



# Women in Performance In the Dressing Room with Coco Fusco, August 19, 2015

By Moira Roth, Patricia Maloney *October 13, 2015*

*Women in Performance, curated by Jarrett Earnest and Patricia Maloney, is dedicated space for conversations with leading artists addressing the aesthetic and conceptual issues, historical precedents, and critical language shaping contemporary feminist performance.*

---

On August 19, 2015, the artist and writer Coco Fusco performed *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* to a packed house at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> The performance was part of the exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, on view at YBCA through October 11, 2015, and curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. It is the first in-depth survey of U.S. and Caribbean-based black performance artists.<sup>2</sup>

Excerpts from Coco Fusco's *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* (2013). Performed at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, on the occasion of *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, December 12–13, 2013. Courtesy of the Studio Museum of Harlem, New York. Videographer: Noah Krell. Editor: Mariacruz Alarcon.

In *Observations of Predation in Humans*, Fusco performs as Dr. Zira, the animal psychologist from the 1960s science-fiction movie franchise *Planet of the Apes*. In the movies, Dr. Zira is a chimpanzee living in a future society dominated by primates. As a student of human animal behavior, she believes our species has a higher level of intelligence. She's sympathetic to our plight as slaves in this world, and in one film travels back in time to Earth, where fearful, uncomprehending humans eventually condemn her to die. In Fusco's reconfigured narrative, Dr. Zira does not die but goes into hiding to continue her research by studying humans remotely. She has surfaced expressly to deliver this lecture on her findings.

Over the course of the lecture, Fusco (as Dr. Zira) describes the symbolic communication present in human predation, in which alpha males invent crises to rationalize accumulation and mask resources at the expense of other humans. She outlines the difference between predation and aggression, and lists the psychological acts of predation that humans inflict on one another, including passive aggression, tactical deception, verbal abuse, malicious compliance, incivility, blacklisting, and alienation. She concludes by saying that the strict social

hierarchies that human predation engenders inhibit the possibility for altruism, which is necessary for species survival.

In sum, the performance was a keenly insightful lecture on the violence of economic inequity delivered by a fictional chimpanzee who is also an esteemed animal psychologist.

The fact that the audience was receptive to the conceit was apparent from the moment that Donna Haraway, the prominent scholar who explores the intersection of science, technology, and feminism, introduced Dr. Zira via the two video screens on either side of the lectern. Social scientists do not usually receive the type of ovation that greets rock stars. Throughout the performance, Fusco so wholly embodied the character that one frequently forgot that, at its core, it was a performance and not an academic lecture.

The observations that Dr. Zira made about the devastating scale of human predation and the violence embedded in its symbolic communication struck a deep chord—so much so that during the traditional question-and-answer session that follows such lectures, those who posed questions addressed them to Dr. Zira, and not to Fusco. There was a palpable desire to embrace the wisdom this nonhuman animal might offer—advice for how we might counter the dominance of alpha males, and observations that nonhuman animals are our mirrors as well as our foils. One question in particular stood out: an audience member addressing Dr. Zira asked if there was room for art to play a role in thwarting human predation, a meta question posed with such sincerity that one wondered if he had forgotten that he was, in fact, asking it of a performance artist in an art venue.

The veil was only partially lifted for us as we ventured backstage after the performance to speak with Fusco. There, we witnessed her remarkable transformation back into artist and human. While her elaborate makeup was being removed, we posed questions about masquerade, science fiction, the performance's origins, and the audience's response. But we recognized that the two of us were also audience to another, more intimate exchange that unfolded with the makeup removal: that of the artist reflecting on the work she had just created. What follows are Fusco's observations and comments; we removed our questions to convey some of the intimacy and liminality of the dressing-room space we were privileged to share with her.

—MR and PM

---

Excerpts from a conversation with Moira Roth following Coco Fusco's performance of *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* (2013), at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, August 19, 2015. Courtesy of Daily Serving | Art Practical. Video: Patricia Maloney.

Even when you are naked in a performance, you are in costume. Everything counts about how you look, because you are the instrument, whether it's your body or your voice. Of course I am masquerading, but I am not acting in a traditional sense. I am not thinking about masquerade; I am thinking about making a performance and what I have to do.

There was a Brazilian filmmaker, Wagner Morales, who made a documentary titled *I Like Girls in Uniform* (2006) about my work for the 2005 Videobrasil International Electronic Art Festival. He was looking at my performance *Bare Life Study #1*, in which the performers are all dressed in orange prison jumpsuits and I'm in fatigues. I've done a lot of pieces in which I am in uniform, such as for example a maquiladora worker's uniform, because a lot of women go to work wearing uniforms. I've done many pieces about the kinds of work that women do.

This performance came about because I was using these films in an undergraduate class on Afrofuturism at Parsons School of Design in New York. I had students who had never heard of this stuff before. It's not like I said, "*Planet of the Apes!*" and they were like, "Yeah!" They were really taken with the films, though, and that was a good sign.

I wasn't a sci-fi fan when I was young, but science fiction is extremely popular now with young people. Technoculture is the culture of young people. I deal with this with my students all the time. They're all obsessed with technoculture, especially the designers. The only kinds of books they read are comics and sci-fi. So anything that comes from sci-fi is cool. There's a pop-culture dimension to sci-fi and there is a social critique dimension that is allegorical, and that makes it palatable. I thought that if *Planet of the Apes*, which is from the 1960s, can make kids who were born in the 1990s have an interesting conversation about weapons of mass destruction or race relations, then maybe it's good material to work with on stage.

So many cities that used to be havens for artists have become totally inhospitable.

I knew I wanted to talk about economic inequality. I don't know how any of you can afford to live in San Francisco; it's more expensive than New York. And New York is unbearably expensive. So many cities that used to be havens for artists have become totally inhospitable. Economic polarization is the key to the instability of the society as a whole.

We don't admit how difficult life is for everyone right now. Things have gotten very difficult for most people. We live at an accelerated rate that is super stressful. I just want to rest; it's too much. We don't have spaces to contemplate, to think, to breathe. The phones, the internet, that constant banter prohibit us from having any time to think. I needed to create a piece to talk about this. How could I do this? What could I say about economic violence that hadn't already been said?

*Radical Presence* was coming to New York, and the Studio Museum in Harlem invited some of the artists in the show to restage old performances. They asked me, and I said, "You know, I don't feel like a Marina Abramović." I don't want to pass judgment on that method, but that is not me. I said, "I can make you something new," and they agreed. I thought, "What would be a 'radical presence' in a conservative museum like the Studio Museum? Showing up as a talking monkey. There's nothing more abject. I'll bring Dr. Zira to the Studio Museum." That's how it came about.<sup>3</sup>

I started with the idea of reinventing Zira, but then I had to think about how to make it work. That's when I

started my research; that's when I asked Donna Haraway to work with me and found a primatologist to talk to and read some books and watched some lectures, because I realized, "I have to sound like an animal psychologist. I've never taken an animal psychology class. What do they sound like?" So I made a school for myself for a few months.

Excerpts from a conversation with Moira Roth following Coco Fusco's performance of *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* (2013) at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, August 19, 2015. Courtesy of Daily Serving | Art Practical. Video: Patricia Maloney. Roth and Fusco first met at University of California, Irvine, which explains Roth's surprise at the mention of the school as a film location.

I interviewed a primatologist and asked for some literature so I could learn a bit of the language they use. There are also courses in neurology and animal psychology at Stanford University taught by an amazing scientist, Robert Sapolsky. He's an incredibly dynamic lecturer who studies baboons as well as humans; he is brilliant on all the issues that were of interest to me. I learned how scientists make jokes about human connections to nonhuman animals all the time. They are very serious about the evolutionary biology perspective, but they see the humor in it. A lot of the ways in which they focus their studies have to do with ethical concerns about humans. They're not separate subjects. I tried to mimic that attitude in my piece.

I honestly didn't know what the response would be. I am not good at predicting beforehand if it is going to work or not. But you can sort of see when your audience is with you, just as you can when you are in a classroom. You figure out when students are resistant or not. And many people love Zira. They love Zira because they love *Planet of the Apes*, and they love the conceit of bringing her into the museum.

I've done a lot of pieces where people have not liked me at all, even when they've understood the relevance of it. The caged Amerindians piece was widely reviled for a long time.<sup>4</sup> It didn't become a cult thing until long afterward. When the tour was happening, we were in trouble a lot, and I dealt with a lot of flak. And even when I did all the work on torture, it was understood as relevant, but I am not going to tell you that people loved my character of a woman who admitted to raping an Arab guy and saying it was a great thing to do for her country.

Dudes, if you are in this room, you are part of the problem.

A lot of places where I've performed Zira, people immediately want me to know that they're the exception; they're not alpha males. And I'm like, "Dudes, if you are in this room, you are part of the problem. Just like me." We're not the have-nots scavenging in the garbage cans. We're still okay. We're on the "have" side. How do you recognize that? And try to do something about it?

It was really illuminating to me to talk to a primatologist. She told me that the trends in primatology—the things that scientists focus on—change depending on what's going on in the human world. After World War II, the focus was on studying aggression, because the scientists were preoccupied with war and the capacity of humans to destroy each other. They thought if they looked at other primates, it might help to illuminate what it was that made them so violent. There is a lot of that preoccupation in the discourse of *Planet of the Apes*;

they're constantly chastising humans for their violence.

But since that time, the focus has shifted. At conferences now, they're talking more about the ability of different primate groups to adjudicate and negotiate, their peacemaking and sociality. That's something that Donna Haraway insisted upon when I reached out to her. She told me, "Zira is a bonobo. We have to study the bonobos because they're not hierarchical; it's a matriarchal order. We need to know how to be more like bonobos and less like gorillas or other chimps."

So, given that scientists make jokes all the time about the parallels between human and nonhuman animal behavior, I decided to make similar jokes. I'd compare humans to baboons, and do all the things they do, but in the service of this particular message that I want to drive home about a certain kind of violence. Civil-asset forfeiture *is* violence. We're obsessed with police beating people, but there are more people in Ferguson, Missouri, being rendered penniless because of being excessively fined for their parking tickets than there are people getting beaten. There are more poor people being offered these ridiculously easy-to-obtain mortgages to buy houses in polluted Superfund sites than there are people being racially profiled. We obsess about physical violence, which is bad, but it is the tip of the iceberg compared to the way that poverty is reproduced and expanded.

I am going to do one more Zira in the fall, then Zira is going to bed and will live on as a video. A museum in Germany asked me to make a video of the piece, and I had—at first jokingly—said, "I should do a TED Talk." I commissioned a sculptor to make a red sign like the TED sign, but using the *Planet of the Apes* typeface. I persuaded a community TV station in Brooklyn to let me use their studio, and I set it up like a TED Talk, with black curtains and the red sign. I bought a red, round rug at IKEA; Zira stands on the rug with the TED sign behind her and does her shtick. That's the video version of it.

I have been performing this piece for two years. I've done the show three times in New York. I've done it in Germany, Minneapolis, Providence, here. I enjoy it and all, but it's very expensive because I have to bring my makeup artist. And I need to focus on my other body of work, which is about what's going on in Cuba.

You have to find a way to do it so people will listen to you.

Over the past two years, while performing Zira, I wrote a book about the history of performance art in Cuba, and I have made two new videos about Cuba.<sup>5</sup> Prior to working on Zira, I made two other videos, in 2011 and 2013, about different aspects of the transition. The piece that I am working on now and the one that I did for Venice are about the *poètes maudits* who were elevated and then rejected because of the criticality of their message.<sup>6</sup> I'm trying to excavate a history of demands for democratic reform from within an intellectual space.

Cuba has been changing for a long time. The presence of the U.S. Embassy isn't changing anything that hasn't already happened. It will make Americans more obsessed with Cuba again, but Cuba started changing when the Soviet Union dissolved. They were forced to change because they hit bottom. They went into total crisis

mode, with outbreaks of disease and starvation and social unrest and massive repression. And that was twenty-five years ago. The country has been evolving since then, but what is happening now is that the regime has found a new friend. The United States wants to help the Cuban regime. Who would have thought? There are many who are pissed about that, because they wanted the U.S. to topple the government, but the U.S. doesn't want to topple the Cuban government.

I might find another way to address this topic. The U.S. is depressing as all hell. Zira is really about economic inequality. And the torture piece was about torture. I don't have anything happy to say. But look at the political landscape: Trump is terrifying. The world we live in is terrifying. It's real; that's a real trader for Goldman Sachs in my show.

But this is the problem all the time: When you want to be critical of society, nobody wants to hear about it. It's either depressing or you're preaching to the converted and they already know. Or they don't want to know because they like it the way it is. You have to find a way to do it so people will listen to you. Humor helps.—CF

**This article is made possible through our Writers Fund, thanks to readers like you. Help us keep it going!**

## Notes

1. Predation is a term used primarily to describe the interaction between species in which one species relies upon another for food. It is also used to describe the exploitation or victimization of one person by another.
2. *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* was on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston from November 17, 2012 to February 16, 2013. The exhibition additionally traveled to the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, from July 24, 2014 to January 4, 2015 and was co-presented at New York University's Grey Art Gallery from September 10 to December 7, 2013 and the Studio Museum in Harlem, in New York, from November 14, 2013 to March 9, 2014.
3. Fusco performed *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* at The Studio Museum in Harlem on December 12 and 13, 2013.
4. Fusco performed *The Couple in the Cage* with artist and MacArthur fellow Guillermo Gómez-Peña in various locations beginning in March 1992. They locked themselves in a cage, dressed and performing as aboriginal inhabitants of a previously undiscovered island in the Gulf of Mexico. Many who saw the performance did not understand that it was fictitious. In a 1993 interview with Anna Johnson for *BOMB* magazine, Gómez-Peña notes that reactions ranged from sympathy and solidarity to violent outbursts. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1599/>
5. Coco Fusco, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015).
6. Curator Okwui Enwezor included Fusco's *The Confession* (2015) in the central exhibition of the 56th Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures*. The film essay centers "on the infamous confession by Cuban poet Heberto Padilla in 1971 that he was a counterrevolutionary, a statement that he delivered at the time

of his arrest." (Digital video, b&w, color, sound; 30:00.) [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice\\_biennale/2015/tour/all\\_the\\_worlds\\_futures\\_2/coco\\_fusco](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice_biennale/2015/tour/all_the_worlds_futures_2/coco_fusco)