

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Both Sides Now: In Conversation With Lorraine O'Grady

On the eve of her first major retrospective, the artist talks about her past, her process and the benefit of criticism.



By Kate Guadagnino

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In 1977, in a nod to the Surrealists, the conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady started cutting phrases out of The New York Times and rearranging them into lines of poetry, which she glued, mostly slantwise, onto sheets of rag paper: "Dinner is reserved for/Twin Speech: A Language of Their Own" reads one spliced fragment. She was in her early 40s. Fifteen years earlier, O'Grady had worked as an intelligence analyst for the federal government. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, she was tasked with reading around 10 international newspapers a day and, as she likes to say, "at a certain point, words just became gelatinous." But from that experience O'Grady was able to extract new meaning out of language. "I did a poem a week, and when I got to the four-month mark, they started taking off, and I could tell something was happening," she says, though the knowledge that her own ideas could carry her from one place or plane to the next must have already been familiar. In addition to her time in Washington D. C., her pre-artist life included stints as a translator, a teacher, a student of fiction at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and, as if she weren't already intimidating enough, a rock critic. "I don't feel I've had much un-lived life," says O'Grady, now 86.

Next month, she'll be the subject of a major retrospective — her first — at the Brooklyn Museum, its title, "Both/And," a reference to her rejection of binary thinking, which not only oversimplifies but ultimately tips the scales of perception in favor of one side or the other. Much of O'Grady's philosophy is informed by her sense of self as a Black American woman with Afro-Caribbean and Irish roots. In her artwork (she's also a writer, and her 1994 art historical essay "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," is considered a canonical feminist text), she often explores the idea of multiplicity through the form of the diptych, which forces the viewer to hold two sides of something in their mind simultaneously. In 2017, O'Grady reworked her newspaper poems, cutting up their contents for a second time and turning them into two-panel haikus. Both versions of the project are included in the exhibition, as is "Miscegenated Family Album" (1980/1994), a series of diptychs in which O'Grady juxtaposes photos of her family with depictions of ancient Egyptian royals, thereby lessening the presumed distance between them.



O'Grady's "Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I), L: Nerfnefruatén Nefertiti; R: Devonian Evageline O'Grady" (1980/1994). Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Her knack for critique is especially apparent in the work she did under the name of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, her former alter ego, a French Guianese pageant winner who, dressed in a gown and cape made of white gloves, made dramatic entrances at two early '80s art openings — one at Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown and one at the New Museum. After politely handing out chrysanthemums, she began to whip herself with a cat-o'-nine-tails while spewing poetry that decried what she felt at the time to be the timidness of some work by Black artists (“No more bootlicking...”) and the segregation of the art world (“don't you know/sleeping beauty needs/more than a kiss to awake”).

Another notable intervention was “Art Is...” (1983), which centered on a float equipped with a 9-by-15-foot gold frame that Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and her collaborators created for Harlem's annual African-American Day Parade. A frame, of course, is a device that confronts choices about inclusion; here was one that insisted individuals and communities of color were worthy artistic subjects. As the float made its way up Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, a group of dancers joined the crowd and held up smaller frames to Black spectators (and at least one white policeman). Like Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, the dancers wore white, the color of cotton, cotillions, gallery walls, surrender, protest — both/and.



“Art Is...(Girl Pointing)”(1983/2009). Like so many of O’Grady’s works, the performance undermined multiple binaries — Black vs. white, art vs. life, the personal vs. the political — all at once. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York. ©Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The second child of Jamaican immigrants, O’Grady grew up in Boston’s Back Bay, about five blocks from the public library. Bored by story hour one day, she wandered off and picked up Howard Pyle’s early 20th-century takes on King Arthur and his knights. “Everything in my work is kind of chivalric — it’s all about rescue and the divided self. The inability to hold to one’s own standards all the time,” says O’Grady. (Many years later, after graduating from college and eventually moving to New York — “I knew I had to test myself” — she happened upon a very different book, Lucy Lippard’s “Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972,” published in 1973.) Despite the nature of some of her best-known pieces, then, O’Grady considers the bulk of her work, which has spanned from performance to photo installations to video, to be less argumentative and more autobiographical. “She’s thinking about how these larger forces, whether the force of history or of institutions or of language itself, are caught in those same sorts of contradictions that she feels personally,” says Catherine Morris, who co-curated the exhibition with the writer Aruna D’Souza and the curatorial assistant Jenée-Daria Strand.

“What I’m trying to do is get as much of myself expressed as possible, because there is so little out there that allows for an understanding of the fullness of the Black mind or soul,” says O’Grady. In part a deliberate attempt to right one of many such oversights, “Both/And” will introduce visitors, perhaps for the first time, to a deeply important living artist — Morris considers O’Grady to be a crucial bridge between the conceptual artists of the ’60s and ’70s and the Pictures Generation that followed. It might also, as O’Grady wishes, help pave the way for others to tell their stories. “I don’t think the struggle is going to be over anytime soon,” she says. “But that doesn’t mean there isn’t hope.” The work of self-exploration — and of art-making — is also ongoing for her. “The only defense I can offer against the horrors of the outer world are new ways of thinking and seeing,” she says. Or, as a line from one of her collaged poems puts it, “This could be/The Permanent Rebellion/that lasts a lifetime.”



O’Grady’s “Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in Red starts painting the stove her own color” (1982/2015). Held in Central Park, the performance was an elliptical telling of O’Grady’s arrival in the art world. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Recently, O'Grady spoke to me over the phone from her apartment at Westbeth, a housing complex for artists in Manhattan's West Village.

What is your day like?

I've been working on the retrospective and the catalog and a book of collected writings all at the same time. I don't know when things are going to be sent to me and I can't stop the oncoming train, so I just have to keep doing it and doing it until I can't go anymore. To be honest with you, I never know whether I'm sleeping at night or in the daytime. There was a stretch two months ago when I did, if you can believe this, 13 all-nighters. But the process of explaining the work has helped me understand it. You get the benefit of other minds, and it's made me realize how artists who are not attended to lose opportunities to grow. People think the critic has no function, but I beg to differ.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

That is the bane of all artists' existence. You come into it in order to be creative and then you find that you're spending 95 percent of your time just doing business. This might be especially true for me since I'm a text artist as well and not really making things in the literal sense. Still, I can't say I'm not enjoying myself. And I have several moments of joy in the day because, whenever I do anything well, even if it's just a shopping list, I get a sense of pleasure.



"I had ideas like that all the time," O'Grady says of reading Lucy Lippard's "Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972," a sort of anthology. "I just didn't know they were art." Tiffany L. Clark

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

Probably "Sisters," a quadriptych from "Miscegenated Family Album." Other things I made knowing they could never be sold, but that piece was gorgeous. The Davis Museum at Wellesley [College], my alma mater, was doing a show, and the curator came to see me and bought it for the collection. I think I sold it for \$3,000.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

Well, I'm still basically a conceptual artist, so the first thing that happens is that I get an idea, and then I figure out the best way to express it. I move from idea to idea fairly rapidly. I'd say I'm a breadth artist, not a depth artist. I never went tumbling down the rabbit hole the way most visual artists did, going deeper and deeper into their craft until they got to something bigger, some bedrock of truth. Perhaps because I'm not crafted, and because, having come to art later in life, I don't have the time. In other words, I'm not playing in art as much as other artists would be playing — I'm out there to make the best possible work and as close to a masterpiece as I can. I think of myself as somebody who's working on the skin of the culture and constantly making incisions and stuffing works into each incision, the way you'd season a turkey so that the flavor gets in, even if you don't have much of the original material left.

How do you know when you're done?

I only start making something once the idea is complete and I think it's good enough to put out into the world. Then it becomes about trying to live up to the idea. That is the goal of the work process. And so I'm done when I feel, "OK, I've said that." The same way you'd know when a novel is done, you know when an installation is done. You know that if you were to add one more thing to it, it would fall apart.



O'Grady's "Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire celebrates with her friends)" (1980–83/2009). Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

What music do you play when you're making art?

Every artist I know who's making visual art is listening to music, but because I'm a conceptual artist I have to listen to the inside of my head. Although I'm working on a piece for which I'm going back to my dancing days. From the early '40s to the early '90s, I was a big social dancer, and there's a line in "Olympia's Maid" that says, "I dance, therefore I think." So I'm in the midst of making the biggest playlist in the world, with songs from all those decades.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

Let's just say I'm an artist. That probably didn't happen until Mlle Bourgeoise Noire got a review in the Village Voice after the New Museum performance. And it was written by Lucy Lippard so, basically, that was it. It meant I had something.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I don't cook. I heat. What I do is I order through Seamless, and I hate this idea because I can tell that they're affecting the restaurants I like for the worse, standardizing them in some horrible way. But I order enough for a week from one restaurant all at once. That way I don't have to keep looking at the menu and thinking, what do I want to eat now? I used to be kind of a foodie, passing judgment on every mouthful, but not anymore. No time.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

No because I haven't had a television set in 15 years. There are two shows I've binged in my life: "The Wire" (2002) and Krzysztof Kieslowski's "The Dekalog" (1988). I also watched the first version of "Star Trek" when it was being aired — I got really hooked — and, in the days when you could buy DVDs, I bought a lot of films by Claire Denis. She's my favorite.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

The weirdest object in my studio is a sort of hexagonal crystal desk object, I guess you'd call it, that I use as a doorstop. It was a Christmas present from Hugh Hefner. I used to translate things for Playboy and for his private journal, which was also an archive of press clippings. He'd send me the three-ring biology paper he used for it.

How often do you talk to other artists?

Most of my friends are artists but we don't talk about art that much.



Westbeth opened in 1970, three years before O'Grady moved to New York. Credit...Tiffany L. Clark



The building's courtyard. Credit...Tiffany L. Clark

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I sort of give work my all, but after that I have to do nothing. I vegetate between steps, and that's when I listen to music a lot. I tend to be more or less addicted to YouTube, and I like the comment columns — they're so bizarre. I studied Spanish literature in college and at that time all the Spanish teachers had been exiled from Franco's Spain, so this young woman found herself overseeing a bunch of us who lived on the Spanish Corridor, and she introduced us to flamenco. I became immensely attached to it and have remained so ever since. For a while I had a favorite young flamenco singer and had a habit of defending him in the chat rooms.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

I cry easily, but the last thing to really make me cry was this Biden campaign video that was inspired by "Art Is..." It turned out that two people from the campaign team, one with Biden and one with Harris, had both seen the piece when it was at the Broad in Los Angeles. And they decided to invest a large portion of their ad budget in this one film that they'd only show if they won. Talk about risk, right? The final result was so beautifully done, so far beyond what I'd imagined.

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

This is a sad story. I have five six-foot-tall windows. But I have these blinds that I inherited when I moved in, and I keep them down all day. I did that when they started building this row of townhouses that are about level with me. And I frequently wear nothing. So I decided to keep the blinds at an angle so people couldn't see in, but now I can't see out. Luckily, though, my studio here has a river view.

What's your worst habit?

Someone once said that I'm a creature of no habits at all.

What embarrasses you?

The only thing I get embarrassed by is if I go out and I've not put myself together and somebody calls attention to the very thing that I was hoping nobody would notice. I guess I feel anxious in the sense that I don't have too much going for me anymore. I used to be kind of cute. In fact, I was pretty for a little too long, you know? It was a curse because it meant that I hadn't developed as fully as I should have. My best friend from college was in the same position and we helped each other become serious.

Do you exercise?

For a long time, I followed this advice — was it something I read somewhere? — that said walk where you would have ridden a bicycle and ride a bike where you would have driven a car. I rode my bike all over Manhattan, even in winter. At one point, when the art world wasn't paying much attention to me, I added swimming and started to take that very seriously, swimming four days a week and doing somewhere between a 45- and 50-minute mile. I'd go up to this place in the 40s with an Olympic-size pool. Anything smaller is hard for me because I spend too much time turning. And, well, I'm still coasting on all of that.

What are you reading?

I don't read as much as I would like to — I kind of read when my computer is backing up. But I have a library that never has fewer than about 3,000 volumes. I have to prune it from time to time, because I don't have space for any more. Since I've been in New York, I've completely turned the library over around three times. I've just done a really wonderful retooling that should take me to the end of whatever is left. Right now, I'm reading "How Long 'til Black Future Month?" (2018) by N. K. Jemisin. She's the biggest thing in science fiction at the moment, and she's Black. Also, her father was one of the male artists in my piece "Rivers, First Draft" (1982) and helped build the props.

What's your favorite artwork (by someone else)?

The first one that comes to mind is Adrian Piper's "Food for the Spirit" (1971). Though for a while I taught on the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists, and I think that, together, that is still my favorite art movement. Not very many people would ever have thought it would sort of be the only one to make it out of the 20th century alive. But I knew that what it had to offer was permanent — because it was complete. For a while I taught a different course on the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. One was an expressionist Surrealist and the other was an impressionist Dadaist, but those aren't just names of schools of art-making. They are tendencies of the human mind, and you can't stay on either side forever. Now we have an art world in which the two tendencies are equally validated. And I have a practice, I think, that has room for both.

This interview has been edited and condensed.