

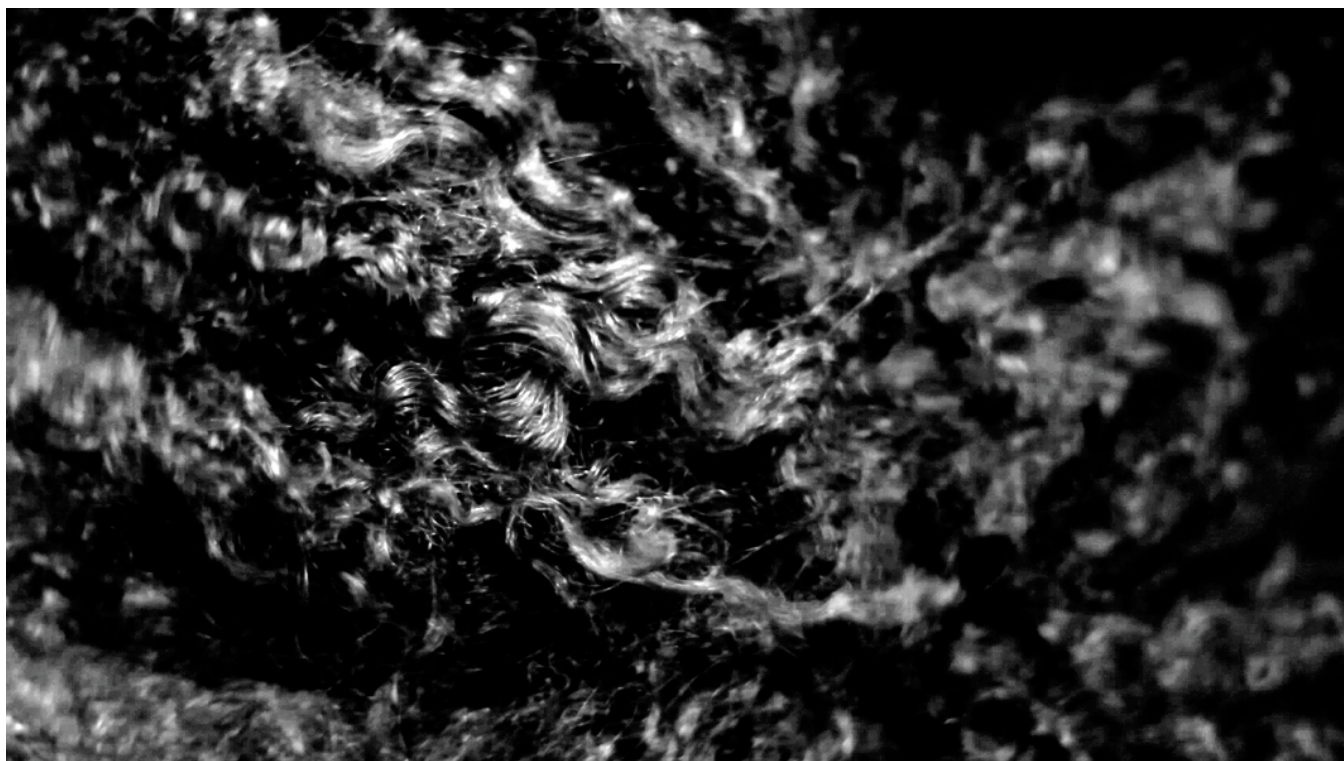
# ARTFORUM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRINT MARCH 2021

## LORRAINE O'GRADY

Catherine Damman, Mira Dayal, and David Velasco reflect on O'Grady's art



Lorraine O'Grady, *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2010/2011, HD video, black-and-white, sound, 18 minutes 4 seconds. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

“**BOTH/AND**” is the title of Lorraine O'Grady's first major retrospective, curated by Catherine Morris and Aruna D'Souza and opening this month at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. But it is also the key to the artist's exhilarating proposition: that the best path through the tepid “either/or” structure subtending Western hegemony is the cultivation of a hybrid and nonhierarchical “both/and” approach. “The governing aim of my work is to

undermine the concept of opposites,” Lorraine O’Grady wrote in 1982; few artists have furnished such fruitful manifestations of their ideals.

On the occasion of this long-overdue presentation, *Artforum* reflects on the many achievements of an artist whose multivalent practice—incorporating everything from performance to writing to video and photocollage—has opened up avenues for diasporic thinking and fresh strategies for confronting anti-Blackness. **CATHERINE DAMMAN** takes the long view, assessing the full scope of O’Grady’s four-decade career, while artist and critic **MIRA DAYAL** provides a close read of her 1980/1994 *Miscegenated Family Album*. Finally, O’Grady herself gives an account of her *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*, with an introduction by *Artforum* editor in chief **DAVID VELASCO**.

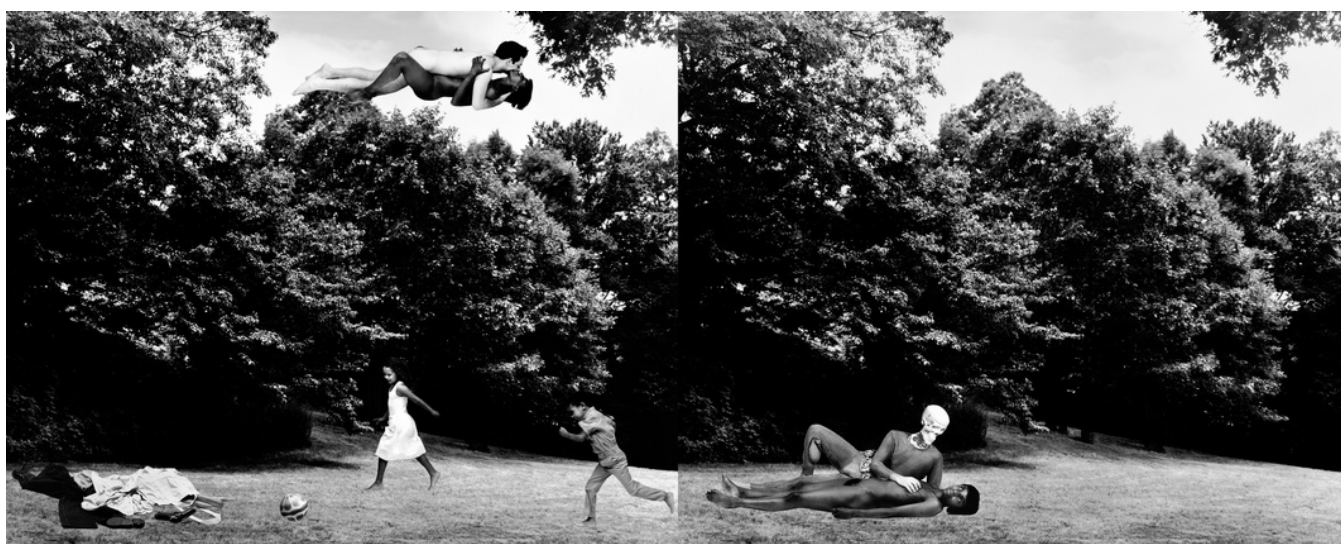
All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRINT MARCH 2021

## RISK EVERYTHING

Catherine Damman on the art of Lorraine O'Grady



Lorraine O'Grady, *The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me*, 1991/2019, diptych, ink-jet prints, each 40 × 50". From *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, 1991/2019. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**A BALL TEMPTS** two running children, their mouths joyful, their eyes on the prize. Clothes and baguettes spill onto the grass; neither modesty nor scarcity is of great concern. Suffused with delectation and too good to be true, the scene is Edenic, a black-and-white fête galante for the end of the twentieth century. Above it all float a nude couple unencumbered by gravity and ensnared in each other. His pale hips sink between her thighs, his torso presses limply on her chest. Her countenance is bolted in an ambiguous expression.

On the right, we are in the same place: the same lush trees, the same inviting field. The two figures have dropped back to earth, shoved down by gravity's unseen hand. The man's head is now a skull, his body wrapped in a chain-mail carapace, his fingers territorially on her breast, uninvited stray marks against her dark skin. She casts her eyes uncomfortably heavenward.

The twinned collages constitute a diptych in a 1991 group of works by Lorraine O'Grady called *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*. Tripping the tongue is the title's absent article, refusing both the academic's putative distance from flesh ("the body") and any claim to ownership ("my body"). The work's pairings are not new, but they retain their purchase. Eros and Thanatos, sure. Sedition disguised as leisure, of course. Half a millennium, perhaps longer, of brutality laminated with real pleasure, maybe even romance—one can never be certain. What else still furrows the brow like interracial sex?

**At the precise moment when O'Grady's oeuvre is being treated to recuperative attention, we would do well to celebrate the rightful consideration, but not let the mist get in our eyes.**

Such dehiscences of the past are O'Grady's enduring subject. *Risk*, I would suggest, is her primary medium, in a rich practice that spans collage, performance, and video. Viewers will get to see the breadth of that engagement in a long-awaited retrospective, "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And," opening this month at the Brooklyn Museum, curated by Catherine Morris and Aruna D'Souza, the latter of whom edited an anthology of O'Grady's texts, *Writing in Space: 1973–2019*, published last year by Duke University Press. A scholarly monograph by associate curator of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum Stephanie Sparling Williams is set to appear with the University of California Press later in 2021. (Sparling Williams contributed short essays on each of O'Grady's series to the exhibition's catalogue.) The artist, it would seem, is finally getting her due. Countering the art world's breakneck pace, over the past fifty years, O'Grady has labored in carefully articulated series, often returning to and reworking earlier pieces. Amid her tightly controlled production, hers is a mind that whirls. "Body Is the Ground of My Experience" is a prime

example. When O'Grady first exhibited the grouping in 1991, at New York City's INTAR Gallery, she titled the aforementioned diptych *The Clearing*, an oblique phrase jangling with possible meanings. It flew over everyone's heads. Today, it is called *The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N., and Me.*

Risk indeed. The title's pairings concatenate figures in the manner of a highway pileup. What is at stake in placing her and her white male lover in an analogous relation with the others named? What is imperiled? What might be seen anew? The nature of O'Grady's coupling with N. (whole worlds of feeling are loaded into that single initial) is, of course, distinct from Jefferson's relations with Hemings, the woman he enslaved, for whom liberal definitions of consent were structural impossibilities. It is likewise irreducible to those between the Spanish conquistador and the Nahua woman, whose real name was likely Malintzin, and who long bore the blame for the Spanish colonization of the indigenous Aztec empire. O'Grady's is a tightrope walk over catastrophic hyperbole. It is also inarguable that the histories of enslavement and colonial genocide here invoked are the marrow of modernity's global project, inextricably part of the landmass we now call the Americas, and of any endeavor to live within it—including O'Grady's own.

The past snaps into focus like a rubber band on the wrist: a brisk, rude interruption of the sensuous. So, too, is it a lurking, quiet presence, the only ground against which the self's figure can ever be seen. Intimate details from O'Grady's biography uneasily pervade. Her son was conceived in an open, grassy clearing (a tender memory); her first sexual experiences were tinged with the specter of death (the scent of embalming fluid overwhelming the factory shed into which neighborhood kids snuck for adolescent trysts).



Lorraine O'Grady dresses for her performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, 1980–83, Just Above Midtown, New York, June 5, 1980. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

O'Grady created *The Clearing* while at work on her essential text “Olympia’s Maid,” first presented at the College Art Association’s annual meeting in 1992, on the role of Laure, the Black model featured in Édouard Manet’s *Olympia*, 1865. At the time Laure’s name was mostly unused, though it had been part of the published record as early as 1931. O’Grady wrote against such vanishings, and, at the same time, widened the panel’s focus on the female nude. As O’Grady explained, “The Black female’s body needs less to be rescued from the masculine ‘gaze’ than to be sprung from a historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, and not paradoxically, it erases her completely.” In this, she elaborates Hortense Spillers’s articulation of the historically “ungendered” place of Black women. She likewise invokes the scholar’s devastating critique of Sojourner Truth’s representative plate in Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. That O’Grady’s retrospective will sidle up alongside *The Dinner Party*, a permanent installation in the

Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, seems a pointed rejoinder.

While hyperattentive to the past, O’Grady’s project has never been to rescue individual figures from the ash heaps of history. Rather, hers is an ongoing attempt to interrogate the system that effects—perhaps requires—that very evanescence. At the precise moment when her own oeuvre is being treated to recuperative attention, we would do well to follow her lead: to celebrate the rightful consideration but not let the mist get in our eyes. What would Mlle Bourgeoise Noire do? After all, O’Grady’s most iconic performances in this guise, staged between 1980 and 1983, staunchly rejected the paucities of mere “inclusion.”



Lorraine O’Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, 1980–83. Performance view, New Museum, New York, September 18, 1981. Center: Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Lorraine O’Grady). Photo: Coreen Simpson and Salima Ali. © Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Something of an art-historical fable, the performances persist as a catchment of investments rather than of facts, their images “widely reproduced without an explanatory context,” in the artist’s own words. The twentieth-century-art-history survey knows not what to make of it, other than to mark its distance from other—more dominant, more anhedonic—Conceptualisms. Who *is* this figure so conjured, sash on her breast, 180 white debutante’s gloves flapping ridiculously in the stale air? She first appeared in June 1980 at the opening of “Outlaw Aesthetics” at Linda Goode Bryant’s Just Above Midtown gallery, and then, in September 1981, at “Persona” at the New Museum. The sites at which she installed herself—one exhibition featuring Black artists, the other featuring exclusively white ones—were as purposeful as the objects she carried, including flowers, which she gave away freely throughout the vernissage, and a cat-o’-nine-tails made of white chrysanthemums, with which she lashed herself, all the while walloping partygoers with words.

At JAM, she adapted Léon-Gontran Damas’s 1972 poem “*Trêve*” (“Enough”). In the poem, the speaker has had *enough* “of bootlicking and / of an attitude / of hyperassimilateds.” One of the many Francophone writers associated with Négritude, an anticolonial cultural and intellectual movement, Damas was born in Cayenne, French Guiana, once a French penal colony (and Mlle Bourgeoise Noire’s fictional home). *Trêve* means both “truce,” a mutually agreed upon cessation of hostilities in warfare, and “enough.” It’s the latter sense Damas uses to contranymic effect, suggesting both exasperation and plenitude. O’Grady transforms Damas’s elliptical phrasing into a series of unequivocal commands: “THAT’S ENOUGH! / No more boot-licking / No more ass-kissing / No more buttering-up / No more pos . . . turing / Of super-ass . . . imilates / BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!”

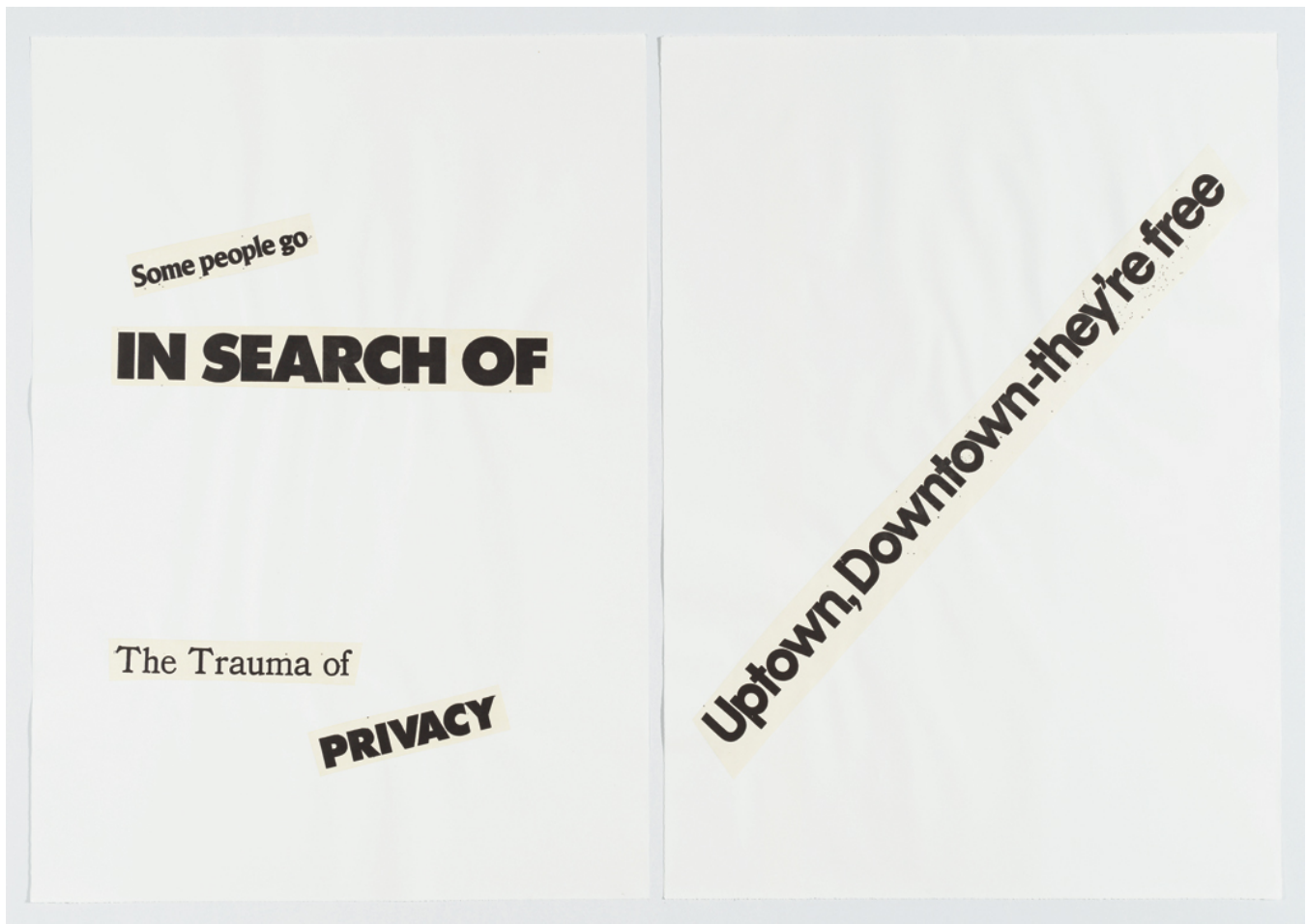
**Loving language is like loving anything: The object is precious even though—or perhaps because—it is inadequate.**

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire no doubt hails from the place Margo Jefferson slyly called “Negroland” in her 2015 memoir of that name, a region of the mind characterized by its



privilege and respectability, and one familiar from O’Grady’s own tony Bostonian childhood (she was middle-class, biracial, propelled first to Wellesley, then on to a professional career). That familiarity breeds both contempt and tenderness, as when O’Grady describes the gloves adorning her dress as the kind worn by “women who believed in them.” Looking at the long, elegant pair folded primly across O’Grady’s décolletage, one could be forgiven for so believing. Hers are tirades against “art with white gloves on,” but such gloves are worn not just by the debutante but by the art handler and conservator, too—which is to say that the performance eviscerates not only artists who play it safe, but also the entire system of extracted value and its preservation that parades under the banner of “art.”

In both performances of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, O’Grady was accompanied by a male companion in a tuxedo (at JAM, the artist’s brother-in-law, Edward Allen, played the part; at the New Museum, Jeffrey Scott did.) The role of “Master of Ceremonies”—a stuffy determinant of form and protocol—ricochets against the emcees of hip-hop, a cipher for Black authenticity that was, in the early 1980s, undergoing rapacious commodification; it also, when paired with *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*’s whippings, evokes the “masters” by which slavery enacted its terrible project, violence’s masquerade in genteel names. Like Spillers’s grammar and Damas’s syntax, O’Grady’s artistic operations are more often than not linguistic—enjambments of the world-historical and the intimate.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Cutting Out CONYT, Haiku Diptych 9, 1977/2017*, letterpress on Japanese paper, collaged onto laid paper, two panels, each 41 3/4 × 30". From the series "Cutting Out CONYT," 1977/2017. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Loving language is like loving anything: The object is precious even though—or perhaps because—it is inadequate. In 1977, O'Grady started cutting phrases from the *Sunday Times* to make "counter-confessional" poems, her first works of art. "Cutting Out the New York Times," 1977, began as a private endeavor, but one she felt necessary to extrude through the most public of source material. In 2017, she revisited the series. In the resulting "Cutting Out CONYT," filets of language sprawl across conjoined pages, the gutters between which act as both gulf and bridge to association. The original poems become source, doubling the operations of the first, and the words sprawl more expansively across the composition. The cotton-candy observations of the paper's lifestyle sections gain meaning through each new orthographic juxtaposition. "Some people go / IN SEARCH OF / The Trauma of / Privacy" says one. On the right-hand side, "Uptown, Downtown—they're free" conjures the art world's racialized divisions, as entrenched then as now, the

invocation of independence bitterly ironic. Another, which reads, “In the Amber Glow of / August skin / there is no escape from terror,” begins with the respite of a summer vacation and ends in a petrifying scene; the conjunction of skin and the kind of terror from which there is no release can only conjure white supremacy’s repeated enactments. Still another puts things more baldly: “White and Black and / THE SOUND THAT SHOOK HOLLYWOOD / The Crisis Deepens in / Theatrical Détente.”



Lorraine O’Grady, *Art Is . . . (Man with a Camera)*, 1983/2009, C-print, 16 × 20", From *Art Is . . .*, 1983/2009. © Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

As Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, O’Grady would, in 1983, undertake two additional creative gambits, both curatorial. The first was organizing “The Black and White Show” at Kenkeleba House gallery in the East Village. Its premise—to feature fourteen white and

fourteen Black artists, all exhibiting black-and-white work—risked gimmickry. Many people thought it was the best show in New York that year. Via the bluntest articulation of “parity,” O’Grady exposed one of racism’s many ruses: that even basic redress is difficult, requiring time and patience to begin. The second was her performance *Art Is . . .*, staged in September 1983 as a float in Harlem’s annual African American Day Parade. The resulting photo-installation—the means by which most viewers have encountered the work—portrays Black people in joyous reverie. Sometimes alone and sometimes in groups, the “sitters” cock their heads, scooch in close, delight in one another’s gazes, all brought to the glittering fore by gold frames that repeat and amplify the camera’s own means of directing focus. In a pointed elaboration of the Duchampian readymade, each paradegoer becomes the “art,” as do the waystations dotting Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard: Lickety Split Cocktail Lounge, Sheadrach Home Cooking, Ashanti Professionals. (O’Grady’s captions are a particular delight, especially those accompanying the photos of white police officers assigned to work the parade beat: “Cop framed,” “Framing cop.”)



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . . (Girl Pointing)*, 1983/2009, C-print, 20 × 16", From *Art Is . . .*, 1983/2009. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Viewers may have been surprised when, on November 7, 2020, the day the presidential election was finally called, the Biden-Harris campaign released a celebratory video cribbing from O'Grady's performance. (O'Grady gave her consent to use the work as inspiration.) Compared to O'Grady's *Art Is . . .*, the clip was arid: a phantasm of multicultural liberalism, stretched uncomfortably taut by a thousand social-media managers and sucked dry of any spontaneity or exuberance. If the work's original aim was to celebrate the beauty of Black people and culture, the campaign replaced that focus with a spotlight on *America the beautiful*, as in the lyrics of the backing track. To this writer, the displacement of Harlem and, specifically, of Black lifeways in favor of a celebratory fantasy of "nation" was plainly gross, but perhaps the veneer of gutless representation spread over an imperial hegemon can only ever be that. One can imagine the damning collage O'Grady might yet make, taking her scissors to the corresponding *New York Times* headline: "One Artist's Vision Frames Biden's Message on Unity."

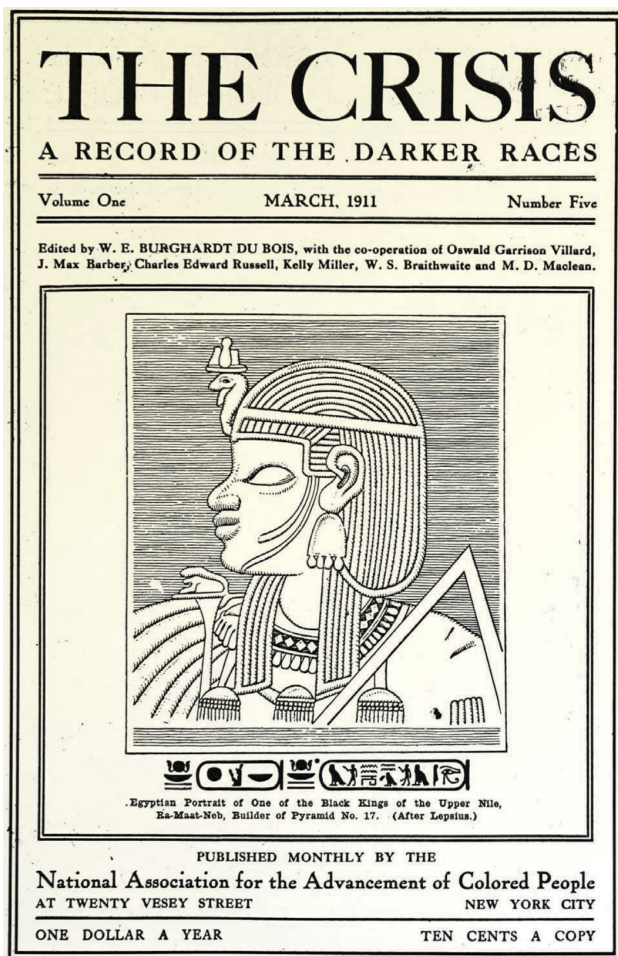


Still from the Biden-Harris campaign's video *America the Beautiful*, 2020.

Against the smug ideologies of our nationalist project—in which the Black middle class is offered up, again and again, as proof of absolution from America's original sins—O'Grady

herself has always favored the distinct traditions of Black internationalism. As O'Grady explains in her 1994 essay, for her, hybridity is not merely "genetic commingling," but rather a means of using diaspora peoples' "internal negotiation between apparently irreconcilable fields" as a mode of operation, of critique. Given her Jamaican heritage, she might be placed amid Caribbean philosophical currents, joining figures such as Damas, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon, Maryse Condé, Stuart Hall, Sylvia Wynter, and Hazel V. Carby. O'Grady writes, "Wherever I stand, I find I have to build a bridge to some other place," a sentiment that sits well with the heterolingualism, archipelagic geographies, and relentless querying of movement and relation in much Caribbean thought.

**Rather than taxonomize, O'Grady finds herself fluttering madly against representation's many pins.**



Cover of *The Crisis: The Record of Darker Races* 1, no. 5 (March 1911).

Rather than taxonomize, O'Grady finds herself fluttering madly against representation's many pins. Consider her *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994, which features diptychs of O'Grady's family photos set alongside reproductions of ancient Egyptian busts and tomb carvings. (It draws on and adapts material from a 1980 performance, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, also presented at JAM.) Many critics have rightly observed that the work skewers the white compulsion to conscript Egypt as an ancient font of Western culture, but such accounts elide the floating signifier Egypt has long been and, in particular, the persistence of Egyptian imagery in the history of African American art and thought. In the early twentieth century, visual invocations of Egypt—at once real and imagined—appear in the murals of Aaron Douglas, in the paintings of Loïs Mailou Jones, in the sculpture of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, and on covers of the NAACP's *The Crisis* alike.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Miscegenated Family Album (Worldly Princesses)*, L: Nefertiti's daughter, Merytaten; R: Devonian's daughter, Kimberley, 1980/1994, diptych, Cibachrome prints, overall 26 × 37". From *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

By recourse to that staple of art-historical study, the dual-slide comparison, O'Grady reverses Tolstoy's dictum. These are tender considerations of unhappy familial likeness. She turns to the eighteenth-dynasty Egyptian queen Nefertiti and her husband, Akhenaten, their three daughters, Merytaten, Maketaten, and Akhesenpaaten, and Nefertiti's sister, Mutnedjmet. O'Grady maps this family tree onto that of herself and her own late sister, Devonian; Devonian's husband, Edward Jr.; and their two daughters, Candace and Kimberley. Each pairing operates by way of similarities that are more a function of composition and framing than of actual physiological resemblance, though they suggest the latter to great effect. In *Sisters I* (L: Nefertiti, R: Devonian), it is the wry, unfixed gaze of the sculptural bust on the left and the direct, conspiratorial look from the photograph on the right that cinch the analogy; in *Sisters II* (L: Nefertiti's daughter, Merytaten, R: Devonian's daughter, Candace), an implied similitude between the Egyptian *nemes* and Candace's natural hair



makes the case. Elsewhere, it is the doubled expressions of maternal affection and a child's weariness with adult ways, as in *A Mother's Kiss* and *Worldly Princesses*, respectively, that draw the eye. We are partners in the painful work of identification, sorting through records of loss and unknowing. Still, in their invitation to compare and contrast features such as the shape of eyes, the placement of cheekbones, and the upturning of noses, the pairings likewise conjure the terrible history of scientific racism and photography's early conscription into its discourses of phrenology and polygenesis. Thus the series is at once a poignant reach across history in search of kinship, precedent, and solidarity, and also a wry smirk at the pseudomorphology that might undergird any such endeavor.

Many things seem alike. Learning a language, you might call them "false friends." O'Grady's genius lies in her willingness to embody speculative, treacherous conjunctions cresting the edges of comprehension. It is our task to keep up, lest we confuse liberation—what really matters—with something that just stands in its place.

*Catherine Damman* is a New York-based art historian and critic.

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.

# ARTFORUM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRINT MARCH 2021

## CLOSE-UP: THEORY OF RELATIVITY

Mira Dayal on Lorraine O'Grady's *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994



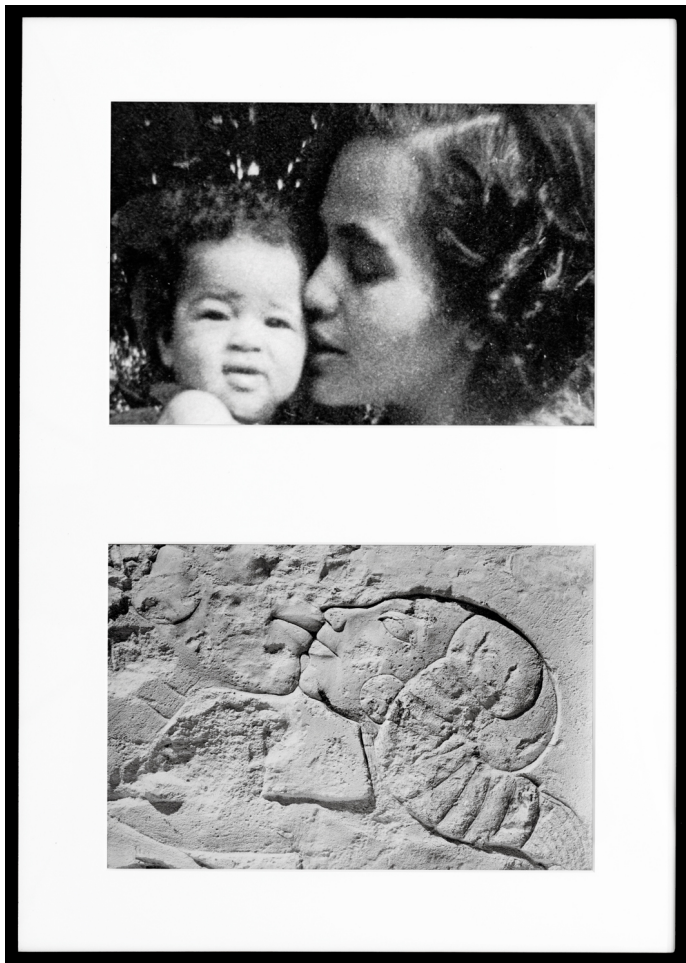
Lorraine O'Grady, *Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters IV)*, L: Devonia's sister, Lorraine; R: Nefertiti's sister, *Mutnedjmet*, 1980/1994, diptych, Cibachrome prints, overall 26 × 37". From *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**GOOGLE “NEFERTITI’S SISTER,”** and a diptych from Lorraine O’Grady’s *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994, is the second result. The piece features a photo of the artist beside a photo of a stone bust of Mutnedjmet, the sister of the Egyptian queen; O’Grady and Mutnedjmet, both shot in three-quarter profile, bear a strong mutual resemblance. The subsequent search results also belong to O’Grady’s series: a different view of that same Mutnedjmet bust, next to a ca. 1340 BCE bust of Nefertiti (less resemblance here, even though they are sisters); a sculpture of Nefertiti’s daughter Merytaten with a photograph of Candace, O’Grady’s niece. In the latter pairing, the pictures’ similarity may be attributed as much to devices such as cropping and framing as to the subjects’ shared appearance: their matching poses, slight smiles, rounded faces, dark eyes, angled brows. As in many of the sixteen diptychs in O’Grady’s series, the images are intimate and approachable, like pictures slipped into the plastic sleeves of a photo album.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Miscegenated Family Album (Sibling Rivalry)*, L: Nefertiti; R: Nefertiti's sister, *Mutnedjmet*, 1980/1994, diptych, Cibachrome prints, overall 26 × 37". From *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Still, the diptychs' formality and the Egyptian representations' evident materiality remind the viewer that these arrangements were not made at home. They are, however, at home on the internet, where opaque algorithmic tools such as Google's reverse image search may discover similitudes that span contexts, media, creators, palettes, and periods. Consider the image search in a more rudimentary way, as a recollection of lost material, a resurrection of old files, and you arrive at a curious inversion of that stubborn association of photography with death ("I am truly becoming a specter," Roland Barthes thinks as he sits before the camera): The image search is a tool of revival.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Miscegenated Family Album (A Mother's Kiss)*, T: Candace and Devonian; B: Nefertiti and daughter, 1980/1994, diptych, Cibachrome prints, overall 37 × 26". From *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

O'Grady's series itself began with a search for images. On a trip to Egypt in 1963, the artist saw her own features in the faces of others and found herself being identified with a people for the first time. That experience led to the performance *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, staged in 1980 at the New York gallery Just Above Midtown. The piece riffed on an ancient Egyptian ceremony called the Opening of the Mouth, which addressed the stages of the life cycle (it called for a tool otherwise used to cut umbilical cords) and centered on a priest "animating" a statue of a deceased person to facilitate the transition to the afterlife (the Egyptian word for *sculpture* means "a thing that is caused to live"). During O'Grady's performance, a slide projection of sixty-five diptychs compared the features and lives of her sister Devonia and Nefertiti, of O'Grady herself and Mutnedjmet, and of their relatives, thereby suggesting a reunion of the members of these distinct families. When a prerecorded soundtrack announced the deaths of Devonia and Nefertiti—O'Grady's sister had died

after an abortion nearly two decades earlier—the artist, in her voluminous red dress, began a sequence of sweeping pseudo-ceremonial gestures, as if facilitating these relatives’ rebirths into the afterlife through photography.



**Lorraine O’Grady, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, 1980.** Performance view, location and date unknown. Lorraine O’Grady. Photo: Freda Leinwand. © Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The resemblance between Devonia and Nefertiti was particularly striking to O’Grady given her family’s diasporic roots (her parents were Jamaican immigrants to the United States who held “British colonial values”) and the fraught and racist history of Egyptian scholarship. As explained by a wall text in the Egyptian-art gallery at New York’s Brooklyn Museum—where O’Grady’s series is to be shown as part of a retrospective opening this month—Egyptologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “rejected the notion

that Africans could create a high civilization” and attributed the country’s cultural production to “lighter-skinned outsiders.” But Egyptian culture’s distinctive traits can in fact be traced back to the indigenous people who lived in the south of the country five thousand years ago. By the time Nefertiti ruled the region, its art had incorporated media and styles from neighboring areas while remaining distinct—and distinctly tied to African traditions and beliefs.

**For O’Grady, Egypt is a locus of relations, a site of hybridity and therefore of possibility.**

The hybridity of Egyptian art is closely related to the “miscegenation” of the series’ title. As a descriptor for a fabricated family album, the word is at once particular and general: The album is “mixed” in the literal sense that it brings two disparate families into one whole, but the title might also describe the respective lineages of O’Grady and Nefertiti. Either way, it suggests likeness and similarity across what might otherwise be perceived as difference. As Jared Sexton notes, the *gen* in *miscegenation* is the root of *gene*, *gender*, and *genesis*—words associated with particularity—as well as *general* and *generic*. “The general is *always already mixed*,” he writes, as with an arithmetic mean.

A desire to address the racism in scholarship on Egyptian art, and in museum practices more broadly, was surely a spark for *Miscegenated Family Album*. But for O’Grady, Egypt is also a locus of relations, a site of hybridity and therefore of possibility. Although the diptychs’ initial appeal may be their attention to physiognomy, phrases in their titles —“Sibling Rivalry,” “A Mother’s Kiss,” “Hero Worship,” “Progress of Queens”—allude to larger parallels, untold narratives both real and imagined. O’Grady deploys the family album as a storytelling device. We attempt to follow along, always aware of a certain misalignment or incompleteness.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Miscegenated Family Album (Cross Generational)*, L: *Nefertiti, the last image*; R: *Devonia's youngest daughter, Kimberley, 1980/1994*, diptych, Cibachrome prints, overall 26 × 37". From *Miscegenated Family Album*, 1980/1994. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The series is therefore not only a set of comparisons but also a network of relations. In ancient Egypt, death was understood to be a “form of dismemberment, both corporeal and social”; O'Grady's work processes death through the inverse: by staging an assembly of family members otherwise dispersed. The work is, in a sense, all connection, tiers of relations—and at the same time, it insists on the isolation of each subject in her own frame. Images of Nefertiti are scarce in part because, under her reign, artisans made sculptures in pieces—eye, eye socket, eyebrow—and then combined them into a single figure. Over the years, the disparate parts were scattered, some lost.



Mira Dayal is an artist and critic based in New York.

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.

# ARTFORUM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRINT MARCH 2021

INTERVIEWS

## 1000 WORDS: LORRAINE O'GRADY

Lorraine O'Grady talks about *Announcement Of A New Persona (Performances To Come!)*



Lorraine O'Grady, *Family Portrait 1 (Formal, Composed)*, 2020, digital C-print, 50 × 40". From *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*, 2020. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**NEW WORK BY LORRAINE O'GRADY** is already good news, and the world needs some. But word of a new persona stirs the kind of anticipation usually reserved for a famous comet rounding the sun. It's been more than forty years since O'Grady's radiant alter ego Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, dressed in a gown and cape made from 180 pairs of white thrift-store gloves and wielding a cat-o'-nine tails plaited with chrysanthemums, stormed the opening of "Outlaw Aesthetics" at New York's Just Above Midtown gallery. On that day, June 5, 1980, O'Grady kicked off a three-year sprint of some of the most profound performative work of the twentieth century—from the early vernissage provocations to her curation (as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire) of "The Black and White Show" at Kenkeleba House to *Art Is . . .*, 1983, her jubilant intervention in Harlem's African American Day Parade, which graces the cover of this issue. The sudden occultation of this subversive spirit was as inexplicable as its emergence.

Now we have these mysterious pictures of a Knight boasting hybrid arboreal headgear. I wanted to know more about O'Grady's cipher, debuting this month as part of her retrospective "Both/And" at the Brooklyn Museum, and sent her some questions, intending to edit her responses in the magazine's traditional as-told-to format. She came back with the text below, more or less as is, a reminder that O'Grady is an accomplished writer and theoretician as well as an artist. She sometimes calls her art "writing in space," which is also the title of her formidable book of collected essays, beautifully edited and introduced by Aruna D'Souza, published last year by Duke University Press. She's electric with language.

Her Knight's arrival presages that of another. "I sense that the true audience may be *coming*, not here now," O'Grady wrote in a 1983 statement that also articulated the multidimensional "knowing" this audience might achieve. *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*, 2020, promises not just performances but audiences—what O'Grady, citing Heidegger, refers to as "preservers." The work sets forth a blazon of gifts: A new performance by O'Grady is a felicitous invitation for us to grow into the role of true audience, to become the preservers the work deserves.

—David Velasco



Lorraine O'Grady, *Announcement Card 1 (Banana-Palm with Lance)*, 2020, digital C-print, 50 × 33 3/8". From *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*, 2020. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**FLANNERY O'CONNOR** once said something that I try to bear in mind: “The artist can choose what she wants to write, but she can't choose what she can make live.”

So if O'Connor wanted to amplify the Roman Catholic vision of salvation, but the only lives she'd known intimately beyond her own were those of Southern Protestants, they were what she would use.

As someone who'd spent my life on the hyphen between *Caribbean* and *American*, I'd thought my work would be complex. But because Jamaican proverbs had blended with New England taciturnity and my family's Episcopal church rituals were reinforced by

Boston Public Library murals and reading Ovid at Girls' Latin School, without my realizing it, thinking mythologically became second nature. Now, whenever complexity raises its head, I seem to rein it in because only simplicity and memorability work for me. And it feels like communication is more complete that way.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in Red walks toward the studio of the Black Artists in Yellow*, 1982/2015, digital C-print, 16 × 20". From *Indivisible Landscapes*, 1982-. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In 1978, after finishing “Cutting Out the New York Times,” 1977, I began seriously thinking of myself as a performance artist. My first project was to develop a three-part work called *Indivisible Landscapes*. The parts would be titled *Rivers*, *Caves*, and *Deserts*, and the surrealist actions composing them would happen simultaneously. In each location, a female persona would wrestle separately with issues of the body, soul, and mind: In *Rivers*, the Woman in Red would gain control over her physical habitus and learn not to see femaleness as a limitation, but simply to occupy it; and in *Caves*, a woman in a black

Paco Rabanne–ish gown covered with reflective squares would gradually uncover her goals, finding a “self” to follow wherever it led.

But *Indivisible Landscapes* was impossibly ambitious, embodying a mythography that suspiciously replicated my own life. In 1980, before I could produce the parts together, the character from *Caves* appeared, not in black but in white leather and silk, as a persona called Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. By the time I presented *Rivers, First Draft* in Central Park in 1982, the story of the Woman in Red had become a prequel to the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* works.



Lorraine O’Grady, *Rivers, First Draft: The Nantucket Memorial blends into the granite and the stream*, 1982/2015, digital C-print, 20 × 16". From *Indivisible Landscapes*, 1982–. © Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

*Deserts* was to have been a journey of acquiring the knowledge needed to execute one’s goals, become one’s self. But this is work that usually happens offstage, alone and unseen.

The Deserts of artists and early Christians are filled with figures, named and unnamed, from others' books and their own journals. I didn't know who or what this character would be, as I was still living her. The project was set aside for thirty years. Then, in 2013, the curators and art historians Claire Tancons and Krista Thompson invited me to be in an exhibition on Caribbean performance and festival art. I proposed *Indivisible Landscapes* for four flatbeds in Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza. *Deserts* was still there. But now there was a fourth landscape, *City/World*, where the body/soul/mind shaped in the others' dreams would come to life. Though the piece was not performed, the Knight was the character who'd emerged from the process unbidden. I may never know who it was that came out of the Desert.

Now the Knight is on the wall of my retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum. The piece is called *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*, 2020, and is what it says. Composed of cartes de visite enlarged almost to life size, this first of multiple expected pieces debuts a new persona, one that will soon embark on a series of actions ranging from self-exploration to cultural critique. In its six images, you can see various character traits that define the Knight, who is wearing medieval European armor topped by headdresses emblematic of the Global South.

**If you conceal everything—race, class, age, gender— what is left? What is possible?**

Two "Family Portraits"—one formal, the other "real"—show the Knight with her attendants. One is a toy wooden horse reminiscent of those in ancient European and Near Eastern folklore. The other, the Squire, is based on a combination of characters from the Jonkonnu festival of Jamaica, which my parents grew up with, and from the Wanaragua festival of Belize, where my maternal grandmother was born and raised before she moved to Jamaica.

The toy wooden horse will always be called Rociavant and the Squire's name will always be Pitchy-Patchy, but the Knight, like legends of old and modern royalty, is known by a variety

of sobriquets in different languages, depending on which character trait, action, or provenance is to be inferred: Lancela Palm-and-Steel, Lancela de la Ville, Lancela del Mar, Lancela Urbaine, and so on. Although the Knight's given names and presentation are female in gender, she is always addressed as "Sir." The Knight is never a "Dame."

*Lancela Palm-and-Steel* is a reverse image of *The Fir-Palm*, a piece from 1991 that has a tree with a palm trunk and fir foliage, melding elements of New England and the Caribbean. In the Knight, the position of the Caribbean is inverted. Now it's the mind, not the body. The two images are my way of saying the intellect and the body can be both, without gain or loss. One can live equally on both sides.



Lorraine O'Grady, *The Fir-Palm*, 1991/2019, ink-jet print, 50 × 40". From *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, 1991/2019. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Howard Pyle's illustrated novels of King Arthur's court are the first books I read on my own, as a seven-year-old. And Joan of Arc has never been far from my mind. I've made the



armor as feminine as I could. It's based on a young boy's suit at the Art Institute of Chicago and was forged by Jeff Wasson. Every part is supported by points on my body, so it doesn't feel heavy. The heaviest part is the Caribbean headdress. I spent two years studying modern carnivals in the Western Hemisphere before finally taking off from an image in Isaac Mendes Belisario's 1837 portfolio of Jonkonnu in Jamaica.

After developing the persona privately since 2013 while I continued to write and make new work, I will be relieved to have the Knight execute her first performance during my retro. Called *Greetings and Theses*, it's an homage to Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, who will be there on her platform. The Knight is an avatar of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire forty years later, setting out to finish what she started. It will be a hard job. If you conceal everything—race, class, age, gender—what is left? What is possible?

People tell me my work looks as if it could have been made yesterday. To me, this is a sign that little has fundamentally changed. Even our successes stay safely bracketed. My tasks in art remain the same: to find ways to develop and maintain a rich inner life while standing firm in the attempt to overturn the depredations of the outer world.

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.