

Coco Fusco

Alexander Gray Associates, New York 9 January – 6 February

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Jacques Derrida describes how archival objects exist ‘under house arrest’. His words are apt for Coco Fusco’s exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates, in which she mines a range of archives – government records, oral histories, film databases – to document the Cuban regime’s brutal suppression of political dissent. Fusco has maintained a steady focus on Cuba throughout her long-running career; in both her artistic practice and numerous publications she has often returned to the politics and people of this island nation, most recently with *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (2015). Yet this show is not simply another contribution to an ever-expanding corpus. Rather, it takes the display of a new installation, *Confidencial, Autores Firmantes* (*Confidential, Signatory Authors*, 2015), as an occasion for revisiting many of the artist’s earlier videos, and positions her latest offering as an elucidation of themes manifest throughout her work.

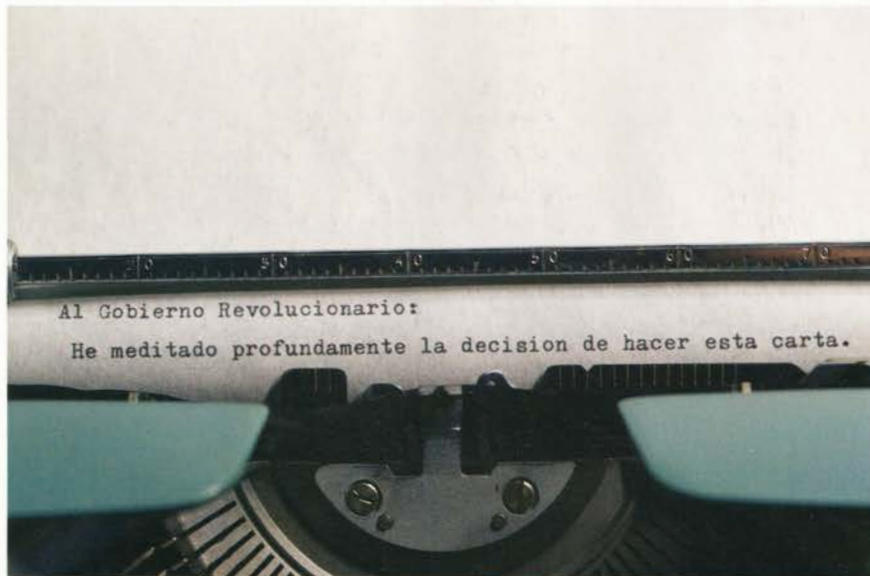
On the ground floor of the two-storey gallery a selection of typewritten documents are held in Perspex cases. Although written in Spanish, it becomes clear that these papers contain a confidential exchange among Cuban authorities from 1971. Translations by Fusco reveal plans for

the censorship of intellectuals supporting the detained ‘anti-revolutionary’ poet Heberto Padilla, and original copies of the texts in question are displayed nearby. The letters, however, are not what they seem; they are, in fact, painstakingly reproduced facsimiles, and were made in collaboration with historian Lillian Guerra after her accidental discovery of the original documents in the archives of the Cuban Ministry of Culture. Guerra smuggled out copies of the papers by taking pictures of them with the camera on her mobile phone, then Fusco set to work recreating each one using a period letterpress, typewriter and paper-ageing techniques. Her final installation marks a subtle creative intervention in the act of historical research and echoes the formal strategies of videos on display upstairs.

A rotating programme of works from 1993 to the present includes two recent works that cover similar thematic ground: *La confesión* (*The Confession*, 2015), previously displayed at the 56th Venice Biennale, explores Padilla’s public confession after his five-week imprisonment; and the 44-minute *La botella al mar de María Elena* (*The Message in a Bottle from María Elena*, 2015), created for the 2015 Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, focuses upon

the poet María Elena Cruz Varela, exiled after her 1991 campaign for political reforms. As the central features in the video programme, *La confesión* and *La botella* exemplify the artist’s broader working methods vis-à-vis art and politics. Although they adopt elements of political documentary such as talking head interviews, Fusco also incorporates lengthy still shots and extracts of narrated poetry to remind us that these videos are resolutely creative projects. What results is a captivating meditation on creativity itself, yet also a sombre exploration of its volatile consequences under autocratic rule.

At a Q&A event to launch the exhibition, Fusco explained that she distinguishes her artistic practice from her activism, and does not expect her art to elicit political change. Indeed, she regards the term “activist art” as “dangerous” and “unclear”, and is wary of its limitations. How, then, might one assess what is so evidently political in content, yet nonpolitical in aims? Fusco doesn’t provide clear answers, but perhaps such indeterminacy is part of the point. Instead of making grand claims for her work, she presents an art inflected, but not dictated, by politics. Whether it inspires political action is entirely up to us. *Dan Udy*



La confesión, 2015, digital film, 30 min.
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