

Art Is . . .

by LUCY LIPPARD. 1988

Highlighted box review, taking a retrospective look at O'Grady's 1983 performance *Art Is . . .*. In "Sniper's Nest," *Z Magazine*, July-August 1988, p 102

One of the most effectively Janus-faced artworks of the last few years was Lorraine O'Grady's float for the Afro-American Parade in Harlem. The title, "Art Is..." was emblazoned on the side of a huge, ornate, gold frame that rode on a float. The artist and a group of other women, dressed in white, hopped on and off the float as the parade progressed and held up smaller gold frames to children, cops, and other onlookers, making portraits of the local audience as the big frame made landscapes of the passing local environment.

The direct message of course was: Art is what you make it; Harlem and black people are as worthy as any other subjects for Art. On a more complex level, O'Grady was commenting on the artist as manipulator and reflector, and the participatory role of exchange in culturally democratic art. The piece was about "framing and being framed," to borrow a phrase from corporate critic Hans Haacke. The initially simple idea opens up the field of art to include what has until now been peripheral vision, rarely projected on the centralized screens of galleries and museums.

O'Grady (who is black and has done performance pieces in the persona of Mademoiselle Black Bourgeoise) thus raises a layered set of questions about representation in high art. These questions were posed in the community and radiated to current analyses of stereotypes and representational exclusions in the mass and other media. The gold frame raises another set of questions about class, context, and autonomy. When photographically documented, the piece shows black women choosing their subjects, as well as a mutual exchange or

collaboration, in which the artist or framers and their found subjects mutually determine the focus on the art, thus illustrating a process of self-determination sparked by an art process.

The piece can also translate effectively from its primary audience, Harlem residents, to a secondary one, the art world. The direct, intimate, photobooth process taking place within the parade as public drama allows the art to be both entertaining and affirming. The indirect process by which little recoding is needed for use in the "art world" opens up layers of meaning about the history of modernism and its constant search for the new, the history of collage and performance and site-specific art as potentially populist forms, and the one-liner as potential paragraph. And, finally, O'Grady's piece scrutinizes the multiple meanings of the frame itself—physical (gold and theoretical (ways of seeing)).