

Coco Fusco
by Elia Alba

*Being a provocateur, *Planet of the Apes*, and the
"wow" factor of Cuban Art.*



And Then the Sea Will Talk to You, 2012, performance media/installation at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

The complex structures of power and control have preoccupied performance artist, writer, and curator Coco Fusco for over 20 years. In *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2008), a performance lecture explores the expanding role of American women in the War on Terror. *Bare Life Study* (2006), a group performance which draws on her training in military interrogation with "Team Delta", sheds light on the subjections in American military prisons. The video, *The Empty Plaza (La Plaza Vacía)*, (2012), narrated by Yoani Sanchez, depicts an empty Plaza de La Revolucion, a stark contrast to an arena that was the platform for all major political events in the past half century. Currently, the artist is at work on a project centered around contemporary Cuban performance art. Through her personal history Fusco walks us through Cuba's past to tell us how the existing conditions on the island have led to a wave of performance and

happenings. Moreover, by restaging and performing the character, Dr. Zira, a chimpanzee psychologist from the 1970s iconic movie series, *Planet of the Apes*, she illuminates the economic violence humans inflict on each other. And speaking of archetypes, we get Fusco's reactions on being dubbed "The Provocateur" in my current project, *The Supper Club*, a publication / event series that brings together 50 contemporary artists of color through photography and dialogue.

Elia Alba As you know everyone in *The Supper Club* will have a moniker as way to define each of you within the group. It's also the word I will use to conceptualize a portrait of you. How do you feel about yours being "The Provocateur"? The term itself is a person who provokes trouble or incites dissension, an agitator, if you will. However, in the context of your practice, I would say you definitely provoke or challenge preconceived ideas and structures; in other words you incite us to think.

Coco Fusco I believe there are plenty of people out there who see me as a provocateur because I talk back, and because I work on subjects that irritate some people. But *provocateur* can have a negative connotation, it can suggest that I am just an enfant terrible who wants to shock people rather than delve deeply into issues. It can be used as a slight. I don't see myself as someone who is just trying to get attention. I am interested in politics as sculptural material. I look at relationships of force, of power and control.

EA I saw your video interview following your Absolut Art Award win late last year and you briefly talked about your first writing experience, which I thought was really quite interesting and touching. At the same time, I was really not surprised since I believe certain talents appear early on in our lives. So tell me, when did Coco become a writer?

CF It was wonderful to have the Absolut Art Writing Award, to have an opportunity to work on a publication and to be so well supported for it. At the same time, it is a challenge because part of working with a company like Absolut is that I have to think about a very broad audience. So when I was answering those questions I was trying to find a way to connect to people who are not artists. I was asked, "When did you know that you wanted to write?" I was a serious bookworm as a kid. I would get lost in the fantasy world of fiction and most of the questions I had about Americans, as a child of immigrants, I found

answers to in the books I read.

When I was about seven, there was a fire in my neighborhood. My parents were both physicians and my father went to try and help. Of course, I was afraid...my father was running into the fire. Although the fire was just three blocks away I could see the smoke coming up into the sky. I ran and got one of my parents' prescription pads, that was the paper that was around the house, and I wrote a little essay about it and now I look at it and there are spelling mistakes, the handwriting of a little kid. On top of the essay I wrote, "The New York Times." My mother kept it for me.

EA You were given the prize to continue your research project on the evolution of Cuban performance. You've written other books on performance—can you elaborate on this project and why it is this important now?

CF I started traveling to Cuba when I was a month old. My Cuban mother was deported from the United States in 1959—she had come to the US five years prior to that to finish her medical studies and then began to work. In order to guarantee her reentry to the US, she became pregnant with me, hid me until she gave birth and then took me with her back to Cuba in July 1960. This happened at the beginning of the Cuban Revolution when thousands of people were trying to emigrate. We spent several months in Cuba, until she was able to get her papers together and return. My father didn't know if he would ever see us again. I didn't go back to Cuba until I was in my twenties. During the 1960s and '70s it was forbidden for exiled families to return. It wasn't until the Carter Administration reopened conversations with the Cuban Government that family reunification visits were permitted. All my life I had heard horror stories about the Cuban Revolution, and then suddenly when it became possible to travel there, one of my aunts went and then my mother went to visit and they came back saying things that were not negative about what had happened to their country.

In 1985, just after I finished graduate school, I met a group of Cuban artists who visited the US and exhibited their work here: José Bedia, Ricardo Brey, and Flavio Garciandía. They were friends of Ana Mendieta's. I felt a real affinity with them: We were about the same age, we were interested in the same art and the same ideas, and we had read many of the same books. Temperamentally I felt really close to them and I wanted to see more and learn more so I started travelling to Cuba. This began a long relationship that I've had with the Cuban visual art scene. The vitality of the place, the energy in the art scene, even the intense

politicization of every aspect of life is fascinating to me. Over time, I grew to understand the complexities of negotiating life there as an intellectual or artist and developed a somewhat more skeptical view of life in the land of tropical socialism.



The Empty Plaza (La Plaza Vacía), 2012, Still from single channel video, courtesy of Alexander Grey Associates.

In the 1990s, after the Cold War ended and the former Soviet Union withdrew its financial support for Cuba, the country entered its Special Period of extreme material scarcity on the one hand and the explosion of tourism to offset the loss of foreign aid on the other. A very brutal form of capitalism managed by a military dictatorship was taking shape and this, of course, affected every aspect of life, including culture. Stark living conditions, harsh political repression and increasing exposure to foreigners and returning Cuban exiles led to the Cuban rafter crisis of 1994, a steady brain drain, and a resurgence of prostitution directed at foreign clients. The art scene I walked into in the 1980s was a scene that was trying to build a local audience for art and transform what a radical nationalism culture could be. That scene changed radically in the 1990s; not only artists, but also the cultural bureaucracy became much more focused on getting Cuban art out into the world and bringing foreigners in to consume it.

EA We did start to see a big influx of Cuban artists in the United States.

CF That was the result of two things. The Havana Biennial, which started in the 1980s, and became a really major geographically peripheral biennial in the '90s.

Carlos Garaicoa, Kcho, Tania Bruguera, and Los Carpinteros, to name a few, all launched their careers there. Foreign visitors were “wowed” by Cuban art. The Cuban Revolution had established a pretty solid educational system for artists. The talented kids were spotted when they were young and put through rigorous training—not just in art but also in dance, music, theater, sports, and science. I think a lot of people from other parts of the world just didn't expect a country in dire straits to have such a sophisticated group of young artists, who were very well informed, talented, and also very familiar with everything going on in the so-called West.

I spent many years exploring that world but I stepped back at the end of the 1990s because I had too many questions about the direction that the country was going in and many of my artist friends had gone into exile. Then in 2006, Fidel Castro became ill and stepped down from power and his brother Raul took over. Raul has implemented a number of economic reforms since then but has not really changed the political system or addressed human rights issues. One significant reform for the cultural arena was the legalization of cell phone possession in 2008. This enabled independently-produced journalism, music, and art to make itself known with much greater speed.

EA Is it at this point where people like the blogger and journalist Yoani Sanchez rose to prominence?

CF Yes, what I started to see in 2008 was an explosion of media coming from Cuba involving rappers, bloggers, punk musicians, independent filmmakers, and political activists. They all spoke very critically about the need for reform the repression of political prisoners and the failure of a social contract in Cuba. The content of blogs was often sent via text and many bloggers have also become quite proficient at Twitter. This is a new wave of culture that the state cannot control. I will argue in my book that there are important elements of performance connected with this burgeoning social media sphere. I will be exploring the intersection of public performance on the street, in galleries, and online.

EA The first time I saw or knew of Sanchez was during the 2009 Havana Biennial. I was invited to participate and it was there that Bruguera did the performance *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, where a man and a woman dressed in military-style clothing flanked the podium and placed a white dove on speaker's shoulder to mimic to the 1959 speech by Castro. The speaker was allowed one minute of free speech apparently without consequence. Yoani, along with others, took to the podium to

express their discontent. During my visit, a young black man befriended me and he came with me to see the performance. As it was unfolding, I asked him if he was going to go up to the podium and he said that these things are only possible for specific groups of people. Does race play a part in who can or cannot say what they feel? Also was Bruguera's performance a reflection or was it aligning itself with what was happening already? People were voicing very strong opinions, yet this man felt he couldn't do it.

CF During the Biennial the controls on political speech are loosened within the realm of art for two weeks to help give foreigners the impression that Cuba is an endless party. But dissidents and artists working in unofficial contexts are kept out of that context, and members of marginal subcultures are swept off the streets by police near tourist areas before the Biennial begins.



A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America, (2006–2008), Performance at the 2008 Whitney Biennial, courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

EA Yes, however, there is a quote of yours I read on the Absolut website regarding the book project: "These practices project the abject body of those persons considered socially dangerous by power against the body define officially as revolutionary and yet restrained and limited by the same power." I believe this aligns with this young man's reaction and comments. He was implying to me that he could not symbolically protest because in no uncertain terms: "I will be in jail tomorrow."

CF That young man appears to have internalized the generalized political repression in Cuba that makes any public expression of dissent potentially punishable. If you are asking if he is more vulnerable because he is black, I would answer yes. However, I would not say that political repression is limited to blacks in Cuba by any means.

I am writing about performance and am interested in performance that involves putting bodies on the line in a literal sense. I've been watching how the blogging phenomenon and digital technology's late arrival to Cuba's cultural scene has allowed images of protests and of cultural events that are not officially sanctioned to become instantly visible to the outside world: bodies that represent abject relations to the state. The artist and activists I write about are not engaging in forms of public display of bodies that historically have been identified with the Revolution. These are not the disciplined bodies, like the uniformed military body, the marching masses in en La Plaza de La Revolucion, children in communist youth outfits saluting, the volunteer brigades working for the Revolution.



Bare Life Study #1, Performance, Premiere: VideoBrasil Festival of Electronic Art and Performance, Sao Paolo, September 2005, courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

There is a history that most non-Cubans outside of Cuba are not aware of—that of negative depiction of the improper body, of improper conduct. From the 1960s onward there were magazines for youth that were full of caricatures of intellectuals, hippies, rock and roll aficionados, and men presumed to be effeminate. These were all very negative terms applied to so-called counter

revolutionaries, and the main point of that visual culture was to describe what counter revolutionaries looked like and how they behaved. Is your hair too long? Do you read the wrong books? Do you listen to rock music? Do you go to church and pray? These were all counts against you in Cuba once upon a time.

Image culture in Cuba codified revolutionary conduct and the proper uses of the body, but it also delineated improper conduct and the improper uses of the body. The repressive response of the state to “impropriety” included massive round ups and imprisonment of presumed counterrevolutionaries in the 1960s and the establishment of “re-educational” labor camps for gays, hippies, and observant Christians. By the early seventies, forms of improper conduct were medically codified as pathologies. The current Cuban penal code includes a section on *peligrosidad predelectiva* which translates as “social dangerousness.” One definition of social dangerousness is behavior that runs counter to norms of socialist morality. That is so broad and vague, it could mean almost anything. It is one of the accusations frequently levied against artists and intellectuals who are out of favor with the government. The state has the right to arrest people based on such an accusation, and/or to subject them to surveillance or various forms of “re-education.”

So that young black man who befriended you knew that if he did speak up during that performance, it wouldn't be art. It could be classified as social dangerousness and he could go to jail.

EA So it appears that these laws are used against artists that are not doing what the state wants or whom the government does not sanction. In what ways does this play into practice of performance?

CF What interests me about social dangerousness, as a legal classification, is that it is about behavior. And performance is also about behavior. Many artists and intellectuals have been arrested using the social dangerousness law but also many artists have developed artworks that specifically contest the social dangerousness laws. I am trying to look at how the codification of improper behavior evolves, how artists have responded to this and how the dissemination of digital cameras in the past decade has made performative interventions— which are forms of improper conduct—more visible and more viable as political protest. Some might say that what I write about is not art, but I want to explore that distinction between art and non-art from a political perspective. On the one hand, many activists are now using theatrical strategies to draw attention to their

causes and because in certain situations, speaking and publishing would be more dangerous. Those people don't really care if we think what they do is art, but they perform their protests. On the other hand, there are artists who are not supported by state institutions who create performances that are condemned as socially dangerous rather than treated as art—that distinction serves as the justification for their arrest.

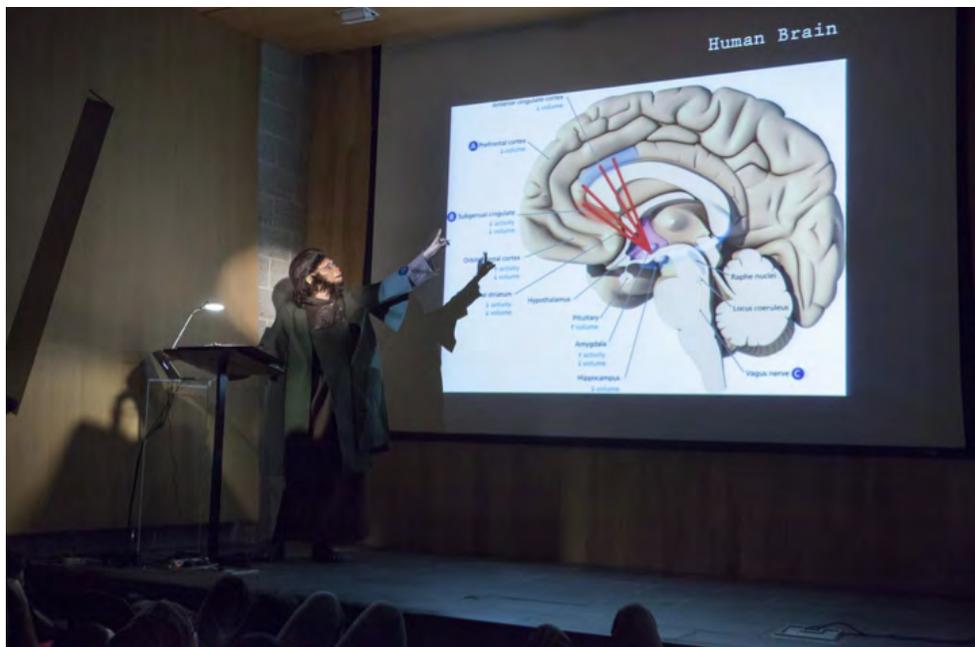


Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, 2013, performance at the Studio Museum in Harlem, courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

EA Which brings me to your most recent performance *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira*. You are using the iconic film *Planet of the Apes* as well as its main character, Dr. Zira as a way to study different aspects of human behavior through the paradigm of animal behavior. While your book project on Cuban performance via the study of the Cuban penal code looks more at political violence, with this performance your focus is on the economic violence humans impose on each other. Can you talk about how you came about framing this study utilizing Dr. Zira and Dr. Zira's take on predation and excessive accumulation.

CF I wanted to find a way to address economic polarization as a form of violence without being boring. Zira gave me that opportunity. I was a big fan of the original *Planet of the Apes* films (there were five made between 1968 and 1973) when I was a child and adolescent in the 1970s they played them on television

often. More recently, I taught a lecture course on Afrofuturism and included a section on two of the films. There is an interesting body of literature about those original films as critiques of American race relations. I don't know if I understood that when I first saw them but reviewing them now, I can see how the films functioned as social critique on many levels. I became interested in Zira's character: she is an animal psychologist who studies the human brain, a pacifist intellectual who constantly points to problematic aspects of human behavior. In the original films the focus on the critique of humans is on their aggressive tendencies—their capacity to kill each other, their use of weapons of mass destruction, etc. I started to think about how I might revive her and have her explore other dimensions of human behavior. To develop her character I had to familiarize myself with the basic language used by animal psychologists, primatologists, and evolutionary biologists. So I interviewed some scientists, watched lots of documentaries videotaped lectures about neurology and read some books. The research process was challenging but fun.



Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, 2013, performance at the Studio Museum in Harlem, courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates

EA One particular thing that stood out for me was how primates, even within their social structures and hierarchies, show empathy to others within the group. Humans, on the other hand, don't seem to empathize within the group at all, inflicting not only physical but psychological harm. Clearly social dangerousness is form of psychological harm. Why is that? And for Dr. Zira, is there any hope for humanity?

CF Actually that would not be accurate. Human beings do express empathy and not all Great Apes are primarily empathic in their relations with others. Some non-human primates are quite aggressive—I use baboons as an extreme example of that behavior in my performance. And human beings cannot survive without forms of social cohesion that are fundamentally empathic, such as the nurturing relations between mothers and children. All I am suggesting in my piece is that the balance in human society has shifted away from empathy toward aggressively individualistic behavior.

Zira worries about the future of humanity because she comes from the future and what she saw there wasn't very good for the human race. In the original *Planet of the Apes* films, humans managed to destroy just about everything they created through war and bombs. The few humans left in Zira's time were mutants living underground who worshipped the one bomb they had left and were highly combative toward the apes.

Elia Alba is a New York-based multidisciplinary artist. She is currently collaborating with Recess, a nonprofit space in Soho, working on a publication/event series titled The Supper Club. She is also working on another publication with publisher Photology in Milan on Larry Levan and DJ culture. For more updates, follow her on [Twitter](#).

Coco Fusco is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist and writer. She is a recipient of a 2013 Guggenheim Fellowship, a 2013 Absolut Art Writing Award, a 2013 Fulbright Fellowship, a 2012 US Artists Fellowship and a 2003 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts.