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**Coco Fusco**

MC, Los Angeles, USA

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'If you have eyes, you may do something stupid', explains anonymous Interrogator #2 to his blindfolded prisoner. The dialogue occurs in Coco Fusco's recent video *Operation Atropos* (2006), in one of many interrogations documented on screen. A deceptively simple hour-long documentary, Fusco's work is driven by, among many other things, the artist's view of a changing female role in the military as evinced by the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs and reports coming out of the US detention camp at Guantánamo. Galvanized by this new reality, Fusco and a group of female colleagues sought out an ex-military unit in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, named Team Delta, to learn army interrogation techniques currently in practice. Inspired by, if not also overwrought with, polemical politics, Fusco's video is a provocative assessment of a mediated war's protocols of suffering.

Following a rendezvous with Team Delta at a local Holiday Inn, Fusco and company are driven away in a van, then kidnapped, bound, hooded and marched into an imitation military encampment run by a group of men with quasi-East European accents. The group is held together in an outdoor, fenced-off pen, suffering awkward indignities, and individual captives are led off to dark holding cells and subjected to various modes of interrogation.

Outside the darkened viewing room at the gallery Fusco affixed a facsimile copy of the military's 'approved approaches' for interrogation as posted at Abu Ghraib. There are two rows – those requiring prior approval by a commanding officer and those not. The 'captives' in Fusco's video undergo such approved methods as 'fear-up mild', 'emotional love', 'comrade pride' and 'the soft sell'. Never, in the course of the video, are methods in the Abu Ghraib 'style' (as the media has termed the photographed abuse and torture methods) alluded to. Although the Team Delta cadre is never physically harmful to their clients/students/captives, the one-on-one sessions are tense, abrasive and affective.

Team Delta practises an experiential method of pedagogy, one used by US special forces and trainees at various intelligence agencies; through role-playing students endure what they wish to learn. Fusco's team assents to this dynamic on entering the 'lessons'. Images of the women one day before the start of training are surrogates for the viewer – we are innocent, naive and uncertain as to how to react, as military-style interrogation is known to us mainly through the imagination of Hollywood or such rare instances of visual proof as the Abu Ghraib photos. After hours of questioning and intimidation the mumbled assurances of 'it's just a game' – when some participants' eyes are swollen with tears – reveals how psychologically gruelling a process of even supposedly harmless role-play can be. In this light the precedents of the Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) and Polish artist Artur Zmijewski's recent *Repetition* (2005) – a re-enactment of that notorious bit of research into captive and captor psychology – are hard to ignore.

Fusco's project takes a curious view of this tough role-playing tutelage. In a pamphlet displayed in paginated sequence across the gallery walls she caricatured the gender role-reversals evinced in the Abu Ghraib images of US Army reservist Lynndie England posing happily with terrorized Iraqi captives. One image from *Human Resource Exploitation Manual for Female Interrogators Part 2: Coercive Techniques* (2006), for instance, pictured a blond-haired woman in a black bra and khaki pants taunting a bound and perceptibly agitated male prisoner. This tongue-in-cheek guidebook, aimed at would-be female officers emulating

the actions of Private England, is a sardonic commentary on a culture that is capable of quickly transforming heinous crimes into humorous late-night talk-show fodder.

Fusco's Operation Atropos motivates concerns of viewership in the midst of mediated military transgressions. The hooded volunteer-captives of Fusco's video cannot see the faces of their captors, or one another. The 'comrade pride' technique exploits this blindness. A 'false' inmate planted among the others is made to act as if she is being beaten, while a hooded captive is interrogated with increasing aggressiveness and to greater effect. As Fusco's reality-TV Gitmo experiment demonstrates, what we think we know, what we are told (by the media, by the government, by those we trust) and what our senses seem to tell us rarely agree. We are left to fumble rather blindly in trying to decide where the truth actually lies.

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