

Dr. Stephanie Sparling Williams reflects on the meaning of Lorraine O'Grady's artwork

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It is a hard truth that in the last decade funding for the arts has been cut and the art world seems to have changed into the art market. And, according to iconic artist Lorraine O'Grady, "that women artists who are not attended to lose opportunities to grow. People think the critic has no function, but I beg to differ." In the newly released book by Dr. Stephanie Sparling Williams reflecting O'Grady's conceptual art of visual images and poetry, O'Grady's work is highlighted and informed on with the artist's insight.

The interview with the Ithaca Times covers the vast material of a 40-year oeuvre by a feminist conceptual artist as Williams charts the long career of O' Grady in her recent book, "Speaking Out Of Turn: Lorraine O' Grady and the Art of Language."



Dr. Stephanie Sparling Williams

Ithaca Times: You were drawn to the artwork, but what do you feel drives Lorraine O'Grady as a visual and poetic artist? And how does she reflect the soul of a people that has been overlooked?

Dr. Stephanie Sparling Williams: My book, "Speaking Out of Turn," sought to produce a critical dialogue around O'Grady's work and practice in ways that examined and celebrated the artist's innovative use of language. In the introduction and conclusion, I discuss the ways O'Grady's art "spoke" to me on the levels of ideology and subjectivity. I found it interesting to approach a monographic study of an artist through the methods of auto-ethnography, critical theory, and phenomenology. We will hear in the reviews whether that was successful. In the meantime, I will

just add that my directive emerged from what I understand as the “soul,” to use your term, of O’Grady’s work, which is its proclivity towards risk-taking. A demand, really, for all of us to take great risks in our work. Failing is productive and interesting.

IT: O’ Grady has gone back into some of her past artwork and recuperated it, in other words rewritten the poetry. How does she organize her work and the time it takes in order to do this? And why does she do this?

SSW: Returning to past work is a central artistic strategy seen throughout O’Grady’s practice and the reasons vary across each of her projects. Ranging from a dissatisfaction with the work that was originally produced, as was the case with *Cutting Out the New York Times* (1977), or a desire to produce something for “the gallery wall” in *Miscegenated Family Album* (1980/94), I discuss several of the driving impulses in O’Grady’s process of recuperation throughout the book.

IT: Can you speak, Dr. Williams, of the beginning and ending of this artwork, and the changes O’ Grady has undertaken with her poetic work. And what makes her art stand out?

SSW: O’Grady’s work stands out for many reasons, namely, her use of language. Examining O’Grady’s use of language, both written and spoken, I chart the artist’s strategic use of direct address—the dialectic posture her art takes in relationship to its viewers—to trouble the field of vision and claim a voice in the late 1970s through the 1990s, when her voice was seen as “out of turn” in the art world. I love that through O’Grady’s avant-garde practice an idiom historically used to silence women is gaining new theoretical significance.

IT: Many were glad to know of Lorraine O’ Grady’s artwork which had a recent major retrospective exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. But what are your thoughts as to why more museums and art galleries seem to ignore women artists or limit viewing of the vast amount of artwork that has been created by so many diverse women artists?

SSW: This is an important question; one that Black feminist, womanist, and feminist artists and scholars have illuminated for decades. The short of it: intersecting systems of oppression that undergird societal exclusion at every level, including fine art institutions.

Indeed, the artistic impulse fueling institutional critique, along with dozens of artists' collectives and organizations that emerged in the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and beyond, came together to expose the compounded effects of capitalism, racism, and sexism in the art world.

While Lorraine O'Grady benefitted from class privilege, an elite education, and cultural mobility, racism and sexism within the art world affected the ability for her work to be taken seriously by the powers that drive artistic success (critics, curators, gallerists, museums), and thus, be seen and appreciated by wider audiences at the time much of her work was being produced. As you note, though, this was endemic for all women and artists of color. Importantly, O'Grady continued to make work, continued to exhibit and hone her conceptual practice, despite what the art world was doing. Her resume is quite impressive in that way. She never stopped; still to this day, she is making new work.

IT: Lorraine O'Grady seems to be working hard to reflect and change the culture in a different direction. But change brings new thoughts and ways of thinking. What insights do you feel lie ahead with O' Grady's art?

SSW: O'Grady will always be a risk-taker; the conceptual heft of her work only outdone by her prolific writing. I believe O'Grady offers a rigorous model for artists, curators, and scholars alike of how to sit with oneself-- with one's work-- over time. So much of our creative cultures are yielding to the frenzied pace of an increasingly digital world, but O'Grady's work dares to look back, to return, to slow down and repeat. In 2021, this is a risky move indeed. We should take notes.