Still In The Cage

Two Undiscovered Amerindians Twenty Years Later

BY COCO FUSCO

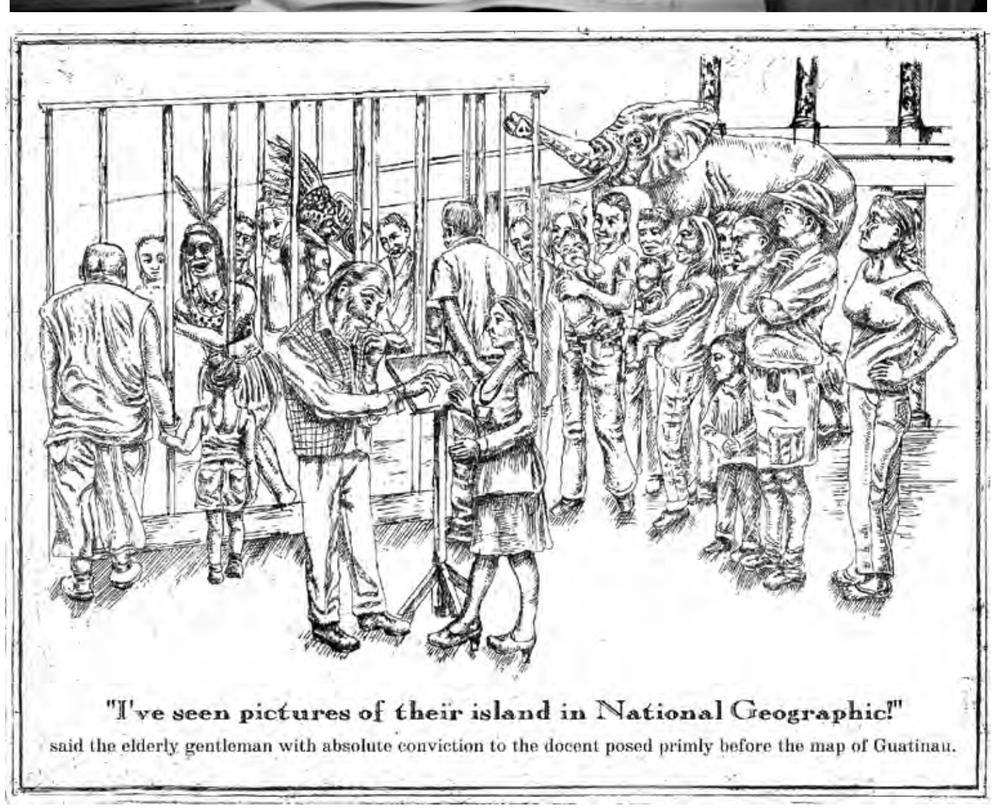
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY CHRISTENSEN

This year marks the 20th anniversary of my caged performance Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West, with Guillermo Gómez-Peña. To commemorate that adventure, I have created a set of engravings in the style of 19th-century illustrations that represent memories of mine from that performance that were never documented on camera. Those works will be shown in February at Alexander Gray Associates, in New York.

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



FROM TOP:
Coco Fusco at work in her Brooklyn home, 2011.

"I've seen pictures of their island in National Geographic!" said the elderly gentleman with absolute conviction to the docent posed primly before the map of Guatinau, 2012. Intaglio, engraving, and dry point, 23 x 20½ in.

OPPOSITE:
Performance of Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West, 1992–94.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

Avgikos confessed she couldn't think about cultural genocide because she just kept thinking about how nice my body was.

of an actual tribe. But many gatekeepers of the art world and performance studies frowned on us and wrung their hands while 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. Doyenne 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 renege on and public interest in our antics, we were not going to disappear with the wave of a curmudgeonly critic's wand.

We frustrated bourgeois ethnics who wanted multicultural art shows to be dignified celebrations of their peoples' triumphs over adversity or their talented tenths' greatness: Why, they would ask, did we want to show something so ugly? Our refusal to strive for authenticity short-circuited the efforts of curators who sought to overcome institutional racism with positive 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 outcries. Others who had equated multiculturalism with insipid family entertainment denounced our work as offensive, even shocking. I'm honored by their astute appraisals. 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 haut conceptuel art cognoscenti who hated abject aesthetic interventions that make a point with humor and 1980s art sharks who hated sharing the spotlight with colored people they saw as party crashers. The last of the three remain unforgiving, while the others have, over time, begrudgingly conceded that the performance had unexpected staying power, even if they didn't like our message or our method.

In the wake of the culture wars, after serving time as whipping boys for anti-PC pundits, we became poster children for the academic Left. The video documentary about our performance became standard fare for the "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About What's Wrong with Anthropology" unit in cultural studies courses around the country. As time passed and our audience changed from those who were present at the live act to those studying the original, the response to our performance shifted away from moralistic concerns about whether it was OK to lie to Joe Public (as if artists don't do that all the time!) toward more nuanced consideration of what our experiment had actually yielded. Since no one was on the hot seat once the show was over—no more audiences could be potentially duped and no more bureaucrats could get in trouble for hosting us—we lost our threatening edge. We slowly transformed from enfants terribles into postcolonial participant observers. Reflecting on the causes for this shift, I would attribute it largely to our many years of pounding the pavement—we gave dozens, if not hundreds, of public lectures to convince the academy that our "lies" had a 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 art historians were trashing multiculturalism and rediscovering 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 Amerindians still aren't included in Janson's History of Art but we did make it into quite a few other art history textbooks, much to my surprise. The records of our tumultuous adventure continue to be scrutinized by academic experts worldwide. Students who weren't even alive when we were frolicking behind bars now write me to ask in wonder how we did it. I still believe the audience did "it." They made the performance weirder than anything I could ever have imagined when I first stumbled upon Sander Gilman's account of Ashanti being asked to defecate in public while they were on display in the Prater in 1890s Vienna so that prurient European visitors could gawk at them.

I had read classic texts about the collective unconscious as a semiotics major at Brown University but I had no idea what it felt like until I performed the role of the savage in front of so-called civilized beings. I shall never forget the uncanny sensation that a cavalcade of Freudian slips about colonialism was springing forth each time our show began. Neither of us was convincing, but what we promised to be for others was enticing and familiar, even though the ethnographic display of human beings as curiosities was a defunct practice by the time we launched our tour. We offered forbidden fruit for a multicultural moment—a blatantly racist display—and elicited 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 Wailing Wall. The political implications of these ambiguous responses constituted a hot potato for museum bureaucrats and cultural theorists: While it was fine to acknowledge racist errors of the past, it was an entirely different matter to support art that elicited racist 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 decried our experiment—even if they celebrated with us in private. Their feigned 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 anything racial to be equated with racism and swept under the rug with a legal injunction. After what I've seen in archives and real life, I'd stake my bets that even abolitionists got a kick out of gazing at their dark brethren.

The artist in her doorway.

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 piège à con, or sucker bait, as if 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 responses 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 mimic the Kiplingesque 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 front of people who 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 into the cage. Is there anyone who really believes that we could be "post-racial" in a culture that fetishizes black athletes, equates black style with rebelliousness, pillages indigenous belief systems for pithy profundities 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. Uneasiness was a better response to the persistence of race as a social fact than disbelief or disinterest.

I continue to marvel at how much curiosity the Undiscovered Amerindians performance generates after the fact, especially when I contrast it to the fury the piece caused in its moment. Although I am 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 awkward neologism that has been embraced of late by the art world. Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West emerged from and belongs to another time, before webcams and reality TV normalized exhibitionism and turned popular media into a 24/7 hypersexed freak show. We are all in cages now, trying very hard to couple. MP