

NEWS

LORRAINE O'GRADY (1934–2024)

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Lorraine O'Grady, 2018. Photo: Ross Collab.

Pathbreaking conceptual and performance artist Lorraine O'Grady, whose visceral work explored the latent tensions arising at the intersection of culture, race, class, and national origin, died at her home in New York on December 13. She was ninety. Her death was announced by her eponymous trust. Though O'Grady launched her artistic career comparatively late, in her mid-forties, she leaves behind a body of work as vast and diverse as her experiences before she arrived to artmaking, the two spheres of her life continuing to resonate with generations of artists. From her early canonic performances as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, which highlighted the racial apartheid experienced by Black artists; to her joyful 1983 performance *Art Is . . .*, which presented everyday people of color as framed living art; to her *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, a 1991 project of Surrealistic photocollages investigating the violence to which women are subjected on a daily basis, O'Grady boldly reckoned with a prevailing Western power structure that sought to subjugate women, especially those of color. Her determination to expose and remake this structure spilled into her incisive writing, which arguably reached its apotheosis in the 1992 essay "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in which she called out the racism inherent in a masterwork by Édouard Manet. "As an advantaged member of a disadvantaged group, I've lived my life on the rim—a dialectically privileged location that's helped keep my political awareness acute," she wrote in 1981. "But the main reason my art is 'political' is probably that anger is my most productive emotion."

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Lorraine O'Grady was born in Boston on September 21, 1934, to Jamaican parents who helped to found the city's first West Indian Episcopal church. O'Grady was fascinated by the rituals and pageantry of the services taking place at a nearby High Episcopal church, and the aesthetics of that religion would come to shape her artistic practice. A gifted writer from an early age, she studied economics and Spanish at Wellesley College, graduating in 1955. Though her mother wanted her to become a lawyer, O'Grady took a job in government, seeing opportunities for Black women to advance there. Disillusioned, she left the field after five years, cashing in her retirement fund and traveling through Europe. "[I] started the process of doing something that I felt I needed to do, which was explain myself to the world," she told [Artforum's](#) David Velasco in 2021.

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In 1965, O'Grady enrolled in the Iowa Writers Workshop's MFA program for fiction; by 1967, enmeshed in a second marriage (her first, in college, had produced a son, who lived with his father), she had dropped out and moved to Chicago, where she ran a translation agency. In 1973, once again single, she moved to New York and began dating a music executive. Resolved not to be relegated to the role of his "old lady," she embarked on a career in rock journalism, making her debut with a 3,000-word cover story on the Allman Brothers for the *Village Voice* and continuing to write for that paper and *Rolling Stone*. Her voracious thirst for knowledge soon led her past rock to art, however, and in 1974, while teaching English at New York's School of Visual Arts, she left her students to their own devices to sneak upstairs and attend a class that was being guest-taught by firebrand performance artist Vito Acconci. "I said, 'Okay, if he can do it, I can do it,'" O'Grady told Velasco.

Following a breast cancer scare in 1977, O'Grady embarked on her artistic career with "Cutting Out the New York Times." Inspired by André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, the series began as an intended gift for the artist's doctor but instead came to comprise twenty-six poems juxtaposing fragments sliced from the headlines of the titular publication. The works, created according to a strict set of parameters O'Grady set for herself, evince a range of moods and in some instances (for example, the poem *Vivo*) slyly incorporate double entendre.

In 1980, having volunteered to assist with communications at Just Above Midtown (JAM), a Black avant-garde gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant and representing artists including David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, and Howardena Pindell, O'Grady performed the first of her iconic *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* works (1980–83). For these performances, O'Grady, clad in a floor-length evening gown made from 180 pairs of white gloves and brandishing a cat-o-nine-tails studded with chrysanthemums, burst guerilla style into art gatherings, where she spoke loudly on art-world segregation while flagellating herself, before departing as abruptly as she had entered.

Though O'Grady considered the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* works a failure, believing they did not effectively integrate Black voices into the art world of the day, they have taken on mythic proportions. They also presaged a tremendous outpouring of works by the artist in disparate media including video, photography, installation, collage, performance and writing. Chief among these is *Art Is . . .*, for which O'Grady entered an unauthorized float, comprising a flatbed truck on which was mounted a colossal gold picture frame, in a Harlem parade. Fifteen white-clad performers armed with smaller gold frames leapt on and off the truck, holding the frames up before the faces of paradegoers and participants, as well as the policemen monitoring the event, urging them to see themselves as art.

"*Art Is . . .* was fabulous, in concept and execution," JAM's Bryant, who attended the event, told the [New York Times](#) in 2021. "For anyone who's been in a position of social and cultural oppression, it was such a poignant statement and could be absorbed instantly."

O'Grady continued to make work prolifically over the ensuing decades, frequently re-making or re-presenting works from her undefinable oeuvre, such as her "Miscegenated Family Album" of 1980, a thought-provoking record of diasporic kinship placing photos of her own relatives in dialogue with those of royal figures of pharaonic Egypt, which she reintroduced in 1994. In 2015, she produced a set of still photographs of her 1982 performance *Rivers, First Draft (or, the Woman in Red)*. Sponsored by JAM and taking the form of what O'Grady called a "collage in space," the autobiographical *Rivers* was staged in New York's Central Park and limned the path of a woman struggling to become an artist. Juxtaposition remained an important component of her practice, as revealed for example by 2010's *The First and the Last of the Modernists*, which paired images of Charles Baudelaire with those of Michael Jackson. ("What shocks people when they see them side-by-side is they think: how can you compare a pop star with an avant-garde poet?" she told the [Brooklyn Rail's](#) Jarrett Earnest in 2016. "When I look at them, I see Michael as the greater genius.")

Concurrent with her artistic practice, Grady for decades continued teaching at SVA, retiring in 2000; she also continued to write, contributing to the trailblazing feminist journal *Heresies*, producing columns for [Artforum](#), and most notably penning "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" for *Afterimage*. Expanded in 1994 for *New Feminist Criticism*, the essay pointed out the lack of attention paid to the Black maid in Manet's 1863 *Olympia*, which foregrounds a white female nude who looks out at the viewer and depicts her Black maid as subservient, fading into the background, her gaze on the unclothed woman. "White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be," O'Grady wrote. The essay remains essential reading today.

Though her uncategorizable practice and relentless artmaking earned her the respect of many in the art world—"I would not be who I am without Lorraine," sculptor Simone Leigh told the *Times*—it was not until recently that O'Grady gained the attention she was finally due, participating in the Whitney Biennial in 2010 before appearing in a slew of highly regarded group shows, among them the traveling exhibitions "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" and "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85." O'Grady received a retrospective of her own at the Brooklyn Museum in 2021; the show closed at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, her alma mater, earlier this year. O'Grady's writings are collected in the 2020 volume *Lorraine O'Grady: Writing in Space*, and her works are held in the collections of major institutions around the world, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, all in New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, both in Boston; and the Sammlung Verbund Collection, Vienna.

"I'm not somebody who is digging down deep to find an ultimate truth," O'Grady told [Artnet News's](#) Ben Davis in 2021, "just simply trying to make as many of my truths as visible as possible since they've been made invisible."

"O'Grady's genius lies in her willingness to embody speculative, treacherous conjuncts cresting the edges of comprehension," wrote Catherine Damman in a 2021 issue of [Artforum](#). "It is our task to keep up, lest we confuse liberation—what really matters—with something that just stands in its place."

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