

A West Indian Yankee in Queen Nefertiti's Court

by CALVIN REID. 1993

Article in *New Observations* #97: COLOR. September/October 1993, pp. 5-9. Special issue, edited by ADRIAN PIPER.

LORRAINE O'GRADY'S career embodies a fascinating combination of personal transformation, risk and intelligence leavened with an ingenuous sense of inquiry and discovery. Examining O'Grady's work, and consequently her life, reveals several experiential narratives that flip back and forth connecting her life to her art and consequently to a broader sense of how African-American people construct a sense of who we are in the world. O'Grady's work manages to address the classic alienation of the 20th century artist from bourgeois taste and conventional practice; as well as the inner struggle of a woman clashing with sexist social tropes in a effort to recreate her life and embrace her talents. And, if that weren't enough endeavor for one creative life span, she manages to extend these narratives into the racial complexities that form the foundation of American life. From her original performance pieces to her recent two dimensional photographic works, her works capture the process of the female artist embracing her own value and autonomy as a woman, and the relationship of that dearly acquired sense of self to the role of the contemporary artist — particularly the Black female artist — within the matrix of a male-dominated and a race-obsessed society.

O'Grady's work embodies a reconstruction of the psyche, spurred by class as well as race and driven by individual and social memory. This multi-tiered examination of consciousness distinguishes O'Grady's work. Her guerrilla performances recreated the inner conflict, history, ambiguities and social patterns of her own life, presenting themes emblematic of the neglected psychic terrain of the Black female. Rooted in a

commitment to expressive narration and an almost spiritual transformation of physical space, her performance took on the experiential complexities of class stratification, diversity, aesthetic and spiritual growth, intraracial diversity and interracial exclusivity. But if her work reveals a Black feminist embrace — to distinguish it from assumptions of white assumptions of what feminism means — it also embraces a preoccupation with experimental form. Her work, in particular the performance works, is typified by risk, mercurial change and an expressive subjectivity, honing her presentations as she dissects the social tropes surrounding her life.

O’Grady addresses these topics with a broad framework of identity-based exploration first evoked in her embrace of the act of performance, itself an existential act of affirmation. Her discovery of performance art in the mid 1970s reflects the ways in which some women of her generation stumbled into new possibilities of interpreting and living their lives. Born into a middle-class black family of West Indian parents, O’Grady grew up in a relatively privileged environment, with a set of values that set her apart from stereotypical representations of Black Americans. Growing up in Boston, she graduated from the Girls Latin School and Wellesley College; and later went through two marriages before arriving in New York City, as she puts, “the girlfriend of a big-time rock music executive.”¹ The experiences that followed were a combination of both luck and insight leading to her transformation into an artist. Moreover, as she embraced the artist’s life, the expanse of her life’s experiences became the core of her aesthetic concerns, burgeoning into a radical cultural critique of Black life and femininity.

Her association with the rock executive boyfriend gave her the opportunity to write rock criticism for the *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*.² When her adventures as a “40-year-old rock groupie” led inevitably to bouts of frustration and boredom, a request by a friend to teach an English class at the School of Visual Arts became the event that would lead to the redirection of her life. At the time she knew nothing of the art world but subsequently, in an attempt to learn more about Art in order to better relate to a roomful of art students, she read Lucy Lippard’s *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*,³ and, as she

says, “It totally changed my life.” The book, a history of various conceptual practices, including performance, in the late 1960s, provided the spark that opened her to the possibility of life as an artist. The book crystallized the vague ideas she had been having all along as she discovered that these artists had created a language — as complex and theatrical as her inner life — to address similar concerns.

This brief recapitulation of her life serves to illustrate the parallel sense of ingenuous discovery and incisive percipience that characterizes O’Grady’s particular brand of identity-based social analysis. But O’Grady’s embrace of life as an artist was only the beginning of her confrontations with the present through the past. Although concerns about identity, authenticity, internalized social tropes, vanguard form and representation are interlocked within the framework of her life and art, they are manifest in discrete projects that, over time, illuminate past projects even as each work reveals a progression to the next logical psychic station.

Her creation of the performance persona — although performance art is a term she dislikes — *Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire* was her first attempt to address concerns on art and race. As a teen she refused to take part in cotillions and her adoption of the debutante guise recalls a past in conflict with the rituals and social expectations of her own Black bourgeois upbringing. In performance as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, she wore a splendid gown made entirely of white gloves and carried a bouquet of white chrysanthemums that concealed a more ominous flowering beneath: a white cat-o-nine-tails. She arrived by limousine, uninvited, at the openings of a number of Manhattan exhibitions, a vision of radiant criticality, sharpening, by her presence, the short-comings and contradictions embodied in the exhibitions themselves.⁴

But apart from these art world interventions, the adoption of this surrogate persona was itself a self-conscious exploration of social contradiction. *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* epitomizes the Black middle-class simulation of White social exclusivity — recognizable in her own and in other Black communities’ brand of high society. In this instance Black social exclusivity — neither

condemned nor romanticized by the artist — is posited as an attempt to achieve a public sense of fulfillment in a society plagued as much by the absence of universally valued Black imagery and public social rites as by America's surfeit of negative Black representations. The cat-o-nine-tails and the white gloves — symbols of outer repression, and internalized social restraint respectively — combine in vivid critical analysis of traditional Black middle class life.

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's initial appearances — at Black art dealer Linda Bryant Goode's Just Above Midtown/Downtown space in 1980 — were a vivid critique of what O'Grady saw as the timidity, the unadventurousness of Black avant garde art of that moment. In her catalog essay on O'Grady, critic and professor Judith Wilson describes Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's first appearance June 5, 1980, at the exhibition *Outlaw Aesthetics*: "Moving slowly through the crowd, with her tuxedoed male escort, she flashed a glittering smile and asked assorted onlookers, 'Won't you help me lighten my heavy bouquet?' while proffering one of the 27 white chrysanthemums she clutched. As the flowers dwindled, it became evident that a white cat-o-nine-tails formed the core of the bouquet.

"When the last bloom was distributed, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire handed her cape to her escort who then offered a pair of over the elbow white gloves, which she carefully donned. Thus attired, she now began pacing the floor like a caged animal and lashing herself with the whip. Suddenly, at the height of her frenzy, she abruptly came to a halt, dropped the whip, and shrilled:

THAT'S ENOUGH!

No more boot-licking. . .

No more ass-kissing. . .

No more buttering up. . .

No more pos. . . turing of

Super-ass...imulates. . .

BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!⁵

Her poetic diatribe was adapted from a work by Negritude poet Leon Damas decrying his own bourgeois background. O'Grady uses it to decry the complacency of Black creative vision. But, at her next uninvited appearance at the opening of an exhibition called *Personae*, a September 1981 exhibition on performance art (actually nine white performance artists) at the New Museum, Mlle Noire's presence challenged the narrow cultural framework the exhibition presented as characteristic of the state of the art form. Her declamation in this case called for "AN INVASION"⁶ of the culturally narrow concerns of so-called avant garde institutions, laying down the gauntlet as well to other Black artists to invade these temples of *de facto* Eurocentricity.

O'Grady's self-critical embrace of "acting out" resonates equally well whether directed at white parochial aesthetics or as an examination of idiosyncratic subjectivity as vanguard form, introducing her developing concern with the diffuse cultural sensibilities of Black postmodern consciousness.

Mlle Noire's prickly focus on African-American social and aesthetic contradiction, Euro-American "Affirmative Action" and avant garde form, received continued attention in a project combining elements of her fascination with the Black privileged classes and a broad meditation on the historical antecedents of African-American cultural currents. This new work examines the relationship of Black Americans to Africa, probing the heterogeneous, mutative character of African-American culture and anointing it as a symbolic standard for understanding the equally hybrid nature of the American experience in general. This sets the stage for *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, O'Grady's lyrical evocation of the African American diaspora — and by extension mainstream U.S. culture as well — through the timeless imagery and mythology of the Egyptian dynasties.

In this prescient performance/installation, first performed at Just Above Midtown/Downtown in October 1980, her sense of class privilege, racial mutability and cultural memory were combined in an unusual comparison of families: a dynastic line from Egyptian antiquity and her own privileged Black, West Indian clan from New England. Projecting photos of the Egyptian

Queen Nefertiti alongside those of her sister Devonia Evangeline, who died at 38, O'Grady creates an eerie parallel history based on the physical resemblances between the family of the Egyptian queen and that of her own. The strange parallels between these two "dynastic" lines — the number of family members, the shunting aside of the two women by their husbands and their early deaths — produce a meta-narrative filled with questions about presumed African-American racial and cultural homogeneity, focusing to some degree on the sense of cultural extension that Africa, and particularly Egypt — as a heterogeneous civilization — as a Black mulatto cultural antecedent to sub-Saharan, Greek and European cultural development — has long been a feature of black nationalist thought, loudly, though not necessarily widely, disseminated by such black writers as Cheikh Anta Diop, John Henrik Clarke, and more recently by Martin Bernal, a white professor of politics, in his book *Black Athena*. O'Grady's meditation on the subject served to introduce the subject in a new venue — New York downtown bohemia — and in a form unusual at the time, the early 1980s, and controversial even to this day.

Her fascination with Egypt began with a visit to Cairo in the early 1960s and centers on Egypt's great mix of cultural ingredients.⁷ A woman of classic "mulatto" yellow/brown pigmentation, O'Grady's obvious mixed-race background motivates her interest in both cultural intermingling and the old fashioned skin color hierarchies within the Black community. Consistently mistaken for an Egyptian during her stay in Cairo, she became fascinated with the culture,, and Egypt itself — a heterogeneous amalgam — came to represent a meta-narrative on racial/cultural encounter, dispersion, and hybridization. Her identification with Egypt as a mulatto culture brought O'Grady full circle to her own status within both American society and the African-American diaspora. This observation reveals itself more vividly within the paradoxical context of American racial and cultural cross-breeding; a powerfully hybrid cultural isolation, enforced by apartheid-like racial separation. Leapfrogging from her first Egyptian encounters in the 1960s to the 1980s, her visual discourse on racial and cultural fusion is further shaped by what she describes as a "reclamation" of Black female subjectivity through the visual reanimation of the putatively

Black Nefertiti and O'Grady's own Black sister. The performance also included an Egyptian ritual meant to communicate with the dead, in effect, an attempt to restore the sister's presence to the land of the living. It is through these symbolic acts of rescue — the metaphorical reinsertion of Egypt into Africa and into the cultural history of Black America — that this race, culture and gender reclamation enters the dialogue portending the politicized aesthetics of identity that would finally surface in the 1980s mainstream art world after incubating, in different forms by different artists, on the so-called fringes for years. The overall effect is a highly theatrical variety of introspection in conflict with the Western scholarly denial of Egypt as an African cultural clearing house.

O'Grady's work suggests that, in any radical analysis of American culture and American art, the Black artist (in particular the Black female artist) — animated by a healthy skepticism for stereotypes promoted by Blacks or by Whites — must address this rescue of the self and of Black cultural lineage. This sense of a single life playing out grand historical vectors of race, sex, class and culture pervades her work and continues to do so even as she abandons, for the moment, live performances. She left the New York art scene between 1983 and 1988 because of the illness of her mother, and on her return she continued with a new variation on the performance of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*. After 1988 her interests have shifted to creating fixed images within the gallery space. She has spoken of her performances as a heightened form of writing, a form that enables her to combine the linear narrative of the story with the ability to simultaneously present successive layers of fact and symbol. "Performance is the way I write most effectively," she said in an unpublished interview with Tony Whitfield in 1983, "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire is actually a didactic essay written in space, while the form of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* approximates that of a book — a family photo album, interlaced with personal reminiscence and ritual."

The new work, photomontages dating from 1990, was displayed in 1991 at New York City's INTAR Gallery. Despite her careful documentation of performances she has expressed some dismay⁸ at the transience aligned to physical performance — the

inability of her audiences to savor, contemplate and engage the issues in a work that is suddenly here and just as quickly gone. These photo works represent another effort to “write” in an unconventional mode and the manipulation of composition and culturally charged imagery used to spur an interpretive response informed by O’Grady’s pervasive sense of cause, effect and social dilemma.

Once again O’Grady uses the pictorial works to inspect her own life while dissecting that around her. In these works, using a model and photographer for technical applications, O’Grady’s interest focuses often on the Black female body, highlighting its general absence from the contemporary visual discourse and arranging it in compositions of striking visuality, relocating her critical vantage point from real acts in real space to a postmodernist location as a creator and manipulator of images capable of mass projection.

In the 1991 work, *The Fir Palm*, a tellingly fictional “hybrid” stalk of vegetation — palm tree trunk topped with the bristled branches of the Northern Fir tree — appears to spring from the landscape of a close-up crop of the model’s loamy black body. Planted exactly in the navel, this absurd combination of geographical and arboreal opposites extends upwards towards a sky streaked with clouds. O’Grady’s West Indian background, symbolized by the trunk of an island palm tree, is visually married to an equally dear geographically resonant emblem of Yankee New England. Strangely captivating and mildly comic, the image manages to evoke the sublime contradictions that contribute to the artist’s sense of identity as well as what she sees as her cultural legacy as a Black artist and intellectual. Her refreshingly unconventional symbolism unites the apparently contradictory elements of her life and development. She presents her life — middle-class Black female and an intellectual to boot — as representative of a new wing to the African-American cultural diaspora; as a bonafide extension of traditional representations of Black culture as a southern American phenomena or as an urban extension of that tradition. Her work opens black tradition to a broad range of Black experience, chipping away at the tendency of Black folks as well as White folks to narrow Black experience.

In *Lilith Sends Out the Destroyers*, a kaleidoscopic stream of warships spouts upward and outward from the pubic area of another close-in profile shot of the Black female body. This image, rife with connotations of destructive progeny and latent female power, contrasts with other works chronicling interracial sexuality, death and domination, once again as strikingly enigmatic as they are culturally interrogative.

In *The Clearing*, 1991, (the work is composed of two individually titled and framed panels), she presents the perennially startling image of interracial lovemaking within a visual discourse on the nature of sexual relationships between Black women and White men. The effect of this work is a complex parade of imagery calculated in its attempt to visualize the female contemplation of interracial coupling; its precedents, its contradictions and to some extent its inevitability. In the panel on the left, subtitled *Green Love*, hovering in the sky above a lush park setting, a white man settles between the legs of his Black mate in an image of sexual partner and tenderness; while below, in a clearing, children play, running around a forgotten pile of clothing. The panel on the right, *Love in Black and White*, presents a White man covered in medieval chain mail, seducing a Black woman. A death's head obscures the man's features while his hand rests on the naked, impassive woman beneath. The image captures an image of white men, sheathed in social armor; protected and preying on a relationship of unequal power with the inherent potential for blatant sexual exploitation.

In *Gaze 1,2,3,4*, a series of portraits present two images of the four individuals pictured, two Black men and women, their torsos bare. A smaller image of each model, whose expressions are responses to cues from the artist, is placed over (or seemingly within) a larger image of the same individual. This simple but effective image presents two faces to the world; the inner and outer view, the physical and the metaphysical. The works attempt to locate the existential core of their subjects, stripped of defenses, presumptions and psychic bric-a-brac. The models stare directly at the viewer, locking their photographically portrayed sensibilities into the viewer's.

Certainly many of the issues that motivate O'Grady's work have been explored by other artists. Yet it is her particular combination of skills and experiences that give her works such a distinctive cast. Her works reveal a sense of mission, an unabashed and genuine delight at her own discoveries. In particular, her works display an enthusiastic embrace of African-American cultural history and a cosmopolitan notion of how that history has been constructed. There is a palpable sense that African-American history embraces the world, that its influences and patterns are wider and more complex than what we have believed them to be. Her elegant and outrageous public acts imbued the performance process with a style, wit, spontaneity and coherence, not often seen in conventional performance venues. Her sense of the particular marketplace of American society directly addresses a long-running false issue in the Black community: What or who is really "Black." She breaks down that misused concept, and attempts to question our inherited notions of "Blackness," defining it as a series of typically American assumptions that ignore how ideas of culture and race are construed by the intermingling of people, forced or unforced, over time.

Although she has functioned primarily within the downtown New York art scene, her work is directed at a Black audience and is positioned as a voice from the presumed American cultural margin asserting its place in the critical discourse of our time. She has also attempted to address the relationship of Black avant-gardism to the Black community. Her *ART IS* float, a giant gold frame on flat-bed truck that made its way through the 1983 Afro-American Day parade in Harlem, brought a lively display of conceptual practice to the parade, "framing" the community in Harlem. This elaborate conceptual gesture effectively turned the people lining the street into art, in a delightful example of avant-garde critique brought home and adapted for mass consumption; its integrity intact.

For O'Grady the question of identity — who she is, who we are — seems of such importance in her work that other issues often appear as ancillary to it. Nevertheless in this constellation of cultural observations, her interests and emphases hurtle around a glowing center of personal revelation; flashing into

sight as their orbits intersect and allowing her audience to watch the multiple play of shadow and light this movement inevitably produces. As a Black woman and an artist, she demands the right to express what the identity of such an individual might be and provide an alternative to the assumptions about race — by Blacks and Whites — that characterize this culture. Her work is best defined as a proclamation of the inner life of a Black woman and an implicit manifesto on the uses of art as a critical and symbolic gesture.

Calvin Reid is an Art Critic for Art in America

¹ Unpublished interview conducted by Linda Montano in June 1986.

² Riffs, *The Village Voice*, August 16, 1973.

³ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*.

⁴ Lucy Lippard, "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire goes to the New Museum," *The Village Voice* (October 7, 1981).

⁵ "Lorraine O'Grady: Photomontages," Judith Wilson, catalog essay.

⁶ Lowery Stokes Sims, "Aspects of performance in the work of Black American women artists," ed. by Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer and Joanna Frueh, *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, U.M.I. Research Press, Ann Arbor/London, 1988.

⁷ Letter to Lucy Lippard, June 24, 1989.

⁸ Conversation with the artist, December 1991.