

Becoming Zira: Coco Fusco Transforms into an Ape Psychologist

BY PAUL SCHMELZER



Coco Fusco performs *Observations of Predation in Humans, A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* at the Walker Art Center, November 6, 2014. All photos by Gene Pittman, © Walker Art Center

Next week, artist Coco Fusco will again undergo a transformation a few of us at the Walker were lucky enough to witness a year ago: she'll become—outwardly, at least—Dr. Zira, the chimpanzee psychologist from the 1968 film, *Planet of the Apes*. The in-costume talk *Observations of Predation in Humans, A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* was presented at the Walker November 6, 2014, as part of the exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, and on November 18, 2015, Fusco will reprise the piece at New Jersey's Monmouth University. In honor of Zira's return, we decided to share some of what went on in the green room last year, as Fusco—her voice occasionally muffled as she underwent her simian change—shared her thinking about the performance.

1

DATE

November 13,
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CATEGORIES

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Scenes
Exhibitions](#)



Over the course of nearly three hours, a professional makeup artist turned Fusco into Zira, the scientist who studied human behavior in the 1960s and '70s film series. Using film industry makeup, costumes, and prosthetics, the transition involved adhering facial features,

a mane of human hair, and tufts of fur to Fusco's knuckles. But getting into character mentally and intellectually took much longer—starting with a request from the Studio Museum in Harlem to re-perform a past work for the New York presentation of the CAM Houston-organized *Radical Presence* show in 2013.



Her initial reaction to that request: “I’m not Marina Abramović! I don’t do that. I’m not gonna get in a cage again!”—a reference to her performance with Guillermo Gomez-Peña, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–1994), in which the duo appeared in a

cage. As the Walker's Mia Lopez wrote last October, citing the work's 1992 presentation in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden:

During the performance Gomez-Peña and Fusco presented themselves as members of the fictional Guatinaui tribe, inhabitants of an uncolonized island in the Gulf of Mexico. Wearing leopard print loincloths and artificial feathers while contained in a gilded cage, the artists told stories in a made up language, performed fictionalized ritual dances, and ate bananas fed to them by docents/zookeepers. Despite exaggerated theatrics and outlandish costumes and props, many museum visitors believed the performance to be authentic and reacted accordingly.



Fusco sees a deep link between her depiction of Dr. Zira and that early work with Gomez-Peña. “For *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*, I researched how the scientific discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to popular understanding of non-Europeans as subhuman; I was exploring the boundary between humans and other animals,” she told Elia Alba, writing for Art 21. “That returns in Zira’s monologue. Zira studies humans through the lens that humans use to study nonhuman primates.”

But not wanting to rehash a work from two decades ago, Fusco proposed a new piece. She had been teaching undergraduate classes on race, science fiction, and Afrofuturism and noticed that whenever she’d show films from *The Planet of the Apes* series, students would deeply connect. “I had this realization: *damn*, these films—there’s a lot of material in here to work with,” she recalled. “And the one book that I used with the students about it had to do with the connections between the race riots and the *Apes* films, and it underscored how there’s so much overlap. So, this works, I thought, and also, you know, what is the most overused stereotype of blacks? It’s that they’re like monkeys, right? So, I was like: OK! A

talking ape in the Studio Museum is a pretty radical presence.”



What also appealed to her about the original movies—for her use as an educator and for this performance—was that they contained “full-on social commentary about that time—a really strong anti-nuke message, anti-war message, all about race relations.”



To develop her embodiment of Dr. Zira, Fusco says she did hours upon hours of research.

She watched nature shows, online lectures by scientists like Stanford primatologist and neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky and documentaries like *Project Nim* (2011) and *Koko: A Talking Gorilla* (1978). “I would look for films about primatology, science—*National Geographic*—style stuff—and just watch the people talking about them. Jane Goodall, of course. But she’s so particular. She has this combination that’s kind of like Zira, of being very arch and very superior on the one hand and then very excited on the other. When she starts imitating the chimps, she starts going, ‘Oh ooh ooh ooh!’ and all that, and you can see that she’s all happy that she gets to play with chimps.” (See an excerpt from *Observations of Predation in Humans*.)



Were zoos part of her research? A bit, yet, but more for *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* than *Observations of Predation in Humans*. “Zoo animals are depressed. They’re not very active. So it’s more instructive to watch science films about them in the wild, to see them interacting in the wild.”





This close observation underscored the similarities between humans and chimpanzees (geneticists say there's only a 1.2 percent difference between the two species' genomes). "Even without recognizing the DNA, you can see it," says Fusco. "When you see them interacting with each other—having sex, playing with their kids, feeding each other... There's really practically nothing separating us from these other animals."



And that—grappling with the animal in the human—is one of the main reasons Fusco has

repeatedly undergone her transition into Dr. Zira. As she told *Artforum* in 2013:

Studies of animal behavior often focus on aggression and predation. We tend to think of predation usually in terms of the hunt for prey—carnivores attacking other animals to feed themselves. But in a broader sense predation means “to plunder,” and in animal psychology it is understood as goal-oriented aggression for the accumulation of resources. Dr. Zira comes from the future and focuses on our species’ drive for status, territory, and material. These are aspects of behavior that humans share with primates and many other animals.

