

Coco Fusco

12.11.13



Promotional image for Coco Fusco, *Observations of Predation in Humans*, 2013.

Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco is well known for addressing abjection in her work. For her latest piece, *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist*, which she will perform at the Studio Museum in Harlem on December 12 and December 13, 2013, Fusco will personify a popular film character—a chimpanzee psychologist who studies human behavior—in order to look at economic violence from an evolutionary perspective. Here, she speaks about the piece and her concurrent research project on contemporary Cuban performance that will result in a book to be published next year.

FOR THIS PERFORMANCE. I am reviving Dr. Zira from the science fiction film *Planet of the Apes*. She will give a lecture on her research about her observations into the current day *Homo sapiens*. Studies of animal behavior often focus on aggression and predation. We tend to think of predation usually in terms of the hunt for prey—carnivores attacking other animals to feed themselves. But in a broader sense predation means “to plunder,” and in animal psychology it is understood as goal-oriented aggression for the accumulation of resources. Dr. Zira comes from the future and focuses on our species’ drive for status, territory, and material. These are aspects of behavior that humans share with primates and many other animals.

I have explored the border between the human and nonhuman in several of my previous works. The history of colonialism in Western culture is a long story about who gets to be fully human; subordinated humans have frequently been caricatured as apes. This new performance is probably most closely related to *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, in which Guillermo Gómez-Peña and I were displayed in a cage.

In evolutionary biology and animal psychology, goal-oriented aggression is seen as not only rational and acceptable but also desirable; it is considered key to survival and dominance. (A die-hard capitalist would probably align himself with such thinking today.) These issues are explored in Dr. Zira’s lecture and are similar to the set of issues that underlie my research into contemporary Cuban performance.

In *Observations*, I look at human behavior from a speculative angle. In my study of Cuban performance, I examine political rather than economic violence, concentrating on artists who confront and critique the Cuban state’s codification of “antisocial” behavior. The Cuban penal code has an article that defines the category of “social dangerousness,” a classification that has been used against many artists, intellectuals, and dissidents. Whoever is identified as such by the state is effectively turned into an outcast—another kind of outsider. The term is somewhat vague, allowing representatives of the state to determine whether a mode of behavior, statements, or actions carried out in public run counter to socialist norms. The penal code allows the state to impose several forms of discipline on those deemed socially dangerous: reeducation, forced therapies including electroshock, and surveillance. You don’t even have to be caught engaging in socially dangerous behavior to be identified as such; it’s enough to

be seen associating with other "socially dangerous" people to be considered guilty. As you can imagine, the very existence of such a code generates a great deal of self-censorship among Cubans. But it has also generated some interesting responses from artists and activists who intentionally challenge the right of the state to enforce such a code.

There have been artists who have directly challenged the state's right to decide which artists can exhibit publicly and which live acts are considered art. In 1990, for example, Angel Delgado walked into an exhibition and defecated on a copy of *Granma*, the Communist Party newspaper. He was subsequently sentenced to six months in prison. The artists' collective Omni Zona Franca has also appropriated public space without authorization by creating music and poetry festivals, engaging communities from marginalized neighborhoods in the street. The punk musician Gorki Aguila, leader of the band called Porno Para Ricardo, routinely dresses in a Young Pioneer uniform and sings virulently anti-Fidel songs that appear in music videos, which are circulated on flash drives throughout Cuba. In my study I compare these kinds of performative confrontations with the strategies of media-savvy civil rights activists in Cuba who stage public events that dramatize their power struggle with the Cuban government.

— As told to Frank Expósito