

# Art World Voodoo

by *Coco Fusco*

Los Angeles in the late 1970s. “Hotel California” on the radio. Ponytails, bell-bottoms, and psychedelic sex. Cheap rents and an under the radar avant-garde meant you could nail yourself to a car, pretend to be a goddess or smear ketchup on yourself—and then find peers who would call it art. The women dumped their husbands and formed radical collectives and the men turned regressive and compulsive behavior into spectacle. No one was worried about who their audience was—a room full of friends was just fine.

That was the rosy picture of performance art history that I got when I moved to the West Coast in the early '90s. The “performance art community” celebrated its diversity, its social vision, and its openness to experimentation. So imagine my surprise when, some years later at a dinner party in Australia, I was sitting across the table from a beady-eyed art critic who asked me if I had heard about an artist from L.A. who fucked a dead woman in Mexico and called it performance. I locked myself in the bathroom to write a note about it and wondered how could I have missed that chapter of art history.

I didn't miss it because it hadn't been told. In the 1970s the only people who cared about performance were artists. If they didn't discuss your work at their parties it would have no afterlife—which for performance means everything. Teasing the details out of veterans of that scene turned out to be no easy task—they had taken a vow of silence to make that guy disappear.

I found a trashy book about the art world that mentioned the piece. That book didn't say who the artist was but it did note that David Ross had run into him while he was a curator at the Long Beach Museum. Ross's response to my query was laced with nasty words—and he refused to utter the artist's name “on principle.”

I made a hit list of Californian feminist artists who might have known the guy and started contacting them. I decided to give the performance a bicultural twist in order to break the silence. What did it mean that Mr. Performance Perv crossed the border to find the dead señorita he used as a prop? Was this border art? Wasn't this performance as racist as it was sexist? Maybe it was a guilty desire to recognize shared oppression that made a couple of them relent.

His name was John Duncan and his piece was called “Blind Date.” He had pulled off weird and violent stunts before—such as showing up at Paul McCarthy’s door with a mask and a gun. He confessed his sinful act during a performance festival and he had an audiotape to prove he wasn’t making things up. He said he was kicked out of a bunch of porn shops for asking how to find a corpse for sex before someone sold him a phone number in Mexico, et voilà, he got his wish. His audience of fellow artists was horrified—the women, I was told, felt particularly violated but no one liked the feeling that they were somehow complicit as witnesses. The decision to suppress the performance appears to have been unanimous. Duncan managed to score airtime to defend himself on a local public radio show, but he was now a pariah. He soon left the United States for good.

One more educated guess led me to an art historian who specialized in body art from the period and lo and behold, she turned out to be a staunch defender of Duncan’s. One’s person’s taboo is another’s valiant transgression. When I brought up the Mexican angle, she quickly retorted that it was Mexico’s problem that dead bodies were available for sex in exchange for money—not Duncan’s. How curious that in a field of art that is rife with sexual perversion and dark humor, only necrophilia would be considered beyond the pale—and how telling that art historical validation would rely on ignoring the ongoing history of America’s exploitative approach to Mexico. Art has nothing to do with *that*.

Armed now with a name, I found him on the Internet and tried to engage him in a virtual conversation.

“Would you talk to me about ‘Blind Date’?”

“Maybe. What do you want to know?”

“Do you remember her?”

“Of course. How could I forget?”

“What was she like?”

He refused to continue. Soon thereafter, word got to him that I was working on a performance of my own that tried to imagine what it might have been like to be a Latina who was forced to act as if she were dead in order to survive—and that his “Blind Date” served as my starting point. He didn’t appreciate being quoted and I didn’t think I needed his approval. He hadn’t asked for hers.

But he did get a shot at a more dignified comeback. Paul Schimmel resurrected his audiotape for L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art’s *Out of Actions* show in 1998. Shortly thereafter, a much more mild mannered middle aged Duncan, now residing in Europe, began to give interviews in which he reflected pensively on the transformative effects of “Blind Date” on his life, but never expressed remorse. Some things never change.