Persistent (2007)
by Lorraine O'Grady

Summary

Persistent, O'Grady's 2007 project for Artpace, San Antonio, is her first video installation. With a generously funded residency, she was able to experiment and, as a "reactive artist," she chose to make herself open to the stimulus of a new place and situation. It would be only her second trip to Texas and her first extended stay, but she was connected to the state through her second marriage — to Chap Freeman, a seventh-generation Texan whose roots extended back to the Republic. Her first idea was a piece involving boots (Chap's forbears had been cowboys) and a play on the Freeman family's membership in the Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

A chance googling of terms like "San Antonio," "African Americans," "music," yielded a blog item about a multiethnic dance club being closed by its landlord. It was a depressingly familiar story of real estate and the "wrong crowd," but in it O'Grady sensed a kernel of hope. By serendipitous accident, the DJ who had blogged was also the receptionist at Artpace. With Jay Lopez's help, O'Grady contacted the owners and dancers of the recently closed Davenport Lounge to produce perhaps her most personal piece to date. A club dancer in her youth and later a rock critic, in videotaping 12 dancers individually on green screen and then monumentalizing them as ghosts on the wall of the vaguely reconstructed club, O'Grady attempted to bridge through a shared intensity for this most basic human activity, one she has often referred to as "better than sex," both the loss of an essential communal space and perhaps of youth itself.

Documentation proved more difficult than making. Photographers and videographers could only capture the image of the darkened club on a dimly lit street (like the old Paradise Garage cul-de-sac) by changing essential elements of the work. The locked door preventing viewers from entering and approaching the dancers also raised a question: can one make a piece about the frustration of desire that does not itself frustrate?