Dada Meets Mama, Lorraine O'Grady on WAC

O'Grady was one of less than a handful of women of color active in the Womens Action Coalition. WAC had been begun by women in the New York art world in response to Anita Hill's denigration during the congressional hearing on Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court.

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Today again, it feels like a World War I moment, what with a breakdown in bourgeois certainties and the new order nowhere in sight. The world seems cut deep with trenches out of which heads pop only to be shot off by mortars from the opposing side. That Dada arose then, and WAC now, proves that the sleep of reason produces not only monsters but millenarian dreams of bliss.

WAC (for anyone who hasn't been watching) is the Women's Action Coalition, and for me it's become a sort of "guilty pleasure." Begun anonymously in New York last January by some 15 women, mostly artists, WAC in five months multiplied 100 times to become a more heterogeneous grouping. But it still retains the sensibilities of the art world, and for an artist, that's the pleasure of it. As with ACT UP, on whose nonhierarchical model of spontaneity they are based, WAC meetings and actions have the compelling quality of process art: things come together, and then they intuitively click.

At a meeting, the first thing you notice is the anger, a fissioning energy that seems as though it might lead anywhere. The room has the excitement of danger; at the Friends Meeting

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House, the high ceilings and consecrated space seemed to damp down some of it, but earlier meetings at the Drawing Center felt about to explode. Attending may be 600 mostly upper-middle-class white women between their late 20s and their late 30s, many of whom, in the wake of the second feminist movement of the '60s and '70s, expected the doors to their lives to be open but have found them stuck instead. Now, Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas, William Kennedy Smith/Jane Doe, and the threats to *Roe v. Wade* have pushed these women to the edge.

Educated to know the purposes of analysis, they often seem to have decided not to think. At WAC, the line from idea to action is unmediated and direct, and little distinction is made between the sublime and the trivial: between collecting personal statements from junior high school girls, to defeat the parental-consent abortion bill in Albany, and the "breastival," a topless beach-party supposed to promote awareness of breast cancer, every proposal is presented and received with the same intensity. Votes are taken with delirious speed; minutes are kept, but there is no time to read them. Each meeting is so dense that two weeks ago feels like two years, and two months ago is ancient history. There is an awesome shortness of organizational memory, then—not to mention the irrecollection of real history. Those of us old enough to remember how the second feminist movement died only recently because it couldn't make itself meaningful to working-class white women of all classes feel almost irrelevant.

As in Dada, the sum of activity is itself a collage, a simultaneity of chaos, with actions on the streets and in the media, and the sounds of drum corps and chants combined with collaborative visuals of wildly varied effectiveness. The meetings and actions have set in motion an aleatory process that generates ideas beyond what the mind might supply. (What other group would make a connection between abortion clinics and the Guggenheim?) But the Dada and Surrealism of the teens and '20s were, as we know, the last art-world effluents to believe that states of mind could change the world. Dada may have been "the chameleon of rapid, interested change,: and may, like WAC, have had "391 different attitudes and colors depending on the sex of the chairman,"[1] but after applying larger and larger doses

of shock, it was finally outdistanced by the bourgeoisie's own chaos. It makes you wonder about WAC's long-term survival.

Without a focused program grounded in theory, some of WAC's most effective actions have been in support of other groups, such as WHAM! and NARAL, for which its willing cadres and visual talents have proved estimable. On its own, WAC has sometimes made mistakes. An ill-conceived slide-show/speak-out during the Republican convention in Houston, for example, consumed a privately raised budget of $35,000—more than all previous activities combined—and produced a crisis of definition for the group as a whole.

Though the general information bombardment of the culture may account for much of WAC's historical amnesia, one suspects there is something else. Which brings me to the guilty part of my pleasure.

In its earliest planning stages, WAC made a decision not to deal with difference head-on, not to risk discussions that might impede getting the job done. It may have started so white that it cannot now recover. At a philosophy meeting in late March, one young woman stunned the room by saying, "I don't think WAC is too white or too anything. I didn't come for the women. I didn't come for the coalition. I came for the action!" It's a statement that as the months have passed has come to seem more and more central. Even WAC's bias against analysis seems to support it: If you don't want to talk, read, think, then nothing will change, and white women will maintain their privilege within the movement of determining what and where the action is.

So why am I still here? Perhaps because, like Dada, WAC offers an opportunity to act and to observe at the same time. There is the thrill of watching social forces work themselves out along a new Maginot Line. Besides, with the emergence of the Multicultural Caucus (now called the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion) and the Lesbian Issues Caucus, and with the coming to the fore of more politically evolved members, WAC appears to be changing in spite of itself; as one lesbian says, "It's not about making friends. It's about making allies."

Yet unless there is sustained coalition-building with nonartists and more action directly related to the concerns of nonwhite women, the number of women of color in the group won't dramatically increase. The room now is probably a fair manifestation of the art world. In addition, with the careers of nonwhite artists as much as ten years behind those of white artists of comparable talent, and with less discretionary time and income and proportionately greater demands on them, the women of color will not be as active. But, unlike the black woman who told me, "I have to deal with white people all day. I don't have the energy to jump into that bag at night," those who do come seem to feel comfortable. We are able to speak freely and occasionally we are heard. Mostly middle-class artists ourselves, we may not have the temperament for the politically necessary task of organizing poor women outside.

We have our own differences. Though for all of us the traditional gender issues of white feminists—reproductive rights, sexual abuse, parity in the workplace—seem a tired throwback to the '70s unless inflected by economics, class, and race, not all are as theoretically oriented, or as protective of their time, as I am. Together with those white women who are their allies, some women of color have willing taken on the permanent task of educating *them*, resigned to WAC as a microcosm of the world.

As for me, I am impatient with educational processes that take time from pressing goals, such as advancing in my own work, and helping African-American visual arts become established as a total field. But until someone figures out a way to get middle-class black women—all those doctors, lawyers, teachers, and administrators—"out of the stores and into the streets"[2] in what little time they have between jobs and family, WAC is as interesting a political activity as I can imagine. Dangerous and unpredictable, as exciting to observe as to participate in, it has all the qualities of the art I like best. I can't help hoping it comes sooner rather than late to the understanding of Tristan Tzara: "Dada remains within the European frame of weaknesses it's shit after all but from now on we mean to shit in assorted colors and bedeck the artistic zoo with the flags of every consulate."[3] By finding the means to

change itself, through thinking as well as acting, WAC *could* just change the world.

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[1] Tristan Tzara, "Seven Dada Manifestoes," in Robert Motherwell, ed., *Dada Painters and Poets*, second edition, Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981, p95.

[2] Sheila Radford-Hill, in "Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p170, makes the strongest and most succinct of the contemporary calls for a separate black feminist movement, one in which middle-class black women learn to unite with working-class black women to achieve their common goals.

[3] Tzara, p75.