The Art of War, Or
COCO FUSCO'S Occupation

Jonathan Beller

In lectures, books, performances, DVDs, classrooms, theater spaces, gallery installations, and museums that include the Whitney, the MoMA, and the Guggenheim, Coco Fusco has been waging a counterattack on the Bush-era United States of America. "But," one might ask of this endeavor, "is it art?"

You won't find that question explicitly posed in Fusco's current work. However, her occupation of spaces and people's time normally reserved for practices comfortably domiciled in the domain of art—with works like the DVD *Operation Atropos* (2007), in the Whitney Biennial (about her group's participation as students in a military interrogation course, which includes their being kidnapped, strip-searched, and interrogated over several days), or her gallery exhibition, *Buried Pig with Moros* (2008) at The Project (composed of display cases with, of all things unaesthetic, history books and military communications about the Filipino-American War, a monitor with an archival Hollywood film clip, and a screened PowerPoint presentation made from a "2005 Lecture by Dr. Larry Forness, American Military University" [Audio recording with power point illustration, 18 minutes, 2008])—raises the issue.[1] But rather than naively setting about answering such a question, better perhaps to allow the presence of Fusco's work in spaces ordinarily the preserve of art, aesthetic learning, and high culture to raise the more general question, "What is Art (now)?" This question, long debated, never adequately answered, is again upon us—particularly since culture has been taken up as another, if not the preeminent, medium of war.

By steadfastly refusing to cater to the precious, witty, high-tech, cynical, or knowing options currently offered by art world product, indeed by refusing any other gesture toward art beyond occupying the spaces where it normally appears,

Coco Fusco, *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America*, 2006–. Performance; Seventh Regiment Armory Building, New York, NY. Whitney Biennial 2008.
Courtesy of the artist and The Project, NY.
Photo courtesy of Coco Fusco.

Coco Fusco, *Buried Pig with Moros*, 2008. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and The Project, New York.

Fusco's work seems to place the mainstream Chelsea-ified, China-ized, Modernism-ist concerns of contemporary art somewhere beneath the threshold of contempt. A careful consideration of Fusco's current work including the documents selected to foreground aspects of the little-known, but profoundly significant Philippine-American War (subsequently called "the first Vietnam") allows for the locating and tracking of certain cultural vectors of aggression that are today constitutive of state power.[2] These vectors, while no less deadly than more commonly understood forms of state-sanctioned violence (including the deployment of armies, police actions, and the dropping of bombs), implicate cultural practice, and more pointedly perhaps, cultural practitioners. In a cultural space, Fusco's assemblage in *Buried Pig* clearly makes visible historical precursors to the racist aggression that Mahmood Mamdani, in his brilliantly indicting book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, shows to be operative in the essentializing "culture talk" currently buttressing the deadly conjuncture known as the War on Terror.[3] The exhibition helps to reveal cultural, political, and economic continuities between the early twentieth-century imperialist forays that brought U.S. expansion into the Pacific Theater in a quest for territory, labor, military power, and markets and the early twenty-first-century strategems of neoimperialist aggression. *Buried Pig* foregrounds the century-long discourse of anti-Islamic cultural production—smelted in expansionist warfare, mythologized by official history and Hollywood alike—that has been bent upon portraying Islam as a savage, superstitious, irrational, and inhuman religion.

The trajectory of this racialization and its over-

lapping with other forms of U.S. racism is particularly significant in the transformed environment of media capitalism. The arena of culture itself seems to have taken on new significance. Indeed in my own work on the industrialization of the visible world, I have shown that the domain of cultural praxis itself has become something like a means of production.[4] Readers of the *New York Times* have no doubt begun to notice that the basic distinction between "The Arts" and "Business" sections—with their articles on funders and media companies—is about to disappear. If there remained any doubt that Samuel Huntington's post–Cold War "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm, which pitted Christendom against the Muslim world as the next phase of history, did not indicate a shift in the role of culture in the current constitution of the military-industrial complex and its state, the reader might wish to consult the long sections on cultural engagement in the 2006 CIA Counter-Insurgency manual FM3–24, sections which give new significance to the seemingly academic phrase "the cultural turn."[5] Culture has been reconceived as a kind of command/control platform that can be tinkered with and operated upon for military and financial ends. While the broad technical outlines of this historical mutation have been visible since Hitler, nowadays, along with the business community's growing recognition that culture is an economic engine, the military explicitly understands culture as a medium of war. The fusion of culture, business, and war, the understanding of these presumably autonomous endeavors as being "moments" of one dynamic system, various "fronts" for the informatics of struggle, informs both U. S. foreign policy and Fusco's challenge.

As Fusco clearly demonstrates in *Buried Pig with Moros* (a show in which, by the way, there is literally nothing to buy), the utilization of culture as a technique of imperialism goes back more than one hundred years. (Although, given the West's long history of engendering "Others," one may already suspect that the histories and "evolution" of racism, cultural essentialism, white supremacism, modern "civilization," and "humanity" itself emerge simultaneously as legitimations of and enabling fictions for economic, military, and political violence.) Central to *Buried Pig* is the American identification of the pig blood method. The Pershing legend, in which *juramentados* (Muslim insurgents who took a vow to kill Christian infidels) were terrified of the consequences that being buried in contact with this impure animal would foreclose the afterlife, claimed that the fear it struck in the heart of Muslims secured peace in the Muslim South for four decades. The identification of a point of vulnerability of the *juramentados* was especially welcome to American occupiers since the Filipino Muslims were notoriously hard to kill—indeed a new and larger standard-issue gun had to be invented during the Philippine-American War to

Postcard, circa 1905."Moros killed during attack on Company 'D' 6th Infantry Outpost near Pantar."

Film still from *The Real Glory* (1939), Production: Samuel Goldwyn, Director: Henry Hathaway. Starring Gary Cooper, Andrea Leeds and David Niven. Based on a novel by Charles L. Clifford.

The Battle of Bud Bagsak, U.S. Army Poster No. 21–48 (1963). This poster commemorates a four-day battle personally led by General John. J. Pershing against Moro resistance fighters. Two thousand Moros died, including 196 women and 340 children. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Center for Military History.

bring these men down—the Smith and Wesson ".38 Special."

> But the new firearm was not enough—under the leadership of General "Blackjack" Pershing, one of the most decorated military officers of American history, a special tactic was devised to terrorize the Moros based on the U.S. military's understanding of their religious beliefs. According to legend, Pershing ordered that Moro insurgents be executed with bullets dipped in pig blood and buried facing away from Mecca, covered with pig entrails.[6]

The "magic bullet," a recognition of culturally specific taboos, and the militarization of cultural elements as a mode of containing *jihad*, persisted as part of America's sense of its own cultural ingenuity and was revived after 9/11. Fusco's exhibition of this American discovery about the *juramentados* and her documentation of its treatment in various media during the first half of the twentieth century shows not only that culturalist assumptions about the most effective ways to deliver violence to Muslim subjects have a long history of elaboration in the United States' arsenal, but makes an explicit connection between these first forays of U.S. imperialism in 1898, and the current neoimperialist militarization. It has the added benefit, if that's what it is, of illuminating the racism that is encouraged and indeed cultivated by the military in its construction of identities for its enemies. However, what should also be clear

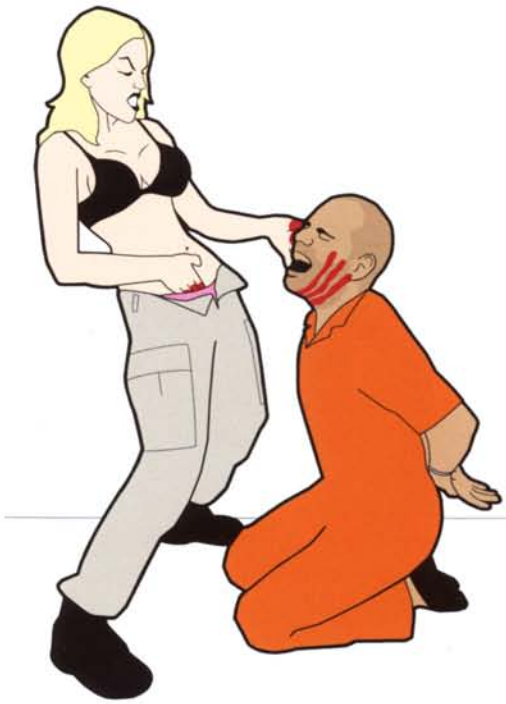
is that the various media for the dissemination of the message about the Moros that Fusco foregrounds, while of great significance, are nothing compared with the current massive electronic saturation of both the public consciousness and military intelligence with actionable if contradictory constructions of Islam: Islamofacism, terrorism, cowardliness, irrationality, barbarism, and the like.

Two other Fusco works, the illustrated "Coercive Techiques" in her book *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, and her performance piece, *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America*, stress the *intersection* of these culturalist assumptions about Muslim prohibitions with the new spaces of feminine agency in the U.S. military. These spaces represent the military's accommodation and cooptation of feminist struggle. This intersection of "feminism" and "cultural studies" provides a new role for women while making female sexual provocation, contact with female bodies, and proximity to the menstrual blood of female interrogators into torture techniques designed to contain jihad. The fusion of these cultural tactics with the "scientific" development of psychological (touchless) torture techniques in CIA-funded research at prominent university psychology departments during the fifties and sixties (notably at Cornell, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania and fifty-five other universities), as well as a containment and retrenchment of feminist empowerment by neoimperialist culture and practice, leads to the recent synthesis in Abu Ghraib and in Guantanamo, where prisoners have been detained without representation, recourse, or even charges for almost seven years.[7] The existence of these prisons should not surprise anyone familiar with the Phoenix project, the School of the Americas, and the Office of Public Safety, a division of USAID, which by 1971 "had trained over one million police officers in forty-seven nations, including 85,000 in South Vietnam and 100,000 in Brazil."[8] The current facilities in Iraq and Cuba contain prison populations that even by members of the State Department's own admissions are 80–90 percent composed of persons whose only "crime" was proximity when the United States was paying $5,000 bounties to Afghanis and Iraqis to round up suspects. What is new here, however, is the role of women in torture—the military appropriation of feminine agency for the exacerbation of racist, imperialist violence. These prisoners, unwilling audiences for a militarized version of gender performativity in the theater of torture, are the unfortunate victims of an unprecedented state-sanctioned experiment that involves psychology, spectacle, and performance as well as the criminal expropriation of bodies from their proper owners. This situation is not only a violation of habeas corpus but also a deprivation of one's rights to one's own body that harks back to the violent imposition of social death on the Other necessary for the justification and enforcement of slavery.

The mobilization of culture as a medium of war has a long history and need not only take the form of the hegemonic identification of specific attributes of a racialized subject or the utilization of aspirations for female empowerment as an avenue for torture. Indeed one could see the development of no-touch/sensory depriving psychological torture in order to create "existential chaos" for the victim as on a continuum with the harnessing of sensory inputs by media technologies as the very medium for the intensification of capitalism (e.g., advertising). One of the major military projects in the Philippines that testifies to the recognition of the role of culture in war, was the importation on August 12, 1901, of the Thomasites. The Thomasites were an army of teachers (1,074 men and women by 1902) brought to teach English to Filipino schoolchildren and paid for with the war chest as a key part of the overall pacification strategy. English-language instruction and the revamping of the Philippine school system were understood as important *strategies* for securing the U.S. victory over the Philippines. Ironically, in 2001, on the 100th anniversary of the Thomasites, as Filipino was already well on its way to displacing English as the de facto national language, and despite a century of U.S. intervention in Philippine affairs that included the utilization of the islands as military bases, abandoning the Philippines to the Japanese military onslaught in World War II, interventions in post–World War II

16. Fear Up Harsh

This tactic is so inflammatory that it should be reserved for only the most resistant sources. There is no way to resume a normal exchange after the severe emotional crisis that it is likely to generate.



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From *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* by Coco Fusco. Published by Seven Stories Press (2008).

elections, and CIA financial and military backing for the Marcos dictatorship and martial law (with at least 3,174 killed, 35, 000 tortured), the cultural arm of the U.S. embassy was asking the Philippines to celebrate the great "contribution" to the history and culture of the country that was the English language. Unmentioned too, is the fact that to bring English in the first place, the U.S. killed between one-tenth and one-sixth of the population of the Philippines, and did so after snatching away the imminent victory of the Filipino nationalist revolution for its own self-determination and sovereignty, the *Katipunan,* against Spain, in 1898.

In taking the measure of the culturalist dimensions of imperialist war, we might also want to know that there are many efforts to show the ongoing imbrication of race, culture, and imperialism in Filipino-American relations. For example, alternative filmmaker Nick Deocampo explores the utilization and hence substitutability of African Americans as Filipino extras up for slaughter in Edison's early films about the Filipino-American War, as well as the way the camera and the gaze are used to produce a standpoint of American invulnerability that makes victory into destiny and licenses public displays of patriotism utilizing the symbolic death and disappearance of racialized bodies.[9] In *White Love*, Vicente Rafael shows how the U.S. Census of the Philippines conducted in 1903 used photography to wrench images of colonial bodies "from their historical social context" and racial categories that included "civilized" and "wild" to impose a White Supremacist narrative of racial hierarchy upon the varied occupants, and to posit white Americans as the manifest inheritors of the Philippines in its supposedly centuries-long progress toward whiteness.[10] Thus artistry—in the form of film, photography, and other media of ideological interpellation—has long been used to create perspectives of national and racial supremacy for white-identified Americans.

However, what is really radical about Fusco's

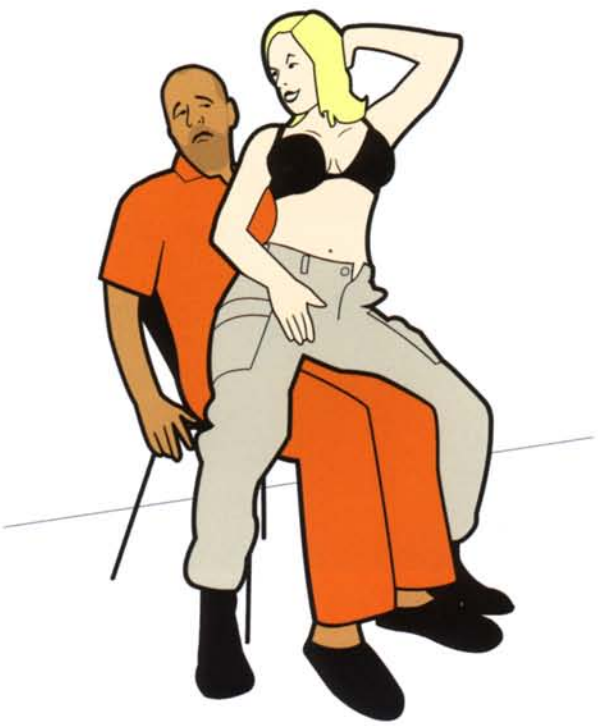
work is that it places the space and subject of art on a continuum with the military endeavor itself—as if these spaces too were inexorably embattled—effectively commandeered to support Euro-American neoimperialist culture unless proven otherwise. Indeed, invited to a landmark panel at the MoMA called "The Feminist Future" in which the MoMa publicly acknowledged the importance of feminist art and art history for the first time, Fusco used "her 15 minutes" to perform as a military commander coming to talk with the museum world about their "image problem with their techniques for the management of gender" and to congratulate them for their "strategic containment of feminism and their effective use of women."

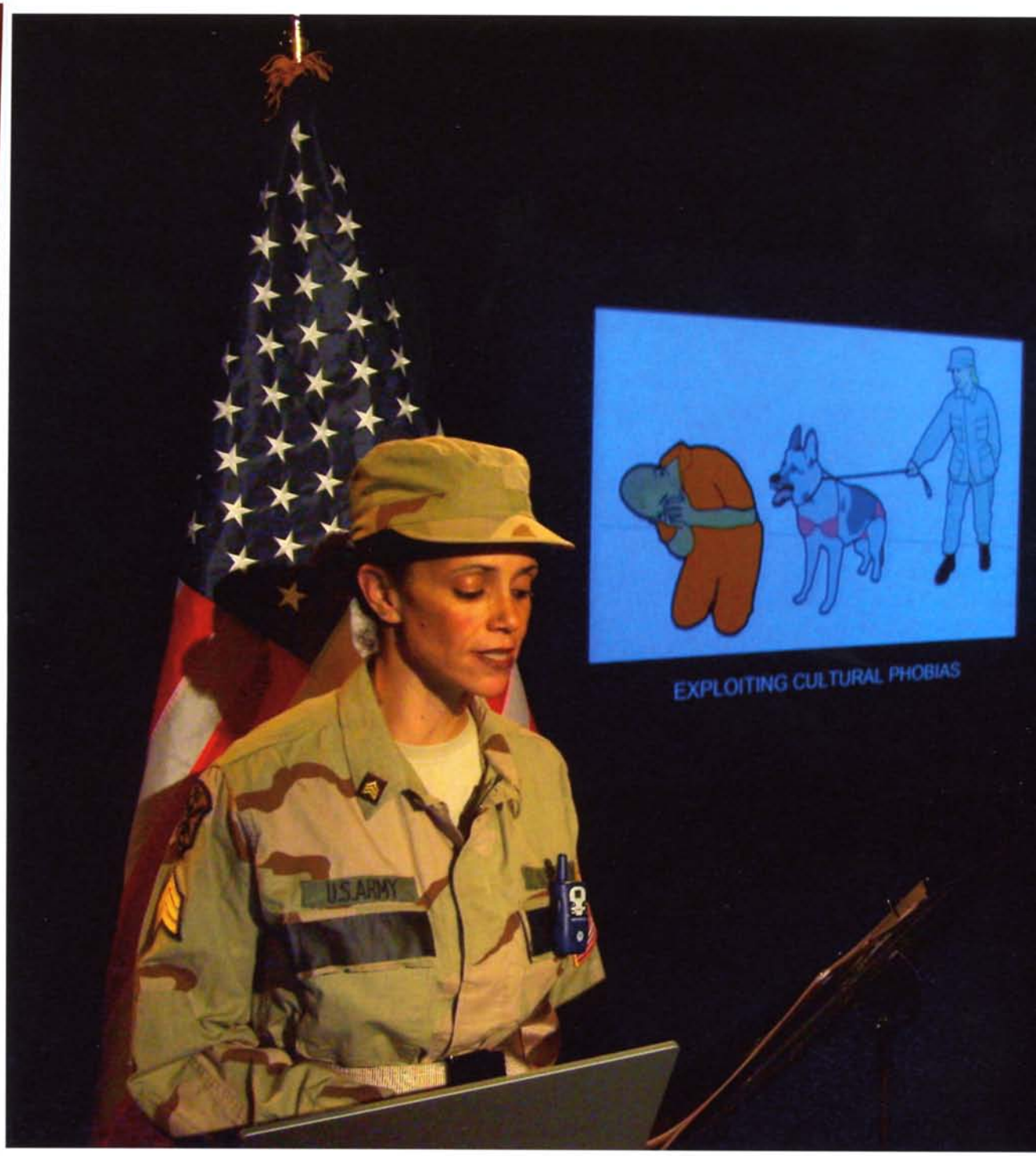
> Many of us in the military feel a kinship with those of you in the arts. Military intelligence involves the careful study of culture, and like you, we seek to understand people's beliefs and learn how to shape them....
>
> Both institutions are guardians of this country's sacred freedoms. We are both hierarchical in structure, and global in scope. We maintain amicable and productive relations with multinational corporations, and our operations run best when unsavory details remain far from public view. We both know that the surest way to hide things is to put on a good show.
>
> In fact, the military has learned a great deal from the arts about how flashy spectacle draws public attention away from the less uplifting aspects of our engagements. We have also take a cue from you about how to ensure press cooperation by limiting access to our special events to those in the media who share our views.
>
> Today I would like to take a moment to commend the art world for its strategic integration of women, and bring to your attention the fact that some of the tactics we developed for gender management have also been useful to you.[11]

Fusco extends this scathing criticism and concludes with six recommendations that include: "Don't Deny, Contain: Give Feminism a place in art history as part of the past, thereby burying it so it will not be seen as a force among the living," and "Tokenism, Not Quotas: Reward female conservatives so that they may serve as role models." She stated that by following these rules we can be assured that "Everyone will have forgotten that there was ever supposed to be a feminist future" (103–4).

After considering Coco's occupation of artistic space with committed, practically unfetishizeable works that under the specter of actually existing torture and murder question the very practices and reception of history, media, and art, one might find reason to wonder if the institution known as "Art" has not itself become an alibi of fascism—an ideal expression of present-day

From *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* by Coco Fusco. Published by Seven Stories Press (2008). Description: Stress Position. Direct sexual advances from a white Christian female generate anxiety in devout Muslim males by forcing them to confront their desire to break cultural taboos. Illustration by Dan Turner.





Coco Fusco, *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America*, 2006–. Performance; Seventh Regiment Armory Building, New York, NY, Whitney Biennial 2008. Courtesy of the artist and The Project, NY. Photo courtesy of Coco Fusco.

fascism. The art world, busily constructing tchotchkes and experiences for the rich continues to be characterized by a cult of personality, which, as Walter Benjamin noted so many years ago, leads to "a processing of data in a fascist sense." Artists are free to risk everything on their vision (perish if you will ...), but to "make it," they must brand themselves and find a market niche in spaces sanctioned by capital's tastemakers, be they philanthropists or collectors—the masses get not the right but the chance to represent themselves, and empowered wealth will adjudicate. Reading the Art (or was it Business?) pages about Sotheby's auctions, it would seem that here, success is best accomplished by embodying the contradictions of capital in the artwork and selling it back to the rich, as, for example, in Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull, which is designed to allow an owner to savor the fact that he can take $75,000,000 worth of human life (that is, 75,000 years of human labor at imperialism's third-world wages), render it useless (dead), and stick it on his wall. The mask is not just an image of death, nor is it a "mere" fetish—it is actual death inasmuch as its value is the expropriated life of others, 75,000 years of human life—in short, money, made in the imperialist market, that could have been schools, medicine, hospitals, literature, another type of art, or another type of human condition. When the world's expropriated, disempowered poor are paying for the cynical, self-serving ecstasies of the rich, when billions are suffering for the ironic, pleasured self-legitimation of an unthinkably wealthy minority enthralled by the cult of their own personalities, when militant capitalism has subsumed culture, and when art is war by other means, it would not be prudery that asserts that there should be harsh penalties along with reparations extracted for the Hirst type of aesthetic obscenity. Fusco's work makes me wonder ..., "Would 'off with their heads' be too much to consider?" But of course one realizes that many more things must change in order that work like Fusco's is understood as being of far greater significance than much of the "important" (expensive) art of our time. A real appreciation of Fusco's artistic practice involves changing the world. Not only to bring about social justice, but to prevent Hirst's spawn from collecting those heads, posting them in Lucite boxes full of formaldehyde, and selling them back to their former owners' children as tax-deductible heirlooms that might ultimately litter our museums masquerading under the guise of Art.

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Notes

[1] "Coco Fusco, *Buried Pig with Moros*, April 3–May 2, 2008," publicity materials from The Project gallery.

[2] See, for example, Luzviminda Francisco's article entitled, "The First Vietnam: the U.S.-Philippine War of 1899," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 5 (1973) "With apologies to Mexicans, American Indians and other early victims of American imperialism."

[3] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

[4] Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth University Press and UPNE, 2006). See also my *Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle and the World-Media System* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006.)

[5] Downloadable at http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3–24.pdf. I am grateful to Nicholas Mirzoeff for drawing my attention to this document.

[6] "Coco Fusco, Buried Pig with Moros, April 3–May 2, 2008," op. cit.

[7] On the development of these techniques, see Alfred McCoy, *A Question of Torture* (New York: Holt, 2006). On the implementation and dissemination of these techniques, see Leslie Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Darius Rejali's monumental *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[8] McCoy, p. 60.

[9] See Nick Deocampo, "Imperialist Fictions: The Filipino in the Imperialist Imaginary" in *Vestiges of War*, edited by Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

[10] Vicente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 37ff.

[11] "Our Feminist Future," in Coco Fusco, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), p. 98.