



Lorraine O'Grady, *Cutting Out CONYT 04, 1977/2017*, diptych, collage on paper, each sheet 41 3/4 × 30".

## Lorraine O'Grady

— Colby Chamberlain

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

Frames within frames: For a lecture in 1969, Jacques Derrida distributed copies of “*Mimique*,” a prose poem written by Stéphane Mallarmé in 1897 describing a theatrical scene involving the pantomime character Pierrot, whom Mallarmé had read about in a pamphlet purportedly authored by the mime himself. In the scene, Pierrot learns that his wife, Columbine, has betrayed him, and he resolves to murder her—by tickling her to death. Pierrot performs this fanciful deed onstage, playing the parts of both tickler and tickled, alternately wriggling his hands ferociously and giggling with helpless delight. As he switches between masculine and feminine roles, he also oscillates temporally, from buildup to aftermath. Mallarmé quotes the pamphlet’s account of the mime’s frantic motions: “Here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, *under the false appearance of a present.*”

Now again: For a solo exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates this past fall, Lorraine O'Grady presented a set of letterpress prints based on works first shown in 2006 in a group exhibition at New York’s Daniel Reich Gallery curated by Nick Mauss, but

composed in 1977 as collage poems made of snippets cut from successive editions of the Sunday *New York Times*. That year, O'Grady was teaching a course on avant-garde literature at the School of Visual Arts in New York; she has cited Dada and Surrealist montage as an inspiration for the poems, though only to a point. Whereas Tristan Tzara and André Breton reveled in the cutup method's aggressive nonsense—enjoying the privilege of the white male bourgeoisie, for whom sense was always a given—O'Grady sought to turn the paper of record into a medium of personal expression. In 2017, she pared the poems down into haiku-like diptychs. Exhibited here, their side-by-side panels resembled spreads from *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance, 1897), the book that prompted Walter Benjamin to hail Mallarmé as “the first [poet] to incorporate the graphic tensions of the advertisement in the printed page.”

I furnish all this context because it sticks to the prints themselves, which appeared collectively under the title *Cutting Out CONYt, 1977/2017* (that is, “Cutting Out Cutting Out the *New York Times*,” a cutup of a cutup). Like Pierrot's performance, the works were temporally out of joint, a consequence of numerous delays and deferrals, among them the belated reception of the historic avant-garde in the 1960s and '70s; O'Grady's own halting entry into the visual arts, typically pegged to the debut of her persona Mlle Bourgeoise Noire at New York's Just Above Midtown Gallery in 1980; the perpetually overdue recognition of JAM's formidable roster by “white” art institutions; the nearly three-decade interlude between the poems' completion and their premiere at Daniel Reich; and their reappearance here in a new format. Yet through all these dislocations, *CONYt* held onto a historical element: headlines and advertising slogans pilfered from not just the *Times*, but the Sunday *Times*, with its bourgeois lifestyle sections on travel and real estate. No matter how it's excised or rearranged, the paper's language will always betray the markings of class.

O'Grady has explained her use of diptychs as a strategy for destabilizing the hierarchies implicit in the dualisms that structure Western thought: public and private; male and female; white and black. This is strikingly analogous to the aims of Derrida, who, in his Mallarmé lecture and elsewhere, sought to overturn philosophy's valorization of speech over writing. That said, Derridean deconstruction was never so succinctly trenchant as

O’Grady’s diptychs. The gap between each work’s two panels—akin to the gutter between pages in a book, or the slash between 1977 and 2017 on the exhibition checklist—is an ambiguous break. How does one read across this divide? Left panel: “for years you’ve written the hard way / are you capable of selecting.” Is this a public address or a private musing, perhaps even a reference to O’Grady’s own transition from studying at the Iowa Writers Workshop in Iowa City to teaching Dada at SVA? Right panel: “the loose, drifting material of / plagues.” Should we take this as the direct object of “selecting”? If so, is this drifting material specific to the 1970s, or are the plagues yet to come?

— Colby Chamberlain

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