



Coco Fusco does what she wants

BY MIKE ALLEN ON MAY 16, 2012

IN ARTS & CULTURE, FEATURE

Performance artist to deliver latest Art and Social Practice MFA lecture at PSU

Coco Fusco is a New York-born Cuban American, multimedia and interdisciplinary artist perhaps best known for her performance and video pieces. Her work falls squarely into the category of what is referred to as “social practice”—art whose primary focus is a social, political or economic critique/exploration.



COURTESY OF COCO FUSCO

Coco Fusco, below, is a multimedia artist whose piece “La Plaza Vacía” (“The Empty Plaza”), above is meant to contrast with overused spaces of public protest in the Middle East.

Fusco deals primarily with themes of gender, race and power dynamics. Her style is brash and often heavily ironic, her resume is long and impressive, and her work has been featured around the world and in two Whitney Biennials.

Fusco, who is currently an associate professor of fine arts at Parsons New School of Design, will be delivering the latest art and social practice Master of Fine Arts lecture Monday, May 21, in Portland State’s Shattuck Hall Annex.

She was kind enough to speak with the Vanguard about her body of work and forthcoming talk. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Vanguard: How do you refer to your art?

Coco Fusco: I do video, I do performance, and that's basically what I make. I've had the opportunity to experiment a little bit with online stuff when that was coming out in the '90s and early aughts. I do a little curating work, and I also write. I've written some essays which have been anthologized into books.

VG: When you lecture here, what are you going to be speaking about? What can we expect?

CF: I was asked to talk about my work, and I also was told that the degree program was focused on social practice. So they're interested in the intersection between art and politics, which is something that I really frequent. I feel comfortable talking about my relationship to certain kind of politics, progressive politics, and then also how I deal with politics as subject matter because a lot of my work does address political situations and political relationships, relationships of power.

VG: My next question was about politics and art. How did that come to



COURTESY OF DANNY CHRISTENSEN

be your focus?

CF: Well, some people are moved by nature. Some people are moved by sexuality. There's lots of things that move people that make them want to respond creatively, and the things that I've always felt inclined to respond to creatively have a political dimension. That's just how I explain it.

I'm not an agitprop artist. I don't try to force people to do anything with my work. I don't expect the work to change the world, either. But I do think that political situations, political relationships and political history can be subject matter for artwork.

VG: One thing I've noticed in your work is irony. It's really raw and brash, especially in the piece "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America." There is irony to be gotten there, right? Can you talk straight about it for a minute? About the role of women in the War on Terror? I realize you're coming at it slantwise in an ironic sense...

CF: I was very disturbed about the invasion of Afghanistan, the war in Iraq. I wanted to respond to the war. I felt that the best way to do that was to look at the performative dimensions of the conflict. The military interrogations were a very key way to look at performances because interrogators do approach interrogation as a kind of theater, as political theater. You also train and prepare to interrogate the way that actors do.

When I started researching military interrogation was when all the news about abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib came out in the media. I was studying the photographs that were in circulation and was very struck by the images of women as victimizers. It was not what I expected. I had at the time a much more naive view of women in the military. I tried to find out as much as I could about it, and I tried to create a character who was a woman in the military who was proud of being a victimizer, who sees it as a patriotic act.

I thought there was a tendency for artists and intellectuals to immediately, in an obviously unethical situation, jump to identify with the victim, and that's very easy for Americans, to sympathize with the victims of violence that we perpetrate. But I still think it's much harder to understand that we are the perpetrators of violence in our very culture, in the very violence that we carry on outside as well as inside.

We are all implicated in that, whether we voted for Bush or didn't. Simply by virtue of the fact that these acts are carried out in the name of all Americans, we are implicated. I wanted to bring that persona of the victimizer who feels justified to the stage. I wanted to demonstrate that there was a logic—that the logic was very perverse but nonetheless was an officially sanctioned one.

People inside of that world are made to believe in its legitimacy through training. We, by extension, normalize that behavior because the entertainment pop culture in which we bathe ourselves daily completely endorses the kinds of actions that were carried out by the military.

It's not a pretty picture. It's not a happy story that I'm telling. It's a very concerning one, and it's very comforting for Americans who don't support the war to pat themselves on the back and say, "I had nothing to do with it." But we have everything to do with it.

So I could have sat there and pretended to be a prisoner from Abu Ghraib and had everybody cry for me, but I frankly find that useless because it's really easy to cry and much harder to deal with the damage.

VG: So what you're saying is that irony is a powerful manner of speech, and you deviate from a narrative of victimhood...

CF: But also of redemption. The Abu Ghraib scandal is going to become the representative moment of that conflict, if it isn't already. That's what will be remembered in history, what we did in those prisons. I don't think what we've done there is that different from what's been done in other military prisons in other times. But we tell ourselves very majestic stories about how we've transcended torture, and that's not true.

On top of that, we tell ourselves self-important stories as women about how we understand suffering more than anybody because we're women, and that's also not true. Women and their sexuality were key to this, and that's what I was focusing on.

VG: The piece called "Operation Atropos" also came out of this?

CF: Yeah, that piece was part of the project. I got several women to come with me to train with former army interrogators so that we could learn

about their tactics, and so that I could observe them to understand the character of an interrogator, to be able to write a monologue. The video is a documentary about our training.

VG: That training looks really intense. Can you speak at all about that experience? It looks terrifying.

CF: It's not really terrifying. A lot of people assume that we are much feebler than we are in real life, and if you're an athlete or a dancer or anybody who has to train themselves and use their body in their work, you have to put yourself through incredibly stressful training situations. And if you're an actor and you go by method technique, you also have to subject yourself to very difficult psychological and emotional scenarios to develop the awareness you need for a role.

They put you through immersive simulation for a day or two in which you're living like a prisoner of war, but you're not really a prisoner of war. You're somebody who paid a lot of money to go to a class, and that's not the same thing. It looks scary on camera, but it's nowhere near as scary as it would have been in reality. Volition and duration are the two key elements of the psychology of torture.

VG: And the "we" that you're referring to when you say, "people assume we are feeble," who do you mean? Actors, artists, women, or all of those?

CF: In my case, I have to talk about the people who are on camera with me. Every time I show the video, somebody's like, "Oh my God, are you OK, did they recover?" And I'm just like, "You never cried in your life? You never fell down and hurt yourself? You never gave birth?" We do a lot of things in our life that are very painful, and we get over it.

VG: A lot of your work does seem like it's cinema. It's film. What separates it from cinema, film?

CF: I don't shoot on film.

VG: I'm sorry, I mean film in the broader sense. I don't mean...

CF: I don't work in the filmmaking world. I don't make feature-length films. I don't make scripted narrative films. I don't function in that circuit. I'm an artist, and sometimes that work ends up in a video image and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it ends up as a book. Sometimes it ends up as a photograph. Sometimes it ends up as a video. It ends up as all these different things.

But I'm not a filmmaker. I don't sit around writing scripts. I don't run to Hollywood. I don't go to Sundance. I don't have a film degree. I don't circulate in that world. The world of visual art includes a lot of electronic media, and also I'm not wedded to video as my medium. It's there if it serves me.

VG: You were talking there about narrative and how you don't sit down and write scripts, but you do seem to take a lot of stock in narrative. Your work doesn't seem to defy narrative—it seems to

embrace narrative.

CF: I'm not interested in being thought of as a filmmaker. That doesn't serve me. It doesn't serve me to start talking about myself as a filmmaker. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in doing what I do, and that can take a variety of forms. I'm not interested in filmmaking. I studied film when I was an undergrad—

VG: I'm not trying to talk of you as a filmmaker. I'm just speaking of your work as having narrative, of art having narrative...

CF: Well, there are some things that I do that involve storytelling. But I know what happens when people go to film school, and they sit in scriptwriting classes, and they have to go and develop and workshop. I have no interest whatsoever in being part of that world. None.

And I have no ambition to put my work on a movie screen. That would actually destroy me as an artist. I know what the consequences of that are. I don't want to sit around for 10 years trying to get half a million dollars to make a movie or competing with people who have resources and ideas that are completely outside my world.

VG: I hear from the art department that you never actually received any formal training as an artist.

CF: Uh-huh, I didn't go to art school.

VG: But you do teach now, correct?

CF: I do. As an undergraduate I took photography and filmmaking and film editing and video, and I apprenticed and worked for many different artists. But basically, I'm a child of immigrants. I helped to put myself through school with my mom, who was widowed by the time I went college. It would have been unthinkable for me to go to art school. Absolutely unthinkable. Due to my family background, it would not have been in the realm of possibilities for me.

So after I graduated from school, I couldn't afford to go to art school. So I had to learn from working for other people. That's what I did. I learned from working for other artists, other artists and other independent filmmakers. And I worked for nonprofit organizations, and I understood how you get funding and how you get distribution. I worked as a program officer, and I learned how to write grants.

So I had to learn from working because I don't come from a cultural background where art was seen as a legitimate area of study. My family would have never permitted me to do that in school, and then I didn't have money. I didn't have anybody to bankroll me while I spent two or three years at art school. So I had to work.

VG: Can you speak about some of the other disciplines that you draw on for your work?

CF: I work from a conceptual art tradition in that I start with an idea, and then I find the medium that's most appropriate for it to come out. I don't think that what I do is that different from what a lot of other artists do.

My art professor in college was somebody who had written novels, started an underground press, photographer, lighting design, made experimental films and also made sculptures. This was a person who was my most important teacher. He told me I could do whatever I wanted. That's what I do: I do what I want.

PSU School of Fine and Performing Arts presents

Coco Fusco: art and social practice MFA lecture

Monday, May 21

7:30–9 p.m.

Shattuck Hall Annex

Free and open to the public
