

# DAILYSERVING

AN INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

March 9, 2016 Written by [Amelia Rina](#)

## Cut-Up at Franklin Street Works

“Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born,” professes Clarice Lispector in the first lines of her 1977 novel, *The Hour of the Star*. Like the



Phyllis Baldino. *The Unknown Series*, 1994–96 (detail); mixed media. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Matt Grubb.

universe, art also begins with a yes. Some yeses are small: get out of bed today, put this image next to that one. Other yeses are bigger: continue affirming the validity of my presence, let go of assumed truths and embrace the miraculous unknown. The most productive yeses often occur when we welcome the primordial chaos of incomplete ideas and allow new meaning to grow out of incongruities. In *Cut-Up: Contemporary Collage and Cut-Up Histories through a Feminist Lens*, curated by the artist Katie Vida at [Franklin Street Works](#) in Stamford, Connecticut, the works of twenty-two artists demonstrate the potential of jumbling discordant materials and ideas.

In the exhibition’s newsprint handout, Franklin Street Works’s creative director Terri C. Smith writes about two divergent connotations of the term *cut-up*: it implies both works of art made by extracting and

reconfiguring source materials to produce something new as well as a mischievous prankster that disrupts order, promoting confusion by upsetting social hierarchies. While each of the works on view exhibits these qualities to varying degrees, the Brooklyn-based artist Phyllis Baldino is a cut-up par excellence. In her video piece, *The Unknown Series* (1994–96), Baldino implicates a medley of mundane objects in a wry investigation of their possible uses and uselessness. “Americans will sell you anything, even if they do not know what it is,” explains Baldino of the thrift-store trinkets she bought and then redefined through her interventions.<sup>[1]</sup> *The Unknown Series* features thirty objects, each filmed for no more than sixty seconds, during which time Baldino de- and re-constructs each with the utmost intentionality. The resulting objects, given descriptive titles such as *Shaving Cream Thing*, *Straw Thing*, *Mayo Thing*, and *Green Velour Pads Thing*, embody puckish mutations of their original functions.



Lorraine O’Grady. *Cutting Out the New York Times, Just the Two of Us*, 1977/2010; Toner ink on adhesive paper; Courtesy of the Artist and Alexander Grey and Associates, New York. Photo: Matt Grubb.

What Baldino does with found objects, the British artist Vicki Bennett does with sound. Under the moniker *People Like Us*, Bennett overlays countless sound clips from experimental and popular music, film, and radio, conflating multiple bits of audio into condensed compositions such as *Welcome Abroad* (2011) and *Don’t Think Right, It’s All Twice* (2006–13). In addition to producing a schizophrenic amalgamation of sonic culture from the past half-century, the sound works demonstrate the human mind’s remarkable ability to find order in pandemonium. Bennett’s expertly edited mash-ups never become indiscernible to the point of being pure noise. Instead, they prompt an aural gestalt that is both familiar and uncanny. Working in the inverse of Bennett’s cultural consolidation, the New York–based Lorraine O’Grady’s textual collages reveal the artist’s perspective through redaction. For *Cutting Out The New York Times* (1977/2015), O’Grady reticulates snippets of the newspaper into Dadaist poems. The portion of the series exhibited at Franklin Street Works features text from twenty-six consecutive Sunday

papers in 1977; O’Grady would “smoosh the cut scraps around on the floor until a poem appeared.”<sup>[2]</sup> From news headlines and advertising slogans, O’Grady constructs narratives that fluctuate between effervescent lyricism and ominous cultural insights. Take, for example, the excerpts, “Just the two of us./Then There Were Two./A Rich and Happy Life/The Endless Movie Film,” and “Finding the one you love...is finding yourself/Come out, come out, wherever you are.” For O’Grady, randomness was a way to extricate herself from the “irrational Western culture [she] felt inundated by.”<sup>[3]</sup>



Cut-Up, 2016; installation view, Franklin Street Works, Stamford, CT. Courtesy of Franklin Street Works. Photo: Matt Grubb.

In a world of seemingly endless irrational phenomena, to respond negatively—to say no—can seem like second nature. Many contemporary art institutions seem burdened by a need to define what things are or are not instead of what they could be. The survey show remains a popular solution for pursuing diversity—or at least the appearance of it. Beyond the all-star roster in *Cut-Up*, one of the exhibition’s greatest achievements is presenting a survey that evades the failures of most institutional overviews, such as wall text that expects brain-dead viewers who need overbearing guidance through the works, or sloppy curatorial decisions that produce more incongruities than enlightening insights. Instead, *Cut-Up* succeeds by demonstrating the thorough consideration of each element—such as the integration of the People Like Us sound pieces at tables within the adjacent café, or the impressive installation of many audio and video works that avoids sonic conflicts—and the care enacted by the curator and gallery. Furthermore, by viewing complex social issues with humor and gaiety, the show provides a refreshing reprieve from the often heavy-handed messages propagated by art-world institutions. With well-crafted, affirmative gestures, each artwork in *Cut-Up* proclaims a much needed yes.

Cut-Up: Contemporary Collage and Cut-Up Histories through a Feminist Lens *is on view at Franklin*

*Street Works, Stamford, CT, through April 3, 2016.*

[1] Phyllis Baldino quoted in Katie Vida, “Cut-Up: Contemporary Collage and Cut-Up Histories Through a Feminist Lens,” gallery handout, Franklin Street Works, [https://franklinstreetworksdocuments.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/cut-up\\_newsprint\\_to-print\\_v2.pdf](https://franklinstreetworksdocuments.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/cut-up_newsprint_to-print_v2.pdf).

[2] “About the Exhibition, Lorraine O’Grady, May 28–June 27, 2015,” Alexander Gray Associates, [http://www.alexandergray.com/exhibitions/2015-05-28\\_lorraine-oand39grady/](http://www.alexandergray.com/exhibitions/2015-05-28_lorraine-oand39grady/).

[3] Ibid.