Lorraine O'Grady

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May 28–June 27, 2015

Alexander Gray Associates

Rivers and Just Above Midtown*

Intro

The *Rivers, First Draft* installation consists of photos from a performance done in Central Park as part of "Art Across the Park" in Summer 1982. Together, the curator and I made an exhausting tour of the Park to look at suitable locations.

When she and I reached The Loch, a little-known section at the Park's northern edge, it captured me. This wasn't the Frederic Law Olmsted I thought I knew. It was wild and frighteningly unkempt, like something out of literature, not the city. And it was perfect for the piece I needed to create.

Rivers would be a one-time only event with a cast and crew of 20, several of whom, including a young Fred Wilson and the late George Mingo, were part of JAM,[†] the black avant-garde gallery I was associated with then. The piece would be performed for an invited audience barely twice as large as the cast, no more than 40 people, nearly all with JAM or part of its environment. And there was an uninvited audience of about five passers-by who'd come on the scene accidentally and stayed. One, a young Puerto Rican taking a short-cut from the pool where he worked as a lifeguard, said afterward it was like walking into one of his dreams.

The piece was a narrative three-ring circus, about a woman trying to become an artist. In it, her present and past happen simultaneously.

It was called *Rivers, First Draft* because it was done quickly and I knew I would have to go back to it. It was always meant to be the first of a three-part piece called *Indivisible Landscapes: Rivers, Caves, Deserts.* But perhaps when I revisit it, it will be unrecognizable. For me now, the making of *Rivers* and what it uncovered was one of the most important moments of my artistic and personal life and could not have happened without Just Above Midtown, a nurturing space when others would not have us.

For me, doing *Rivers* in the context of JAM was a unique art-making moment, one when the enabling audience—the audience which allows the work to come into existence and to which the work speaks—and the audience that consumes the work were one and the same.

The installation here is silent on the wall or on pages in a catalogue, titles newly added. Imagine my voice reading a text which bears on it only tangentially. Of course, you will not be able to follow the installation and the text simultaneously. But whether you wander in and out of the installation and the text in alternation, or attend to them sequentially, it's OK. Cognitive dissonance can be overcome when you slow down and repeat.

Text[‡]

She'd been invited to speak, asked to address the differences between East Coast and West Coast artists at Just Above Midtown. But she hadn't experienced it that way. She'd come late to the party, late to art. By 1980, when 57th Street was gone, when the gallery was re-opening in Tribeca, they had long forgotten their resentments. It was a family now, dysfunctional perhaps, but one where everyone felt free. On one wall, an installation of *Artforum* covers. On another, an altar to Santería gods. And in the basement, directors who were often better artists than some of those they showed.

JAM was a complete world. Between the business model of the gallery and the clubhouse model, JAM was definitely the clubhouse where people gathered. It was sometimes hard to know who was a JAM artist and who was not. David definitely, and Senga and Maren, and Houston and Randy. But what about Tyrone? He was nominally with Cinqué, but was he ever not at JAM? Did George ever have an exhibition there? Did it matter? Everyone knew how good his work was. Then there were young artists finding their voices, like Sandra and Cynthia.

But artists were just one part of the whole. There were art historians *in potentia*, like Judith Wilson and a young Kellie Jones. Photographers documenting others' work and doing their own, like Coreen, like Dawoud. There were intellectuals like Danny and pure spirits like Charles. And there were curators. Lowery was always there. Kynaston never was, but his presence hung like a shadow on the wall. That was one way to be, she thought. That could have been her goal. It was easy when whiteness was part of what you were. But instead she had come HERE.

JAM was an *esprit* formed in exclusion. A kind of isolation that brings strength, brings weakness, brings freedom to explore and to fail, to find the steel hardened within. David did his originary work there, as did others. Refinements would come later, of course, but if they were lucky, the rough edges would remain. Integrity, originality, adventurousness, those were Linda's ideals. In truth, she was inspired by Linda, the founder-director, more than by the artists there. But mostly she felt at home. JAM was a place as much as a world, a place where people ate together, discussed and argued, drank and smoked together, collaborated on work, slept together, pushed each other to go further, and partied 'til the cows came home. There was even space for those who didn't quite fit, like Dan, like her. She was embarrassed by her age. She was becoming aware of it. It was now or never.

The new space on Franklin Street took longer to finish than expected. The sun beat down outside the Riverrun Café, on tables laden with large glasses of ice-cold white wine.

Arguments inspired by articles in *Artforum* sometimes went nowhere. For each person peering out at the art world of Castelli and Sonnebend, there was another for whom THIS was the art world that mattered, the one where the art was most advanced, and where the artists were most cosmopolitan. It was hard to argue with that. Whereas for white artists, traveling between European capitals was still considered urbane, by 1980 Senga had lived in Japan, Tyrone had lived with the Dogon in Africa. The mid-day discussions were sharp, funny, sarcastic. In the evening, they got even more so as the scene switched to outdoor tables in the East Village where the arguments were complicated by the circles around Steve Cannon, Quincy Troupe and Ishmael Reed.

It's hard to remember what happened where, but JAM's energy seemed always the focus. An endless progression of the toughest jazz she'd ever heard, dance performances alone and as part of the art work. It seemed Pina Bausch's influence was God. And always, JAM was a place to hook up with friends. Dawoud and Candida had their wedding there.

These, finally, were her people. When she did *Rivers, First Draft*, she wanted them to understand . . . what route she'd taken to becoming an artist, what being West Indian was like, the mapping of the world of the Black Bohemian. And then she wondered if it were not already too late, if the Black Bohemian were not long enough gone to be almost inscrutable. But she felt herself gain in incremental respect as the audience of JAM watched her struggle and grow. That was enough.

Lorraine O'Grady, New York, 2013/2015

Notes

- * A meditation on why Rivers, First Draft might not have existed without Just Above Midtown's challenging, supportive environment. © Lorraine O'Grady 2013, 2015
- † Just Above Midtown/Downtown members mentioned in text: Charles Abramson, Candida Alvarez, Dawoud Bey, Can Concholar, Houston Conwill, Danny Dawson, Linda Goode-Bryant, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Cynthia Hawkins, George Mingo, Tyrone Mitchell, Senga Nengudi, Sandra Payne, Coreen Simpson, Randy Williams, Fred Wilson. In addition, Kynaston McShine and Lowery Simms
- The text was first read by Lorraine O'Grady as she stood in front of a slideshow showing the images of *Rivers, First Draft* in a presentation for the *Now Dig This!* Symposium at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 8, 2013.

Rivers, First Draft, 1982/2015



Rivers, First Draft, 1982/2015

Rivers, First Draft includes forty-eight images of the 1982 performance O'Grady created for the public art program, "Art Across the Park" curated by Gylbert Coker, Horace Brockington, and Jennifer Manfredi. Rivers, First Draft was performed in the Loch, a northern section of Central Park, on August 18. O'Grady envisioned the performance as a "collage-in-space," with different actions taking place simultaneously on two sides of a stream and further up a hill. She describes its structure as a "three-ring circus," in which multiple temporalities and micro-narratives coexist and speak to O'Grady's life experiences. The narratives that compete for attention present multiple realities with the aim of uniting two different heritages, the Caribbean and New England, and three different ages and aspects of O'Grady's self, family dynamics, and artistic identity. It involved seventeen performers, including O'Grady, with precisely designed costumes and props. The characters were identified by their vibrantly colored clothing, such as the Woman in Red (O'Grady's adult self), the Woman in White (O'Grady's mother), the Teenager in Magenta (O'Grady's adolescent self), and the Young Man in Green. Serving as *tableaux vivants* of O'Grady's past are the Girl in White, who recites Latin grammar government lessons through a megaphone, the Woman in White, who disinterestedly grates coconuts throughout the entire performance, and the Nantucket Memorial, a symbol of O'Grady's New England upbringing. In the 1970s reality of the Woman in Red, she navigates her entrance into the New York art world through the characters of the Debauchees (who represent her life in the realm of pop culture as a rock critic), Art Snobs, and Black Male Artists in Yellow. A decisive moment in the piece is when the Woman in Red spray-paints a white stove red, shown in the photograph The Woman in *Red starts painting the stove her own color.* This action not only signifies the moment O'Grady begins her artistic transformation, but also when she becomes her own person outside of her mother's indoctrination, aligning her own narrative with the Feminist discourse of the time. The ending sequence of Rivers, First Drafts unites O'Grady's childhood, adolescent, and adult selves as the characters walk down the stream together. For her, this scene represents the moment before she performed her first artwork, the now iconic MIle Bourgeois Noire.

The piece was performed only once, for a small invited audience of friends from Just Above Midtown (JAM) gallery and the occasional passersby. In the early 1980s, as O'Grady embarked on a new career as an artist, she found a supportive and challenging community in JAM. Headed by Linda Goode-Bryant, artists such as David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, Tyrone Mitchell, and Dawoud Bey congregated around JAM, as well as the art historians Lowery Stokes Sims, Judith Wilson, and Kellie Jones. O'Grady explains, "For me, doing Rivers in the context of Just Above Midtown was a unique art-making moment, one when the enabling audience-the audience which allows the work to come into existence and to which the work speaks—and the audience that consumes the work were one and the same." In addition, she cast JAM artists George Mingo and Fred Wilson as characters in the performance. Having taken place in the daylight, the lush green sun-dappled nature of the Loch was a prominent backdrop, adding to the conglomeration of saturated color and sound. O'Grady's succinct selection and cropping of images reflect this simultaneity and the dream-like quality of the original performance. Only Kodachrome 35 mm slides of the piece survive to memorialize the event. In collaboration with Eastman Kodak Company, the 2015 manifestation of Rivers, First Draft captures the rich colors and deep contrasts of the performance, achieved with analog and digital technology and photographic paper from Kodak's headquarters in Rochester, NY.

Production Credits Rivers, First Draft

Rivers, First Draft was originally performance in The Loch, a northern section of Central Park, New York, August 18, 1982. It was presented as part of *Art Across the Park*, curated by Gylbert Coker, Horace Brockington, and Jennifer Manfredi.

Cast

Woman In White: Marilyn Worrel Nantucket Memorial: Robert Feinberg Male Artists: Lorenzo Pace, Noah Jemison, George Mingo Little Girl: Bouqui Kya-Hill Art Snobs: Andrea Radu, Cesar Palma Woman In Gold: Beverly Trachtenberg Debauchees: Francine Berman, Richard De Gussi Woman In Red: Lorraine O'Grady Teenager: Darnell Martin Young Man: Fred Wilson The Production Assistants: Emily Velde, Bern 1905 Nude Swimmer: Richard De Gussi

Production

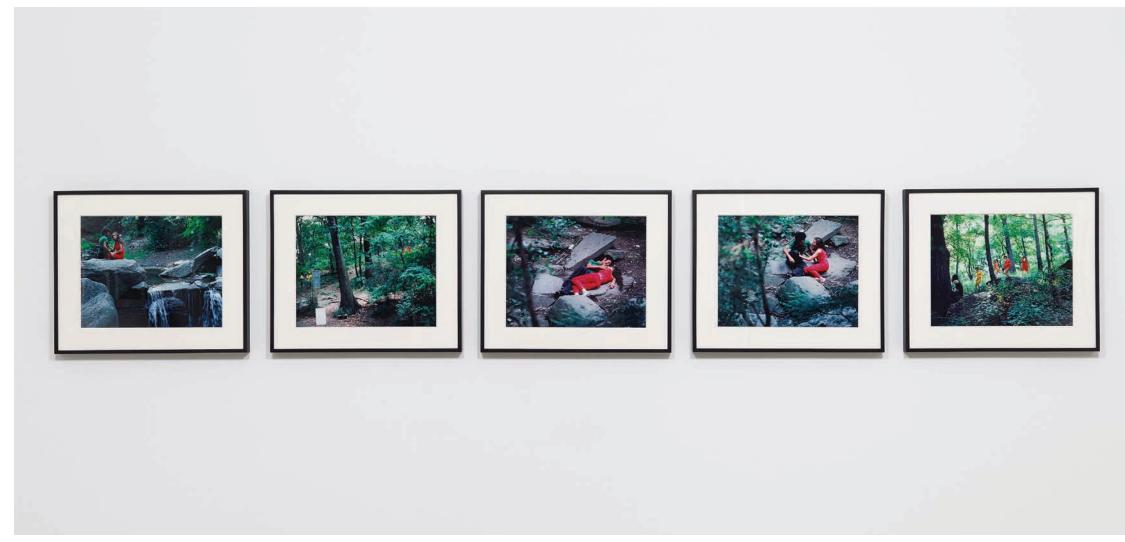
Writer, Producer: Lorraine O'Grady Directors: Lorraine O'Grady, Ellen Sragow, Emily Velde Costume Designer: Bern 1905 Set Designers: Noah Jemison, Lorenzo Pace Sound Editor: Richard De Gussi New Wave Tape: Bill O'Connor West Indian Newscast: Claude Tate, WLIB Flyers And Programs: Beverly Trachtenberg Athena Helmet: Fons Music: Jimmy Cliff, "Under the Sun, Moon, and Stars," "On My Life," Warner Proc. Peoerde: Nine Heggen, "Smook, Jock," by E. Kormelk, CRS Peoerde:

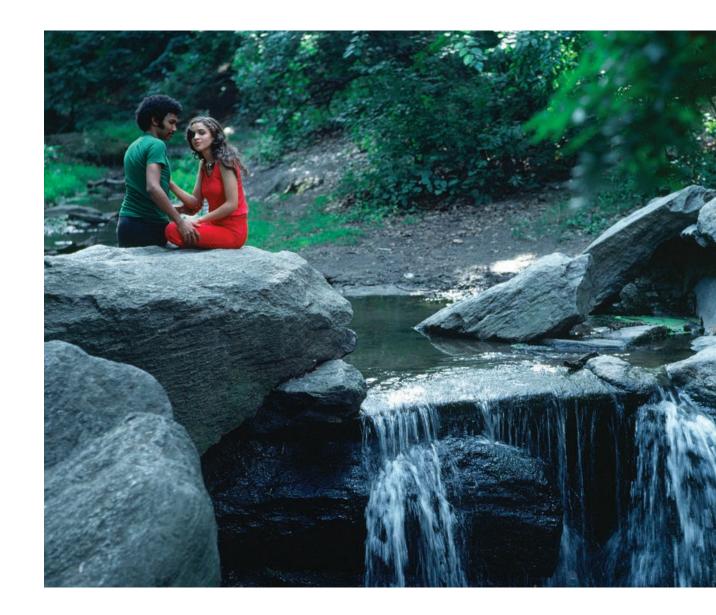
Bros. Records; Nina Hagan, "Smack Jack," by F. Karmelk, CBS Records; Tom Tom Club, "Wordy Rappinghood," Sire Records; John Foxx, "Metal Beat," Island Music Ltd.; Lorraine O'Grady, a cappella Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," tape-recorded by Richard DeGussi; Public Image Ltd., "Graveyard," Warner Bros. Records





The Little Girl with Pink Sash memorizes her Latin lesson





Their flirtation begins





The Debauchees dance down the hill, the Woman in Red falls further behind



The Debauchees dance in place, and the Woman in Red catches up to them



The Nantucket Memorial blends into the granite and the stream, detail





The Debauchees intersect the Woman in Red, and the rape begins



The stove becomes more and more red





The Woman in Red returns to her album, and the Nantucket Memorial comes to life





The Woman, the Teenager in Magenta, and the Little Girl in Pink Sash steady each other's footing



The Woman in the White Kitchen tastes her coconut

Cutting Out the New York Times, 1977/2015



Cutting Out the New York Times, 1977/2015

Cutting Out the New York Times was created over twenty-six consecutive Sundays during the summer of 1977, resulting in twenty-six text-based images assembled from headlines and advertising tag-lines. In a private and performative gesture, O'Grady explains, "I would smoosh the cut scraps around on the floor until a poem appeared." At that time, O'Grady was teaching the course "Futurist, Dada and Surrealist Literature" at the School of Visual Arts in New York, while simultaneously exploring alternative avenues of creative fulfillment and expression. Her interest lay in challenging the Dadaists' and Surrealists' embrace of the random and irrational as oppositional attitudes to rational Western society. O'Grady welcomed the random in order to expose and force meaning back into it, making instead "an effort to construct out of that random public language a private-self, to rescue a kind of rational madness from the irrational Western culture I felt inundated by."

The resulting work—digital color-prints of the original text—became a vital and transitional piece for O'Grady. She connects the piece to her personal history when she worked as an intelligence officer for the Departments of Labor and State in the years leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Her job entailed reading ten newspapers a day, unedited transcripts of Cuban radio, and classified agent field reports. By the end, O'Grady states, "Language had melted into a gelatinous pool. It had collapsed for me." Through Cutting Out The New York Times she investigated the potential of visual art through a linguistic mode. She viewed the creation of the poems as an aesthetic exercise, exploring a means of visual and performative expression beyond the purely linguistic. Relating the poems to Concrete Poetry, O'Grady creates their visuality through the linear and syncopating placement of the cut-outs. The juxtapositions of size and style between the typefaces add to the collages' visual rhythm. These poems present a highly personal narrative that touches on themes such as love, family, womanhood, hybridity, race, and self, subjects that would unfold in O'Grady's subsequent performances and artworks.



Missing Persons, detail

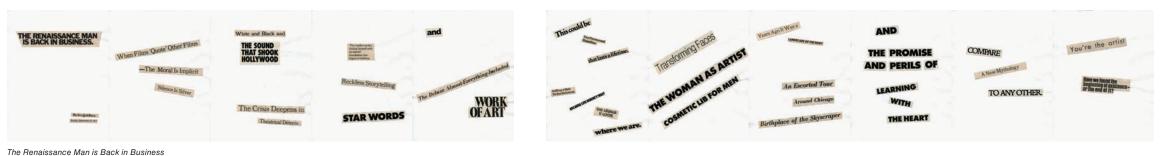


Missing Persons

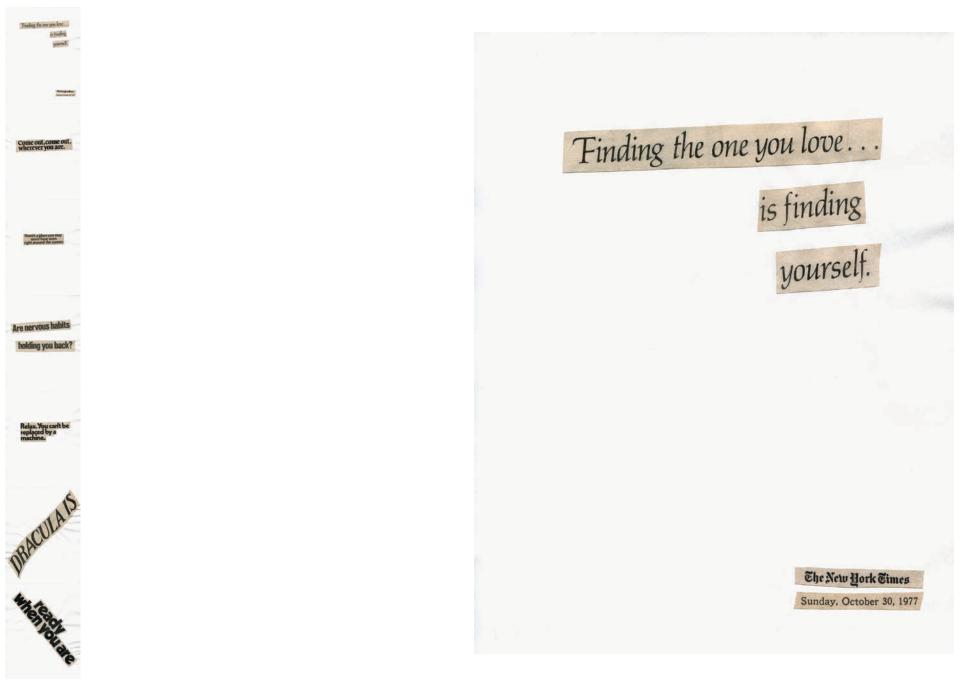
THE RENAISSANCE MAN IS BACK IN BUSINESS.

The Renaissance Man is Back in Business, detail

Ehe New Hork Eimes Sunday, September 25, 1977



The Renaissance Man is Back in Business



Above: Finding the one you love . . . is finding yourself Right: detail

Just the two of us.

Ehe New Hork Eimes September 11, 1977

Just the Two of Us, detail



Just the Two of Us



Ehe New York Eimes Sunday, September 18, 1977

I Heard My Sister Speak My Name, detail



I Heard My Sister Speak My Name

Lorraine O'Grady (b.1934) combines strategies related to humanist studies on gender, the politics of diaspora and identity, and reflections on aesthetics by using a variety of mediums that include performance, photo installation, moving media, and photomontage. A native of Boston, MA, her work involves her heritage as a New Englander, and daughter of Caribbean immigrant parents. After she graduated from Wellesley College in 1956 studying economics and Spanish literature, she served as an intelligence analyst for the United States government, a literary and commercial translator, and rock music critic. Turning to visual arts in the late 1970s, O'Grady became an active voice within the alternative New York art world of the time. In addition to addressing feminist concerns, her work tackled cultural perspectives that had been underrepresented during the Feminist movements of the early 1970s.

In the 1980s, O'Grady created two of her most recognized bodies of work, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–83), a guerilla performance taking place in the heart of New York City's downtown art scene, and *Art Is*... (1983), a joyful performance in Harlem's African-American Day Parade. In *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, O'Grady's extravagant persona responded to the Futurist dictum that art has the power to change the world and was in part a critique of the racial apartheid still prevailing in the mainstream art world. Wearing a costume made of 180 pairs of white gloves from thrift shops and carrying a white cato-nine-tails of sail rope from a seaport store that she had studded with white chrysanthemums, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle-Class) was an equal-opportunity critic. She gave both timid black artists and thoughtless white institutions a "piece of her mind." Under this persona, O'Grady visited both the bourgeoning Just Above Midtown black avant-garde gallery and the then recently opened New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Art Is... embodied O'Grady's desire to fully connect with the audience. The performance was undertaken in a spirit of elation which carried over through the day; unlike previous works which had critiqued the art world from within, this piece went outside to be about life and art. O'Grady used a 9 by 15 foot antique-styled gold frame mounted on a gold-skirted parade float that moved slowly up Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, framing everything it passed as art. Today, the work is a compelling reminder of the politics and power of art making, as well as the joy of experiencing art.

Concerned with the lack of African-American and other representation in the Feminist movement of the 1970s, O'Grady critiqued the effort's inability to "make itself meaningful to working-class white women and to non-white women of all classes." O'Grady has continued an ongoing commitment to articulating "hybrid" subjective positions that span a range of races, classes and social identities. In addition to her work as a visual artist, she has also made innovative contributions to cultural criticism with her writings, including the now canonical article, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity."

Lorraine O'Grady's work has been recently exhibited at MoMA PS1, New York (2014); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2014); 1a Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo, Cartagena, Colombia (2014); Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2013 and 2012); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2012); the Whitney Biennial, New York (2012 and 2010); Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar (2012); La Triennale Paris 2012, France (2012); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2012); Prospect.2 New Orleans, LA (2011); Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa (2011); Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain (2010); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2008); Art Institute of Chicago, IL (2008); and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007). Her work is represented in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA; Walter Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; and Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, Cambridge, MA. She has been a resident artist at Artpace San Antonio, TX, and has received numerous other awards, including a Creative Capital Grant, the CAA Distinguished Feminist Award, a Life Time Achievement Award from Howard University, Art Matters grant, Anonymous Was A Woman award, and United States Artists Rockefeller Fellow. Most recently she was named a 2015 Creative Capital Awardee in Visual Art. O'Grady's work will be the subject of one-person exhibitions at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015), the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (2015), and Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Sevilla, Spain (2016).

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Portrait of Lorraine O'Grady (Supper Club Series), 2014 Photo: Elia Alba

Illustrated Checklist

From Rivers, First Draft, 1982/2015 All photographs: Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides printed on Kodak Professional Endura Premier Glossy Paper Horizontal: 16h x 20w in (40.64h x 50.8w cm); Vertical: 20h x 13.4w in (50.8h x 34.04w cm); in 48 parts Edition of 8 with 2 APs



The Woman in White continues grating coconut



Their flirtation begins







The Nantucket Memorial stands motionlessly in the stream



As the Black Artists in Yellow work in their studio. the Debauchees enter at the top of the hill



Two Art Snobs dissect who's who and what's what in the art world



The Young Man in Green makes love to the Teenager in Magenta



The Teenager in Magenta stands depressed on the bank of the stream



The Young Man prepares to leave, and the Teenager tries to hold on to him

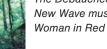


The Young Man in Green enters the scene



The Debauchees dance to New Wave music with the Woman in Red following







The Woman in White grates coconut in her kitchen, with the fir-palm tree outside



The Little Girl with Pink Sash memorizes her Latin



The Debauchees dance down the hill, the Woman in Red falls further behind



The Art Snobs briefly stop bantering



The Young Man pulls away

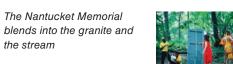


The Debauchees dance in place, and the Woman in Red catches up to them



The Young Man in Green rouses the Teenager from depression

The Nantucket Memorial



The Woman in Red goes to the Black Male Artists' door and the Debauchees dance back up the hill

The Woman in Gold rejects

The Teenager curls up in a

The Art Snobs' chatter

The Woman in White eats

coconut and looks away

The Woman in Red walks

toward the studio of the

Black Artists in Yellow

from the action

the Woman in Red

fetal position

continues



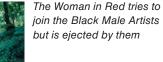
The Debauchees ignore the Woman in Red

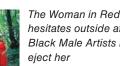
the stream



The Teenager in Magenta sits alone with her







The Woman in Red hesitates outside after the Black Male Artists in Yellow



The Artists in Yellow work on their projects as the Woman in Red struggles with the Debauchees

The Woman in Red begins

The Debauchees intersect

the Woman in Red, and the

rape begins



The Woman in Red, on a bed jutting into the water, skims an accordion-folded album of photos





As if from its pages, the Nude Swimmer emerges from the water and fondles her

to break away from the Debauchees



The Art Snobs comment for the last time



She descends to the stream where the white stove is standing



The Woman in Red returns to her album, and the Nantucket Memorial comes to life

She is absorbed, but the

Memorial insists

The Woman in Red starts painting the stove her own

color



The stove becomes more and more red



The Nantucket Memorial guides the Woman in Red to the other side of the stream

The Woman in White works impassively



The Woman, the Teenager in Magenta, and the Little Girl in Pink Sash steady each other's footing

The Woman in Red cooks, and the Teenager in Magenta lies curled across the stream



The three enter the stream



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Preceded by the Nantucket Memorial, the three make their way down



The Woman in Red, the Teenager in Magenta, and the Little Girl in Pink Sash wade the stream



They exit the bridge tunnel at The Loch's end



The Woman in the White Kitchen tastes her coconut From *Cutting Out The New York Times*, 1977/2015 All poems: Toner ink on adhesive paper Edition of 8 with 1 AP



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Cover image: *Rivers, First Draft: The Debauchees dance down the hill, the Woman in Red falls further behind*, 1982/2015, Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides printed on Kodak Professional Endura Premier Glossy Paper, 16h x 20w in (40.64h x 50.8w cm), part 13 of 48

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Alexander Gray Associates:

Alexander Gray, David Cabrera, Ursula Davila-Villa, John Kunemund, Chad Seelig, Peter Vargas, Victoria Pratt, Michelle Cohen, Rebecca Wolff, Carly Fischer

Interns: Emily Christensen, Jay Jadick

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Through exhibitions, research, and representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Influential in political, social and cultural spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

Alexander Gray Associates 510 West 26 Street New York NY 10001 United States Tel: +1 212 399 2636 www.alexandergray.com