

Artspace

How Lorraine O'Grady Transformed Harlem Into a Living Artwork in the '80s—and Why It Couldn't Be Done Today

By Karen Rosenberg
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A detail of Lorraine O'Grady's *Art Is... (Troupe Front)*, 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The 1983 African-American Day Parade, on Harlem's 125th Street, included a rather unusual float—a gold-skirted vehicle topped by a giant, gilded picture frame. Atop it, 15 actors in all-white clothing danced with smaller frames; as the float moved along its route, they leapt out into the crowd and held them up to intrigued spectators, who summarily found themselves making art, or having art made of them.

This curious contribution to the parade was a project by the veteran conceptual artist **Lorraine O’Grady**, who now has a large critical and curatorial following but was then in the early stages of her career. She made the piece (which bore the wonderfully open-ended title of *Art Is...*) with a grant from the **New York State Council for the Arts** and nothing in the way of publicity, at a time when documenting performance art was almost an afterthought and marketing it was a joke.

Art Is... was an experiment of sorts, contemporaneous with but less strident than O’Grady’s *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* performances, in which she appeared in a kind of pageant-queen costume at gallery openings and exhorted fellow black artists to “take more risks.” But over time, and as the study of performance art has expanded, it has come to be known as one of her signature pieces—exhibited in such diverse contexts as **Art Basel Miami Beach** (2009), **Prospect 2: New Orleans** (2011-12), and the touring survey of ‘80s art “This Will Have Been” (2012).

Now the artwork has come home to the neighborhood where it took shape. This summer, for the first time, all 40 photographs from the performance are on view at the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#) (through October 25). There, viewers can spot vanished local landmarks like the Renaissance Ballroom and the Lickety Split Cocktail Lounge in the background of the parade pictures while contemplating the area’s ongoing transformation (the museum just announced plans to construct a new \$122 million, **David Adjaye**-designed building on its current site.)

In a conversation with **Artspace** deputy editor **Karen Rosenberg**, O’Grady spoke about the social and logistical challenges of making *Art Is...* , its evolution on the web and in recent exhibitions, and the reasons it could not be performed today.



Art Is... (Woman with Man and Cop Watching), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

What inspired you to make *Art Is...*?

A black female social worker told me that she didn't think avant-garde art had anything to do with black people. So I decided to prove that she was wrong—to make the point that avant-garde art, contemporary art, was something that everyone had a connection to.

The parade idea was never very far from my mind, because I'm West Indian and parades are a very big part of my life—my mother always took us to watch them when we were kids. My first thought was to put actual avant-garde art on a float and just float it down, but the owner of the flatbed company said, "You know, you've only got two minutes from start

to finish.” I realized that my original idea was not going to work. It was at that point that the piece really came into being, to actually do something that was art that people made themselves.

But I didn’t know how to tell people that that was what it was. The only directions I could give were the words on the float itself—“Art Is...,” in large letters, on either side. That was the only instruction to the parade-goers. And I didn’t know whether or not they’d get it.



Art Is... (Window Grilles), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O’Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

They did get it, overwhelmingly—you can see it in the photographs, in how they're posing within the frames. As you've recalled in other interviews, they also said things like "Make me art!" and "We're the art!"

Yes. It was just astonishing. I believe that 50 percent of the people got it, really got it, and that they were very self-consciously turning themselves into art objects.

I was shocked, because I understood how the large frame would work, as documentation, but I didn't know what would happen with the people on the route. I guess I didn't understand what the power of a frame and a camera were.



Art Is... (*Women in Crowd Framed*), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Cops are a constant presence in the photographs, and they seem to be participating in the performance and enjoying it along with everyone else. What do you recall of these interactions, which really stand out today at a time of tension between minorities and the police?

I have to tell you, this was a very different time. That piece has become unintentionally historic. 1983 was basically one to two years before the crack epidemic hit Harlem, and before a different kind of policing hit Harlem. There's always been surveillance, and policing of minority neighborhoods, but I think the methodologies of policing changed substantially. As a result, you could not do that piece now. You really couldn't.

I shot some footage of the Brooklyn parade here last year, and you couldn't get people to talk to you. They would not be on video. They would not allow you to photograph them. Now, any external camera—as opposed to their own cameras—is surveillance, as far as they're concerned. They don't know you, they don't trust you, they don't know what you're going to do with this footage, and they just say no.

I saw on the internet that someone put up a copy of one of the images where a woman was interacting with a policeman, and said, "Could this even happen now?" It's unthinkable. People can't even put their minds around it. But there are several images where there is flirtation between the women and the cops.



Art Is... (Cop Framed), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

I don't know how much of that also was that the people I hired to carry those frames were all actors and actresses—like many people in show business they were not native New Yorkers, and they were coming from a different place with a different relationship to the police.

I think the most interesting thing, actually, is the police's reactions. There's one place where you really see the tension.

You're talking about the image that's titled "Cop Eyeing Young Man," in which an empty frame calls attention to a white policeman who seems to be trailing, or watching, a young black man?

Oh, yeah. The entire thing, I think, could not happen now. It could not happen now because the parade viewers would not want to be bothered—and also because that parade was creating a film, and it was capturing everything on that route as cinema.



Art Is... (*Cop Eyeing Young Man*), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

You mean, because it was making a kind of documentary film about Harlem?

Now, people are interested in it not just because of the people on the route but because there's this urban landscape that no longer exists. There was a big deal being made at the opening of the show the other night about the Renaissance ballroom captured in a photograph there. It was a hugely important part of the Harlem Renaissance, and it was taken down last year.

Did you also see *Art Is...* as having an element of community outreach?

At the time, I was saying to myself, "Okay, Lorraine, if there's just one young person who sees this piece and wants to go to art school, then it will have succeeded." It was community outreach at that level. I was trying to show these people, "This is what you can do, this is who you can be." It was more role-modeling than community outreach.

I don't use the word community in the way that many people do. People with power have countries; people without power have communities, and communities live in fear of power—therefore, they have to close the ranks. My attitude is, if a community can't critique itself then it remains weak.

That piece was very much for the people on the parade route. In fact, it was much more for them than it was for my peers, because I didn't even share the documentation until five years later, when Lucy Lippard asked me for it.



Art Is... (Girlfriends Times Two), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

How did you get from those initial performance documents to the current format of *Art Is...*? It's been exhibited as a series of photographs in recent years, in places ranging from Art Basel Miami Beach to the touring museum survey "Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art," now at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

The first exhibition of the piece was on my website—when I put together the website, in 2009, I tried to put up as much of the performances I'd done as I could. That was the point at which I made a temporal exhibition of the piece. And then I got asked to do it as a wall piece, by my gallery, at Art Basel Miami.

It really wasn't until I did the spatial installation that I understood *Art Is...*... Because when you're on the route, you don't know what's happening—what it's adding up to. The parade was a complex logistical effort; there was so much that I had to think about, every minute, that I couldn't see the piece globally.

When I got asked to do it as an installation, I really resisted that idea. Then, in the process of doing it, I understood the parade but also realized that I had created a very separate artwork. The parade was one thing, and this was the artwork out of the parade.

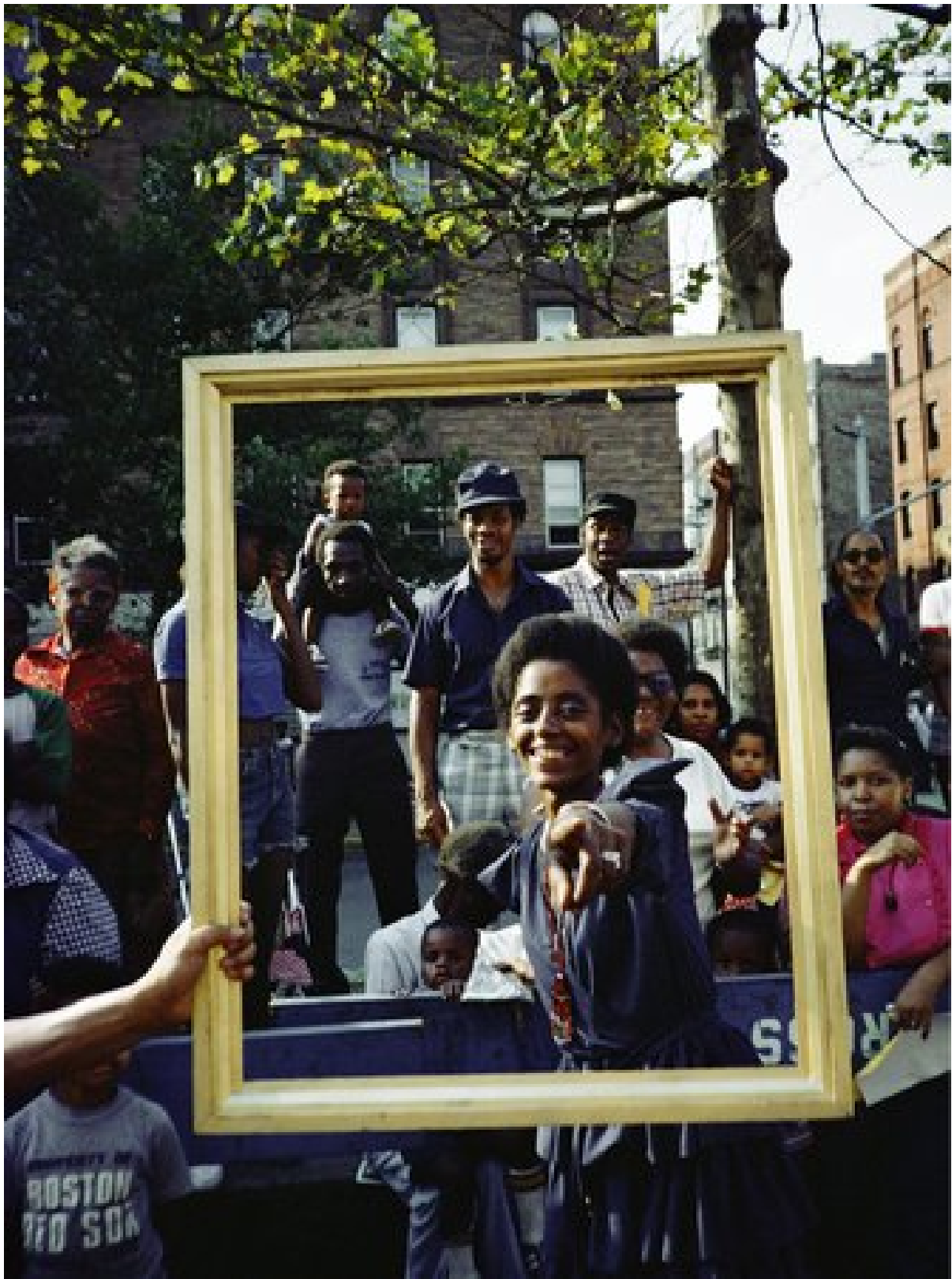


Art Is... (Faded Renaissance), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The Walker Arts Center owns *Art Is...*... Are there opportunities for other museums to own it was well?

Yes, there are, and I'm certainly hoping they will. It's a piece that grows in importance, and grows in resonance. One of the responses that meant the most to me, at the opening, was my friend Nick Mauss, who wrote about me in *Artforum* and had been grappling with it on the website. He was just astonished at how much stronger it is in person. Several people said that to me, that they'd seen it on the website and thought they knew it but then when they saw it in the space they realized they didn't know it.

It was a thrill to see it in Harlem, where obviously it belongs. But it was also a thrill to imagine what might happen once the opening-day festivities are over, and people from Harlem go to the museum—to just imagine what might happen once they see themselves there.



Art Is... (*Girl Pointing*), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.