

MoMA

Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia's *The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey*

In this exclusive two-week screening, watch the landmark video about the troubling legacy of museums.

Mar 9, 2022



Coco Fusco, Paula Heredia. *The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey*. 1993. Standard-definition video (black and white and color, sound), 31 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mario Cader-Frech through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund. 2022 Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia. Courtesy Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



In 1992, artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña performed *The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, touring the United States, Spain, the UK, and Australia as representatives of the fictional island of Guatinaui. Dressed in costumes ranging from luchador masks borrowed from Mexican wrestling to grass skirts and brand-name sneakers, they provocatively reenacted the conditions and history of ethnological exhibitions in which humans—presented in reconstructions of their supposedly primitive environs—were showcased at world’s fairs and other exhibitions beginning in the 19th century. As Fusco and Gómez-Peña demonstrate, these exhibitions continue to contribute to stereotypical representations of BIPOC communities today.

The following year, Fusco and independent film director Paula Heredia produced *The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey*. The video uses the techniques of collage and montage to document the performances and present interviews with audience members alongside found footage. It considers the tangled relationship between the museum and colonialist histories—a starting point for Fusco’s work as an artist, writer, and teacher. On the occasion of the 30-year anniversary of the original performance, I spoke to Fusco via email about this landmark work of institutional critique.

—Lilia Rocio Taboada, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance Art

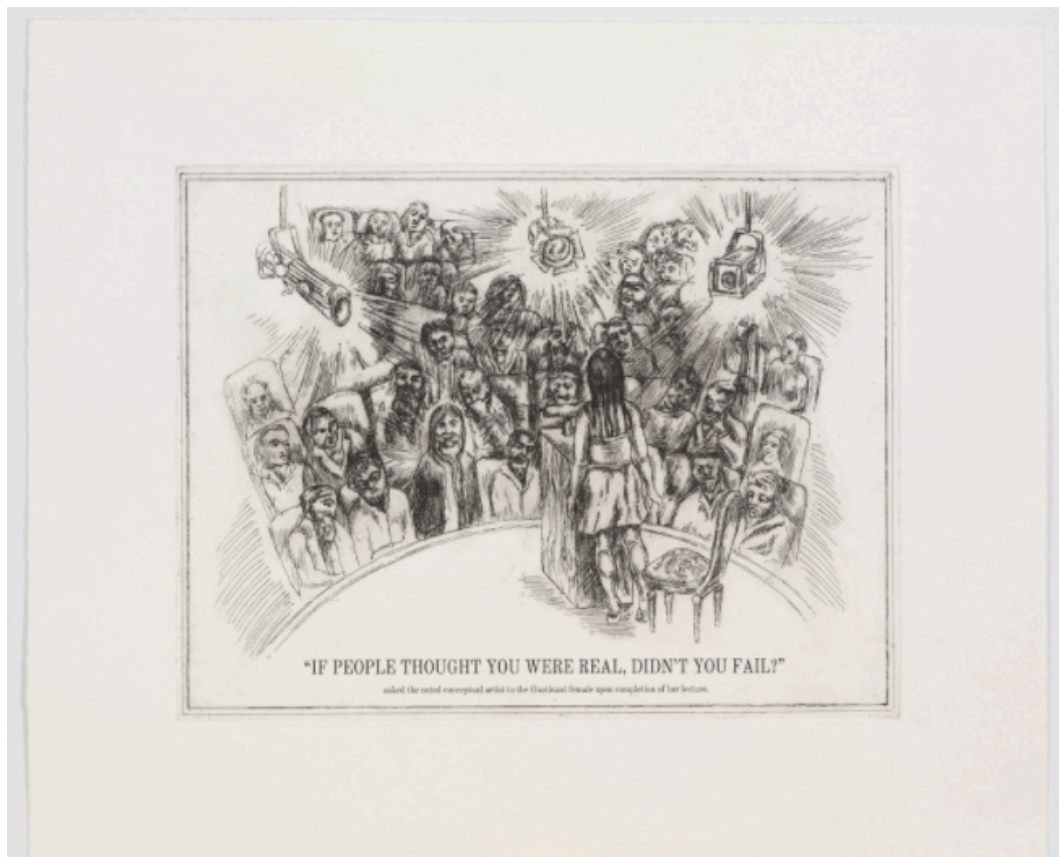
Lilia Rocio Taboada: Almost 30 years after its initial performance, *The Couple in the Cage* is part of curricula in performance studies, art history, and ethnic studies programs. How has it informed your work as an artist, writer, and teacher?

Coco Fusco: The performance and its repercussions completely changed my life. In a way I will always be the girl in the cage. Not a month has passed in the last 30 years in which I haven’t received a query, a letter from a student, a chapter of a dissertation that refers to it, or a request for a photo of the performance. I think the experience of the performance and the audience reactions have shaped my understanding of performance art and how institutional frameworks shape people’s perceptions of what they see in museums. And of course, the experience helped

me understand how colonialist views of non-Western cultures inform contemporary perceptions of people of color.

The video explores the relationship between museums, performance, tourism, and the ripple effect of the colonial gaze on BIPOC individuals. How has the video's connection to these various threads shifted from 1993 to the present day?

I don't know if I can be the judge of the video's impact. I do know that many people have seen it and commented on how moved or even disturbed they were by what they saw in the work. It is important to remember that the performance, the video, and my essay about the experience were all very controversial in the 1990s. The work was not viewed favorably in the art world for a long time.

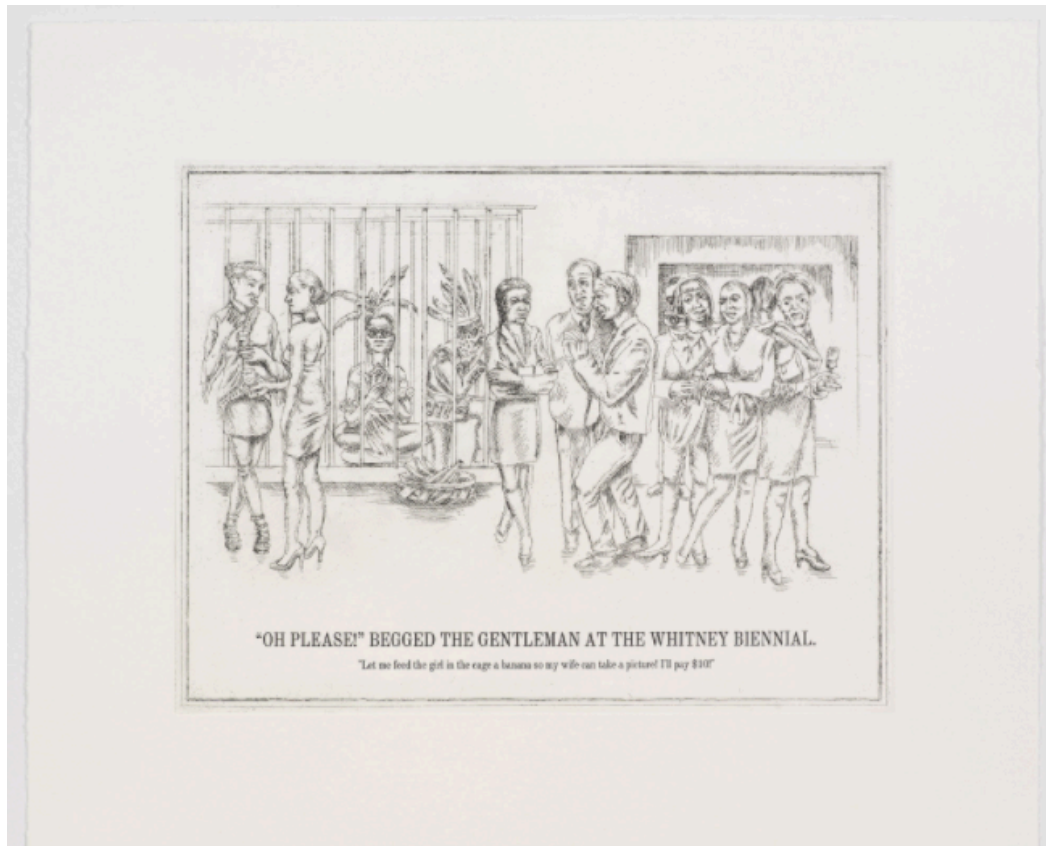


Coco Fusco. *The Undiscovered Amerindians; If People Thought You Were Real, Didn't You Fail?* 2012

How did you work together with Paula Heredia to select and develop the material for the video and maintain the sense of hyperbole that characterized the performance?

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and I worked very closely on the conceptualization of the performance. We also asked colleagues to videotape our interactions with audiences at the different venues, so we amassed a collection of documentation with the intent of making a film at the end of the tour. We both did archival research on the history of the ethnographic display. I collected images all over Europe, in antiquarian bookshops, at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, in ethnographic collections, etc. My mother was a physician, and she gave me X-rays to use. Gómez-Peña and I had created an extensive chronology of the ethnographic display for the signage we used in the performance and

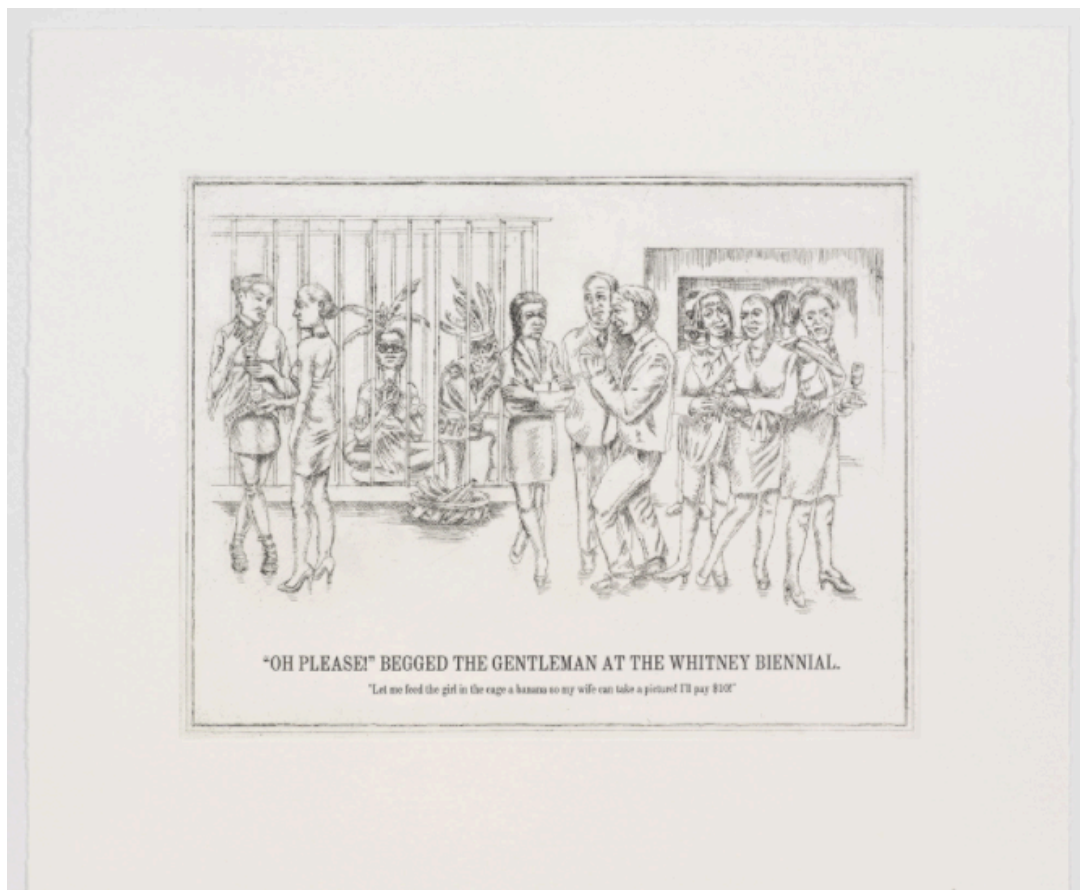
the posters. We invited Paula Heredia to our last US performance at the 1993 Whitney Biennial and at that point she began working with me on the editing of the documentary. During the video edit, an archival film researcher helped to secure some footage from the Circus World Museum. Before we started editing the video, Gómez-Peña and I had already written several texts for the performance that parodied the discourses of the circus barkers and dime store museum hosts that had featured ethnographic oddities. These were texts that framed our performance, appearing in signage, postcards, posters, and other marginalia. It was easy for me to extend that into the language used in the video.



Coco Fusco. *The Undiscovered Amerindians; How can the Museum Justify Such Deception?* 2012

You made *The Undiscovered Amerindians*, a series of works on paper, on the 20th anniversary of the 1992-94 performance. How do you see the printed imagery mirroring the live work and video?

The idea I had was to illustrate memories I had of the experience that had not appeared in photographs or the video. Important moments, such as our tense meeting in Washington, DC, with Smithsonian officials and politicians, in which we did not know if we would be able to carry out the performance. I worked with master printer Arlen Austin to visualize those scenes. Much of the early documentation of ethnographic displays was done in print media to be published in magazines. I was trying to emulate that style of visualization.



Coco Fusco, *The Undiscovered Amerindians*; "Oh Please!" Begged the Gentleman at the Whitney Biennial, 2012

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