Still In The Cage

Two Undiscovered Amerindians Twenty Years Later

BY COCO FUSCO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY CHRISTENSEN
Fate should have it that I would make my most lasting mark on the art world as an ethno-freak in a grass skirt. From 1992 to 1994, I danced, somewhat pathetically, at numerous international festivals and biennials while my masked partner wowed onlookers with his guttural mix of Nahuatl phonemes and global brand names. For hours on end, Guillermo and I paraded around the confines of a golden cage pretending to be hitherto undiscovered Amerindians, as people stared, grimaced, chuckled, and wept. We were taken to the bathroom on leashes by docents and fed by businessmen who paid for the honor of peeling bananas and stuffing them in our mouths. We were jeered at, burned with cigarettes, courted, and cheered. We remained expressionless as our visitors peppered docents with questions about our sexual habits and suspiciously light skin or expressed their outrage at the sight of caged human beings surrounded by a visibly enthralled public.

After each day's work, we'd shower down to wash the crowd away, collect stories from friendly witnesses, and read notes that viewers left behind. Together with friends, we would laugh about the strangeness of it all as we counted the change we had collected for telling tales in “native tongues” and selling Polaroids of ourselves posing with visitors. During the course of two years, our traveling show took us to Madrid, London, Sydney, Buenos Aires, Chicago, Minneapolis, Washington, New York, and Irvine, California. We performed in two public plazas, three natural history museums, and the Sydney (1992) and Whitney (1993) Biennials. We watched in wonder as myths were conjured about us that evoked classic anxieties about monsters, barbarians, and philistines—at various moments it was feared that we would spread disease, traumatize children, enrage Republicans, or shock wealthy museum donors with noise and live nudity.

We made news, lectured widely on our findings, and eventually made a movie. We got ill, and we got sued. Twenty years later, I can say without a doubt that our escapade changed our lives. I may have left the cage behind but it doesn't leave me. From behind the bars of our gilded enclosure festooned with voodoo dolls, postmodern theory books, and a TV-topped altar, we confused some and angered many. At times we annoyed each other: Guillermo didn't like my face paint, and I found his rock en español grating. I preferred a minimalist approach to carrying out our actions, while he wanted to ham it up. But we both sensed that we had hit a nerve and reveled in private as the ghosts of history came alive. People we hardly knew sent us information about the history of the human display in their respective corners of the world, strengthening our premise that we were reviving a venerable performance tradition. Indigenous elders we met in America and Australia understood our message and gave their blessings to our endeavor as long as we agreed not to pose as members of our Iroquois tribe.
of an actual tribe. But many gestures of the art world and performance studies frowned on us and wrung their hands when we toured. Jan Avgikos confessed in her Artforum review of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, for example, that she couldn’t think about cultural genocide because she just kept thinking about how nice my body was. Dozeness of performance studies and New York University professor Diana Taylor complained that we were too hetero-normative to be truly radical debunkers of stereotypes. Nonetheless, there was something exquisite about the feeling that we had become a “bad object” for the art world, and that even so, thanks to contractual arrangements that would have been embarrassing to renegotiate and public interest in our art, we were not going to disappear with the wave of a murderous critic’s wand.

We fashioned bourgeois ethics which wanted multicultural art shown to be dignified celebrations of these peoples’ triumphs over adversity or these talented tenets’ greatness: Why, they would ask, did we want to show something so ugly? Our refusal to stoic for authenticity short-circuited the efforts of curators who sought to overcome institutional racism with poignant images of people that their institutions had largely ignored. Some responded by becoming allies and shepherded us through byzantine cultural bureaucracies while devising defense strategies for containing public outcry. Others who had espoused multiculturalism, with inspired family entertainment dismissed our work as offensive or shocking. I’m stuck with my astrological array. Our detractors found themselves in strange company. Those very liberal but very uptight museum officials who hated washing their dirty laundry in public had to share their irritation with haute conceptual art cognoscenti who hated object chauvinistic interventions that made a point with humor and 1980s haute conceptuel hated abject aesthetic interventions that made us seem normative to be truly radical debunkers of stereotypes. The video documentary serving time as whipping boys for anti-PC crashers. The last of the three remain with colored people they saw as party shockers. I’m honored by their astute look at Brown University but I had no idea that this was the last time I had actually yielded. Since no one was on the hot seat once the show was over—no more audiences could be potentially doped and no more bureaucrats could get in trouble for hosting us—we lost our threatening edge. We slowly transformed from theatrical weapons into proselytizing participant observers reflecting on the causes for this shift, I would attribute it largely to my many years of pandering the performance-weirdness of our dreamers. For hundreds, of public lectures to convince the academy that our “lies” were greater purpose. We also benefited from the expansion of cultural studies in the 1990s, which provided us with a sympathetic audience at a time when many academics were trashing multiculturalism andrediscovering beauty. Finally, credit is also due to the Whitney’s and the Walker Art Center’s publicity machines and their extraordinary capacity to disseminate our images on a global scale.

The undiscovered Americans still weren’t included in Janson’s History of Art but we did make it into quite a few other art history textbooks, to my much surprise. The records of our untold adventure continue to be scrutinized by academic experts worldwide. Students who weren’t even alive when we were frickin’ behind bars now write theses about us, and a decade later they still believe the audience did “it”. They made the performance weirder than anything I could ever have imagined when I first stumbled upon Sender Gähler’s account of dreadful being or defeat in public while they were in display in the Paris 1991 Biennale. I always thought that the European visitors could pick at them. I had read much about the collective unconscious as a semiotics major at Brown University but had no idea what it felt like until I performed the role of the savage in front of so-called civilized spectators. I shall never forget the uncanny sensation that a cascade of反馈 klips about colonization was springing forth each time our show began. Neither of us was conversant, but we were prepared for us to be entertaining and fascinating, even though the ethnographic: display of human beings as curious was a defunct practice by the time we launched our tour. We offered testimonials that for a multicultural moment—a blatantly racist display—and abject shudders of pain and pleasure. It even seemed at times that the pain we engendered was pleasurable to some, as if we were an antiracist Walking Wall. The political implications of these ambiguous. But arguments that cultural theorists: While it was fine to acknowledge racist errors of the past, it was an entirely different matter to support art that excited racial pleasure in the present. And so, those who believed that their professional integrity depended on distancing themselves from the pleasures offered by the display of racial difference publicly condemned our experiment—even if they collaborated with us in private. They fended horror at the prospect that racial difference could not only be desirable but entertaining at the end of the 20th century was a magnificent charade. If only the psychic life of human beings were simple enough for one to accept that even as we were an antiracist performance to its limits and to refuse to break character to see if the audience that we were not real, let them breathe a sigh of relief, and wander home. Unavoidably was a better response to the persistence of race as a social fact than disbelief or defiance. I continue to marvel at how much curiosity the Undiscovered Americans performance generated after the fact, especially when I contrast it to the fury the piece caused in its moment. Although I frequently asked to talk about my experience with the work and often feel as though I live in its shadow, it’s not something that I could ever re-perform, to use that astoundingly resonant term that has been embraced of late by the art world.

The entire enterprise turned out to be a kind of exposé of the racial doublespeak of educated liberals in the so-called post-racial era. One particularly nasty critic called it a ploy to get a few black artists at it to say that you had to be stupid to fall for it. But what does it mean to “fall for it?” Does that mean that all those who believed could be divided neatly between those who believed we were real and those who didn’t? What about those who didn’t believe it but wanted to play the game, to compile the Kiplingean arrogance of a colonial? Why was the “lost tribe” script so familiar that anyone seemed able to pick it up and run with it? What explains the attraction to a lie? What about those who knew who we were and championed free speech and contemporary art but didn’t want us to experiment with volatile subject matter in a culture that fetishizes black athletes, equates black style with rebelliousness, cloaks indigenous belief systems for witty profoundness to satisfy the spiritual cravings of secular materialists, and then depends on cheap immigrant labor, redlining, and mass incarceration to safeguard class hierarchies that are obviously racialized? It was the unspeakably grotesque irony of our imagining America as a multicultural paradise that inspired me to push the performance to its limits and to refuse to break character so as to assure the audience that we were not real, let them breathe a sigh of relief, and wander home. Unavoidably was a better response to the persistence of race as a social fact than disbelief or defiance. I continue to marvel at how much curiosity the Undiscovered Americans performance generated after the fact, especially when I contrast it to the fury the piece caused in its moment. Although I frequently asked to talk about my experience with the work and often feel as though I live in its shadow, it’s not something that I could ever re-perform, to use that astoundingly resonant term that has been embraced of late by the art world.

Two Undiscovered Americans that the West emerged from and belongs to another time, before webcams and globalized follow me. What explains the attraction to a lie? What about those who knew who we were and championed free speech and contemporary art but didn’t want us to experiment with volatile subject matter in front of public that might not “get it”—did they not also believe that something “real,” albeit inappropriate, was happening? Twenty years later, I still think about an unanswered question that led me to the cage. Is there anyone who really believed that we could be “post-racial” in a culture that fetishizes black athletes, equates black style with rebelliousness, cloaks indigenous belief systems for witty profoundness to satisfy the spiritual cravings of secular materialists, and...