

LORRAINE O'GRADY HAS ALWAYS BEEN A REBEL

The eighty-eight-year-old artist and critic, whose profile has risen in the past decade, examines her role in the art world then and now.

By Doreen St. Félix
September 29, 2022



Photographs by Stefan Ruiz for The New Yorker

How to walk properly, according to Lorraine O'Grady, the eighty-eight-year-old conceptual and performance artist: "With your chin tucked under your head, your shoulders dropped down, your stomach pulled up." Good posture has become a concern for O'Grady in the past couple of years, as her latest persona, the Knight, is a character that requires her to wear a forty-pound suit of armor. "As long as I don't gain or lose more than three or four pounds, I'm O.K.," O'Grady told me in late August, over Zoom, while we discussed "Greetings and Theses," the fourteen-minute film that constituted the official performance début of the Knight. The première was held, in late July, at the Brooklyn Museum, the site of the 2021 exhibition "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And," a retrospective of her radical and soul-shaking oeuvre. The film is meta: the Knight trawls the arteries of "Both/And," surveying the contents of a life's work.

I hesitate to assign the honorific of "master" to O'Grady, because of the notion of dominance which word evokes. But I can say that she is a legend of extraordinary magnitude, precisely because her legend has resisted being flattened, tokenized, ossified. She was born in Boston in 1934, to a Jamaican family that believed in a dogma one might now call Black Excellence. Although O'Grady excelled in the bourgeois space, she always knew that she did not belong there—that she was an other within the class of others. It was not until she was in her early forties that she began putting out works. Since then, she has reached across media—criticism, performance, photography, collage—to produce foundational pieces of the Black avant-garde conceptual art. "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire," her first and most famous performance, in the early eighties, was an insurrection which saw her, clothed in a débutante's gown made of gloves, bring to light the conservatism and the racism that beset the art world.

It has been in the past decade that O'Grady has become an art star. I met her this past May, at Alexander Gray Associates, her gallery, during a vegan dinner held in honor of a photo exhibition that harked back to her first solo show, from 1991: "Body Is the Ground of My Experience." She was wearing leather, and her hair was softly spiked and striped black and white. No one could look cooler.

It is now chic to attach a certain narrative to O'Grady, that the trailblazer is receiving a belated coronation from a generation of art-world arbiters who are better equipped to recognize her genius. O'Grady is not receiving this status passively. In "Greetings and Theses," she explicitly asks, "Have I become part of what is keeping the door closed to them?" The atmosphere gets lifted, toward the end of the film, by the addition of music. The Knight dances the cumbia. The movement speaks to O'Grady's humor—she tends to punctuate spoken paragraphs of intimidating insight with welcoming laughter—and her restlessness. She works at least sixteen hours a day. She recently published "Writing in Space, 1973–2019," a compendium of essays, with Duke University Press. In October, her work will be featured in an exhibition at the moma, memorializing Just Above Midtown, the experimental Black gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant, where O'Grady developed her intellectual interventions. When I asked about the provenance of the Knight, her latest persona, she replied, "The question I ask is, when you remove all the markers of identity, race, gender, age, class, what's left?" Our conversation has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.



“In my family, either you went along with what they were doing or you revolted,” O’Grady says. “I felt the most important thing I could do was establish my complexity.”

I wanted to ask you about your relationship to fame and attention, especially the fame and attention that have attended your work in the past decade or so. When we think of Lorraine O’Grady, we think of the gate-crasher. With “Greetings and Theses,” the persona of the Knight—your second since “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire”—was anticipated, so much so that the announcement of the upcoming performance was taken as the work itself.

There’s two different questions there. The first is the reaction to the reception of the earlier body of work. And that was very calculated, of course, because, from the minute I got invited to be in this groundbreaking show that Connie Butler curated, called “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” I realized that it was going to be more important than maybe even she thought. I woke up and I said, “Nobody knows who I am.” Connie knew who I was because she had been one of the young women at this organization, was, the Women’s Action Coalition, which I had been very active in during the early days and which she had named her show after. She always knew she was going to put me in the most important position of the show, which was the opening act. You couldn’t get into the show without passing me. I didn’t want to be a one-hit wonder. I wanted to make it possible for people who had been impressed by what they saw, or mystified by what they saw, or whatever they were, to find out more about me. I made sure that I had a Web site that was pretty extensive of all of the work that I had done up to that point.

Your Web site is a living archive. One of the best artist Web sites.

It’s pretty extraordinary, but that’s only because I grew up with the Internet, believe it or not. I’m eighty-eight, but I was one of the early adopters, because I happened to just luck out and have a fellowship at the Bunting Institute, at Harvard, the year the Internet began. My first browser was Netspace One. That was 1994 and I’ve been digitized ever since.

Why don’t you do social media?

I don’t do social media because that would be a black hole. I would really care whether people unfriended me, or if I followed them and they didn’t follow me. I have not lifted a finger and somehow my hashtag, which I follow as a lurker—

You lurk!

—has over three thousand images.

How do you feel about that?

You don’t get to dictate the terms under which the work you put out there is received. “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire” is an extremely directed body of work. This trilogy that I did, [it was all about] what’s wrong with the art world, and what we need to do to remedy it. That work became so popular that it just took over. It’s been a bit of a struggle to get the other work—which is more what I consider the core of what I’m about, the anti-binary argument and all that—that’s a little bit harder to establish, I’ve found.

You’re a rock star to younger viewers. They are the audience that is most prepared for your explorations of Black subjectivity and for your framework of the diptych, the “Both/And”—which was the title of your retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum—as opposed to the either/or that has dominated Western thought.

You don't always know exactly what you're doing. Within ten years after I started, I really understood that the diptych was the core of the work and that the anti-binary argument was the theme. It took a while to figure out how to present that idea publicly. The best way to start is just with the title. I thought that, outside of a few very smart people, like the curators of the exhibition, I would not be understood. Honestly, Doreen, it was amazing. I mean, before the show even opened, people seemed to have gotten it, you know? I have asked myself, Well, how did this happen? Since I started my work, in 1977, there has been a big change in the intellectual vocabulary of academia. Especially around the work of Derrida and deconstruction.

The other part of it is young people, people under the age of forty, experiencing their relationship to the culture and the world that their families had raised them to inherit—very similarly to the way the young Dadaists went off to Zurich and suddenly all realized that their parents had been fooling them. Not fooling them, but [the parents] had been fooled themselves, had been seduced into thinking that European culture was built on rationality. And now they were in this war, and nobody understood what the war was about. The Dadaists who avoided the draft and went to Zurich, their work became all about overturning the rational by creating a Surrealism, “above reality.” I am basically a *sous réalité*, an “under-reality.” These young people who are now being subjected to an academia built on their deconstructionism, they have a vocabulary that was not available to the two previous generations. But they're also experiencing this world. Suddenly, they're not going to have what their parents had, let alone what their parents told them that they were going to have.

Unlearning the abstraction that Blackness is monocultural, that it is not complicated, that it's predictable—my generation is experiencing the realization that this was a lie we had accepted.

Earlier, you asked what I meant by being a breadth artist as opposed to being a depth artist. The most important thing that I had to do as an artist was to have the concept of Black genius uttered out loud. And this could only be based on complexity. Listen, I was always a rebel. I think I was a little bohemian by about three.

In Boston of all places.

In my family, either you went along with what they were doing or you revolted. I felt the most important thing I could do was establish my complexity. If I put a retrospective up twenty-five years ago, it would have looked like a group show to most people.

There was so much variance.

There has always been and maybe there will always be a tremendous pressure on artists to have the signature image. Now they call it the branding image, I suppose. I decided to refuse that as a possibility for me. I needed to have as many different images of myself out there as possible.

I want to ask you more about your childhood and how it informed your desire to revolt. I am drawn to your biography because my parents are also from the Caribbean. My mother was also a seamstress. They did not force assimilation on us, but, certainly, we had to succeed. Reading the essays in “Writing in Space” made me want to learn more about your relationship to your family.

I didn't fit into my family because I entered a family unit that was already established. My sister was eleven years older than I was. She was like a second mother, which was part of the problem. She could rescue me, occasionally, but mostly she bossed me around. These were the Depression years. I was born

in 1934. It was a disruption in terms of the psychological ecology of the family unit. Suddenly, my mother had this second child and mothering was being extended into the indefinite future for her, and that was not what she wanted. I always experienced my family as a unit that was trying to ignore me as much as they could. And I was pretty unignorable. I had several moments of revolt in my house where I threw all my mother's clothes out of the window. I began sort of defining myself against my sister, my family, almost immediately. I didn't feel I was nothing. I felt I was something. But I was not what they were. I knew that I was kind of a little smarter than my sister was and that I was going to be a better scholar.

And that meant something to your parents?

Oh, yeah. My mother wanted her to go to Radcliffe, and she did not want to go to Radcliffe. She may not have been able to get into Radcliffe, I don't know. My parents settled for Simmons. But, after six years of Girls' Latin School, she didn't want to go to an all-girls school. She did not go to the interview at Simmons. The weeks and the months went by, and my mother was starting to get rather concerned. My sister just kept her counsel. They never heard from Simmons. And, in the end, she got exactly what she wanted, which was to go to co-ed Boston University.

She was a rebel in her own right, too.

But her rebelling was to be even more bourgeois than our parents were. She did very well at B.U. She was the president at Alpha Kappa Alpha when that chapter was the host chapter for girls from all over New England—it was their connection to Black social life. She married a dentist, and blah blah. Just to tell you how I disagreed with her. You don't have to put this in your article, but she described herself as someone who swore by *The New Yorker*. I described myself as someone who swore by the *Village Voice*.

[Laughs.] I think that's the better identification. Were you involved at all in Black bourgeois social life in college?

Not at all. Before I got to college, I was getting every award you could imagine. I got something from the Deltas, the A.K.A.s. I also got invited to the cotillions by the Girl Friends. And I said no. My mother said, "What are you doing to me?"

Did your mother get to view your works that were critiques of the Black bourgeoisie? Did she have opinions on your decision to defect from the class you had been born into?

At a certain point, my mother realized that I was not on her side. She couldn't use me socially. She couldn't talk about me. She couldn't brag about me in the usual ways. I was an embarrassment. Not only did I go to Wellesley but I managed to get pregnant and married in my sophomore year and had to leave. Oh, my God, this was the end of the world for my family. My mother didn't participate even in the successes I had. I sent her the cover story I did for the *Village Voice* on the Allman Brothers because I thought it would make her happy. Nope. It was not her world. I think, in my generation, parents were really not willing to accept too much individuality in their children. They couldn't even imagine art as a profession. I was good at things that made my mother's aspirations for me understandable. I was good at history. I was a good debater. Of course, I'll go to Wellesley and major in history, and then I'll go to Harvard Law School, and then I'll open up a little office in Boston, and then I'll run for office, and I'll become the first Black congresswoman. [Laughs.]

I'm interested in the period of your life after graduation. Being married, being a young mother, but knowing that you wanted to be an artist. There was not a script for the mother, the wife as a working artist.

I made a difficult decision. My little boy and I were by ourselves at this point. Most of the time I was in Washington, I had him with me. Then I realized being in Washington was death for me.

What was the work you were doing in Washington at the time?

I did five years at the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, which was the fanciest of bureaus, where the intellectuals were. I can't say that it was not interesting. There was simply no way of conceiving, on the part of these very smart, well-intentioned people, a Black intellectual class. They couldn't imagine that. And there was certainly no way for them to understand any of the nuances of thought, of life, of emotions, for a Black female intellectual. And I realized that I would never be seen. I had to make myself seen. The first objective in leaving was to write a novel that would help me be seen.

Is that when you went to the Iowa Writers' Workshop?

I ended up at Iowa because I went to Europe in the early sixties. I found out two different things. I didn't know how to write a novel because I wasn't a big novel reader. And I also found out that the United States was way more interesting than Europe at that moment in time.

You didn't have the Black expat experience of never wanting to return.

No. Many people are fascinated by the Black expatriate experience, but most of that expatriation happened in the late twenties and early thirties. That was a time when another aspect of European racism—the obverse of the coin, exoticism—enabled many Blacks to feel that they were being accepted. Whereas that was not the case by the late thirties, when Nazism was rising. There were a lot of right-wing parties in France as well. That was the moment when Negritude began. When I went to Europe, in the early sixties, Europe was down. It had not fully recovered, and it certainly hadn't recovered emotionally or mentally. You couldn't go anywhere. In places like France and Denmark, where I was living, the racism was so extreme. Between the fact that things were more interesting in the United States and the fact that the racism was more extreme than I had imagined, I had to get back.

What was New York City like in the seventies?

I was living this life as a rock critic with this guy I had gone there to be with. He was head of publicity for a record company, so I was living a kind of chichi life. Every day, a chauffeur in a limousine would come along, pick me up, take me someplace, and bring me back. I was getting tired of that. This relationship with this fellow had gotten me to New York, but that was as far as it was gonna go. At that point, I was trying to figure out, What am I going to do next?

A friend of mine was depressed by the fact that his wife was leaving him. He was teaching at the School of Visual Arts and he couldn't teach most of his courses because he had to grieve too much. He said, "Listen, I can't take it. Can you take this course from me?" I got there and I could not believe it. It was so great. It was the opposite of everything I had experienced in education. It wasn't Girls' Latin, with its two-hundred-year history. It wasn't Wellesley. It wasn't any of that. It was bombed out. They had just one building, and it was a mess. And yet the energy was so great. It was still the era where all the students came from the five boroughs. It had not been internationalized—it was dominated by Italians from

Brooklyn. How come these working-class kids were able to think of themselves as artists? That's really just because the Italians had such a long tradition of art in their culture. The father of some crazy kid going to S.V.A. could boast about his kid, and people would say, "Oh, so your boy is going to be Michelangelo!" Many students became heads of comic-book companies. Some of them became punk musicians.

The physical atmosphere, the mental atmosphere, all of it was so exciting to me that I decided to learn more about it. I always had little coffee-table art books but I never actually read them. I just looked at the pictures. I went to the Eighth Street Bookshop. At the cash register, as I was leaving, I saw this funny book, and it had text all over the cover but I couldn't understand the text. I opened it up and saw it was an art book. And so I bought it. And that was Lucy Lippard's "Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object." I don't know if you know that book, but it was the book of the conceptual-art movement. The years were 1966 to 1972. And, by the time I finished it, I thought, You know, I can do this. I have ideas like this all the time. I just didn't know they were art.

Were there women you saw as inspirations for the kind of performance you wanted to put on?

Not for the kind of performance, but for being, for doing performance, yes. It took me almost a year before I realized Adrian Piper was Black. She was just another one of the white artists in the book. The performances were so extreme, so dangerous, not just to the outside but to the inside. I couldn't imagine doing something so psychologically extreme. Hers and Sol LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art" were the things that really popped out for me in this book. And I thought I could do it in my own way, for my own purposes.

Recently, I reread "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," your landmark essay, published in 1991. When did you notice that this world view did not necessarily have a grounding in the performance art that was burgeoning at the time?

Instantly. There were a few other Black women who were doing performance, but they were doing performance as part of another career. I knew that performance was probably the only thing I could do, because I wasn't crafted. From the very minute I started, I began to think of myself as a conceptual and performance artist. It wasn't being done as part of another career. It was the career. I started with this film script. Then I did something called "Cutting Out the New York Times," in 1977. That was part of the conceptual thing. I was already teaching Dadaism, Surrealism. It was very easy for me, but I knew I had to do it not from the point of view of the Dadaists or the Surrealists but from the point of view of an African American woman.

I started by wanting to overturn the irrationality that I had always known was there. You see, the Dadaists and the Surrealists, they only discovered it as teen-agers, early twenties. I knew from the minute that I was born that the way I was being treated was irrational. I was pretty smart and I was also pretty cute. I knew that if people were looking down on me they were crazy. I needed to dominate irrationality. I needed to pull something out of it that I could use to subvert it. I felt that "Cutting Out the New York Times" was exactly where I was going to be going for the rest of my career. And then I volunteered at Just Above Midtown. I was doing press. I actually called *The New Yorker*. I knew that there was no chance of ever getting a review of Just Above Midtown there, and it never did get reviewed there. I had access to my anger, and what always put me at odds with the people that I was around was that a lot of people were very practical and saw the situation for what it was and just felt there was no change in it.

By "the situation," you mean the racism of the gallery and media systems?

Yes. They couldn't change it. I didn't know whether I could change it, but I felt I had to express it. I had to bring it up to the light and look at it.

Is that why the intervention of "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire" was directed to Black artists?

The first time. The first time, she did it at Just Above Midtown. The second time she did it, it was at the New Museum.

What was the response from your peers?

I'll tell you, the only response that I remember from the evening was Linda Goode Bryant. I was standing in front of her when I shouted the poem and I didn't quite know what to do next. She rushed up, hugged me so close, and said, "This was one of the best things I've ever seen."

There was a totally uncomprehending review that included the show and had a picture of me, and it didn't seem to know what I was or what I was doing or why I was doing it. I realized there was a lot of work to be done. I went out again. It was very expensive. There wasn't a system in place to support performance artists financially. The next time I went out was at the New Museum. I was addressing a different audience, the white audience, but always sort of with the subtext of also addressing the Black audience. "Now is the time for an invasion" is addressed to the Black audience. "Now is the time for you to be invaded" was the message to the New Museum.

The next thing I decided to do was take advantage of an offer from Kenkeleba Gallery. I put on "The Black and White Show." Not long after "The Black and White Show," I did "Art Is . . ." It was three different questions: segregation in the art world, who the artist should be, and who the audience should be.

And there is the fourth question: Who should Lorraine be? It's hard to find the archive of your performance from the same year as "Art Is . . .," 1983. But, from research, that piece, which is called "River, First Draft," was a personal reckoning. It could be seen as a guide map to how a woman-of-color artist might introduce herself to the world, might encounter the critic.

The best response, in some ways, was Judith Wilson's, in the catalogue essay she did for my show in 1991, at intar Gallery. She pointed out that I was doing something that was also being done by Adrienne Kennedy in "Funnyhouse of a Negro."

The splitting of the voice.

I didn't really know that at the time.

That's fascinating, because I think of Kennedy as your peer and as your analogue in the theatre. I also think of Margo Jefferson as your associate in criticism, particularly in your excavations of the Black-bourgeoisie psyche. Exposing its secrets. Class traitorship.

In 1981 or 1982, I was also doing this *Heresies* issue called "Racism Is the Issue." I was also keeping a very, very detailed journal. I noticed that, just around the corner on Twelfth Street, I would see this Black woman all the time, and I realized that it was Margo Jefferson and that she was a writer. I wondered if she

would read this journal for me. And she did. You called it “class traitorship.”

Yes.

And I just think that Margo Jefferson and I would have described ourselves at that time as Black bohemians. Now that is a phrase that isn't even comprehensible anymore. It's so far in the past.

In your essay about meeting Basquiat, that's something you clarify. People misremember Basquiat as being a street kid, but he was of this class.

He was a Black bohemian. It usually started the same way: revolt against one's parents' values. Somehow, you were the one that was able to see through the veil that they themselves couldn't see through. I know that I had that in common with him. We talked about that a little bit.

There has been a neat narrative applied to your career: that you were an artist whose prescience outstripped both the critical establishment and the gallery system that ought to have given you your due decades ago. That, until the recent retrospective, you were to a degree unknown. And yet we have the example of “Art Is . . .,” a performance set at Harlem's African American Day Parade, in 1983. People knew you.

[My work] was successful among certain people. In general, it was not successful. There was a smart group of people who thought I was as smart as I thought I was. There is this division between those who think, as I do, that a people can't be fully mature until they can be self-critical, until they can differ from one another. The solidarity of not saying that one differs, even if one differs—that is the sign of a people that feel that they are not standing on firm ground. That they are not standing on ground where they can afford difference.

And, therefore, certain compromises have to be made.

Not just that. They can't allow difference to exist. I'm trying now to determine what really is the role of the individual artist to the community that they serve. I don't want to define it too quickly. I'm trying to define it through the work that they do. I don't know, and I'm not going to know until the end. ♦