CONVERSATIONS

Wednesday, April 24, 2024

THE KITCHEN ARCHIVES

Lorraine O'Grady and Simone Leigh JUNE 7, 2022 **Credits:** By Alexis Jacquet, Fall 2021/Winter 2022 "From the Archives" is a series that spotlights The Kitchen's **Curatorial Intern and Angelique Rosales** Salgado, Curatorial Assistant history. As a complement to our Archive Website, these posts offer focused reflections on the artists, exhibitions, events, and Film/Video Performance institutional practices that have defined and shaped The Kitchen since its founding in 1971. Lorraine O'Grady is a concept-based artist who works across text, photo-installation, video and performance, and

NEWS

Noire handed out chrysanthemums from a heavy bouquet "BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS! Black art must take more risks!" In 1980, the artist Lorraine O'Grady to a room full of surprised art patrons, artists and collaborators. Once the flowers were gone, she was left interrupted the opening-night benefit of Just Above Midtown—a gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant in with what she called the "whip-that-made-plantations-1974 that championed primarily Black artists and artists of move," and proceeded to take off her cape and whip color from New York City and Los Angeles. O'Grady herself for five minutes while shouting poems protesting made a scene as her performance persona Mlle the segregated art world at that time. [1] This radical debut as O'Grady's entrance into the art world has come Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle Class), a French-Guianese pageant winner dressed in a handmade ball to be known as one of her most celebrated and widely gown made of 180 pairs of white gloves. Announcing her cited performances. entrance with the exclamation above, Mlle Bourgeoise

whose contributions to art history and intersectional feminism have been paramount. We are proud to honor

O'Grady as one of two honorees at the 2022 Kitchen Gala Benefit. On this occasion, we celebrate her sweeping

legacy in community with The Kitchen's history and in conversation with Simone Leigh, and artist working in

sculpture, installation, video, and social practice, whose first institutional solo show was at The Kitchen in 2012.

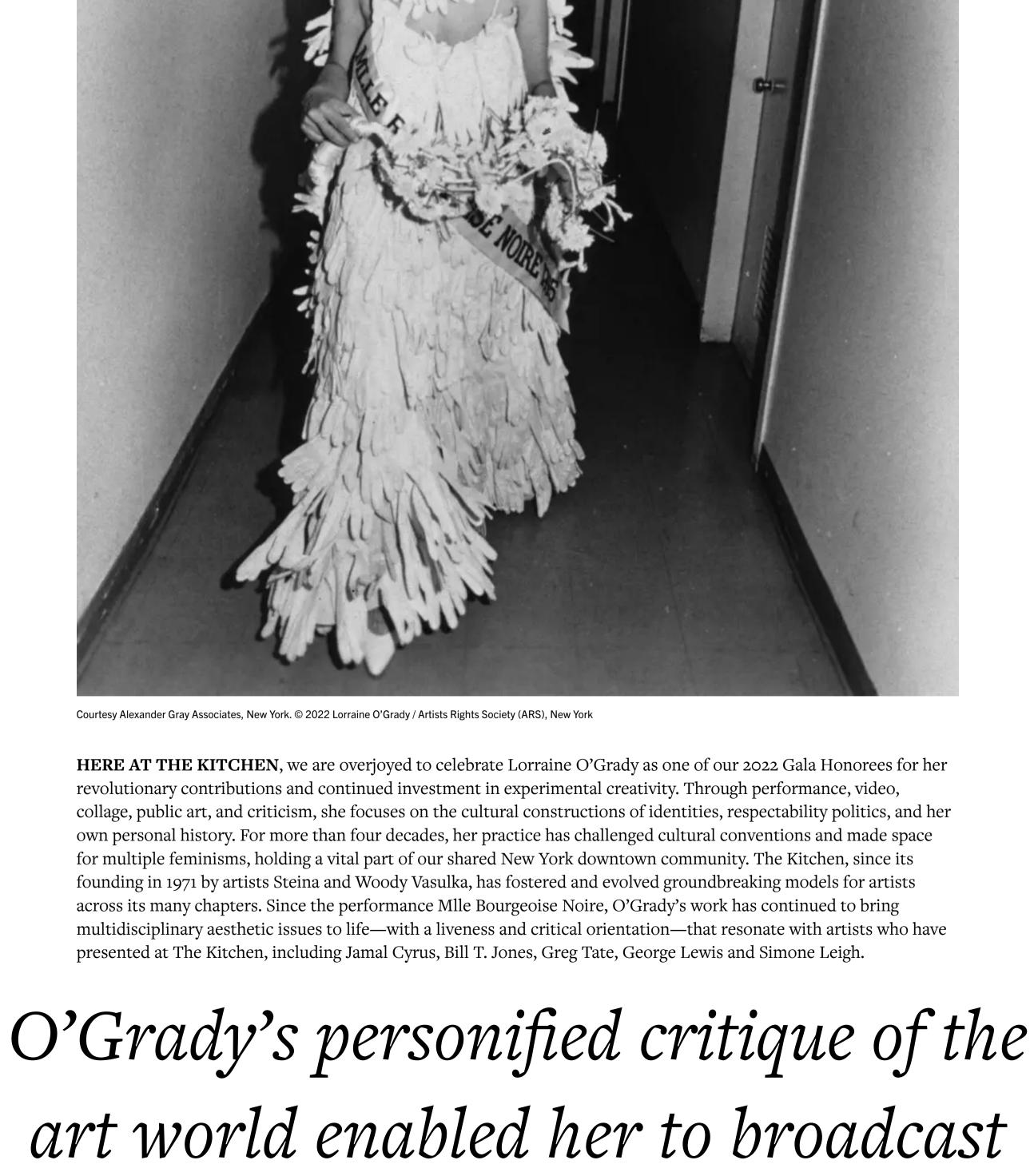
her Blackness, womanhood, and

economic status as intersectional

complexities which she emphasized

in exhibition spaces.

garde.



advocate of hybridity and presents alternatives to the hierarchical: creating images, ideas, and situations in her artwork, writing, and teaching that "allow binaries to be seen as reciprocal, or Both/And." [2] O'Grady created the persona Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (MBN) in response to the exclusion of Black artists from a mainstream art world. MBN serves as a political character that represents elements of O'Grady's identity—at an intersection of poetry and autobiography—as a middle-class woman of European and Jamaican descent. Material and sartorial interventions of the work—for example, the white gloves she wore— are symbolic of the internalized oppression of Black women to conform to the set of gendered beliefs established by respectability politics. The whip as an additional prop exemplifies the external oppression from

AS A CONCEPTUAL ARTIST AND CULTURAL CRITIC,

commitment to process rather than resolution. She is an

O'Grady demonstrates an intention and poetic

art spaces, both in institutions' often singular

interpretation of Black artists, and in their direct

exclusion of these artists' work. The segregation of the art

world in the 1980s prevented Black artists from gaining

mainstream attention. O'Grady recalls that select Black

attention were tentative in voicing any frustrations, and

resistance. [3] MBN was always an "equal-opportunity

critic, or castigator," O'Grady mentions. [4] She had no

interest in presenting "safe, polished work"—her focus

lay perhaps less on how Black artists fit into an already

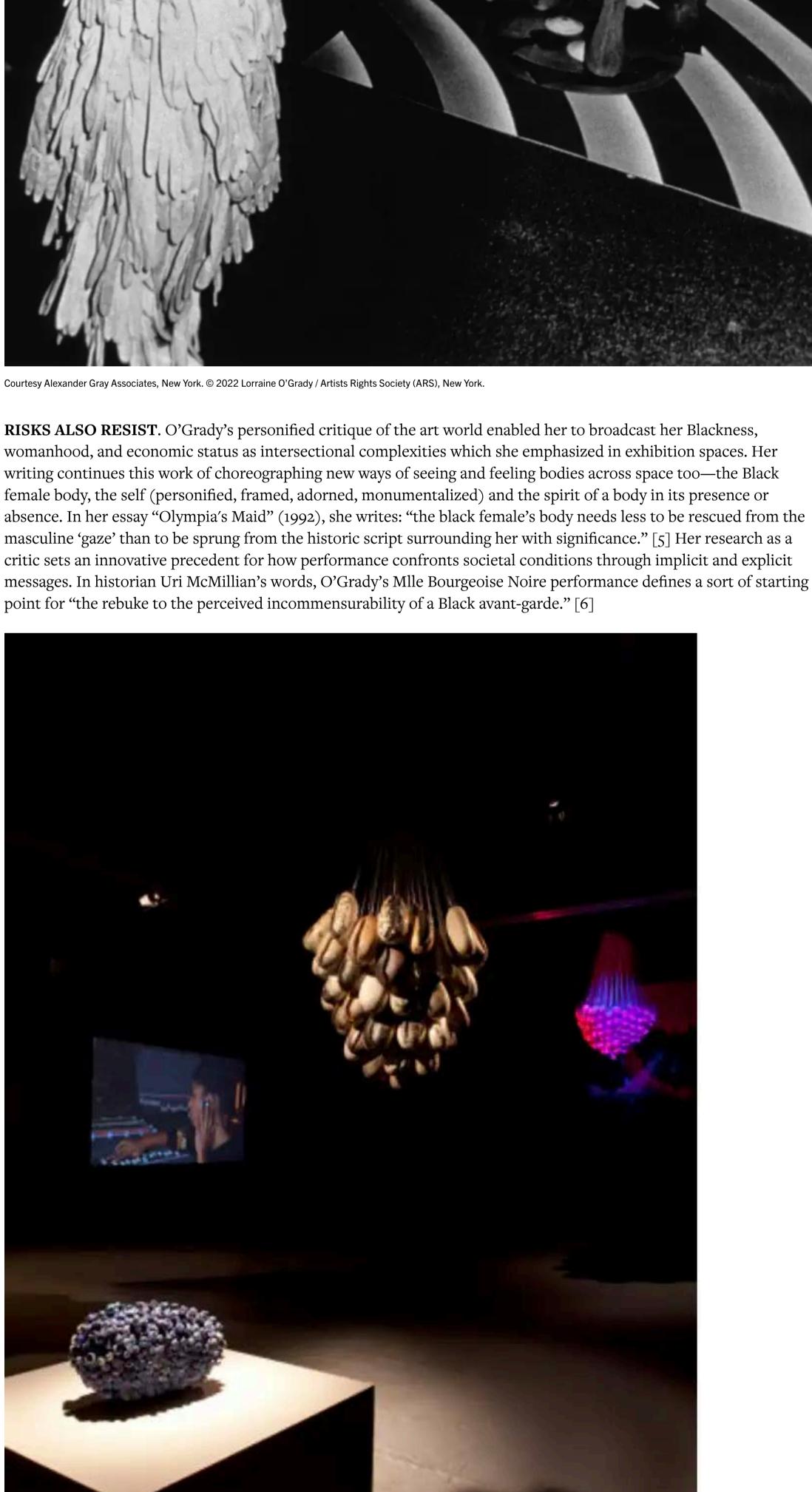
doubleness to show how Black artists and artists of color

shift our understandings of the origins of a total avant-

existing avant-garde, but in embracing a logic of

artists in the 1980s who were receiving "mainstream"

this led them to shy away from explicit displays of



ethnographic research, feminism, and performance. Her practice reimagines perceptions of Black "women's work" throughout history, in artworks that incorporate both historic ceramic techniques and digital media. [7] O'Grady's modernist and subversive lines of thinking has been informative for subsequent generations of artists like Leigh—who herself has described O'Grady as a "foremother" for her work. In her solo presentation at The Kitchen, Leigh debuted

Photo by David Allison

new bodies of work: three sculptural chandelier installations, a tripartite vase flanked on either side by rows of giant odiferous tobacco leaves, a bust sculpture, and two video installations. Illuminated by spotlights throughout The Kitchen's gallery (painted black for the installation), Leigh scales drama to create assemblages that are at once futurist and ancestral, where imagined futures meet connected pasts. Delving into histories yet to be explored, Leigh's practice can be understood as carrying forward O'Grady's unwavering sensibility of persistence. BETWEEN O'GRADY AND LEIGH, a cross-generational adapted Victorian-style dresses, called ohorokova, as a dialogue of aesthetic resistance can be connected symbol of resilience. The Namibia's Herero community focused on the cultural significance embedded within a between works on view in Leigh's multidisciplinary European style of dress and reinterpreted its purpose to exhibition at The Kitchen, like Herero Dress 1904 (2011), and O'Grady's 1980 performance Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. illustrate their own personal history bound up within it. Leigh's sculpture, a portrait in graphite and epoxy of a Whereas O'Grady utilizes her body in performance to Black woman with hair made of white porcelain roses, express resistance, Leigh's material explores Black manifests the "[springing] from the historic script" women's subjectivity across diasporas. Both artists confront this historic script, perhaps in an effort to "de-O'Grady speaks of in her writing. Similar to Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, the Herero people that Leigh is casting,

SIMONE LEIGH'S FIRST INSTITUTIONAL SOLO EXHIBITION, You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been,

subjectivity through sculpture, video, and site-specific installation informed by her interests in African art,

was organized by Rashida Bumbray at The Kitchen in 2012. Leigh engages in object-based explorations of Black female

figuratively, within her works call upon notions of respectability related to colonization. Herero Dress 1904 interrogates the cultural construction of identity by signaling the moment of historical significance referenced in the title: the 1904 rebellion of Namibia's Herero people against the Germans, after which the surviving women

haunt" it and establish agency: as O'Grady has stated, "subjectivity for me will always be a social and not merely a spiritual request." [8] They both spring a vernacular Caribbean image into a variation of new media, emphasizing how living histories form and deform material.

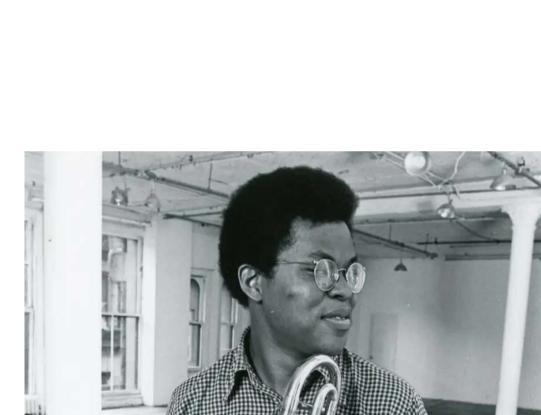


ON THE OCCASION OF LEIGH'S LOOPHOLE OF RETREAT exhibition and convening at the Guggenheim in 2019, O'Grady—who was invited to present at the conference—introduced the notion of "self-blinding," visible in many of Leigh's sculptures that lack eyes, including Herero Dress 1904. That intervention in Leigh's work, O'Grady calls a "radical act of self-preservation that shuts out the exterior long enough to be able to pay deep attention to the interior." [9] In response, she asks: "How brave and how honest will we be when we begin to look inside. What is one willing to see?" [10] The intersection of both artists' practices here makes porous the participatory threshold of risk taking cited by O'Grady in 1980 and embodied now by artists who join the conversation. In her exclamation of the desire to risk-take, whether silent or amplified, there is a collective invitation. An inward-looking history is made external by the interwoven experimental exchange unfolding throughout The Kitchen—one among a nexus of spaces that endure to shape alternatives.

Footnotes: [1] "Under the Cover: Lorraine O'Grady," Artforum, March 10, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDhV2tI9img&list=TLPQMTkwMTIwMjKN5SmCEiZq5Q&index=3, 15:12. [2] Malik

Gaines, "We Must Try to Be Analytic with Our Recuperation" in Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And, ed. Catherine Morris and Aruna D'Souza (Brooklyn: Dancing Foxes Press, 2020), 80. [3] Aruna D'Souza, Lecture and Discussion - Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And, UH School Art, September 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51OKf7TRXEo&t=13418, 22:22. [4] Lorraine O'Grady, "Statement for Moira Roth re Art is...", Unpublished email exchange, 2007, http://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady_Statement-for-Moira-Roth-re-Art-Is_Unpublished.pdf. [5] Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," 1992–1994, https://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady_Olympias-Maid-Reclaiming-Black-Female-Subjectivity1.pdf. [6] Uri McMillan, Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 20. [7] Documentation of Simone Leigh's creative process in Women's Work, directed by Ja'Tovia Gary (2012). [8] O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid." [9] Lorraine O'Grady, "Loophole of Retreat: A Conference Part 3 of 3," Guggenheim Museum, May 3, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeRQVFCY8y4, 1:08:42. [10] Ibid.

CREDITS & FOOTNOTES



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