

Art in America

MEDITATIONS ON THE HISTORY OF THE PRESENT

By *Christina Sharpe* | March 2, 2021

I seem to get my best political ideas when looking for aesthetic solutions.—Lorraine O’Grady
The form of my work has proven to me to be more important than the content. If you had told me when I started forty years ago that I would be saying that, I would probably have laughed. But the diptych has always been, in a sense, my primary form, even in the performances. For me, the diptych can only be both/ and. When you put two things that are related and yet totally dissimilar in a position of equality on the wall, for example, they set up a conversation that is never-ending.

—Lorraine O’Grady

The art world of today is an arena of confrontation, encounter, conflict, and also imagination for Black people. This is true in relation to questions of representation in contemporary art itself as well as in relation to the politics of the spaces where art is gathered, collected, and shown. After all, what we call visibility is not neutral, it is not simply looking, it is a regime of how to see and where one is located on that scale of seeing and being that is founded in the logic of the plantation. La Tanya Autry, cofounder of the advocacy initiative Museums Are Not Neutral, writes succinctly about museums and this power:

As museums are cultural products that originate from colonial enterprise, they are about power. They are political constructs. Their ongoing practices also are rooted in power. The very fact that this field has a long history of excluding and marginalizing people of color in terms of selection, interpretation, and care of art and other objects, jobs, visitor services, board representation, and more indicates that museums are political spaces. Everything in them and about them involves decisions.¹

For nearly a half century, Lorraine O’Grady has produced a profound body of art and writing that reckons with and contests the logics of anti-Blackness, coloniality, and extraction that underpin cultural institutions. The texts anthologized in her new volume, *Writing in Space, 1973–2019*, immerse readers in O’Grady’s prescience. Organized thematically rather than chronologically in six sections, the essays and interviews each begin with a brief introduction written by the editor, Aruna D’Souza. The collection spans the four decades of O’Grady’s career with interdisciplinary writings that address questions of formal beauty in concept-driven art, interrogate where and how power operates in every part of the organization of museum space, and highlight Black avant-garde and abstract work.

O’Grady is an artist and thinker *sui generis*. She arrived at art-making in her mid-forties after careers as a civil servant, a translator, and a music critic, and a brief interlude trying to write a novel. As a forty-five-year-old Black woman, she was not as susceptible to the manipulation,

careerism, and other pitfalls that younger artists encountered. She caught on right away to the kinds of white supremacist gatekeeping that goes by the name of “quality.” This knowledge (what the Ghanaian novelist and playwright Ama Ata Aidoo has named in *Our Sister Killjoy* as “*knowledge gained since*”) is part of what sustains her radical praxis.

O’Grady’s life as a visual artist began with “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire” (1980–83), a series of live pieces in which she adopted the persona of a beauty queen from French Guiana. In this guise, O’Grady burst into the art world at the exhibition “Nine White Personae” at Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York, reading a poem adapted from the Négritude poet Léon-Gontran Damas in a dress made entirely of white gloves (internalized oppression) and carrying a cat-o’-nine-tails (externalized oppression). This was a performance born of critique where the intervention was as much on the level of language as it was the body. Indeed, O’Grady insists “performance” is an inadequate descriptor for her work because she thinks and works, always, in terms of language—her art is “writing in space.”

But, in 1983, just as quickly as she began, O’Grady stepped away from this work in order to care for her mother. Though she returned to making art in 1988, she abandoned live art in favor of photo installations and videos. Still, in the five years that she was away from direct participation in the art world, while doing that care work that so many women do, O’Grady remained deeply enmeshed in conversations concerning art and literature, and in theory (Black feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist), cultural studies, and art history.

O’Grady has a long engagement with multiple philosophical, art historical, and literary traditions and with Black diasporic life and thought. These conversations on [Black art](#)-making have extended beyond the national American context. Her engagement with Egyptology (and her refusal of its racist roots), for example, anticipates the work of Martin Bernal, whose three-volume *Black Athena* (1987–2006) foregrounds the centrality of African culture in antiquity. Her *Miscegenated Family Album* (1994), a printed series of diptychs in which O’Grady pairs photographs of her sister Devonia Evangeline with Nefertiti, thereby links the personal, historical, and political in relation to what she calls “historic forces of displacement and hybridization.” The work also exemplifies the importance of the diptych in O’Grady’s formal and conceptual vocabulary: the comparative structure is, for her, a way to both name and refuse the binary logics of Euro Western modes of thinking.

Given that, according to O’Grady, her “most important influences are literary,” we might chart a genealogy that includes not only Flannery O’Connor (an important figure for her) but also the nineteenth-century Black journalist, fiction writer, publisher, and editor Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, particularly the latter’s speculative 1902–03 novel set partially in Ethiopia, *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self*. O’Grady’s many influences and commitments come to the fore in her philosophical writings, which in their attention to language, their mix of tone, form, and genre, together constitute a theory of Black art, audience, and world-making. Her publications, conversations, and interviews are witty and sometimes biting, interested, perceptive, generous in thought, and aware always of what language can or might do and make. Just read the essay on the Allman Brothers and her devastating read of most white blues singers who “in their rush to imitate the guts of the blues, . . . seem to have completely missed its intelligence.” (“Gregg

Allman,” she continued, “is the first white blues singer I’ve ever believed was telling me the truth.”)

My first encounter with what O’Grady’s words could do came when I read “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” (1992/1994) in a collection on feminist art [criticism](#) while I was writing my dissertation. The essay was originally written for a panel on the nude in feminist art at the annual College Art Association meeting in 1992—and that context is important. O’Grady’s presence on the panel (before an academic audience that would have comprised largely white art historians) and her attention to the still-disprized Black female figure in and beyond the frame of Manet’s famous 1863 painting, brings to mind Audre Lorde delivering “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” at the Modern Language Association’s annual conference in 1977. At that professional meeting of academics from a variety of fields in modern language and literature, Lorde had a pointed question for those white women in colleges and universities who declined to teach Black women’s writing because “their experience is so different from mine.” “How many years,” she asked, “have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust?”

Many writers and critics have noted that O’Grady’s reading of the Black woman in the background of Manet’s Olympia—a professional model whose name was Laure—is among the first examples of sustained attention paid to the Black female figure in Western art.² What is she doing there? What work has her body been put there to do—she who is meant to disappear, she who is meant to turn the viewer’s attention to the white odalisque, she whose purpose is to shore up and insure the other woman’s femininity? With “Olympia’s Maid” O’Grady makes a set of complex arguments about Black female subjectivity that were a revelation and a rebuke. “There have been no last words spoken on subjectivity,” she writes to those who would insist otherwise. In her attention to Black women, sexuality, and their/our uses for others are unmistakable echoes of Hortense Spillers’s declaration in “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” a paper she delivered in 1982 at the Scholar and the Feminist IX Conference on Sexuality at Barnard College that “black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb.”

Part of what O’Grady accomplished in that tremendous work was to teach us how to see: that specific painting, art history’s continued erasures and framings of Black female bodies, the West’s deadly either/or logics. The essay begins: “The female body in the West is not a unitary sign,” and on her way to demonstrating this, O’Grady draws on a constellation of thinkers and artists, from Spillers, Gayatri Spivak, Toni Morrison, Michele Wallace, Judith Wilson, and Kobena Mercer to Isaac Julien, Stuart Hall, Jacqueline Rose, and many others. “Forget ‘tonal contrast,’” O’Grady writes, “we know what she is meant for: she is Jezebel and Mammy, prostitute and female eunuch, the two-in-one.” O’Grady was teaching us to see the world differently and to envision another horizon; she reoriented our sight (“to name ourselves rather than be named, we must first see ourselves”), and in so doing she also clarified that many white art world preoccupations in the 1990s were another form of gatekeeping—inclusion by way of exclusion.³ While detailing a material and representational assault on and process of disciplining Black women, O’Grady anchored her argument in the *longue durée*. “Olympia’s Maid” was written during the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings, which are a touchstone in the paper. This was

also the year that Julie Dash, a member of the group of filmmakers known as the LA Rebellion, sought to “heal our imperialized eyes,” as she wrote, with her breathtaking *Daughters of the Dust*.⁴ It is the year that Fred Wilson staged *Mining the Museum* in collaboration with the Maryland Historical Society, examining the ways that Blackness becomes the frame in much of Western art history.

If O’Grady’s 1992/1994 critique was an outsider’s challenge to academic processes of canonization, when I reencountered her body of work recently, it served as an invitation to assess the past and present. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire’s gowns and sashes were installed on mannequins as part of “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85,” at the Brooklyn Museum in 2017. Later, in April 2019, at a daylong conference in association with “Loophole of Retreat,” Simone Leigh’s 2018 Hugo Boss Award solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, O’Grady spoke about Leigh’s work, and remarked that the critical mass present in the room that day had helped banish the loneliness of the Black woman artist.⁵ She spoke about Diaspora, about needing all the many Blacknesses, about feminism and hybridity. She noted that even though she perceived herself as a solitary figure at the time, when she saw her work installed with that of forty other Black women artists in “We Wanted a Revolution,” she came to realize, belatedly, that she “was part of a movement.

With “Lorraine O’Grady: Both/And,” currently scheduled to open at the Brooklyn Museum this spring, O’Grady will, at eighty-six years of age, at last receive the full-scale retrospective she has long deserved. With it, she becomes one of several major Black artists to have, late in their careers, major exhibitions in white museums. Among them: Jack Whitten, Sam Gilliam (a major retrospective opens at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in spring 2022), Betye Saar (a solo show at MoMA in 2019), Howardena Pindell (a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2018, and currently showing at the Shed in New York), McArthur Binion, Melvin Edwards, Frank Bowling, Senga Nengudi, Al Loving, and Ed Clark, all of whom made art for decades and are only now receiving the attention they have long deserved, though—and this is key—they continued making work without it. Because, in every instance the work and not white recognition had to be, was, and is the thing.

Art Is . . .

Following a lecture at the University of Houston about O’Grady, D’Souza answered a question from an audience member about Black artists and majority white museums by posing a question of her own: If O’Grady (and by extension other Black artists now in their seventies and eighties) is good enough now at the age of eighty-six to have a retrospective that includes work she made thirty years ago, why wasn’t she good enough to have a retrospective twenty years ago when she was sixty-five, or thirty years ago when she was fifty-five?⁶ Of course, the answers to these questions are not forthcoming from the institutions, but they can be found in O’Grady’s *Writing in Space*. Answers can also be found in all the work that Black curators, educators, and museum workers do to make sure that museums acknowledge and repair their colonial past and present, and to lay the foundation for audiences to engage with the work of Black artists.

Curator Kelli Morgan has written about the work that must be done in white museums in order for Black artists' work to be met with care. Morgan makes utterly clear the institutional commitments necessary to enable audiences to encounter that work in all its complexity: In 2017, La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski were brutally honest when they launched their "Museums Are Not Neutral" T-shirt campaign, which recognized the ways in which institutional concepts of neutrality, objectivity, normality, professionalism, and high quality are used to perpetuate a status quo based on oppression, racism, injustice, and colonialism. This contemporary functionality is deeply rooted in the history of European museums, through what English sociologist Tony Bennett has called "the mismatch" of the philosophies or mission statements purported to govern museums and the exclusionary practices embedded within their actual modes of functioning.⁷

Morgan's assertions connect us to O'Grady's sense that she has been ahead of her time. Because, part of being "ahead of one's time" is not having the institutional apparatus in place to receive and support one's work with any intelligence. O'Grady has had to create the gallery and the art historical audience (if not the audience that quite literally meets her work in the street) capable of understanding the work and meeting it on its own hybrid literary/theoretical/representational grounds.

And by way of that audience, *Art Is . . .* (1983), performed at the African American Day parade in Harlem, employed a float featuring a large gold frame. Performers dressed in white and carrying smaller frames got on and off the float, holding the frames up in front of parade goers as they passed. One of the photographs documenting *Art Is . . .* (unpublished prior to its inclusion in *Writing in Space*), shows O'Grady and one of her assistants, both of whom are framed. The assistant is holding up her own frame; O'Grady's is held by someone outside the photograph's field, and pinned to O'Grady's top are two white gloves.

With *Art Is . . .* O'Grady moved avant-garde art directly into the streets, aiming to "put avant-garde art into the largest Black context she could think of, the million-plus viewers of the parade." The performance is the answer (art as argument) to the charge that the avant-garde has nothing to do with Black life. O'Grady writes that "the announcer made fun of the float as it passed the reviewing stand: 'They tell me this is art, but you know the Studio Museum? I don't understand that stuff.' But the people on the parade route got it. Everywhere there were shouts of 'That's right. That's what art is. We're the art! And Frame ME, make ME art!' It was amazing." O'Grady embarked on this project without, she said, a real sense of what it would produce—she did not really know Harlem, she was not familiar with the parade, and she was not exactly sure what she wanted the actors she hired to do. But once they were on the float and attuned to its staggered rhythms—its stops and starts—she saw a Harlem framed in a moment before the openness and joy of playing out on the street in the community was devastated by the mass introduction of crack.

In 1983 the vocabulary of gestures and references that animated *Art Is . . .* was "gettable," readable, and understandable, inhabited through collective experience and not restricted to the experience, deeply intimate and structural, of navigating white supremacy. *Art Is . . .* was performed and received outside the white gaze—O'Grady did not announce it in advance—

perhaps naively because “it wasn’t addressed to the art world.” We witness a kind of lightness, a spontaneity and freedom, in the photographs of this performance. This sense of freedom shows that while white supremacy does shape Black life, it does not calcify every aspect of our living and knowing and making. White supremacy does not make our living into mere response to its logics. This much is evident in how people respond to the performers: there is the young woman pointing, there are two sets of young girls in two frames, posing and smiling; there is such light in their eyes, you can almost hear their laughter. *Art Is . . .* released a series of gestures, actions and meanings that are, I think, apprehended by other Black people as part of the everyday experience, the grammar, of making Black life in the US and elsewhere.

That feeling and the exchange of looks among participants, performers, and audience meets **Pope.L’s** *Member a.k.a. Schlong Journey*, a performance that took place on 125th Street in Harlem on March 15, 1995. In a documentary video, Pope.L, wearing a powder blue suit, walks along with a long, white telescoping cardboard tube protruding from his crotch and resting on a rolling black support, with a white stuffed rabbit alternately riding in a chest pack or at the tip of the artist’s prosthetic “schlong.” Sometimes, as Pope.L walks and wheels the long white phallus, he inflates a plastic glove, and sometimes, he puts that glove over his head. It seems to me that even when the people he encountered on his walk up and down 125th Street did not know precisely what was going on, at the same time, they absolutely got what was going on. There was incredulity and laughter, not consternation and censure. In the 2019 retrospective “**member: Pope.L 1978–2001**” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the film paused on a watching young girl laughing convulsively. I also laughed out loud with recognition of the beauty in critique, the absurdity, and the palpable life in both *Art Is . . .* and Pope.L’s *Member*.

Likewise, there is joy and recognition and also something I might call refusal in Cauleen Smith’s *In the Wake: A Procession*, a counter-performance in which Smith’s flags—her contribution to the 2017 Whitney Biennial, which were hung in the lobby and the main gallery of the museum—were taken down and, in a refusal of art’s commodification, carried in procession through the streets around the museum, where they might get dirty or damaged.



Pope.L: *Member a.k.a. Schlong Journey*, 125th Street, New York, 1996, inkjet print, 10 by 15 inches.

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In each of these examples, there is a pedagogy and a practice of living. That practice, that changing grammar for life, is one to be found now in the serious jokes that have proliferated on- and offline about the absurdity (the absurdity!) of a \$600 stimulus check (only the second payout since the pandemic began, the first one being \$1,200 checks sent out in April 2020). This is what is imagined as “relief” in the face of massive unemployment (the most recent numbers showing 140,000 job losses among Black and Latina women), an eviction crisis, soaring numbers of people hungry and visiting food banks, schools under pressure, and more than 400,000 people dead in the US. The list could go on. And up against those realities and that brutal delusion that \$600 could do anything in the face of them, the jokes proliferate about what people will do in this panny when the stimmy hits.

O’Grady’s orientation to the world involves fierce intelligence, wit and humor, curiosity, anger (which she calls her “most productive emotion”), determination, beauty, an ear for language, and a commitment to “contribut[ing] to the task of creating a climate of questioning and refusal.” One consistent thread in her writings is the question of audience, and O’Grady’s determination that if she keeps making the work, museums will catch up. *Writing in Space* has invited us into O’Grady’s expansive and never-ending conversation. We have been shown how to read, and it just might be that the museums have caught up, at last, and just in time.

¹ For more on the initiative and a collection of La Tanya Autry’s writings, see artstuffmatters.wordpress.com.

² For other examples, see Jennifer DeVere Brody, “Black Cat Fever: Manifestations of Manet’s Olympia” in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 1, March 2001, pp. 95–118, and Huey Copeland, “In the Wake of the Negress,” in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2010, pp. 480–97. Denise Murrell’s 2018 book, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet to Matisse to Today*, following an eponymous exhibition she organized, was a groundbreaking curatorial statement about the centrality of Black figures in modernist art.

³ D’Souza writes: “The essay, alongside her photo project *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* from 1991, marks a shift of sorts in O’Grady’s thinking, from a postmodernist emphasis on critique (manifest in the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* project, for example) toward a recognition that postmodernism’s easy disposal of the ‘essentialized’ subject was another way of reinscribing white masculinity at the center of critical theory.” Something similar has happened in academia just as larger numbers of Black and Chicana and other nonwhite theorists are entering the academy in larger numbers and working from what they know.

⁴ See Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film*, New York, The New Press, 1992.

⁵ Video documentation of “Loophole of Retreat: A Conference,” held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York on April 27, 2019, is available on YouTube.

⁶ Video documentation of D’Souza’s talk, organized by the University of Houston School of Art and originally livestreamed on September 17, 2020, is available on YouTube.

⁷ Morgan expands on this point in her essay “To Bear Witness: Real Talk about White Supremacy in Art Museums Today,” burnaway.org.