THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art

October 5th, 2015

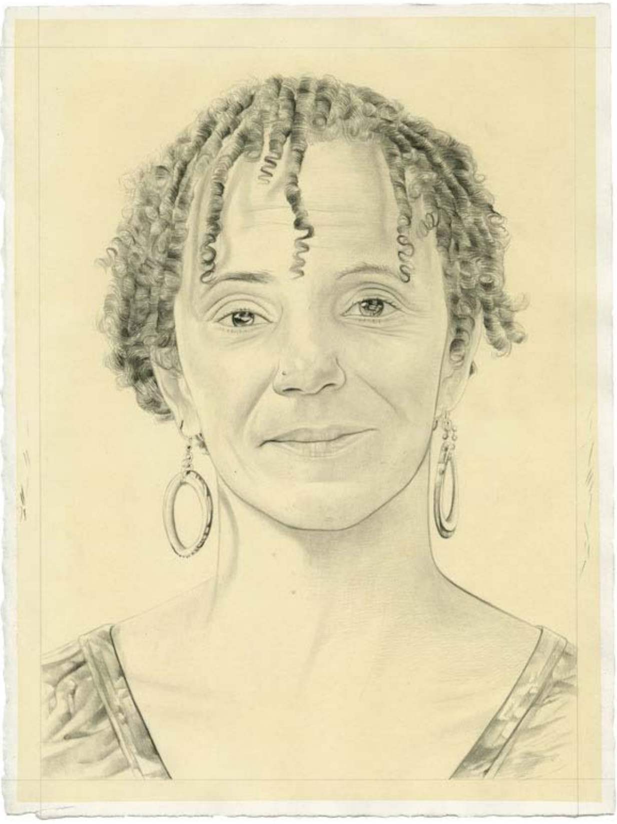
INCONVERSATION

COCO FUSCO with Laila Pedro

Cuban-American artist and scholar Coco Fusco has explored the dynamics of art, bodies, and culture for more than thirty years. She has performed displayed in a cage as an invented primitive character (*The Year of the White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992 – 1994)) and as Dr. Zira, *Planet of the Apes*'s "animal psychologist" (*Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* (2013)), and undertook training in military interrogation techniques to create *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2006).

Fusco is among the most astute and involved observers of Cuba's complex artistic and political landscape, which she has engaged in iconic works like *La plaza vacía (The Empty Plaza)* (2012), and *Y entonces el mar te habla (And Then the Sea Will Talk to You)* (2012). In 2015 she produced two new videos about Cuban intellectuals: *La confesión* (*The Confession*), about Heberto Padilla, and *La botella al mar de María Elena* (*The Message in a Bottle from María Elena*), about the poet María Elena Cruz Varela.

On the occasion of the publication of her next book, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba*, Fusco welcomed *Rail* managing editor Laila Pedro to her Brooklyn home to discuss Cuba, performance, and the intersections—and collisions—of art and power.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Taylor Dafoe.

Laila Pedro (Rail): When did you begin to do work on Cuban art?

Fusco: I met artists in 1985 who came to the U.S. and invited me, and I went. It wasn't family that drew me that much; it was the peers I met, people who were involved in the arts with whom I felt an affinity.

Rail: The generation of Ana Mendieta, José Bedia—

Fusco: Right. At that time it was very not cool to go there, politically. I got a lot of flack both on the Cuban side and the American side.

Rail: How did you deal with that flack?

Fusco: Well, it didn't scare me away, if that's what you're asking. At the time I assumed that was going to happen on the Cuban side. I had friends there who taught me to navigate the terrain. It became clear very quickly that there was a world of official culture in Cuba, which is the milieu most visitors stay in. If that is all you see, then you're going to get a very narrow view of what goes on in Cuba. You're going to be dealing with people who are not always lying but who are not telling you everything, because they can't. But if you spend a lot of time in Cuba, speak the language, and have a sense of culture beyond what you're told about by officials, then you can read between the lines and start to see things. I got in trouble with the official cultural institutions very soon after I started traveling there because of articles I wrote and a documentary I co-produced about postmodernist art in Havana. I also had my run-ins with ardent Cuba-supporters, and with the Cuban exile community; and I acquired an FBI file because of my travel to Cuba. I understood early on in my career that my work in culture had political consequences.

Rail: I'm curious about your conceptual approach. You're both an artist and a scholar that is as academically prepared as anyone can be, so I'm interested in whether you feel that you've consciously developed a unique critical apparatus; your writing is very rigorous from a legal and historical perspective, but it's always informed by a performer's sensibility as well.

Fusco: There are art historians who write about the dead, who don't really know what it's like to make art. There are art historians who have never sat with an artist in the studio while they're making art, never shared the process, never taught people how to make things or how to think about making things. They are only observers of the finished product.

I do know art historians who are not like that, who do know about process, and who are interested in the steps that one takes once something is complete in order to get it out there in the world. But there are a lot of other ones who don't consider process and context to be part of their research focus. They look at the object, and that's it. If you're trying to understand cultural politics, how power relations create conditions that support certain kinds of works versus others, and make certain kinds of works public and not other kinds of work, you cannot just focus on the objects, because you will miss the big picture.

I learned a lot about Cuban art by doing fieldwork, not traditional art history. I was on the ground, observing how an art movement was emerging and being positioned internationally. In the past thirty years I have visited Cuba dozens of times and followed artists who went into exile in Mexico, Spain, and the United States. I got a sense of the lived experience of artists in Cuba, and how they negotiate with state entities. That informs how I write and what I say.

Journalistic and academic commentary on post-revolutionary Cuba is so polemical and polarized. There are the unwavering Cuba supporters who think it's only an enabling and empowering society, and there are the detractors who think it's a gulag and that there are no possibilities. And then there are the hacks who bandy clichés and are excited about anything they find. Cuban culture is a field of contradiction—the country is a cultural superpower with many enabling institutions that also function as censors and collude with the repressive machinery of the state.

Rail: Something crucial about this most recent book is that you've managed to talk about all these worlds that are at play—interacting with, and operating on each other—in a very clear way. A lot of the general audience may not realize what a feat that is, to talk about Cuba in a balanced or level way.

Fusco: Many people who are enamored of Cuba don't want to hear the dark side. There are also a lot of people on the far right in the United States and elsewhere who don't want to acknowledge that Cuban educational and cultural institutions produce great talent. But if you want to understand the society, you have to be able to deal with both aspects of state power—the enabling and repressive elements. You also have to understand that a lot of Cuban cultural producers are in a quandary: on the one hand, they have possibilities that other Latin Americans don't have, which is to say free art education and very powerful promotional state apparatus; on the other hand, they have political and economic limitations that creative people in other parts of the world don't experience as strongly. It's not that there's no political control of culture outside Cuba. It's not as if the art world doesn't play politics here. But as an artist you have other options.

Rail: It's interesting the way in which these cultural politics play out. What really struck me when I was reading the book was the formal, conceptual sophistication with which the Cuban government engages with art. In contrast with American censorship—

Fusco: American censorship is only a small portion of what political control is about in this country. The market exercises as much political control as the government. There are lots of ways to exercise political control over artists: a bunch of Hollywood producers can decide they're not going to allow certain work to be produced or released, or a bunch of art curators can refuse to promote certain kinds of work, or a bunch of collectors can dump certain artists work to lower their prices. These actions are not understood as censorship, because censorship is carried out by governments, but the effects are not very different in that artists and their works are made to disappear or never allowed to be publically visible.

I have no patience, at this point, for those foreigners who are amazed by the fact that Cubans are smart, sophisticated, and knowledgeable. I'm kind of sick of foreigners wondering at the fact that

Cubans are not all ignoramuses or folk artists. Why is it so hard to understand that wealthy people in rich countries do not have a monopoly on intelligence or inventiveness? A high-powered consumer society isn't the only place to achieve cultural awareness or to cultivate talent. You can be materially deprived and culturally sophisticated. You can be an educated person in this world without having a Target or an Apple store or a Barnes & Noble in your city. Academics always want to tell me that "Cubans are so sophisticated." I find those comments quite patronizing.

Rail: That speaks to the rigorous training that you talk about artists receiving in Cuba.

Fusco: Education is free in Cuba. Art education is free. There have been times in the post-revolutionary period when political criteria were used to limit admissions to higher education. That happened more in the early decades, less nowadays, although art students can still be kicked out of school for ideological reasons. Even if political criteria are involved in admissions, you still have to demonstrate talent to get into the University of the Arts. And talent is spotted early. There are specialized schools for art from high school onward, and there are *casas de cultura* all over the island where you can take workshops in all areas of the arts. Kids don't have to have money to have access to art education.

Coco Fusco, Video still: *La confesión* (2015). Image courtesy the artist.

Students at *el ISA* (Instituto Superior de Arte) are much better prepared than any American art student. The teachers are good and the curricula are rigorous. The students are more skilled, they've been exposed to more art history, and they have more technical training. Competition to get into ISA is fierce—much harder than getting into an art school in the United States.

So: is there censorship at school? Yes. Is there censorship of a different kind in American art education? Yes. Many American art schools put little emphasis on the intellectual component of art making and do a poor job of teaching art history. There is an over-emphasis on the technical and formal aspects of art making. Other programs overemphasize theory and cut overhead by eliminating studio training that requires expensive shops and labs, and calling that "conceptually-driven art schooling." In noting these things I am not suggesting that American art schools do not have talented students—they can be very inventive and creative. But the conceptual, sociological, and art historical aspects of their education come in very late and are usually not well integrated with studio training. An ideological struggle still exists in American art schools between those who think that theory and history are unnecessary and even anathema to art making and those who are too obsessed with theory and underplay the significance of craft. That struggle plays out in what art students are encouraged or discouraged from learning.

The other controlling mechanism here is money. American art education costs a lot of money. Most kids lack parents who can spend a fortune on private schools or donate oodles of money to public-school PTAs—and the schools they attend don't have art classes. If you want your kid to have the same amount of exposure as a Cuban kid does for free, you have to pay for it here. But financially based exclusion is not considered censorship.

Rail: Can you talk specifically about performance in Cuba? Because I think the central theme in the book, that Cubans are always performing, is very important. Whether they are explicitly being artists, or socially performing the duties of the revolutionary subject.

Fusco: I found the standard interpretations of the roots of performance in Cuba to be limited. In my book I begin by discussing some of the key arguments about Cuban performance, which focus on its being rooted in folklore and religion. Much of what is understood as the "Cuban" in Cuban performance comes from corporeal expressivity in Santería, carnival, and the nightclub culture that exists primarily for tourists. There are exuberant, folkloric body languages that inform the work of, for example, Manuel Mendive, and Los Carpinteros' *Conga irreversible* [2012]. There are a number of artists who've done performances that are influenced by Santería—Tania Bruguera, María Magdalena Campos, Alexis Esquivel, and others.

Another art-historical focus has been on the art-student collectives of the '90s and early 2000s: Lázaro Saavedra's group, Enema; René Francisco's group, DUPP; Ruslan Torres's group, DIP. After them Tania Bruguera set up her *Taller de conducta*, or behavior workshop. The works produced by these groups have a rather oblique relationship to the social context.

The line of inquiry that seemed to me to be missing was the one that addressed the relationship between performance that emerged in the '80s and Cuba's political discourses and institutions. I am referring to works that take on political discourses through visual, graphic, or verbal means; ones that toy with political speech, and challenge notions of correct political conduct and the control of public space. This kind of performance has existed within the visual arts but it is not limited to that area—it extends to music, spoken-word poetry, and political activism. The construction of the category of political conduct within the Cuban revolution is key for understanding the parameters of acceptable public behavior. But the dominant discourses on Cuban art have little to say about revolutionary behavior or political conduct. Even though now it's fashionable in the Cuban art scene to talk about *la conducta* [conduct], I have to ask *¿qué conducta* [what conduct]?" What are we talking about when we refer to behavior in the Cuban context?

I explore the politics of behavior in relation to performance and socially acceptable conduct defined by the state. I describe how revolutionary subjectivity was supposed to be manifest through public performances that express one's willingness accept the new order of things and to be part of the political community. I look at mass mobilizations, volunteer brigades, demonstrations of patriotism, and cooperation with policing. I also look at the formation of the category of improper conduct, a legal classification used to identify politically undesirable behaviors, which has included homosexuality, attraction to Western cultural trends and bourgeois customs, being openly religious, and “excessive” intellectualism.

The category of improper conduct is a mechanism of social control and a means of limiting access to desirable and ideologically sensitive professions. The revolution promised everything to everybody, but in reality it was never possible to make good on that promise. Society cannot function without people who do work that does not require college degrees, so some means of stratification has to be implemented. But it can’t be on the basis of money, race, or social origin in a socialist society; hence political conduct becomes determinant. Political conduct determined who got access to universities, but also who got access to good jobs, who got promoted, and who got rewards in the form of consumer goods. Conduct became currency, the thing Cubans exchanged for goods.

Rail: There are two performances I want to ask you about specifically. One, of course, is the infamous *Granma* incident with Angel Delgado. It’s hilarious in a very dark way, and it also reflects this obsession with language and punning.

Fusco: Linguistic play abounds in Cuban art. There is a very strong tendency in the culture to use double-entendres and artists work off of that. As for Angel Delgado, the accounts of his performance invariably stopped at the fact that he was arrested and served a six-month prison sentence, and did not consider the relationship between the act and the off-color popular phrase that was enacted. Why does a Cuban artist go to prison for taking a dump on a newspaper in a gallery? Why was the act so inflammatory? What laws made his punishment possible? Was there any attempt from the cultural bureaucracy or art community to defend his gesture as art? And is there any symbolism in this very visceral act or is it just about poop and shocking people? There are other Cuban contemporary artworks that use excrement, both literally and also pictorially, and not all of them have triggered such a repressive response.

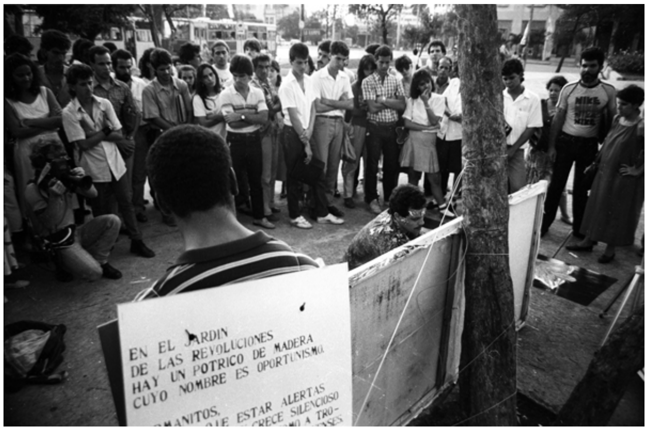
Rail: Tell me about how these decisions are made, because it’s a major contribution of the book to shed light on how these legal mechanics are enacted and enforced by people who are smart about art.

Fusco: You have to look at things on a case-by-case basis. I don’t think there’s one standard operating procedure. There’s a political infrastructure that needs to be considered: Cuban censorship involves the cultural apparatus, the political apparatus, and at least one of the two policing apparatuses. The three main players in decision-making are the Ministry of Culture, the Communist Party, and the police.

Many cultural entities in Cuba deal with the visual arts: the Ministry of Culture, the Center for the Development of the Fine Arts, many museums, state-run galleries and cultural centers, etc. The people who work in them are for the most part administrators but there are security agents and informers embedded in many organizations. There is certain subject matter that is considered too sensitive. There are certain artists who are not acceptable. Making politically motivated decisions doesn’t really make Cuban administrators that different from their counterparts here or in Europe.

But their being beholden to the demands of a centralized political structure is different. Things are a little more intense in Cuba—when the Party or the police want to close down a show or can an artist, the cultural apparatus will comply without a fight. But let's be real here and not demonize the Cuban situation because artists in the United States and Europe also get censored, or are removed from circulation, or are arrested, audited, and sued for political reasons. American art-world types are really good at bandying rhetoric about freedom around, but in a society in which everything is commodified, it's impossible to operate freely.

The Cuban political apparatus includes the Communist Party, the Council of State, and the National Assembly. There are political organizations in workplaces, and in every neighborhood. Political representatives may find art shows offensive and set the wheels turning to shut them down. There are political organizations integrated into schools and universities. There was an art show in 1989 at the Galería L at the University of Havana featuring Arte Calle. Ariel Serrano, who was a member of Arte Calle, made a giant painting of Che Guevara's face and had it the floor, and you were supposed to walk on Che's face. Nobody wanted to walk on the face. Then he brought some dancers in and had them dance on the face. A university representative of Communist Youth freaked out and closed the show down.



JuanSí González, *The Artist as a Political Man* (1988). Image courtesy the artist.

Then there's also the policing structure. There is the Policía Nacional Revolucionaria. There's the Ministerio del Interior or state security. What's the difference between the two? The Ministerio del Interior is concerned about political crimes, ideological crimes, which are perceived as threats to national security. In a tightly guarded society like Cuba's, anyone who has regular contact with foreigners, as artists often do, can be considered a threat to national security. The Policía Nacional is more concerned with public order. Artists could be dealt with by both policing entities. Artists are routinely questioned by state security about foreigners that they interact with, about the political nature of their work, about the people they may have met when they travel, and so forth. The Policía Nacional will come and stop you if you're trying to do a performance in the street and you don't have permission. They can remove you from a public place or prevent you from conducting certain kinds of group activities in private homes if authorization for them is required. Large gatherings in private homes often require prior authorization.

So how is an artist stopped from doing what he or she wants to do? If they're trying to get in a show approved in a museum, they may be refused by administrators. If they're trying to do a performance in the street, they may be stopped by the Policía Nacional, and then questioned by the Ministerio del Interior. Cultural officials may intercede to prevent unwanted public events, as in the case of Bruguera's attempt to stage a performance at the Plaza of the Revolution last year. When Arte Calle was doing anonymous *pintadas* [graffiti] in Havana in the 1980s, they were eventually discovered and questioned by state security. When they wanted to stage a rock concert inside a museum, the museum bureaucracy wanted to see them rehearse and approve all lyrics, and their attempt to hide the more bombastic elements of what they were planning failed—so the concert was cancelled. Juan Sí González's street actions in the late 1980s were stopped by Cuban police even though many were authorized by the Hermanas Saiz Brigade, the division of the artists and writers union for young adults. Eventually, the artists and writers union also repudiated him on political grounds. Angel Delgado showed up to a show that he was not invited to participate in. There were state security agents at the opening, witnessing his actions. They shut down the opening, and left his excrement there as evidence. They reported his actions to the political apparatus and then a decision was made about how to deal with him. The police went to his house several days later to arrest him.

In the United States, there are artists who do not seek authorization before they stage performances in contested public spaces or on private property, and they often face legal consequences. If I decide to go to the White House lawn and do a performance without permission, Secret Service agents would jump me, I would be taken to the police. It wouldn't be tremendously different, but the punishments would not be as draconian.

Rail: Right, and this is what I find very important about your book—that you've situated yourself in this space that's not drastically ideological, but presents itself as an interrelated series of relationships and dynamics.

Fusco: It's important to understand that when artists are subject to political control in Cuba, it's not as if there's a group of aliens that come in and judge them. Their friends are often involved. The same curator who gives you a show can just as easily take it away. The same people you went to school and hung out with could be signing a letter detailing your shortcomings or your suspect activity for state security. That's the hardest thing for Americans to understand. They want to imagine that there are some bad people who attack artists because they don't know or don't care about art. Actually the person who picked up that rich collector at the airport or who brought an air-conditioned chauffer-driven car to the visiting curator's hotel or the very urbane artist who entertained that foreign art-star—those are the people who engage in repression together with state security agents.

Rail: There's also this intense relationship with iconography at play—Delgado with the state newspaper, Sandra Ceballos writing every single word of Fidel's speeches until they become layered abstract drawings.

Fusco: Is it difficult to comprehend that artists would address the structures, systems, and discourse that represent power in their society? During the Renaissance the main art patrons in Europe were the Catholic Church and the aristocracy. The main subject matter then was also biblical iconography and some artists at that time were able to inject a degree of criticality into their representations of biblical lore. The main supporter of Cuban culture is the state. The state holds exclusive rights to exercise power. In that situation, it's logical that there would be many artists who choose to work with and against political iconography. In our context, artists interested in power structures tend to be more focused on the market—because the market determines what gets out there, what's known, and what's valued.

Rail: I think you deal with the question of the construction of the revolutionary subject very interestingly. How do you see that evolving now?

Fusco: Little has changed for most Cubans. Life is still very difficult, and the Cuban political apparatus retains absolute control over public life. Americans are also being bombarded with propaganda right now in support of the Obama Administration's position. The Administration has worked very hard to give the impression that Cuba is changing because of the rapprochement between governments. The American press is full of very superficial articles about Cuba being a great place to visit, about it being a wonderful place for economic investment, and about its having an educated labor force that is cheap to employ. It is not hard to figure out what is going on the American side. The Obama Administration wants to build congressional support for lifting the embargo and the media is cooperating in shifting public opinion. The U.S. government also wants to drive home that the exile community has become more liberal and is pro-democratic and pro-reestablishment of ties, that the majority of Cuban exiles and Cuban-Americans are in favor of rapprochement. They are succeeding in isolating the Cuban-American political hardliners, which will make it easier to cut off State Department funding for anti-Castro, pro-democracy activities. None of that is contingent on political change in Cuba.

If you compare the current scenario to how things were or forty years ago, there's a larger sector of the exile population that is interested in reestablished diplomatic ties, that sees the benefits of lifting the trade embargo. Many Cuban exiles just want to have an easier time visiting their families and sending money and goods to the island to help relatives. Because of the trade embargo, travel and communication between the two countries are insanely expensive and the exiles bear the burden of that, so it does not surprise me that exiles would support policy change.

But Americans live in a virtual black hole regarding Cuba. It has been quite easy to shift public opinion because most people know next to nothing about the island, but few recognize the difference between diplomatic relations and the trade embargo.

Angel Delgado, *Hope is the Last Thing we are Losing* (1990). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Evel González

Reestablishing diplomatic ties has not yet yielded material consequence for Cubans. What many Cubans fear is that it will change immigration laws. Cubans are still a privileged group. They still have the Cuban Adjustment Act: all they have to do is set foot on U.S. soil and ask for political exile, and the process of securing residency begins. Fear that the act will be rescinded soon has led to a sharp increase in illegal immigration in the past year.

There has been no significant political change in Cuba. Some Cubans may benefit from the increase in remittance levels approved by Obama. But foreign relations are separate from domestic policy. What the Cuban government agreed to with the United States hasn't entailed any internal change as of yet. As the negotiations are moving forward, the subject that keeps getting postponed is human rights. The demands of the opposition groups are the last things that the Cuban government is interested in talking about. And the U.S. government is not pressuring them to do so. The U.S. has other priorities in its dealings with Cuba.

Rail: And how does it affect artists' lives, specifically?

Fusco: Artists are Cuban citizens. What makes the artist's situation slightly more privileged than the average Cuban? Cuban artists were among the first professionals permitted since the 1990's to function economically as freelancers. They can sell directly to foreigners. They can make more money in hard currency than most other Cubans. When exit visas were required for Cubans, when travel restrictions were very tight, artists were among the only Cubans who were allowed to travel. The Faustian pact for Cuban artists is this: if they keep their mouths shut, they can travel, make money, and live well at home. That is a political game that most artists have played in order to live well.

Now, in the last several years the Cuban government has been privatizing many state industries and laying off a lot of state workers. Recently the government has begun to tell entities like the Ministry of Culture that they're allowed to go out on their own and get private funding. I just read a news story today about how Cuban museums are being urged by the government to seek ways to operate independently in financial terms.

Since the economic crisis of the '90s, the Ministry of Culture has had to get foreign aid in order to produce the Havana Biennial. Foundations and individuals donated money for the catalogues. The Cuban cultural apparatus has gotten better and better at forming partnerships with foreign entities. How does that change the ground rules for Cuban artists? I can't say at this point. The Ministry of Culture still operates as the key mediator between artists and foreigners. If you want access to those collectors coming into Cuba to buy, you had better be in good standing with the cultural ministry—because they control access to the outside world.

CONTRIBUTOR

Laila Pedro

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