

ART OF WAR

Coco Fusco investigates the role of aesthetics in human aggression



Scenes from Coco Fusco performance pieces, "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America," above, and "Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist," opposite



By **Bret McCabe**

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Baltimore's rebooted Contemporary museum debuts its 2014 programming with the launch of its CoHost speaker series this week. It's a yearlong partnership with 13 local galleries and artist-run spaces—Area 405, Current Space, Galerie Myrtis, Gallery CA, Gallery Four, Guest Spot, ICA Baltimore, John Fonda Gallery, Lease Agreement, Nudashank, Open Space, Pinebox Art Center, and Springsteen Gallery—to bring somebody from the larger art community to the city. Contemporary director Deana Haggag asked the galleries to pick an artist or gallerist/curator to bring to Baltimore, and the museum would set about trying to make that happen. Haggag sees CoHost as a way for the city's contemporary art gallerists, artists, and professionals to get to know one another and offer an insight into their ideas.

"The partnership was kind of a way for us to get to know the galleries and [for] the galleries to get to know us, but also for our audience to know them and vice-versa, and for their audiences to know one another," Haggag says. "I was also really interested in their minds. I think a lot of them had different artistic taste, and it was interesting to ask 13 very different people who their dream artist was."

The 2014 CoHost series takes place at the Baltimore School for the Arts, and each visiting art professional

will do a series of studio visits with local artists during their time in Baltimore. "We're excited because, as part of the lecture series also, we're arranging studio visits with artists," says artist/curator Rod Malin of Guest Spot, who chose New York-based performance/multimedia artist and scholar Coco Fusco for CoHost's inaugural event Jan. 13. These studio visits are "a way to show Baltimore as being a place for artists to come and do their practice, and this also allows for a bigger dialogue to happen outside the confines of Baltimore."

Fusco is an inspired choice to christen the series; she's an intrepidly intelligent writer and thinker whose performances and video pieces tackle identity, history, and power through explorations of characters and ideas. Her "A Field Guide for Female Interrogators" boldly tackled the American military's use of women and torture in the war on terror. And more recently, as part of the Studio Museum of Harlem's current *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* exhibition, in December Fusco debuted a new performance, "Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist," which imagines the psychologist from the original *Planet of the Apes* offering her insights about 21st-century human aggression.

“A lot of [Fusco’s work] has to do with institutional critique [and], at the same time, race, identity, and transcending those kind of barriers,” Malin says. “So I see her solving a lot of issues with race and identity that really relate to some of the things I’ve seen Baltimore struggle with.”

City Paper caught up with Fusco by phone to chat briefly about her work and upcoming talk.

City Paper: What is your lecture going to touch upon? I ask secretly hoping it might be the Dr. Zira lecture.

Coco Fusco: [laughing] I’m not doing the performance. That requires a theater rehearsal and all that. I’m just giving an artist’s talk and I will talk about my recent projects. So I will talk a little bit about the Zira performance, among others that I’ve done for the last few years.

CP: I have to confess I’ve probably read more of your writing than I’ve seen your work in person. How does your writing and research and curatorial organizing inform your work in performance and intermedia—or does it?

CF: Sometimes it’s connected and sometimes it’s not directly connected. Sometimes when I’m researching a topic, I might develop a class about it, and from there I might come up with an idea for a performance. That’s definitely what happened with Dr. Zira, because I was teaching classes on Afro-futurism and looking at science-fiction paradigms in a number of different art forms. And it was out of that that came the idea to try to create a performance piece using the character from *Planet of the Apes*.

CP: I asked about your writing because I recall a piece you penned for the journal *October* in 2008 which featured various responses to the invasion of Iraq via a questionnaire. And in your response I appreciated you mentioning that the public response to Abu Ghraib torture scandal was stronger than the invasion because Abu Ghraib was consumed and disseminated visually—in photos—and you went on to mention the role of the visual in legitimizing state violence. I think you taught a seminar about art and war during the 2000s, and was curious to hear what that research and teaching process has revealed to you: from Vietnam to the War on Terror, what we do and don’t see of war has changed. Has that changed our relationship to war? Has it changed artist’s relationship to war? Do we have difficulty imaging other aspects of war because we think we’re seeing so much?

CF: I wouldn’t say that we can’t imagine it because we see too much. We see a lot but we don’t see very much about the war even though we see a lot of pictures. The negative public response to the Vietnam War that grew over time was due largely to photojournalism and the reporting on the war that showed the scale of the violence and the number of American casualties in particular.

After the Vietnam War, the military and the Pentagon made a big effort to make it more difficult for journalists to have access to the battlefield and to information that they didn’t want to get out. So by the ’90s it was a very different media landscape than the one of the ’60s and ’70s that I was a child in and that I have vivid memories of coming home and opening up *LIFE* magazine and seeing these horrific pictures of American soldiers and Vietnamese casualties. So by the ’90s, journalists weren’t always allowed on the battlefield and then you get into the whole thing of what it means to be an embedded journalist, which is, to me, a contradiction in terms. There was a lot of more restrictions of what journalists could have access to, a lot more work of spin-doctoring by the Pentagon and by the Department of Defense to control the information that would get out. And as a result of that, we just don’t see as many visual representations of casualties, whether they’re American or on the other side of the conflict.

That definitely affects people. I don’t think most Americans have a very strong sense that there’s a war going on in Afghanistan that we’re participating in. And I don’t really think that the level of carnage in Iraq is very clear in the minds of many people here. That’s certainly not the impression that I’ve gotten when I’ve gone and done talks about these things and my own work. Certainly, when it came to getting people to try to understand torture and what it actually was and what it looked like and so on and so forth, there was very little outside of the images that were leaked from Abu Ghraib. So most people don’t have a clear picture of what was going on in the early years of the War on Iraq and what has continued to go on. That definitely puts a damper on public awareness, and artists are part of the public. You have to dig. If you want to know, you’ll find out. But you’ll really have to dig.

There’s also been a change in how the contemporary art world functions since the Vietnam period. There’s so much more of a chance to make money as a living artist and as a young artist than there was 40 years ago, so there’s a lot more focus put on that—on success in financial terms.