

ARTIST'S STATEMENT  
COCO FUSCO  
June 2005

I am drawn to performative modes of art making, from body art to staged drama, to live street actions, to public speaking because of my interest in working through the complex psycho-social dynamics of lived encounters among people of different cultures in the real world. Even when I am working in video, I am very conscious of the actual encounter with the television monitor or the screen and of the social context of that media experience. Hence, for example, my video installation *Dolores from 10 to 10* is designed as a simulated closed circuit television system so that audiences viewing this simulated surveillance "movie" confront not only the implications of the image but of the viewing scenario.

For more than fifteen years, I have explored the ways that intercultural dynamics affect the construction of the self and ideas about cultural otherness. I have made work that focuses on tourism as a central channel of intercultural exchange between North and South America; I have created pieces that address the ways that the very Western notion of the "primitive" that emerged in Enlightenment thought informs not only anthropology but also Euro-American modernism and postmodernism and contemporary cyberculture. Much of my artwork and writing has been about the politics of Cuban cultural identity and the ways of and reasons for envisioning the experiences of migration and diaspora. More recently, I have been concerned with the effects of globalization on notions of cultural identity and cultural "belonging."

Since the mid-1990s I have been exploring the implications of what many sociologists have characterized as "the feminization of labor" in the global economy. By this I mean that I have tried to create works that address how stereotypes about the so-called passivity and docility of Latin women are deployed to justify their exploitation as cheap labor in export processing zones and in the service industry, particularly in the US-Mexico border zone. My recent multimedia performance *The Incredible Disappearing Woman* looked at how the political and economic abjection in "the Global South" can become a form of entertainment in a contemporary media culture that capitalizes on the thrill of violence. My latest video, *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert*, extends my on-going examination of racial imagery. I combine fictional and documentary source materials to reflect on the use of electronic surveillance against Angela Davis from 1969 to 1972 as part of covert FBI operations that bear a striking resemblance to the current Patriot Act-inspired efforts of American law enforcement to criminalize dissent.

My new work explores contemporary military scenarios as intercultural encounters. I am focusing in particular on prisons and detention centers run by the US military as the last “theatres of combat” in the age of info-war. I have been inspired to consider this arena because of ongoing discussions in the media worldwide about the US government’s attempts to rewrite the international rules regarding torture and in doing so to redefine the parameters of human rights. The writings of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben on the conditions of *Homo Sacer* (sacred man) have helped me to understand the implications of what for me are profoundly disturbing forms of dehumanization. Reviewing ancient Greek philosophical concepts of the meaning of life, he notes that political life was considered to be a separate category from the simple fact of living, which he terms “bare life.” For Agamben, “In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to explain that the modern political state politics turns into biopolitics, the management of physical existence through technologies that discipline bodies and even destroy them en masse.

The life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert. An obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order (*ordinamento*) solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed), has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred texts of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries.<sup>2</sup>

The stories that have emerged about torture occurring in these prisons usually focus on extreme physical abuse and cultural-specific forms of degradation. However, there are also a host of routine humiliating activities that US soldiers force prisoners to engage in order to break them. Some of these activities are staged for cameras, others function strictly as live performances within the prison that dramatize the prisoner’s subservience to be witnessed by fellow prisoners and military authorities. In these grotesque spectacles, the demands of the sovereign power are reconfigured as the prisoners’ expressions of desire and contentment. In that sense, they can be understood as contemporary versions of the scenes of subjection that literary critic Saidiya Hartman has analyzed so effectively in relation to slavery in America. Hartman describes how enslaved blacks were compelled to sing and dance and feign delight en route to the auction block. She notes how these performances combined “coerced festivity of the slave trade” with

---

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

“instrumental recreations of plantation management.” ... “exemplify the use of the body as an instrument against the self.”<sup>3</sup>

In bringing out into the open the coerced performances that American authorities have made a concerted attempt to suppress, I hope to provoke reflection not only about the implications of this “state of exception” as part of contemporary political life, but also about the global public’s role as witness.

---

<sup>3</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).