

Art Almost Live from New York

ARTISTS, EXHIBITIONS

LORRAINE O'GRADY'S RESONANT 'HAPPENING' FRAMED AT SMH

AUGUST 2, 2015 | JODYBCUTLER

Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is . . .," Studio Museum in Harlem, through 10/25/15.

Good art accrues meanings through time, dragging along those seminal semiotics reflecting the circumstances in which it was created and the humanity of the artist behind it.

That's what we see in SMH's current exhibition version of a *happening* (action; relational performance) conceived and enacted by artist-activist-intellectual-polymath-octogenarian, Lorraine O'Grady, with assistants, in 1983. On the cooperatively bright day of the annual African American Parade in Harlem, O'Grady and her team commanded a float of gilded, empty picture frames, and (physically) "framed" anonymous bystanders along the route—the photographic documentation of which is on view. The straightforward presentation and snap-shot quality of the images conveys an aesthetic for the work (*qua* work of art) that wrangles organization, excitement, and intellectual energy.

Literally moving whatever "art is . . ." out of the mainstream (downtown; white) art world and its partisan definitions (at that particular moment), O'Grady delivered a nuanced meta-art proposition as well as myriad messages and themes of invisibility and exclusion, and the social implications of interactive art, in the event of the piece and its aftermath, which lives on (not only here). Nari Ward, in his 2014 project, "Sugar Hill Smiles," in which he "canned" reflected smiles of passers-by (in the Harlem neighborhood, Sugar Hill) to create conceptually individualized multiples, is heir (see [post](#)). So are [Kehinde Wiley](#)'s Baroque-ish-framed portraits of anonymous African American youths.

The same O'Grady presentation was recently installed at P.S. 1 in the context of an international exhibition dealing with class and race politics and oppression ("[Zero Tolerance](#)"); it can withstand

and well deserves the increasing exposure. Even stronger resonances are forthcoming at the history and heart of the piece, here on 125th St.