

When protest came dressed in a tiara

Before Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick, there was Mlle Bourgeoise Noire

By Heather Kaplow



She appeared, uninvited, at a 1980 art opening in a New York gallery, calling herself “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire” — French for “Ms. Black Middle Class.” Dressed in an elegant tiara and a gown made of white gloves, she held a bouquet of white chrysanthemums sprouting out of the handle of a white cat o’ nine tails.

Moving graciously through a bemused crowd, she handed out the flowers, ever-smiling and asking, “Won’t you lighten my bouquet?”

Then, when the flowers were gone, she began flogging herself viciously, shouting out verses adapted from a poem by Léon-Gontran Damas: “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!!!”

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, the alter ego of pioneering artist Lorraine O’Grady, took the insular New York art world by storm for a brief time in the early 1980s. Though the character seemed half poetess, half beauty queen, what she really represented was political action: a way to voice frustration and a strong desire for change within a world that wasn’t ready for the sound.

Decades before mainstream pop artists like Beyoncé and Childish Gambino were drawing headlines for their confrontational work, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire was critiquing art communities from both without and within. She may not have changed the world — at least, not right away. But she set a fierce and memorable standard for action and imagery that challenges the status quo.

“If anyone had known that Mlle Bourgeoise Noire was coming, neither she nor I would be here,” says O’Grady, who still speaks of the character in the third person, as a unique identity.

At 85, O’Grady retains a trace of a Boston Brahmin accent, a vestige of her upbringing in Boston’s Back Bay and her Wellesley College education. She’s an indisputable doyenne, quick with the right words, as active as a critic as an artist. But a 1980s version of O’Grady — one embarking on a whole new career in her mid-40s, and eager to make up for lost time — rises easily back to the surface in conversation.

When O’Grady decided to become an artist, she had no idea that race could be a barrier to her plans. Skin color hadn’t stood in the way of her academic experience or her post-college work as an intelligence analyst for the federal government. Nor had it impeded her stint flying around the world with rock stars as a freelance writer for Rolling Stone magazine.

The art world turned out to be different.

The New York art scene in the ’80s has been compared to Paris’s in the 1920s: afroth with creativity, artists of every medium in frenetic conversation with one another. But unlike Paris’s, where Josephine Baker and other great black artists found refuge from American institutionalized bias, New York’s art scene was deeply segregated. The city’s first fully integrated museum show did not occur until the late part of the decade. And cultural institutions — even those claiming to be on the bleeding edge — made little effort to acknowledge black artists who took any kind of risk. Especially the risk of confronting racism in the art world.

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire arrived not long after an especially vexing day for O’Grady. Paying her dues as an artist, she was making phone calls to promote a show at Just Above Midtown, or JAM: a New York gallery focused on experimental work by artists of color.



Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Shouts Out Her Poem) by Lorraine O'Grady.
Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

“I thought I’d dial The New Yorker and just see if I can get someone,” O’Grady says. “I actually got someone — the editor of ‘Goings On,’ and of course she’d heard of JAM, but she was just never going to review it or talk about it in any way at all, and everything that I said to her became a moment of condescension for her.”

As O’Grady recalls, the editor asked what the show was about. O’Grady shared the title: “Outlaw Esthetics.” At the time, most New York art shows were titled based on form, rather than subject matter; the director of JAM was ahead of her time. But the editor scoffed: “She said, ‘Oh, they do like to put titles on their shows there, don’t they?’”

For O’Grady, the blatant racism came as a shock.

“I don’t know that I would have been so alive to the various levels of condescension in her voice if I had not had the kind of life that I’d had, but as that musical voice went up and down the register of

condescension, I got it all. And it was horrifying,” she says. “I certainly understood that the art world was segregated, but until that moment, I hadn’t understood how illogical and unanswerable it was. It motivated a part of me that can get very angry.”

At the same time, O’Grady was already quietly fuming over a show she’d just seen, featuring African-American abstract art, that felt, in her words, too “careful.” Walking through Union Square Park to her home in the Meatpacking District one day shortly afterward, she had a sudden vision of herself, covered in white gloves. She began collecting gloves from thrift stores between the Battery and 125th Street, fashioning them into a dress — and perhaps even imagining a push from all the hands that had worn those gloves before.

Art handlers wear white gloves in order to “be careful” when holding objects imbued with value by art institutions — objects far too precious to be touched directly by human hands. But white gloves were also connected to O’Grady’s experiences growing up. They were worn to church and job interviews, or on any occasion where one needed to look one’s best. And looking one’s best was an important part of being a well-to-do black person in O’Grady’s day — another gesture of “being careful” in order to avoid abuse based on your skin color.

“People who feel excluded typically try to behave in a way that proves that they are worthy of inclusion — this was not called ‘respectability politics’ until much later,” O’Grady says. “I was critiquing respectability, but it wasn’t until I set out to do it that I realized how crazy this was. Indeed, the first day Mlle Bourgeoise Noire appeared in public, I thought, I may not have another friend left in this particular world [after this].”

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Still, she entered the gallery, handed out flowers graciously, then turned the whip — also a symbol, of the ongoing legacy of slavery — on herself.

“As I was doing it, I was just simply carried away by the moment — I mean I beat myself,” she says. “I beat myself way longer than I had anticipated I would. I had thought I would do some ceremonial swishes of the whip, but I ended up beating myself for about five minutes, which is a long time. And I was really shouting the poem. But as soon as I was done shouting the poem, I just started laughing and smiling again. It was really weird.”

After crashing the New Museum opening, Mlle Bourgeoisie Noire briefly became a controversial figure in the New York art world. Between 1980 and 1983, the persona made two public appearances and curated her own tongue-in-cheek art exhibition, “The Black and White Show.” In 1983, Mlle Bourgeoisie Noire also staged a playful intervention, “Art Is...,” at Harlem’s African-American Day Parade. For that, O’Grady created a float that featured a giant, empty, golden picture frame, which turned the parade-goers into a framed artwork. She also hired performers to carry ornate, golden picture frames through the crowds, celebrating the Harlem community’s beauty and day-to-day artfulness.

At the peak of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's fame, O'Grady had her picture — as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire — featured in *The Village Voice*. As a music critic, O'Grady's first article had been a cover story for *The Voice*. Being the subject of a story instead, felt like a moment of arrival.

"I don't know, if there had not been public notice taken, whether I would have continued making art," O'Grady says. "I knew what I was doing was important, and so I thought I didn't need outside confirmation, but sometimes you do. This gave me a feeling of elation and security that never left."

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire broke an uncomfortable silence in the art world at the time, but she also broke O'Grady's original trajectory as an artist. And at a certain point, O'Grady chose to let her go. "Fly by Night," an intense performance art piece that O'Grady put on at New York's Franklin Furnace in 1983, ended with images of Mlle Bourgeoisie Noire blowing up into bright white light.

With her alter ego gone, O'Grady was free to return to projects she'd had to set aside. She went on to create a prolific body of surrealistic performance, video, and conceptual art, on subjects ranging from her family history and a sister lost too soon; to the parallels between Michael Jackson and Charles Baudelaire; to the complexity and fleetingness of pleasure and life itself. Race remained an important sub-theme, but she's had many other agendas. Liz Munsell, who curated a 2018 exhibition of O'Grady's work at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, sums it up this way: "Lorraine [O'Grady] has always pushed the art world to reconsider its value systems and elitist social positioning."



Lorraine O'Grady visits her exhibition "Family Gained" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 2018. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Lately, O’Grady has revisited the work she had been doing right before Mlle Bourgeoise Noire emerged: creating diptychs of collage poems, composed from headlines in The New York Times, telling truths, as she puts it, “from the outside in.” She is developing a major new performance work, commissioned with a Creative Capital Award for presentation at the Brooklyn Museum in 2020. (She says she can’t say yet what it will be, except that it will involve a certain amount of “slapstick.”) And, confounding expectations about behavior once again, she appears (apparently) nude in a recent music video from the pop star Anohni.

In the past few years, O’Grady says, she has begun to make more sense of the Mlle Bourgeoise Noire performance, which at the time felt chaotic and unpolished to her. Now she sees it as a moment where she came to deeper understanding of her own strength, as an artist and an activist.

“As I moved through the world, I realized that I was not as strong as the image that I was projecting publicly, and I felt a little trapped and confused and embarrassed by that, I suppose,” she says. “And I didn’t see the way out of it, so that was a piece that had no resolution at all.”

The issues that compelled O’Grady to create Mlle Bourgeoise Noire are also far from resolved.

But the character’s carriage may have reverberations farther outside of the art world than O’Grady realizes. There are echoes of her actions in the iconic image of protestor Ieisha Evans, facing down riot police in a flowing sundress in Baton Rouge; in Colin Kaepernick’s choice of the gesture of kneeling to symbolize dissent; and yes, even in the highly produced music video for Beyoncé’s “Hold Up,” featuring the singer smashing car windows with a baseball bat, an angelic smile, and a ruffled gown. Though some have noted that Beyoncé’s image seems snatched straight from Pipilotti Rist’s 1997 installation “Ever is Over All,” it also certainly takes cues from Mlle Bourgeoise Noire’s infamous demeanor.

Infiltrating the subconsciousness of Beyoncé fans, who have viewed the video some 167 million times, is likely not at the top of any of O’Grady’s wish lists. But it’s hard to imagine that Mlle Bourgeoise Noire wouldn’t have nodded in approval at the video’s parting shot, where the pop diva aims her bat at the camera itself.

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Heather Kapplow is an artist and writer based in Boston.