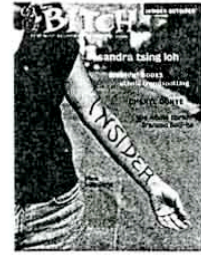


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FEMINIST RESPONSE TO POP CULTURE



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The Bodies That Were Not Ours and Other Writings

Coco Fusco {ROUTLEDGE}

In one of performance artist and writer Fusco's well-known collaborations with fellow writer-artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the pair were displayed in a cage in public spaces around the world. Presented as undiscovered ethnic

specimens in wildly overdone "native" costumes, whose interaction with a curious audience was facilitated by docents and captured in Polaroid souvenirs, Fusco and Gómez-Peña (whose performance was titled *Two Undiscovered Amer-Indians Visit the West*) both embodied and indicted spectators' ideas of Otherness. The same witty but dead-serious commentary on cultural appropriation, colonialism, and the institutionalized racism of the art world characterizes the mélange of essays, performance scripts, and interviews collected in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*, from Fusco's essay on fine artist Chris Ofili (he of the notorious elephant-dung Madonna that got then-mayor Rudy Giuliani's hackles raised enough to threaten the Brooklyn Museum's government funding) to a mock-cheesy *fotonovela* in which the issue of Latin nationalism and cross-cultural dating is given the soap-opera treatment.

Writing about ethnic and artistic identity with acute insight and obvious passion for her various mediums, Fusco nevertheless makes clear that the fusion of art and global politics hasn't come nearly as far as many cultural commentators would like to think. Tackling the art world's prescribed notions of value, Fusco notes in the book's introduction that "the backlash against socially engaged art practice has spread from the popular media and the far right into everyday life and art scholarship.... It is as if we are being encouraged to believe that institutional racism never existed, as if art history had never

been Eurocentric, as if the current wave of 'multicultural normalization' had always already been in place. To focus on the imbalances of power and institutionalized racism has been deemed anathema to beauty, championed once again as the essence of art." Her concern that multiculturalism—a decade ago one of the art world's biggest buzzwords—has been treated as a passing fad is underscored by the essays on and scripts for performances such as *Mexarcane International* and *Stuff*, both of which, like *Two Undiscovered Amer-Indians Visit the West*, involve her audience in making a spectacle of the well-meant marketing of multiculturalism.

Provocative and elegant—though, admittedly, often spiked with a tad too much jargon for the layperson—Fusco's work is as concerned with feminism as it is with art-world hypocrisy, as interested in NAFTA's effect on art in Mexico as it is with the daily life of sex workers in her native Cuba. What holds the varied elements of the collection together are her deeply nuanced critiques of the way ethnicity, gender, technology, and economy create the reality of multicultural experience—in art, in daily life, and in an imagined future. —ANDI ZEISLER