

BRIEF BIO

Lorraine O’Grady (1934-2024) was a conceptual artist and cultural critic whose work over four decades employed the diptych, or at least the diptych idea, as its primary form. While she consistently addressed issues of diaspora, hybridity and black female subjectivity and emphasized the formative roles these have played in the history of modernism, O’Grady also used the diptych’s “both/and thinking” to frame her themes as symptoms of a larger problematic, that of the divisive and hierarchical either/or categories underpinning Western philosophy. In O’Grady’s works across various genres including text, photo-installation, video and performance, multiple emotions and ideas coexist. Personal and aesthetic attitudes often considered contradictory, such as anger and joy or classicism and surrealism, are not distinguished. Even technical means seem governed by both chance and obsessive control so as to express political argument and unapologetic beauty simultaneously. And across the whole, essays and images interpenetrate. While O’Grady’s diptychs are sometimes explicit, with two images side by side, at other times they are implicit, as when two types of hair—silk and tumbleweed, videotaped on the same scalp at different hours of the same day—alternate and interact to create permeating worlds. The goal of her diptychs 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. For O’Grady, the diptych helped to image the kind of “both/and” or “miscegenated” thinking that may be needed to counter and destabilize the West’s either/or binary of “winners or losers,” one that is continuously birthing supremacies, from the intimate to the political, of which white supremacy may be only the most all-inclusive.

An early adopter of digital technology, O’Grady also created a website, lorraineogrady.com, which is considered a model of the online abbreviated-archive, and her paper archive is in the collection of the Wellesley College Library. Among O’Grady’s writings, the 1992/94 long-form essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” has proved an enduring contribution to the fields of art history and intersectional feminism and is now considered canonical. O’Grady’s art works have been acquired by, among other institutions, the Art Institute of Chicago. IL; Museum of Modern Art, NY; Tate Modern, London, UK; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY.