

Lorraine O'Grady
Interstice

01/04

e-flux journal #105 — december 2019 Lorraine O'Grady
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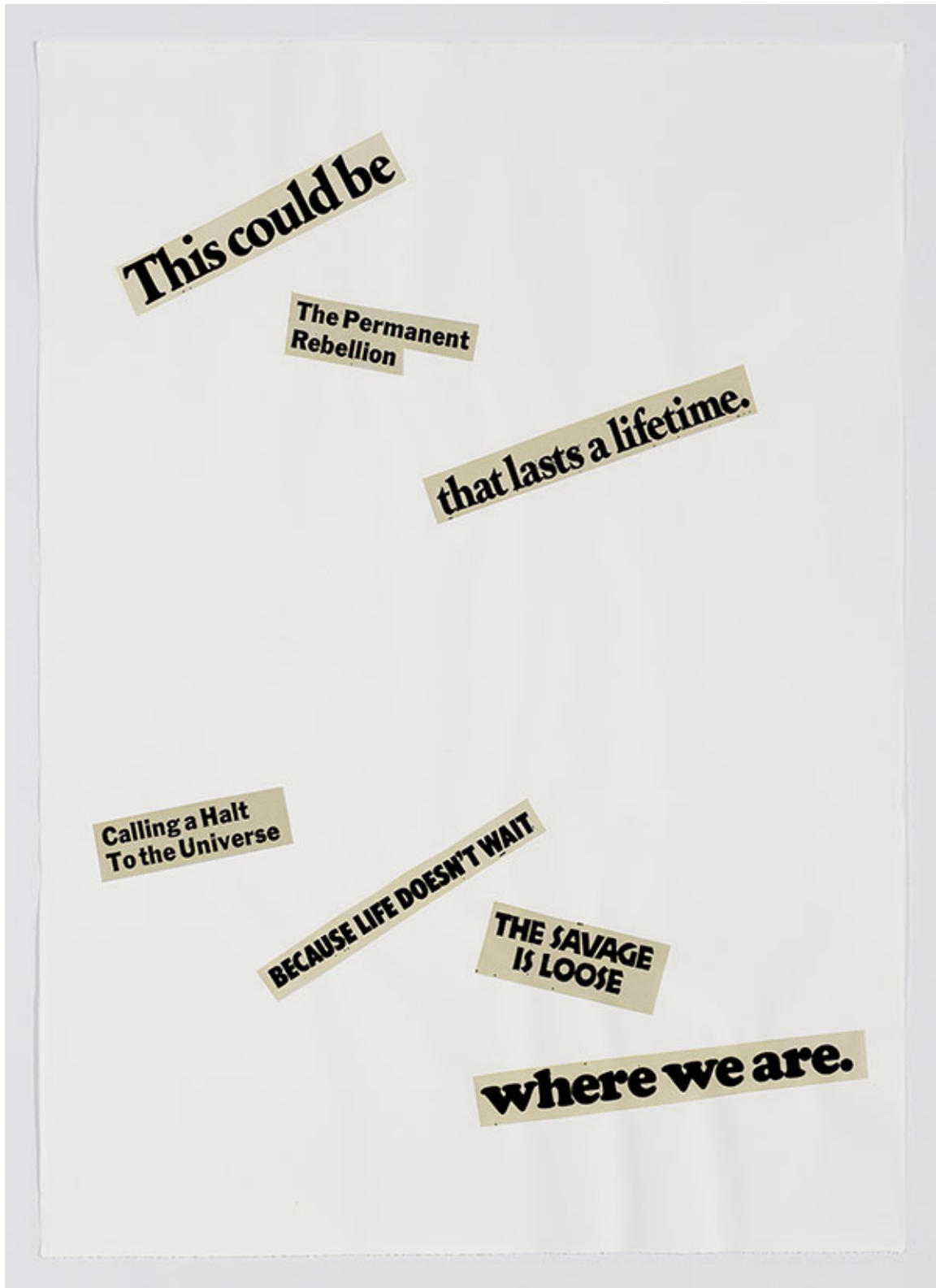
I'm a bit unprepared today. I've just come off six nights of rehearsal and performance for my friend Anohni's play, and the night after that I had to give remarks at the Skowhegan Gala. I'm winging it now on about three hours sleep, so I hope I make sense!

Earlier, at lunch, someone asked, "You must have had events like this in your day, right?"

"Sadly, no," I say, "I've never been to an event like this before." Later, I remember. There had been one. The *Black Popular Culture* conference organized by Michele Wallace at the Studio Museum in Harlem and at the Dia Center for the Arts in December 1991. I was there, but in the audience, not as a presenter. I remember feeling like an outsider – artists with their lonely individual practices seemed more isolated than academics at the time. And visual artists were even more so since, as evidenced by the conference, most black academics of that era did not consider visual art a central form of black expression in the way that literature and music were. Wallace had done her best: of the 29 presenters, seven were artists (four were visual artists who wrote theoretically, one was a musician who often wrote about visual art, and two were fiction writers – of the seven, two were women), but they did not seem integral to the event. I left feeling as unconnected as ever. I think, if you read writings from that period by black female avant-garde artists like myself, Howardena Pindell, and others, you might find an explicit or implicit loneliness. There were so few of us to start with, and no internet, so other than one's friendship and gallery circles, it was hard to get a sense of larger community in the way that's present in this room.

Although I'd left *Black Popular Culture* feeling once again on my own, simply attending the symposium must have affected me profoundly. Now I remember that it could only have been a week or two later that I holed up in my loft and began to read and write compulsively, twelve hours a day, seven days a week. It was a unique moment in my life. Six months after the conference, in June 1992, I published the first half of "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" in *Afterimage*, a film and media journal, and began the long, slow process of finding my "larger community."

Among the differences between *Loophole of Retreat* and the earlier *Black Popular Culture*, more than a quarter of a century ago now, are that *Loophole* consists solely of women (women were half of the presenters at *Black Popular Culture*) and, importantly, that visual artists here are no longer guests at the table but seated securely at its center. But one of the most



Lorraine O'Grady, *Cutting Out CONYT 26*, 1977/2017. Letterpress printing on Japanese paper, cut-out, collaged on laid paper, 41.75h x 30w in (106.05h x 76.20w cm). Photo: Jeffrey Sturges. Copyright: 2019 Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

gratifying differences to me personally is that this symposium has been able to make its call, not to discuss black popular culture, but to range over the multiple agendas of black “fine art.” And that we don’t need to quibble over the definition of that term, because we know how loosely we use it.

I would like to thank Simone Leigh for having convened what many seem to agree may be the first such meeting of black female intellectuals, and to commend her for being, as she so often is, ahead of the curve. The miraculous new thing about this symposium is that we can all now imagine a dozen other convenings occurring simultaneously around the country, each with different topics, different types of presenters, and each coming to different conclusions. But Simone saw the need. We have reached critical mass. We’re on our way. And we’re not going to be lonely again. I would also like to thank Simone and her co-organizers, Saidiya Hartman and Tina Campt, for adding a dimension of depth to this convening, and that is the dimension of physical (and mental) diaspora.

It is so seldom that you find these added voices, like Dionne Brand from Trinidad and Toronto, Denise Ferreira da Silva from Brazil and Vancouver, Okwui Okpokwasili from Nigeria and New York, Françoise Vergès from Réunion and Paris, and Grada Kilomba, who is African-Portuguese from Berlin. When I’m addressing a feminist group, I often say that we need all the feminisms we can get. And I would add to a group like this that we also need all the black-isms we can get. No matter how different our experiences may be, we all face a monolithic response to our blackness that makes our actual experience more common than not. All over the world, we’re faced with the same responses, and we have to deal with them in similar ways. We have a lot to learn from and to teach each other about how to manage and survive it.

I’ll give you an example from my personal experience. I was in a show a couple of years ago called *We Wanted a Revolution*. It consisted of forty women artists, all from about the same period – 1965–1985. Of the forty women, I knew only about ten or so personally. And, you know, full disclosure: I’m pretty arrogant. I always think of myself as quite an original, a kind of self-creation. But I’m always being brought up short. Something always happens to make me see yet again that I’m really the product of things that were given to me, or forced on me, or came from genetics that I had no control over – that no one is that original after all. You’re only about five percent original. I remember standing in the gallery where my work was – I was meeting someone after hours. Nobody else was there, I was completely alone. And when I looked around

the gallery and at all the work in it, I seemed to see it for the first time. My jaw dropped.

“My god, and I thought I was so unique, but here I am.” I hadn’t realized it, but I had been part of a movement. A movement I hadn’t even known existed, or not in this way. Seeing that, across the country, across the decades, women who had never met, didn’t know each other’s work but had been responding to similar issues, had been creating *oeuvres* that were now in active, “knowing” conversation, was of course humbling. But realizing this at this moment, so late, was freeing at the same time. And I am thrilled to think that none of “us” will have to suffer a realization like that again. Such a waste.

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Just talking about the event qua event has brought me thoughts of differences and similarities and how much we can learn from each other. And it also brings me to how much we can learn from ourselves. I haven’t followed the reviews carefully, but I would like to bring up an aspect of Simone’s work that I haven’t heard others talk about so much, and which for me was the most startling and, at least in the beginning, a very frightening aspect of her work, and that was the women without eyes. The blind women. I was frightened, maybe even horrified at first. Blindness – self-blinding – seemed like a high price to pay. But when you are as frightened as I was, I think one of the best things you can do for yourself is to hold your breath and say, “Why? Why does this frighten me so much?” The more you say it, and the more you look at the thing again, the more opportunity you get to let that fear transform into curiosity, and then possibly to learn from it.

I knew that this was – well, I was trying to figure out what it was, you know – I understood that this blinding was not the traditional blinding of European folklore – the kind of blinding that’s come down to us from Sophoclean tragedy. It’s not Tiresias. It’s not the seer who, blinded by external forces, is now able to see the exterior more clearly. The blinding in Simone’s figures seems to me a self-blinding in order to see the self more clearly. A blinding that forces the one blinded to look inside more deeply. It’s a miracle, a radical act of self preservation, this blinding. It shuts out the exterior to be able to pay more and better attention to the interior. And the question it asks is: How brave and how honest will we be when we begin to look inside? It’s one thing to have the safety net of the community, and the celebration and the support of the community, but then there comes a moment when, if one does look inside, one is alone, and what is one willing to see? And what then, from this aloneness and this view – this truth – can one bring back as news, as enlightenment to the

community?

I was born in Boston, and my parents are from the West Indies, and I went to kindergarten in 1939. I lived in the Back Bay and it was a very immigrant neighborhood at that time: Irish, Italians, Greeks, everything. I lived in Boston when only two and a half percent of the population was black. And only a quarter of those were West Indian. So, you can imagine how isolated we felt as a family, and I as a child. I went to kindergarten with my head full of all my parents' British nursery rhymes. You know, "Jack Sprat could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean, but between them both they licked the platter clean." Who knows what that means? ... something from some political campaign in London two centuries previously. I didn't know when I went to kindergarten that I was speaking patois until the other kids did ring-a-rosies around me, laughing as they imitated me. I got rid of *that* pretty quickly. And I learned lots of new nursery rhymes.

In 1939, the playground of the C.C. Perkins School on St. Botolph Street was just 47 years and 53 miles from the City of Fall River in 1892. So it's no surprise that the most popular rhyme of all would be: "Lizzie Borden took an axe, give her mother forty whacks. And when she saw what she had done, gave her father forty-one."

This is a pretty horrible nursery rhyme, of course. But the reason it had such traction and power among the C.C. Perkins kindergarteners is probably that, in this immigrant community where most people were insecure, the crucible of the family didn't always live up to the romantic ideal of what family life should be. Everybody in the schoolyard, five, six years old, knew what this nursery rhyme meant. It sunk deep into our core, and for most, is probably still there. So for me, I have to tell you, this is one of the greatest advancements that has occurred in this new era of fearless black intellectuals and scholars. We are looking at our past, looking at our present, and not putting blinders on. There is a new willingness to bravely face what we find, in a kind of corollary to what I think Simone Leigh is allowing her blind women to do when they look inside.

One of the most wonderful books I've come across recently is the one that I'm holding: *Hannah Mary Tabbs and the Disembodied Torso*. It was published in 2016 by Kali Nicole Gross, a black female historian who is a professor at Rutgers. She went on a search, she followed a clue, and she had the courage to follow it wherever it led. And to learn what she could from this horrific story of the sort of person we do not want to admit to, or to own as part of us.

There was a woman. Her name was Hannah Mary Tabbs. She lived in Philadelphia in the

1880s, and she was a black woman who was clawing her way up into the middle class. And she was a psychopath. Her way of dealing with anything that was inconvenient was to murder it. It seems there were lots of murders. And I have to tell you that, when I read her story, I felt: "Thank God, what a relief. We have our own Lizzie Borden!"

I say this because I have got to the point where I don't want to be better than anyone else. I only want to be just as good and just as bad as everyone else. Can I say that again? I don't believe that I, or we, need to be better than anyone. It's enough to be just as good and just as bad as everyone.

This is probably a strange lesson to bring to a celebration of community, but I think there's both the community and the individual, and that we're going to have to bring all of these things together and learn what we can. I cannot imagine what Kali Nicole Gross must have gone through in producing this book. First, the horror that she herself may have felt, but also the horror that she might have felt from others. You know, "Why are you doing this? Why are you bringing a story like that out and examining it? That's not an image of black women that we need!"

But Kali Gross learned a lot from pulling the thread out to the end, and as a result has a lot to teach us about *what can happen*. What *can* happen. If we can acknowledge all of that – all of the good *and* the bad that we find when we look inside – I think we will be stronger.

We'll be much stronger.

That's all I can say.

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