

Career Narrative

Lorraine O’Grady (b. 1934) is a concept-based artist and cultural critic widely regarded as a leading intellectual voice of her generation. Working across media and disciplines—including writing, photography, performance, curating, installation, and video—O’Grady continues to challenge artistic and cultural conventions through her incisive critique of the binary logic inherent in Western thought. She has skillfully deployed the diptych form to refute and subvert both the “either/or” logic of Western philosophy and, by extension, the prevailing understanding around gender, race, and class. Over the course of her career, she has advocated for an anti-hierarchical approach to difference that follows the reasoning of both/and. From her earliest work, *Cutting Out the New York Times* (1977), to more recent series like *Family Portraits* (2020), O’Grady has expanded the possibilities of conceptual art and institutional critique through her profound explorations of hybridism and multiplicity. And in writings such as “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” an influential essay of cultural criticism published in 1992, O’Grady continues to shape the theoretical contours of a body of work that has been groundbreaking in its charting of the emergence of Black subjectivity in both artistic modernism and Western modernity as a whole.

O’Grady came to artmaking in the late 1970s after having achieved professional successes as a research economist, a literary and commercial translator, and a rock music critic. Her decision to become an art maker being due to the desire to produce work in service of her own ideas, O’Grady has stated that art “is the primary discipline where an exercise of calculated risk can regularly turn up what you had not been looking for.” Indeed, O’Grady’s strategies in *Cutting Out the New York Times* (1977) were propelled by her readings of Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism. By 1980, she was affiliated with Just Above Midtown (JAM), the Black avant-garde gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant, where artists such as David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, and Howardena Pindell were already active. O’Grady began by volunteering to work on communications for the gallery. It was during this time that she conceived of and first performed her landmark work *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–83). “A critique of the racial apartheid still prevailing in the mainstream art world,” *MBN* saw O’Grady perform as the invented titular character whose unannounced “guerrilla” actions intervened in public art events. While she deemed the performance a failure due to its not having begun a meaningful integration of Black voices in the art world at the time, *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* had a mythic aftermath that is felt to this day.

While honing her artistic voice O’Grady continued to write and publish. Her 1982 “Black Dreams,” featured in *Heresies #15: Racism Is the Issue*, was O’Grady’s first attempt to publicly engage with issues of Black female subjectivity. The essay employs personal anecdote and

psychological description more than would her later writings which, though remaining accessible, gradually became more theoretical than narrative. In 1983, O'Grady, acting in her persona of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, curated a group exhibit, *The Black and White Show*, at the Black-owned Kenkeleba Gallery, and staged her well-known performance *Art Is... in Harlem*. Both works continued her inquiry into the political and aesthetic complexities of an industry she experienced as persistently segregated. Her Central Park performance *Rivers, First Draft* (1982), alternated a second tendency of her work in this period, that of intense self-exploration. The work was a one-time only event with a cast and crew of 20, several of whom were part of JAM, including a young Fred Wilson and the late George Mingo. A "narrative three-ring circus of movement and sound" about a woman trying to become an artist, *Rivers, First Draft* simultaneously expressed the protagonist's perspectives as a young girl, a teenager, and an adult woman. Its characters also symbolized conflicting aspects of O'Grady's identity as both a native New Englander and the child of Black Caribbean parents. In 2015, she would re-imagine the work as a suite of 48 images displayed as a "novel in space."

Over the course of the 1990s O'Grady's voice became increasingly important to both the alternative New York art scene and mainstream artistic discourse. She was a member of the Women's Action Coalition (WAC), to which she contributed a crucial intersectional viewpoint on feminist theory and praxis. In works such as *Miscegenated Family Album* (1980/1994), O'Grady synthesized history and identity, the personal and the political, by pairing photographic portraits of her family members with images depicting Ancient Egyptian figures such as Nefertiti and her relations. O'Grady, whose antecedents include enslaved persons, views Ancient Egypt as a "bridge" country, the cultural and ethnic amalgamation of Africa and the Middle East which flourished only after its northern and southern halves were united in 3000 BC. The appropriation of the term "miscegenated" in conjunction with the use of ethnographic visual language poignantly addresses the hybrid experience of class, gender, and race across time. Through this lens, *Miscegenated Family Album* functions as a feminist opus whose goal is not to bring about a mythic "reconciliation of opposites" but rather to "enable or even force a conversation between dissimilars long enough to induce familiarity."

O'Grady has continued to push the limits of the diptych as a tool, concept, and symbol to this day. In works such as *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* (1991/2019), she created a number of photomontages, both diptychs and "collapsed diptychs," that reprised several ideas from *Rivers, First Draft* in still form. These works engage with certain oversimplifications in postmodernist thought, which O'Grady believed "re-located subjectivity away from the body to history in a way conveniently serving those in power." She employs a psychological literalness akin to Surrealism by situating "the Black body as the literal ground [of the composition] on which history acts but is unexpectedly modified." In her video *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* (2010/2011), close-up shots of the textured waves of her hair invoke the contours of undulating landscapes viewed aerially. The work collapses the diptych into a single frame,

an image of “the kind of miscegenated thinking that’s needed to deal with what we’ve already created here.” More recent works such as *Cutting Out CONYT* (1977/2017), find O’Grady, as she does so often and productively, revisiting and reworking her earlier *Cutting Out the New York Times* to create a series of 25 “haiku-like” diptych-poems plus a single panel that serves as a “manifesto” for the entire suite. Enlarged reproductions of selected and now radically rearranged pages from her 1977 poems are cut and collaged by hand. Reflecting on the process of revising an important work made four decades earlier, O’Grady has written: “*Cutting Out the New York Times (CONYT)* had succeeded in its first goal to make public language private, but it had failed, I believed, in its second goal—to create counter-confessional poetry. Too many rules of cutout composition had overwhelmed those poems of ten and twelve or even more panels each. But I thought forty years of experience might correct the failure. And they did.”

Since before 2017, O’Grady has been developing a new body of work, an update of *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* which centers on a new persona, that of “The Knight.” In her photo-installation *Announcement Cards (2020)*, O’Grady introduces The Knight, a striking figure who wears custom-forged armor, in the Renaissance style of the conquistadors but topped with Caribbean headdresses emblematic of the Global South. The Knight, or Lancela Palm-and-Steel, is inspired by the stories of King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table, Joan of Arc, and Don Quixote, and also by Caribbean masquerade traditions, including the characters of “Courtier,” “Pitchy-Patchy,” and “Actor Boy” from the Jonkonnu festival of Jamaica. Like *Mille Bourgeoise Noire*, the Knight, too, will embark on a series of actions ranging from self-exploration to cultural critique, documented in both film and photography. Comparing Lancela Palm-and-Steel to the image of “The Fir-Palm” in *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, O’Grady remarks that “In the Knight, the position of the Caribbean is inverted; it is now the mind, not the body,” and affirms that she needs the options in both images to speak her truth. As both art and cultural criticism, her new work is characteristic in its probing of complex and perhaps irresolvable questions: “If you conceal everything—race, class, age, gender—what is left? What is possible?”

Lorraine O’Grady was born in Boston to parents from Jamaica. A talented scholar, she was educated at the elite Girls Latin School before studying economics and Spanish literature at Wellesley College (class of 1955). While still a student, she passed the US government’s challenging Management Intern Program (MIP) exam and worked as a research economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 1961, O’Grady left her post at the Dept. of Labor to write fiction, ultimately entering the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1965 following a 1963-64 stint at the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence Research, American Republics branch (INR/ARA). By 1968, she was working in Chicago at a commercial translation agency while volunteering for Jesse Jackson and his organization Operation Breadbasket. However, after opening her own translation agency and fulfilling major contracts for Playboy and

Encyclopaedia Britannica, she decided to end her career as a translator. In 1973, O'Grady moved to New York and became a critic for Rolling Stone and The Village Voice, reviewing acts like the Allman Brothers, Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band, Bob Marley and the Wailers, and Sly and The Family Stone. After growing dissatisfied with her role in the music world, she accepted an offer to teach literature at the School of Visual Arts (SVA). There, she describes, "I felt I was home. I knew I was a visual artist."

O'Grady has made important contributions to cultural criticism through both her art and her writing. In 1994, she doubled the length of her 1992 essay "Olympia's Maid" by adding a remarkable "Postscript," in which she expanded the argument on Black female subjectivity with her pathbreaking theorizing of the Both/And. O'Grady also launched an artist website in 2008 that serves as a living public archive. And in 2012, she donated her analogue archive to Wellesley College, making it available for research to the student body and general public at large. A book of her collected writings, *Writing in Space, 1973–2019*, was published by Duke University Press in 2020.

She has been the subject of numerous one-person exhibits, including: her first retrospective, *Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And*, Brooklyn Museum (2021), which, accompanied by an informative catalogue, traveled to the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, NC (2022) and will be re-staged at Wellesley's Davis Museum in 2024; *From Me to Them to Me Again*, Savannah College of Art and Design Museum of Art, GA (2018); *Family Gained*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2018); *Lorraine O'Grady: Initial Recognition*, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Monastery of Santa María de las Cuevas, Seville, Spain (2016); and *Lorraine O'Grady: When Margins Become Centers*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (2015). Her work has also been included in such exceptionally significant group exhibitions as: *Just Above Midtown: 1974 to the Present*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2022); *Michael Jackson: On the Wall*, National Portrait Gallery, London (2018), which traveled to Grand Palais, Paris (2018), the Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, Germany (2019), and Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Finland (2019); *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, Tate Modern, London (2017), which traveled to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AK (2018), Brooklyn Museum, NY (2018), The Broad, Los Angeles (2019), de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA (2019), and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX (2020); and *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85*, Brooklyn Museum, NY (2017), which traveled to California African American Museum, Los Angeles (2017), Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY (2018), and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2018). In 2022, the University of California Press published a major monograph on her work, *Speaking Out of Turn: Lorraine O'Grady and the Art of Language*, by Stephanie Sparling Williams.

Her work is represented in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Tate Modern, London, among many others. She has received numerous awards, including the 2023 American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Art; a 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Women's Caucus for Art; the Skowhegan Medal for Conceptual and Cross-Disciplinary Practices (2019); a 2015 Creative Capital Award in Visual Art; a Lifetime Achievement Award from Howard University, Washington, D.C. (2015); the Distinguished Feminist Award, College Art Association, New York (2014); an Art Matters grant (2011); a United States Artists Rockefeller Fellowship (2011); and the Anonymous Was A Woman Award (2008), among others.