

Grace Banks Contributor

*I cover popular culture, current affairs, travel and lifestyle.*

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## Artist Coco Fusco On Her New Book About Politics in Cuba

The intersection of politics and performance is familiar territory for the contemporary artist Coco Fusco. In 1992, along with friend and fellow artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Fusco locked herself in a cage as the duo masqueraded as foreign nationals from a fictionalized country off the Mexican coast. It was an elaborate hoax, but essentially, it was a political statement. Fusco's line of enquiry then was much the same as it is now; how do postcolonial identities fit into contemporary culture?



Alejandro Lopez  
"Comision para la Investigacion de Fenomenos Historicos"  
Street performance (in construction site), Habana, Cuba  
1990

*Alejandro Lopez. Commission for the Investigation of Historical Phenomena 1990*

Since 1992 she's spent a career creating radical and resolute performance works which are often streamed live online or conducted on internet chat rooms. Through these mediums she has examined the boundaries between identity and history, however her latest project, the book *Dangerous Moves:*

*Politics and Performance in Cuba*, is a departure from her traditional modes of practice. The book offers an in-depth look at the way public space and performance have been crucial to Cuban identity and politics. Filled with pictures and analysis of artworks spanning 40 years, Fusco turns her attentions to the political power offered by performance.

*Dangerous Moves: Politics and Performance in Cuba* presents a modern Havana in which art and creativity are crucial to the development of culture and political policy. Fusco suggests that Cuba's cultural institutions and movements are carefully constructed political vehicles used to present a culturally engaged nation, yes, but also to silence protest. 'The Cuban cultural apparatus is a very sophisticated promotional machine that has done an impressive job of putting Cuban artists on the map', she says. Adding: 'On the other hand, the Cuban political apparatus has always been very wary of artists, and of any kind of cultural activity that takes place in public space.' Featuring the work of emerging and established artists, Fusco presents a series of art cultures characterized by political brio and a dedication to the concept of performance as a facilitator for change.



Amaury Pacheco del Monte, *The Wall* 2006

### **What is the relationship between politics and performance in Cuba like now?**

It is a complicated one that has changed at different points in the post-revolutionary period. On the one hand, the educational and cultural institutions created by the revolution did make it possible for many more people to study art and to work professionally in the field of art. But at certain key moments, the policing operations of the state have intervened to stop artists from exhibiting or performing, usually because the nature of the expression is understood to be critical of the state. I don't write about all

kinds of performance in my book, I focus on the performance artists who have focused their practice on street intervention, political conduct and state power.



*Enema Collective, You See What You Feel 2004*

**How did you go about documenting the work in the book?**

For the most part I did not document the works myself. I relied on photo and video documentation that was produced by people working for the artists, or by the artists themselves. I focused on Havana. The professional Cuban art scene is centered on Havana.

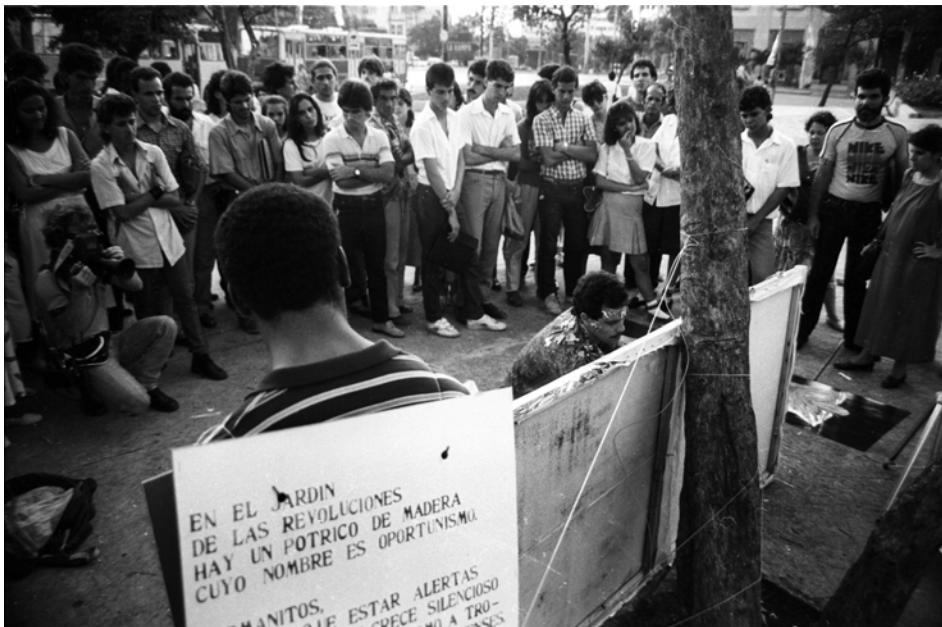
**Is performance, art or otherwise, inherently political in Cuba?**



I think all art all over the world can be understood in relation to politics, not just in Cuba. However, there is a difference between understanding the political nature of public interventions, and interpreting how artists explicitly address political phenomena such as state power, propaganda, policing, etc. My focus is on artists who address political phenomena. There are plenty of other artists in Cuba who do not. I don't know if I work from inspiration. Making art for me is really about work and serious thinking about what happens in the world.

### **How do artists use performance to challenge the states right to control what is shown in galleries, and how has this changed in the last decade?**

Most artists who have tried to challenge the state's right to control through protest have gotten into a lot of trouble and have suffered censorship and expulsion from the artists and writers union. Some artists have been able to create apartment-based galleries where they can show the kind of work that the state does not want to promote. With the increased presence of digital media and the internet in Cuba in the past decade, there are more opportunities for independent production and distribution of art, film and music. Theater is still more reliant on state institutions. Fine art that circulates outside official venues may have an audience but without state promotion, it is difficult for artists to project themselves abroad.



Juan Sijü González, *The Artist as a Political Man* 1988

### **What's the distinction between art and protest?**

There are artists who create works that they intend to function as social protest. There are protests that are carefully planned that have an aesthetic dimension that helps those protesting to capture the imagination of the public. However, most art is not conceived or experienced as protest. Art is generally understood to have metaphorical and ideational dimensions that

are not functional and that do not produce concrete results. I believe most would agree that if artworks are only focused on protesting an issue they are not very interesting to experience as art.

In Cuba, these distinctions have a very strong political effect. Art that is determined to be a form of protest against the state can easily be stripped of its status as art and treated as a criminal offense. That also happens occasionally in the US but much less often.



*Los Carpinteros, Conga Irreversible 2012*

**Cuban artists face severe censorship. Tania Bruguera is a recent and famous example. I've interviewed many Cuban artists who say they've had to leave, or had exhibitions taken down at the last minute. What kind of censorship have you received, and what affect did it have on your work?**

Tania just had her passport returned and the amount of international media attention to her situation surely served as a shield against far worse treatment by the authorities.

I am not a resident of Cuba and perform and show work there rarely. I did co-direct a documentary about Cuban art in the 1980s that got me into a bit of trouble in Cuba because my critical perspective was not liked by the authorities. Since I am not a Cuban national, what the state can do to me is somewhat limited. I have had visas denied from time to time. Friends of mine there have been questioned about their interactions with me. But I have been traveling to Cuba for thirty years and I have learned how to deal with the authorities. I know how far I can go without getting into serious trouble. I would have to say that censorship is not as blunt or direct in capitalist countries. That does not mean that it does not exist. There are plenty of people in positions of power who do not like my views, my politics

or my interests and they can act behind the scenes to prevent me from having various professional opportunities



*Sandra Ceballos, Forever 1999*

### **How did you go about picking the artists you featured in the book?**

In the book I am focusing on artists in Cuba who have explored political conduct and political discourses of the state. In *Forever* (1999) by Sandra Ceballos, Hamlet is quoting from a famous speech by Fidel Castro. Ceballos is copying one of his speeches, whilst Juan Sí González, in *The Artist as a Political Man* (1988) is calling on his audience in the street to think about political conduct and misconduct.



## **What kind of impact do you think the loosening of border regulations will have on Cuban culture?**

For what impact the growth of tourism will have on Cuba, we need to go back to the beginning of the story. Tourism was derided by the Cuban government for the first two decades of the revolution since it was seen as a throwback to the capitalist era and associated with the mafia presence in Cuba in the mid-20th century. As Soviet subsidy began to disappear and the price of sugar dropped and Cuban industry did not prove profitable enough, the Cuban government had no choice but to revive and expand tourism and to set up partnerships with foreign investors. This starts in the 1980s and has grown steadily since. Tourism has had many effects – it has put more ordinary Cubans in contact with foreigners who represent hard currency and the possibility of immigration via marriage and invitations abroad. Tourism created the conditions for the growth of prostitution but it has also made it possible for many Cubans to set up small businesses to make hard currency – by renting rooms, running home based restaurants, driving dollar taxis, acting as tour guides and Spanish teachers, etc. In short, tourists, whether they are American or Spanish or Canadian, have the money that Cubans need right now. American culture has always wielded great influence in Cuba, even when it was officially forbidden. But more Cubans consume American culture through TV shows and movies than from contact with tourists.

[Dangerous Moves: Politics and Performance in Cuba](#) by Coco Fusco is released on 3 October 2015.