the interruptive crossings of the interstitial. *MFA* returns to Nefertiti’s status as the mother of “Western culture” authorized by the discourse of “world culture” only to reposition Devonia in her place. In other words, in the relation of mutual inheritance and spatiotemporal reversibility established between the women, *MFA* inscribes the mark of O’Grady’s sister within the Queen’s busts and, therefore, a ruptural “exteriority” internal to and in excess of the origin story of “Western culture.” In this circuit, *MFA* suggests that it is in fact Devonia who stands as the displaced and antinomian (ante-)origin of the West.

At first glance, O’Grady’s activation of the diptych, conventionally associated with the construction of binary oppositions, might appear to reinscribe a series of distinct yet closely allied distinctions: dead and live, stone and flesh, absence and presence, past and present. But as O’Grady notes, perhaps counterintuitively, the diptych yields neither to the demand for the adjudication of hierarchy nor to a future tense of synthesis or commensurability: “With the diptych, there’s no being saved, no before and after, no either/or; it’s both/and, at the same time. With no resolution, you just have to stand there and deal” (1998:2). This aesthetic unworking and reworking of the diptych and its presumed affordances is particularly illuminated in *MFA*’s rendering of stone and flesh, which merge in the work so as to become indis-

tinct. Nefertiti’s form is not liberated from the fixity of stone into the vitality of the flesh nor is Devonia’s flesh cast in stone in order to ensure that she remain, preserved across the permanence of time. Instead, Nefertiti and Devonia are both stone and flesh, simultaneously. For example, in one particularly striking diptych, *Sisters III*, which enacts a doubling of Nefertiti’s daughter Maketaten with Devonia’s daughter Kimberly, the stilled pose of Kimberly’s head and the clean, sharp, outline of her face and neck are evocative of a sculptural object in ways that do not erase the affective charge of her flesh. At the same time, the soft texture of Kimberly’s skin incites the sense of a similar textural surface in the sculptural head of Maketaten—a delicacy

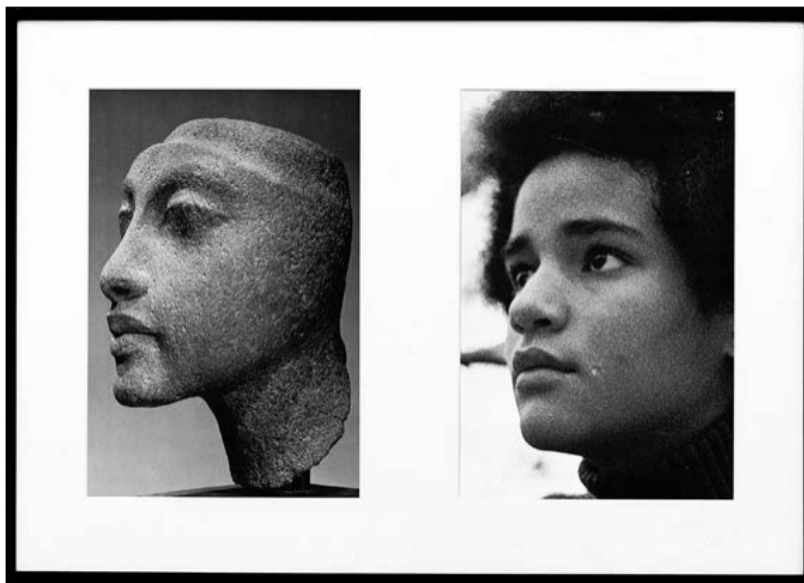


Figure 4. Lorraine O’Grady, *Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters III)*. Left: Nefertiti’s daughter, Maketaten; right: Devonia’s daughter, Kimberly, 1980/1994, Cibachrome print (26h × 37w in, 66.04h × 93.98w cm). (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2017 Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

and fragility of surface that only skin can conjure—even as we simultaneously perceive the workings of erosion that impress stone’s temporal endurance.

This circuit of miming can also be understood as a cross-medial mimicry, in Schneider’s terms, such that Nefertiti’s bust mimes the action of “striking a pose” for a photograph and Devonia’s image mimes the pose of the sculptural bust (2011:161). Schneider has theorized the pose as “a kind of hail cast into its future moment of invited recognition,” one that enacts

a cross-temporal scene enacted in the duration of an ongoing liveness. Schneider's examination of the temporal disjuncture activated by the pose underscores the limitations of hard and fast distinctions between "live" performance and the photographic "document," sculpture, or monument that stills or deadens the pose, distinctions that dissimulate the ways in which the pose is recorded by and reproduced through performance, as well as the ways that photographs and sculptural objects themselves perform (141). In *MFA*, the conditions of both Nefertiti and Devonia's reproductions depend upon the interruptions of temporality, historicity, and origin produced in their circuit of relations. In this circuit, Devonia's poses are not proprioceptive responses to Nefertiti's, and Nefertiti's poses are not anticipations of Devonia's. Both images *in-cite* (rather than only cite) one another. It is not coincidental that this bidirectional relay is rendered through the chiasmatic crossing of stone and flesh. Indeed, O'Grady's evocation of the nonsingular and relational form of black diasporic social and aesthetic practice, demonstrated in her citation (with a difference) of Amiri Baraka's (1991) "changing same," has also been elaborated by the artist through recourse to the deep time of the geological. "To me, the continuity reflected in the piece's dual images was a kind of geological substratum underlying what was in fact a drastic structural diversity caused by two very different histories," explains O'Grady (1994b:4).

By drawing attention to the interstice as that which both binds and separates Nefertiti and Devonia across time and space, O'Grady registers a black feminist aesthetic practice that belies representation. In order to read the relations inscribed within her family album, O'Grady invites us to turn to the spaces outside of and between the frames themselves. In other words, this meeting of images *in the interstice* activates and is activated by a black aesthetics that is always in formation and reproduced through relations that take shape outside the frame. It is through and in the sociality of the interstice, of Nefertiti and Devonia's exchanges across time and space as well as their exchangeability for one another in the work's exploration of shared positionality and experience, that black women's relationality comes into view as that which exceeds representation, as that which, as Terrion Williamson argues, poses "the limitations of representational discourse and practice" as such (2016:17).

Art Is... in the Interstice

O'Grady's final Mille Bourgeoise Noire performance, titled *Art Is...*, took the form of a parade float that was included in the 1983 Harlem Day Parade. The initial motivation for the performance, which constituted its own kind of interruption to the parade's routinized schedule of entertainment, stemmed from a conversation O'Grady had with a black social worker with whom she collaborated on a 1982 special issue of the feminist art journal *Heresies* ("Racism Is the Issue"), who told O'Grady that "avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people!" (2015c:1). To prove her wrong, O'Grady sought out a forum where she could engage with a broader black community about the entanglements of avantgarde aesthetics with their lives and social worlds. By constructing a float with a mounted 9-x-15-foot faux-gold picture frame that resembled the gilded frames for Old Master paintings, O'Grady "framed" Harlem's streets, people, and buildings. Meanwhile, as her float progressed along Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, O'Grady and 14 other black performers and dancers disembarked and approached parade attendees with a smaller set of gold-rimmed hollow frames to engage the crowd in a participatory encounter that blurred the distinction between framer and framed. Each time these frames moved across and through the crowd, the forms of relationality and perspective that they engendered were constantly and continuously interrupted, and the crowd overtook the performance with a fervor unanticipated by the artist. Parade spectators started calling out to O'Grady and the other float performers from the sidelines, beckoning them to come over. As O'Grady recalls the day of the parade: "Everywhere there were shouts of: 'That's right. That's what art is. WE're the art!' And, 'Frame ME, make ME art!' It was amazing" (2007d:4).



Figure 5. Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is...* (Star East Monuments), 1983/2009, C-print (16h × 20w in, 40.64h × 50.80w cm). (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2017 Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

On one level, *Art Is...* destabilized the frame that would cast the social world—and in this instance the terrain of black social life—as extraneous to the aesthetic, to borrow a turn of phrase from Shannon Jackson, with the inside and the outside of the frame placed side by side to reveal the social as the support that falls outside and is rendered interstitial to the frame's representational coherence (2011:16). As art critic Louis Bury underscores, most of the action of the performance is revealed to be taking place outside of the frame, or more precisely *beside* the frame, illuminating, again, the interstice as *the* space of performance and action (2015). Yet, at the same time, the address of the work was never intended as a straightforward critique of the white art institution and the heteronomous social worlds effaced by its representational practices. Although documentation of O'Grady's performance at the Harlem Day Parade has, in the past few years, made its way into a series of national and international exhibitions, at the moment of the performance's planning and execution in 1983 O'Grady refused to publicize the event to the art establishment, claiming that the work was not addressed to the art world.¹⁴ By withholding the recreational practices of minoritarian life at the Harlem Parade from the gaze of the mainstream art institution and of its predominantly white audiences, O'Grady interrogated the desire for white access to the autonomous aesthetic spaces of black sociality that *Art Is...* both explores and envisions, as well as the circuit of intracommunal dialogue within and between black communities engaged by the performance. In other words, she refused to

14. For example, *Art Is...* was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2015 and was included within the survey exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* at London's Tate Modern in 2017.

transform the Harlem Day Parade into an art spectacle for the consumption of the white art world.

Art Is... instead operated on a dialogical register, where the mobility of the frame generated encounters between parade attendees that illuminated the potential of interruption for an alternative organization of (black) relation, one that galvanized an endlessly regenerative conversation. One striking image from the event, titled *Girl Pointing*, features a young woman standing towards the center of one of the smaller frames that O'Grady distributed throughout the parade, with one hand pointing straight ahead to the center of the frame. In the most straightforward reading of this image, this woman challenges the perspective installed by the documentary gaze of the camera, a framing mechanism that would seem to reestablish a hierarchical subject-object relation that the gold-edged frame props were intended to interrupt. Such a reading, however, eschews the participatory nature not only of the performance, but of its documentation, which was photographed both by O'Grady's performance troupe and by the crowd itself

(with the final documentation being a collaboration among all of these perspectives) such that the entire choreography of cameras, of frames, and of spectators dissolved into a collective aesthetic vision. Crucially, the young woman's smirking expression and strident gesture is therefore perhaps less "confrontational" than, in O'Grady's words, "conversational," achieving "a level of equality that you don't always get from the subject of a photograph" (in Hunt 2015:5). As the woman reaches across and through the frame, her hand revealing that the frame itself is, in fact, hollow, the assumed perspective of oppositional sides (between framer and framed, or subject and object) collapses into a horizontal relation, an equality of seeing and being seen that no longer requires the frame at all, or that perhaps never did in the first place.

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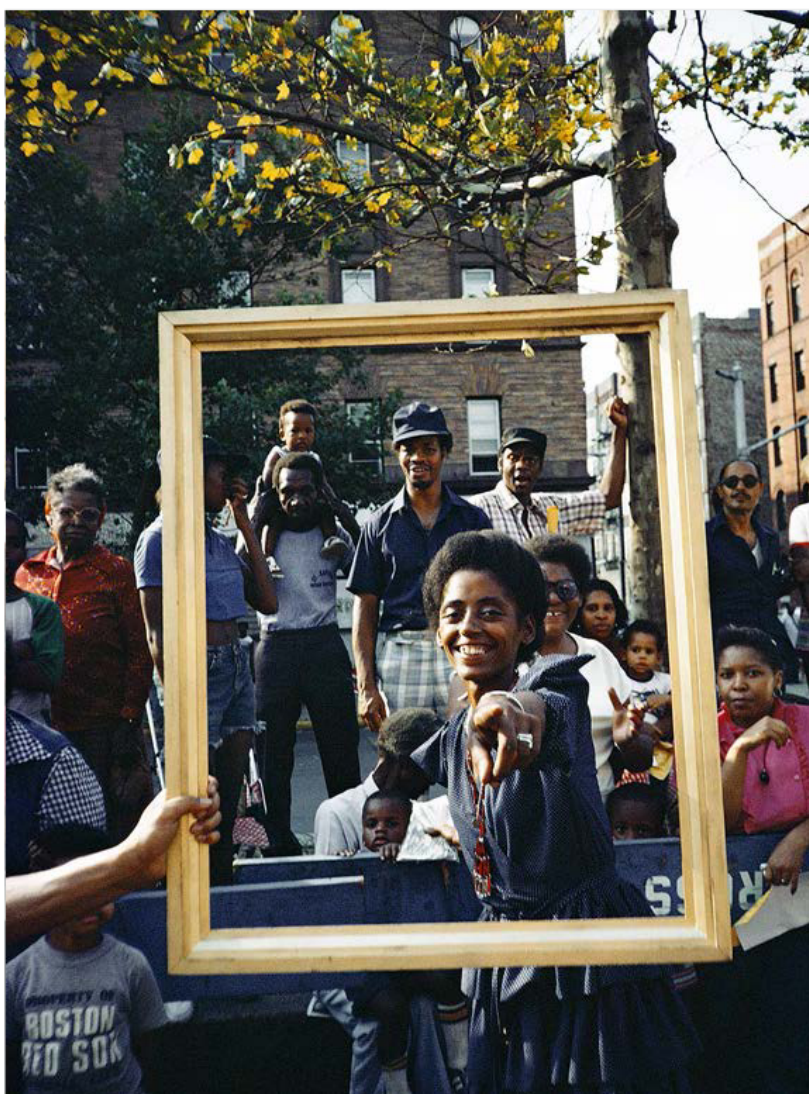


Figure 6. Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is...* (*Girl Pointing*), 1983/2009, C-print in 40 parts (16h x 20w in, 40.64h x 50.80w cm). (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2017 Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

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