Lorraine O’Grady: Cutting Out CONYT

Alexander Gray Associates
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In 1980, with her performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, Lorraine O’Grady formalized what in retrospect seems a lifelong rebellion by entering the community of artists and arts professionals in downtown New York. This act followed her study of economics, Spanish literature and creative writing, and a varied career, first as an analyst for the United States Government, later as a translator and owner of her own translation agency, then as a rock critic for the Village Voice and Rolling Stone, finally landing as a professor of humanities at the School of Visual Arts.

But before creating and executing that first performance work, O’Grady had, three years earlier — every Sunday from June 5 to November 20, 1977 — cut out text in various fonts, sizes, and formats from the Sunday *New York Times*. Each Sunday, she created a single multi-panel poem collaged from that day’s cuttings onto sheets of 11h x 8.5w inch white rag paper, resulting in 26 completed poems. She would position the scraps of text at unexpected angles with large portions of the white paper left visible, prompting the viewer to read them rhythmically, their eyes darting, often energetically, across the pages. This series, *Cutting Out the New York Times (CONYT)*, represented a vital moment of transition in O’Grady’s life and career. Although she had studied Spanish literature as an undergraduate at Wellesley College and Fiction at the Iowa Writers Workshop, she began CONYT, in her words, “as a writer but ended it as more of a visual artist.” The course she was teaching at SVA, “Futurist, Dada and Surrealist Literature,” had informed her characterization of one of CONYT’s goals as the establishment of a “counter-confessional poetry.” Though its poems have been shown sporadically since 2006, O’Grady has insisted that the series is a failure in that “[it] had been overwhelmed by process.” She felt the self-inflicted rules she’d created and followed in order to make them had stifled her poetic input.

Despite her perception of failure, the 1977 series serves, if not as her most resolved body of work, as a lexicon for understanding her larger oeuvre, and more importantly her conceptual framework. Key motifs and processes including: poetry and prose, hybridity and diaspora, the intersection of public and private realms, and appropriation and pastiche are all hallmarks of this work which reappear in virtually every series she has completed since. Additionally, as a result of the “counter-confessional” nature of her *Cutting Out The New York Times* poems, O’Grady’s identity as the Boston-raised, black bohemian daughter of colonial Caribbean
parents permeates her voice. This self-framing has, to some degree, become the origin from which she derives all of her narrative constructs as well as the centering of black female subjectivity, among the more important of the themes she examines through her work. Forty years after first conceiving of CONYT, in an attempt to resolve that which had felt incomplete or ineffective in the original poems, O’Grady would produce, from late July to mid-August 2017, the new work Cutting Out CONYT, a series of 25 “haiku-like” diptychs plus a single panel that serves as a “statement” for the entire suite. These new poems are comprised of replicas of radically selected and rearranged pages from her 1977 poems now printed at 41.75h x 30w inches, still cut and collaged by hand. Through the examination of these two bodies of work, bookends of her practice thus far, one can trace the culmination of key elements of her artistic development, the consistency of her pursuit, and the growth and precision she has refined in the intervening years. Produced in the 40 years between the 1977 and 2017 series has been a body of works addressing the historic and contemporary absence of narratives like her own in the spaces of high art—and constituting an effort by the artist “to make the invisible visible.” Emblematic of her clarity of purpose and her uniquely cultural-critical voice are the first lines of the standalone Statement Panel 26 in which O’Grady aptly proclaims, “This could be/ The Permanent Rebellion/ that lasts a lifetime.” Given her roots in the literary word, it is unsurprising that she would embark on a career in visual art with language at the center of her practice. While CONYT and Cutting Out CONYT are the only series of hers in which text is the literal manifestation of black female subjectivity, among the more important of the themes she examines through her work. Despite common perceptions that the “art world” is a more liberal cultural arena than most, O’Grady experienced more obvious bigotry as an artist than at any previous point in her adult life. As she explains, “in general [I had] avoided the most egregious forms of discrimination—perhaps due to how I looked (I was fair-skinned and still straightened my hair) . . . [and perhaps also because, in my previous worlds, there were more objective measurements of achievement which I met easily].” The art world was the first place I’d felt “unfairly” “cornered” that way.” It is against that backdrop that her emblematic Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (1980-83) entered arts institutions to exclaim her poem aloud. Similarly influenced by literature, her photographic series Miscegenated Family Album (1980/94) and the photo-documentation series made from her Central Park performance Rivers, First Draft are structured as visual novels in space, and The First and Last of the Modernists (2010) is comprised of diptychs comparing and conflating the cultural significance of Michael Jackson and the 19th century French poet Charles Baudelaire. Each set of images in a single series is for O’Grady like a chapter in a book, and in the case of the Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and Art Is… performances and O’Grady’s conceptually curated exhibit, 1983’s The Black and White Show, three seemingly distinct projects function as a trilogy. In an invocation of literature, the diptychs that comprise Cutting Out CONYT are each presented in a single frame, with its two panels just 3/8 inch apart and meant to look like an open book. Beyond a formal unity across the series, the constraints of the diptych also enforce brevity of text. With this came her decision to describe the poems as “haiku-like objects,” haiku being the most condensed form of poetry. The mechanics employed in successful haiku rely on a “turn” in the second half of the poem where a new element is introduced. As Dr. Cora Agatucci, professor of English, explains, “a haiku presents a pair of contrasting images, one suggestive of time and place, the other a vivid but fleeting observation. Working together, they evoke mood and emotion. The poet does not comment on the connection but leaves the synthesis of the two images for the reader to perceive.” In O’Grady’s haiku, the 3/8 inch space between the panels of the diptych serve as the de facto “turn.” The text on the two “pages” is not in a competitive hierarchy but in a circular exchange where each informs and shifts our perception of the other. One such example is O’Grady’s Haiku Diptych 15: the panels read: “In the Amber Glow of/ August skin/ there is no escape from terror” | “The Sun Also Rises/ on New Tracks– Without a Railroad.” She first melodically evokes and then forlornly accepts the inevitability of aging in its physical manifestation– the terror of the first page is both explained and soothed by the notion...
of progress in a future without prescribed tracks on which to rely. For O’Grady, age in her work goes beyond the abstract; aging is not only a theme in these poems but also a condition in her making them. The artist began CONYT just after a hospital stay when she was in her early 40s at a moment when aging felt to her, “[not like a] precursor to death but a precursor to a loss of [feminine sexual] power… I was gradually losing the kind of power that I had been able to count on. The power of response.”14 At the outset of Cutting Out CONYT she was in her early 80s, and thus meditations on aging became both more and less urgent than in her earlier series. Given her age difference while making CONYT and Cutting Out CONYT, O’Grady’s focus on differing themes in each series is inevitable and indicative of her own growth in the intervening years. Conversely, her ability to find poignancy in the same source material across decades indicates a consistency in both her modes and topics of concern. Through this repurposing of her first poems, she enables both the pages and the individual elements of text to take on new meanings while remaining inextricable from their source. In this way, the series Cutting Out CONYT, taken holistically, performs a “turn” where the first element of the proverbial haiku is the original 1977 CONYT and the second element is the new series, her identities at each age imbuing the “turn” with humor and interest.

The Japanese origin of the haiku has a clear relationship to O’Grady’s own “both/and” philosophy, a rebuke of Western dualism. She found in Eastern philosophy not necessarily a guide into spirituality informed by Zen Buddhism, but rather a strong echo that justifies her own thoughts on hybridized identity. This phrasing and theory, “both/and,” is not only central to her choice of poetic form, but also to the physical form of the diptych, a conceptual cornerstone of her practice. In her view, two images, when placed side-by-side are in conversation with one another but not compared hierarchically as they would inherently be under the Western binary, whose condemnation is rooted in the simultaneous irresolution and fluidity of living her Jamaican heritage and New England upbringing.15 As O’Grady explains, “art is a part of my project of finding equilibrium. Of becoming whole. Like many bi- or tri-cultural artists, I have been drawn to the diptych or multiple, where much of the information happens in the space between.”16 She has expanded on her fascination with these interstices as a critical and necessary lack of resolution. In her words, “with the diptych there’s no being saved, no before and after, no either/or; it’s both/ and, at the same time. With no resolution, you just have to stand there and deal.”17

In addition to the interplay of psychological and other differences, O’Grady uses the panels of the diptych to signal historic absence – from the canon, from prevailing power structures – and in the space between them the viewer is left to contemplate the consequences of making visible those fault lines.

Hybridity in various forms recurs in her work, and is in part a product of tension between personal and political narratives, aesthetics, and relationships. As she explains, “we do not look at or produce art with aesthetics and philosophy over here, and politics and economics over there;”18 art can never be extricated from the world in which it emerges or the subjectivity of the artist who produces it. In the case of CONYT, O’Grady entered the project with a desire to navigate her own relationship to the zeitgeist, conceived of as a reversal of the style of confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton whose poetry was popular in academic circles during the 1970s. On the distinction between those writers’ conceit to share their most intimate secrets with the populace and her own approach, O’Grady remarks, “I felt that my poetry was going from the outside in and they were going from the inside out.”19

By this O’Grady meant that she was looking to answer the question, “what would I discover about the culture and about myself?”20 in the poetry’s making.

One poem in particular, Haiku Diptych 10,21 makes clear O’Grady’s consideration of her process of culling from the culture to better understand herself: “For years/ you’ve written the hard way./ Are you capable/ of selecting” | “The Loose, Drifting Material of/ Plagues.” Not only does she make a meta query about the outcome of the poem she is creating, but also about her work as an artist who appropriates text and image to construct narratives and paradigms positioning black female subjective
Cutting Out CONYT 03, 1977/2017

agency at their centers. While The New York Times may seem removed from the personal, her ability to be “counter-confessional” with widely available text is not incidental. The day’s events, advertisements, and criticism all shape and reflect the lived experiences of individuals within a culture and yet O’Grady intentionally removes them from that context and treats them as raw material free of association. Further, popular media in 1977 centered very few stories about black women and even fewer written by them, yet O’Grady claims the text as her own and does so boldly, confidently, as if she does not doubt her own entitlement to see herself in those pages, in itself an act of reclaiming a space of historic invisibility. Her own prior professional experiences and academic excellence had ingrained in her a clarity of her own merits that confirmed her entitlement to language in all its forms, giving way to her desire to apply the public text to her own private expression. In fact, by removing them from the newspaper as a whole she allows the viewer to consume her poems completely apart from the events documented in the paper and to focus solely on the visuality of the mismatched fonts and the lyricism and syntax in which she is more interested. She invokes race only a few times in her 2017 poems, and yet her identity and concerns are embedded because they influence her selection and pairing of panels. For O’Grady, this junction, “that complex point where the personal intersects with the historic and the cultural” is eminently fruitful and has encouraged her to mine cultural output in various projects since CONYT. In the case of one of her best-known series, Miscegenated Family Album, O’Grady aligns personal family portraits with art historical images of Nefertiti and the Egyptian queen’s sister; a literal juxtaposition of personal and communal histories. In collaging poems excerpted from “the paper of record” O’Grady was similarly extracting, for proof to disinterested others of her complex identity, evidence of her place in its world.

In the process of creating Cutting Out CONYT, however, O’Grady now appropriates from her own work, using CONYT as raw material from which she might better understand herself. Interestingly, she focuses on the process of artmaking or on the responsibility of the artist in a number of the resulting diptychs. Back in 1977, when she began her series, it was with an inkling that she’d like to become a visual artist; she created the entirety of the 2017 works knowing for certain she is one. It is with that clarity and four decades of experience that she prescribes in Haiku Diptych 03 what her goals as an artist must be: “The modern artist, / finding himself with/ no shared/ foundation, has/ begun to build on/ Reckless Storytelling/ STAR WORDS’” "The Deluxe Almost-Everything-Included/ WORK/ OF ART.” Her focus on art making as subject is in many ways a result of the “bookending” phenomenon that CONYT and Cutting Out CONYT represents. O’Grady posited ideas in the first series that have guided her practice ever since, and to some extent, in making Cutting Out CONYT, she has reclaimed and revised the very thoughts that propelled her to become an artist.

“The deluxe almost-everything-included work of art” is in many ways a description of her own ability to embed layered, complex content in surprisingly sparse images. In her transition from her earliest series to her most recent, O’Grady proves her increasing sophistication not just of message, but also her heightened ability to convey more substance with less literal information on the surface. Visual sparseness, a kind of concision, is paramount for O’Grady and has become even more so over time. Already in Cutting Out The New York Times she was leaving swathes of white space in which the viewer might project themselves, and yet then, by using as many pages of text as she did, she provided information with which that same viewer could navigate the work. Over time, she has downsized further, so much so that she has downsized to just two panels of text and has removed the titles, favoring numbers instead to reflect the traditional titling of haiku. Beyond that visual economy, her redress of critical absence is another example of what it means for art to be “almost-everything-included;” she acknowledges those and that which has been so conspicuously missing from dominant art practices, from our cultural institutions, and from theory, and centers the absent, including them as she had not been included by artists who came before.

While O’Grady might consider her early poems a failure from a literary perspective, they were clearly a counter-confessional success in which she honed her viewpoint and thematic focuses. In revisiting those works to make Cutting Out CONYT with the clarity of editing honed over the past four decades, her concerns come through more resolutely, most of all her ability to center black female subjectivity through cultural critique. Over the intervening years that separate CONYT and Cutting Out CONYT, the art world has itself been the subject and object of much of O’Grady’s address. It is through her return to text as medium that she is most literally able to make demands of her viewers and peers alike. In transitioning from her multi-page poems to her diptychs, the interstices that are so thematically critical to her critique
of a Western binary are made literal, and her viewers are pushed to contemplate those spaces, and their own assumptions about critical resolution. It is through these two bodies of work that O’Grady has both opened and closed a chapter in her career dedicated to demanding from the art world that they investigate further their own assumptions about who and what constitutes narratives of note.

Notes

1 Interviewed by the author, New York, November 9, 2017.
2 B.A. received 1956. M.F.A. Candidate 1965-76.
3 Still point of popularity in 1977 for confessional poets including: Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton.
5 Letterpress printing on Japanese paper, cut-out, collage on laid paper. Printed in collaboration with RENÉ SCHMITT DRUCKGRAPHIK, Westoverledingen, Germany.
8 Comments added to quote in conversation with the author, New York, October 4, 2018.
11 True Haiku must be 17 syllables: in English translations the result is three unrhymed lines of 5, 7, 5 syllables.
14 In conversation with the author, New York, August 30, 2018.
15 Born in 1934 in Boston, MA to West Indian parents.
19 Interviewed by the author, New York, July 12, 2018.
21 Original pages from Those Missing the Boat Can Catch It in Classes, Sunday, October 2, 1977.
Prophetic Vision

and the Living Is Easy...

We wrote the book on

The Danger of Blurring
Fact and Fantasy

Soft Cover, Hard Cash

at

The House in the Hill
How to get the one thing everyone wants most in life

Are you thinking about plastic surgery?

Good morning. Good afternoon.

Soft in message. Subtle in tone.
The modern artist, finding himself with no shared foundation, has begun to build on Reckless Storytelling

and

The Deluxe Almost-Everything-Included

STAR WORDS

WORK OF ART
DRACULA IS ready when you are
In The Beginning

Crazy Love

Tomorrow

Personal Landmarks

but Crisis Continues

Pleasant Surprises

Just Aren’t Getting Along
The Salton Hot Basket.

And only one woman could have created it.

Perfection has its price.
The “Good Life” Has Found a Limit

If you stay in a different Ramada Inn every night, you won’t get home for nearly two years.
Do something about the weather.

A Little Night Myopia Brings New Life to

Becoming an Extinct Species
twice a day Chase the Wind
Icarus Redux
Wings in
Flight Toward Jupiter and Saturn

The Man With the Perfect Ear
never sleeps

a
Never-Ending
Happy Ending
Some people go

IN SEARCH OF

The Trauma of

PRIVACY

Uptown, Downtown—they’re free
For years you've written the hard way.

Are you capable of selecting

The Loose, Drifting Material of Plagues
WANT

The Effects of Ice on Moorish Delight

Taste

Ideas From Moving Water

Build Yourself a Home That Fits
Come out, come out, wherever you are.

Relax. You can't be replaced by a machine.
I HAD WILD JACK
FOR A LOVER

Lip-Licking, Leg-Crossing

HEART OF ICE

the Parent

That Refused to Die

Come of Age

go to sleep
Turn-of-the-Century America

TIMELESS SUMMERS IN OLD-TIME MAINE

The Dilemma of the ideal way

Is Baseball Too Slow? Or Is It Supposed to Be That Way
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2018
In the Amber Glow of August skin
there is no escape from terror
It's been said that gold isn't
But in fact it often is.

The Best of All Gifts: Common Things That Move the Imagination

A Feeling As Well As A Look
Spinning Around the World
ON A MISSION
YOU WON'T GIVE UP
IN TEN MINUTES.

YOU'VE GOT SO MUCH GOING FOR YOU
—on your way to Rio.

Riding With the Fates

Several Murders Later,
Facing the Unknown
BEGIN

THE LONG NAKED DESCENT INTO BOSTON
Ekaterina, Not Nymphadora

Options Limited

FINALLY COMES HOME

One of us excites you.  One of us delights you.

Is It Déjà Vu?
Here Come
the Brilliant Days of Autumn

Old Energy in New Bottles
Sounding New Alarms

discover the center and
rediscover yourself

SUMMER IS BEING
HELD OVER

UNTIL THE
SUN DIES
Installation view, SCAD Museum of Art, 2018

Perfection has its price.
The "Good Life" Has Found a Limit

The Sultan Hot Basket.

And very one woman
www.airbnb.com

If you stay in a different
Ramada Inn every night, you
won't get home
for almost two years.
White and Black and
THE SOUND THAT SHOOK HOLLYWOOD

You're the artist
Have we found the beginning of existence—or the end of it?

The Crisis Deepens in
Theatrical Détente
Crime Pays on a Dreamboat.

Economic Man Acquires a Soul

AT the club with no time limit

WE'LL GIVE YOU THE WHOLE WORLD
light up the night!

impressions

may be the death of us all.
Only one Connecting Flight Leads from Perseid Shower Delights to A Lost World Staking Claims
somehow
the coldest day
seems gentle.

revelling in

Sexy Economics

Behind Kabuki’s
Masks and Screens

BETTE & JOAN

go wild with

Psychological Autopsies:
Marathon Mother

Is Considering a Change

'Guten Abend,' said a voice as the massive door swung open. 'We've been expecting you.'

But the wind kept blowing harder.
This could be

The Permanent Rebellion

that lasts a lifetime.

Calling a Halt
To the Universe

BECAUSE LIFE DOESN'T WAIT

THE SAVAGE IS LOOSE

where we are.
Illustrated Checklist

From Cutting Out CONYT, 1977/2017
All works: Letterpress printing on Japanese paper, cut-out, collage on laid paper.
Diptych: Each: 41.75h x 30w in, overall: 41.75h x 60w in
Edition of 12 with 1 AP

Cutting Out CONYT 01
Cutting Out CONYT 02
Cutting Out CONYT 03
Cutting Out CONYT 04
Cutting Out CONYT 05
Cutting Out CONYT 06
Cutting Out CONYT 07
Cutting Out CONYT 08
Cutting Out CONYT 09
Cutting Out CONYT 10
Cutting Out CONYT 11
Cutting Out CONYT 12
Cutting Out CONYT 13
Cutting Out CONYT 14
Cutting Out CONYT 15
Cutting Out CONYT 16
Cutting Out CONYT 17
Cutting Out CONYT 18
Other Illustrated Works

Cutting Out The New York Times, 1977
Toner ink on adhesive paper
11.02h x 7.88w in (27.99h x 20w cm)

Miscenegenated Family Album (Sisters III), L: Nefertiti’s daughter, Maketaten; R: Devonia’s daughter, Kimberley, 1980/1994
Cibachrome print
26h x 37w in (66.04h x 93.98w cm)
Edition of 8 + 1 AP

The First and the Last of the Modernists, Diptych 3 Blue (Charles and Michael), 2010
Fujiflex print
46.80h x 37.40w in (118.87h x 95w cm)
Edition of 8 + 2 AP

Cutting Out the New York Times, Just the Two of Us, 1977/2010
Toner ink on adhesive paper
88.19h x 7.88w in (224h x 20w cm), in 8 parts
Edition of 8 + 1 AP
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 Engander of Caribbean immigrant parents. After she graduated from Wellesley College in 1956 with a degree in economics and Spanish literature, she served as an intelligence analyst for the United States government, a literary and commercial translator, and a 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 cat-o-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.”

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.