

# RIVERS, FIRST DRAFT, 1982/2015

A PROJECT FOR ATLÁNTICA BY  
LORRAINE O'GRADY

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*Rivers, First Draft* includes forty-eight images of the 1982 performance that Lorraine O'Grady created for the public art program Art Across the Park, curated by Gylbert Coker, Horace Brockington, and Jennifer Manfredi.

*Rivers, First Draft* was originally performed in the Loch, a northern section of New York's Central Park, on August 18th, 1982. O'Grady envisioned the performance as a "collage-in-space," with various actions taking place simultaneously on two sides of a stream and further up a hill. She has described its structure as a "three-ring circus," in which multiple temporalities and micro-narratives that spoke to O'Grady's life experiences coexisted. The narratives that competed for attention presented multiple realities with the aim of uniting two different heritages, that of the Caribbean and that of New England, as well as three different ages and aspects of O'Grady's self, family dynamics, and artistic identity. It involved seventeen performers, including O'Grady, who were furnished with precisely designed costumes and props. The characters were identified by their vibrantly colored clothing, such as the Woman in Red (O'Grady's adult self), the Woman in White (O'Grady's mother), the Teenager in Magenta (O'Grady's adolescent self), and the Young Man in Green. Serving as *tableaux vivants* of O'Grady's past were the Girl in White, who recited Latin grammar government lessons through a megaphone, the Woman in White, who disinterestedly grated coconuts throughout the entire performance, and the Nantucket Memorial, a symbol of O'Grady's New England upbringing. In the 1970s reality of the Woman in Red, O'Grady navigated her entrance into the New York art world through the characters of the

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Debauchees (who represented her life in the realm of pop culture as a rock critic), Art Snobs, and Black Male Artists in Yellow. A decisive moment in the piece was when the Woman in Red spray-painted a white stove red, as shown in the photograph *The Woman in Red starts painting the stove her own color*. This action signified not only the moment O'Grady when began her artistic transformation, but also when she became her own person outside of her mother's indoctrination, aligning her own narrative with the Feminist discourse of the time. The ending sequence of *Rivers, First Drafts* united O'Grady's childhood, adolescent, and adult selves as the characters walked down the stream together. For her, this scene represented the moment before she performed her first artwork, the now iconic *Mlle Bourgeois Noire*.

The piece was performed only once, for a small invited audience of friends from Just Above Midtown (JAM) gallery and the occasional passersby. In the early 1980s, as O'Grady embarked on a new career as an artist, she found a supportive and challenging community in JAM, Artists such as David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, Tyrone Mitchell, and Dawoud Bey, as well as the art historians Lowery Stokes Sims, Judith Wilson, and Kellie Jones, congregated around JAM, which was led by Linda Goode-Bryant. O'Grady explains, "For me, doing *Rivers* in the context of Just Above Midtown was a unique art-making moment, one when the enabling audience—the audience which allows the work to come into existence and to which the work speaks—and the audience that consumes the work were one and the same." In addition, she cast JAM artists George Mingo and Fred Wilson as characters in the performance.

Only Kodachrome 35 mm slides of the piece survive to memorialize the event. The lush green sun-dappled nature of the Loch was a prominent backdrop, adding to the conglomeration of saturated color and sound. In collaboration with Eastman Kodak Company, the 2015 manifestation of *Rivers, First Draft* captures the rich colors and deep contrasts of the performance, achieved with analog and digital technology and photographic paper from Kodak's headquarters in Rochester, NY. O'Grady's succinct selection and cropping of images reflects the simultaneity and dreamlike quality of the original performance.



Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in White works impassively, 1982/2015  
Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts  
20h x 13.4w in (50.8h x 34.04w cm)



Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in Red cooks, and the Teenager in Magenta lies curled across the stream, 1982/2015  
Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts  
16h x 20w in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)

Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in Red, on a bed jutting into the water, skims an accordion-folded album of photos, 1982/2015  
Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts  
16 x 20 in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)





Rivers, First Draft: As if from its pages, the Nude Swimmer emerges from the water and fondles her, 1982/2015  
Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts  
16 x 20 in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)



Rivers, First Draft: The Art Snobs comment  
for the last time, 1982/2015  
Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts  
16 x 20 in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)



Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in Red returns to her album,  
and the Nantucket Memorial comes to life, 1982/2015  
Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts  
16 x 20 in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)



Rivers, First Draft: She is absorbed, but the  
Memorial insists, 1982/2015  
Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts  
16 x 20 in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)