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Lorraine O'Grady, in All of Her Literary Brilliance

The first book to offer a comprehensive overview of O'Grady's writings, "Writing in Space 1973 — 2019" affirms both the range and reach of the artist's impact upon an art world that has only belatedly recognized her.



by Alexandra M. Thomas

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Lorraine O'Grady, "Told to swing an incense censer, she stirs sand instead" (1981/2019), image #1 of six photo-documents from *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* (all images courtesy Duke University Press)

Lorraine O'Grady is a pivotal figure of the Black American avant-garde — a performance

artist, conceptual artist, Black feminist provocateur, and cultural critic. Although the art world has mainly focused on the visual elements of O’Grady’s work, she has long been a prolific writer. *Lorraine O’Grady: Writing in Space 1973 — 2019*, edited by art critic and feminist writer Aruna D’Souza, underscores the preeminence of the written word as a medium for O’Grady. This is the first book to offer a comprehensive overview of O’Grady’s writing. Monumental texts, canonical essays, interviews, performance transcripts, and previously unpublished material form the edited volume, affirming both the range and reach of the artist’s significant impact upon an art world that has only belatedly recognized her. From O’Grady’s time as a rock critic for *Rolling Stone* and *the Village Voice* in the 1970s, to her ongoing performance art and conceptual photography practices, the book highlights myriad chapters of O’Grady’s career while foregrounding how literary production dictates the stakes of her visual works.



Lorraine O’Grady, *The Faces of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1981/2019)

In a 1983 artist statement, she asserts: “I’d say that I am *writing in space*.” She expresses that writing in the traditional sense is too linear; instead, writing in space allows for a simultaneity that can only be gained through considering language along with one’s spatial surroundings. Her enigmatic yet compelling statement positions performance and conceptual art as liaisons between textual and visual worlds. She elaborates on other guiding principles: hybridity, an attention to both/and-isms and the diptych — these interconnected notions animate many of her searing assessments of race, gender, subjectivity, and modernism.

The diptych is a dominant form in O’Grady’s art and thought. She investigates duality without falling into either/or binaries that she identifies as white supremacist logic. The both/and-ism worldview is one through which she can channel the racialized and gendered

complexities of the world. O’Grady encourages us to sit with difference, which illuminates a path for grappling with hybridity and diaspora, subjects deeply familiar to the artist as the daughter of Jamaican immigrants, raised in a small Caribbean community in Boston.

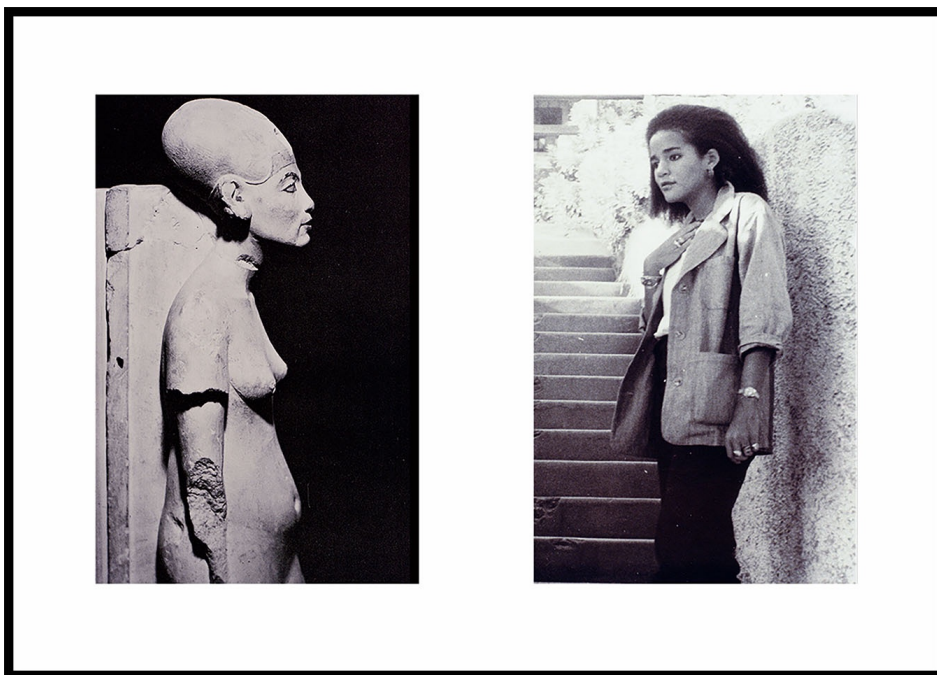


From left: Lorraine O’Grady, “Diptych 3 blue (Charles and Michael)” (2010) from *The First and the Last of the Modernists*; Lorraine O’Grady, “Diptych 3 blue (Charles and Michael)” (2010), from *The First and the Last of the Modernists*

Perhaps the most exciting aspects of the book are those which require a re-reading of O’Grady’s most famous works with the aforementioned concepts in mind. Her diptych, “The First and Last of the Modernists,” featured in the 2010 Whitney Biennale, juxtaposes Michael Jackson with Charles Baudelaire. O’Grady explains the radical nature of such seemingly innocuous comparisons, casting a rewriting of the history of Modernism with an awareness of its Black influences, from Baudelaire’s Black common-law wife and muse, Jeanne Duval, to Jackson’s revolutionary sonic contributions. Another diptych, “Miscegenated Family Album” (1994), is staged between the ancient Egyptian queen Nefertiti and O’Grady’s late sister Devonia. As hindsight makes clear, O’Grady’s intervention into Western, eurocentrist narratives of Ancient Egypt came almost a decade before Martin Bernal’s influential book ***Black Athena***, as well as before the theorizing of appropriation art in Rosalind Krauss’s classic text, ***The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*** in 1985. Similarly, O’Grady’s 1994 essay, “Olympia’s Maid” is now canonical, and its Black feminist

and Modernist interventions remain influential decades later, case in point the exhibition [“Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today,”](#) organized by Denise Murrell.

O’Grady has always been ahead of her time. She writes with what D’Souza observes as a “belief in the futurity of her audience and the imminence of her work.” As if theorizing from another planet and thus truly “in space,” O’Grady’s ideas have been considered uncanny before becoming widely accepted years later. Writing is her form of processing speculative ideas and critical observations, as well as documenting and thus historicizing her ideas.



Lorraine O’Grady, “Cross-Generational” (1980/1994), diptych #15 of *Miscegenated Family Album*

The book delineates how O’Grady’s focus on writing is translated into visual form in her early works. In “Cutting Out the New York Times” (1977), O’Grady collages snippets of the Sunday paper to create 26 collaged poems. Underscoring the written word advances an understanding of the collages as a literary practice that extends beyond concrete poetry. Similarly, *Writing in Space* calls attention to the literary essence of the landmark performance, “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire” (1980) through a close reading of the poem O’Grady chanted, which ended with: “BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS.” Whether it is the solitude practice of cutting the newspaper and assembling collaged poems or it is a guerilla-like intervention that includes a bold critique of the Black art establishment, O’Grady

experiments with the possibilities of language.

Writing in Space is situated within a trifecta, accompanied by: the [artist's archival website](#) (launched in 2007) and her [upcoming \(first\) retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum](#) (opening in 2021). It is part of a wider shift toward acknowledging O'Grady as a visionary, which in turn magnifies the art world's racist and sexist exclusion that has made such recognition belated. The book establishes O'Grady's literary brilliance that shines through her multifaceted creative practice, as she consistently pushes the art world toward deeper thought and political consciousness.

[Lorraine O'Grady Writing in Space 1973–2019](#) (Duke University Press), *edited and with an introduction by Aruna D'Souza*, is now available on [Bookshop](#).

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