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COCO FUSCO

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# ENGLISH IS BROKEN HERE

NOTES ON CULTURAL FUSION IN  
THE AMERICAS

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## THE OTHER HISTORY OF INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE

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**I**N THE EARLY 1900S, Franz Kafka wrote a story that began, "Honored members of the Academy! You have done me the honor of inviting me to give your Academy an account of the life I formerly led as an ape."<sup>1</sup> Entitled "A Report to an Academy," it was presented as the testimony of a man from the Gold Coast of Africa who had lived for several years on display in Germany as a primate. That account was fictitious and created by a European writer who stressed the irony of having to demonstrate one's humanity; yet it is one of many literary allusions to the real history of ethnographic exhibition of human beings that has taken place in the West over the past five centuries. While the experiences of many of those who were exhibited is the stuff of legend, it is the accounts by observers and impresarios that constitute the historical and literary record of this practice in the West. My collaborator, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and I were intrigued by this legacy of performing the identity of an Other for a white audience, sensing its implications for us as performance artists dealing with cultural identity in the present. Had things changed, we wondered? How would we know, if not by unleashing those ghosts from a history that could be said to be ours? Imagine that I stand before you then, as did Kafka's character, to speak about an experience that falls somewhere between truth and fiction. What follows are my reflections on performing the role of a noble savage behind the bars of a golden cage.

Our original intent was to create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other; yet, we had to confront two unexpected realities in the course of developing this piece: 1) a substantial portion of the public believed that our fictional identities were real ones; and 2) a substantial number of intellectuals, artists, and cultural bureaucrats sought to deflect attention from the substance of our experiment to the "moral implications" of our dissimulation, or in their words, our

<sup>1</sup>This essay first appeared in *The Drama Review* in 1994.

"misinforming the public" about who we were. The literalism implicit in the interpretation of our work by individuals representing the "public interest" bespoke their investment in positivist notions of "truth" and depoliticized, ahistorical notions of "civilization." This "reverse ethnography" of our interactions with the public will, I hope, suggest the culturally specific nature of their tendency toward a literal and moral interpretation.

When we began to work on this performance as part of a counter-quincentenary project, the Bush administration had drawn clear parallels between the "discovery" of the New World and his "New World Order." We noted the resemblance between official quincentenary celebrations in 1992 and the ways that the 1892 Columbian commemorations had served as a justification for the United States' then new status as an imperial power. Yet, while we anticipated that the official quincentenary celebration was going to form an imposing backdrop, what soon became apparent was that for both Spain and the United States, the celebration was a disastrous economic venture, and even an embarrassment. The Seville Expo went bankrupt; the U.S. Quincentenary Commission was investigated for corruption; the replica caravels were met with so many protestors that the tour was canceled; the Pope changed his plans and didn't hold mass in the Dominican Republic until after October 12; American Indian Movement activist Russell Means succeeded in getting Italian Americans in Denver to cancel their Columbus Day parade; and the film super-productions celebrating Columbus—from 1492: *The Discovery* to *The Conquest of Paradise*—were box office failures. Columbus, the figure who began as a symbol of Eurocentrism and the American entrepreneurial spirit, ended up being devalued by excessive reproduction and bad acting.

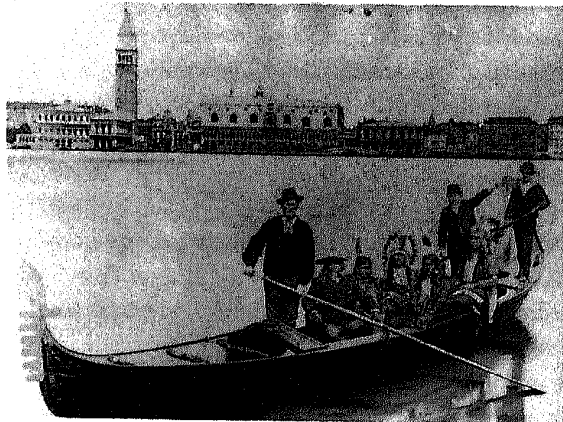
As the official celebrations faded, it became increasingly apparent that Columbus was a smokescreen, a malleable icon to be trotted out by the mainstream for its attacks on "political correctness." Finding historical justification for Columbus's "discovery" became just another way of affirming Europeans' and Euro-Americans' "natural right" to be global cultural consumers. The more equitable models of exchange proposed by many multiculturalists logically demanded a more profound understanding of American cultural hybridity, and called for redefinitions of national identity and national origins. But the concept of cultural diversity fundamental to this understanding strikes at the heart of the sense of control over Otherness that Columbus symbolized, and was quickly cast as un-American. Resurrecting the collective memory of colonial violence in America that has been strategically erased from the dominant culture was described consistently throughout 1992 by cultural conservatives as a recipe for chaos. More recently, as is characterized by the film *Falling Down*, it is seen as a direct threat to heterosexual, white male self-esteem. It is no wonder that contemporary conservatives invariably find the focus on racism by artists of color "shocking" and inappropriate, if not threatening to national interests, as well as to art itself.

Out of this context arose our decision to take a symbolic vow of silence with the cage performance, a radical departure from Guillermo's previous monologue work and my activities as a writer and public speaker. We sought a strategically effective way to examine the limits of the "happy multiculturalism" that reigned in cultural institutions, as well as to respond to the formalists and cultural relativists who reject the proposition that racial difference is absolutely fundamental to aesthetic interpretation. We looked to Latin America, where consciousness of the repressive limits on public expression is far more acute than it is here, and found many examples of how popular opposition has for centuries been expressed through the use of satiric spectacle. Our cage became the metaphor for our condition, linking the racism implicit in ethnographic paradigms of discovery with the exoticizing rhetoric of "world beat" multiculturalism. Then came a perfect opportunity: In 1991, Guillermo and I were invited to perform as part of the Edge '92 Biennial, which was to take place in London and also in Madrid as part of the quincentennial celebration of Madrid as the capital of European culture. We took advantage of Edge's interest in locating art in public spaces to create a site-specific performance for Columbus Plaza in Madrid, in commemoration of the so-called Discovery.

Our plan was to live in a golden cage for three days, presenting ourselves as undiscovered Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked by Europeans for five centuries. We called our homeland Guatinau, and ourselves Guatinauis. We performed our "traditional tasks," which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer. A donation box in front of the cage indicated that, for a small fee, I would dance (to rap music), Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a nonsensical language), and we would pose for Polaroids with visitors. Two "zoo guards" would be on hand to speak to visitors (since we could not understand them), take us to the bathroom on leashes, and feed us sandwiches and fruit. At the Whitney Museum in New York we added sex to our spectacle, offering a peek at authentic Guatinaui male genitals for \$5. A chronology with highlights from the history of exhibiting non-Western peoples was on one didactic panel and a simulated Encyclopedia Britannica entry with a fake map of the Gulf of Mexico showing our island was on another. After our three days in May 1992, we took our performance to Covent Garden in London. In September, we presented it in Minneapolis, and in October, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. In December, we were on display in the Australian Museum of Natural History in Sydney, and in January 1993, at the Field Museum of Chicago. In early March, we were at the Whitney for the opening of the biennial, the only site where we were recognizably contextualized as artwork. Prior to our trip to Madrid, we did a test run under relatively controlled conditions in the Art Gallery of the University of California, Irvine.

Our project concentrated on the "zero degree" of intercultural relations in an attempt to define a point of origin for the debates that link "discovery" and

“Otherness.” We worked within disciplines that blur distinctions between the art object and the body (performance), between fantasy and reality (live spectacle), and between history and dramatic reenactment (the diorama). The performance was interactive, focusing less on what we did than on how people interacted with us and interpreted our actions. Entitled *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*, we chose not to announce the event through prior publicity or any other means, when it was possible to exert such control; we intended to create a surprise or “uncanny” encounter, one in which audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection as to what they were seeing, aided only by written information and parodically didactic zoo guards. In such encounters with the unexpected, people’s defense mechanisms are less likely to operate with their normal efficiency; caught off guard, their beliefs are more likely to rise to the surface.



Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Show performers visit Venice, 1890.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY, WESTERN HISTORY DEPARTMENT.

Our performance was based on the once popular European and North American practice of exhibiting indigenous people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas in zoos, parks, taverns, museums, freak shows, and circuses. While this tradition reached the height of its popularity in the nineteenth century, it was actually begun by Christopher Columbus, who returned from his first voyage in 1493 with several Arawaks, one of whom was left on display at the Spanish Court for two years. Designed to provide opportunities for aesthetic contemplation, scientific analysis, and entertainment for Europeans and North Americans, these exhibits were a critical component of a burgeoning mass culture whose development coincided with the growth of urban centers and populations, European colonialism, and American expansionism.

In writing about these human exhibitions in America’s international fairs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Robert W. Rydell (author of *All the World’s a Fair; Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions, 1876–1916*

explains how the “ethnological” displays of nonwhites—which were orchestrated by impresarios but endorsed by anthropologists—confirmed popular racial stereotypes and built support for domestic and foreign policies.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, they literally connected museum practices with affairs of state. Many of the people exhibited during the nineteenth century were presented as the chiefs of conquered tribes and/or the last survivors of “vanishing” races. Ishi, the Yahi Indian who spent five years living in the Museum of the University of California at the turn of the century, is a well-known example. Another lesser-known example comes from the U.S.–Mexico War of 1836, when Anglo-Texan secessionists used to exhibit their Mexican prisoners in public plazas in cages, leaving them there to starve to death. The exhibits also gave credence to white supremacist worldviews by representing nonwhite peoples and cultures as being in need of discipline, civilization, and industry. Not only did these exhibits reinforce stereotypes of “the primitive” but they served to enforce a sense of racial unity as whites among Europeans and North Americans, who were divided strictly by class and religion until this century. Hence, for example, at the Columbian Exhibition of 1893 in Chicago, ethnographic displays of peoples from Africa and Asia were set up outside “The White City,” an enclosed area celebrating science and industry.

#### INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE

Performance Art in the West did not begin with Dadist “events.” Since the early days of European “conquest,” “aboriginal samples” of people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas were brought to Europe for aesthetic contemplation, scientific analysis, and entertainment. Those people from other parts of the world were forced first to take the place that Europeans had already created for the savages of their own Medieval mythology; later with the emergence of scientific rationalism, the “aborigines” on display served as proof of the natural superiority of European civilization, of its ability to exert control over and extract knowledge from the “primitive” world, and ultimately, of the genetic inferiority of non-European races. Over the last 500 years, Australian Aborigines, Tahitians, Aztecs, Iroquois, Cherokee, Ojibways, Iowas, Mohawks, Botocudos, Guianese, Hottentots, Kaffirs, Nubians, Somalians, Singhalese, Patagonians, Tierra del Fuegians, Kahucks, Anapondans, Zulus, Bushmen, Japanese, East Indians, and Laplanders have been exhibited in the taverns, theaters, gardens, museums, zoos, circuses, and world’s fairs of Europe, and the freak shows of the United States. Some examples are:

- 1493: An Arawak brought back from the Caribbean by Columbus is left on display in the Spanish Court for two years until he dies of sadness.
- 1501: “Eskimos” are exhibited in Bristol, England.
- 1550s: Native Americans are brought to France to build a Brazilian village in Rouen. The King of France orders his soldiers to burn the village as a

- performance. He likes the spectacle so much that he orders it restaged the next day.
- 1562: Michel de Montaigne is inspired to write his essay *The Cannibals* after seeing Native Americans brought to France as a gift to the king.
- 1613: In writing *The Tempest* Shakespeare models his character Caliban on an "Indian" he has seen in an exhibition in London.
- 1617: Pocahontas, the Indian wife of John Rolfe, arrives in London to advertise Virginia tobacco. She dies of an English disease shortly thereafter.
- 1676: Wampanoag Chief Metacom is executed for fomenting indigenous rebellion against the Puritans, and his head is publicly displayed for 25 years in Massachusetts.
- 1788: Arabanoo of the Cammeragal people of North Sydney, Australia, is captured by Governor Phillip. At first Arabanoo was chained and guarded by a convict; later he was shown off to Sydney society. He died a year later from smallpox.
- 1792: Bennelong and Yammerawannie of the Cadigal people of South Sydney travel to England with Governor Phillip where they are treated as curiosities. Yammerawannie dies of pneumonia.
- 1802: Pemulwuy, an Aboriginal resistance fighter from the Bidjegal people, is shot by white settlers in Australia. His head is cut off, preserved, and sent to England to be displayed at the London Museum.
- 1810-1815: "The Hottentot Venus" (Saartje Benjamin) is exhibited throughout Europe. After her death, her genitals are dissected by French scientists and remain preserved in Paris's Museum of Man to this day.
- 1822: "Laplander" family is displayed with live reindeer in the Egyptian Hall in London.
- 1823: Impresario William Bullock stages a Mexican "peasant" diorama in which a Mexican Indian youth is presented as ethnographic specimen and museum docent.
- 1829: A "Hottentot" woman exhibited nude is the highlight of a ball given by the Duchess du Barry in Paris.
- 1834: After General Rivera's cavalry completed the genocide of all the Indians in Uruguay, four surviving Charrúas are donated to the Natural Sciences Academy in Paris and are displayed to the French public as specimens of a vanished race. Three die within two months, and one escapes and disappears, never to be heard from again.
- 1844: George Catlin displays "Red Indians" in England.
- 1847: Four "Bushmen" on exhibit at the Egyptian Hall in London are written about by Charles Dickens.
- 1853: Thirteen Kaffirs are displayed in the St. George Gallery in Hyde Park, London.

- 1853: "Pygmies" dressed in European garb are displayed playing the piano in a British drawing room as proof of their potential for "civilization."
- 1853-1901: Maximo and Bartola, two microcephalic San Salvadorans, tour Europe and the Americas, and eventually join Barnum and Bailey's Circus. They are billed as "the last Aztec survivors of a mysterious jungle city called Ixinaya."
- 1878: The skeleton of Truganini, a Tasmanian Aborigine, is acquired by the Royal Society of Tasmania. Her remains are displayed in Melbourne in 1888 and 1904 and then returned to the Hobart's museum where they are displayed from 1904 until the mid-1960s.
- 1879: P. T. Barnum offers Queen Victoria \$100,000 for permission to exhibit captured warrior Zulu Chief Cetewayo, and is refused.
- 1882: W. C. Coup's circus announces the acquisition of "a troupe of genuine male and female Zulus."
- 1893: The skeleton of Neddy Larkin, an Aborigine from New South Wales, is sold to the Harvard University Peabody Museum together with a collection of stuffed animals, stones, tools, and artifacts.
- 1898: At the Trans-Mississippi International Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska, a mock Indian battle is staged, and President William McKinley watches.
- 1905: The sole surviving member of the Yahi tribe of California, Ishi, is captured and displayed for the last five years of his life at the Museum of the University of California. Presented as a symbol of the U.S.'s defeat of Indian nations, Ishi is labeled the last Stone Age Indian in America.
- 1906: Ota Benga, the first Pygmy to visit America after the slave trade, is put on display in the primate cage of the Bronx Zoo. A group of black ministers protest the zoo's display, but local press argue that Ota Benga was probably enjoying himself.
- 1911: The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company is sold for \$250,000, after thirty days of performances in the United States. 150 shows include one or more Kickapoo Indians as proof that the medicines being hawked were derived from genuine Indian medicine.
- 1931: The Ringling Circus features fifteen Ubangis, including "the nine largest-lipped women in the Congo."
- 1992: A black woman midget is exhibited at the Minnesota State Fair, billed as "Tiny Teesha, the Island Princess."

In most cases, the human beings that were exhibited did not choose to be on display. More benign versions continue to take place these days in festivals and amusement parks with the partial consent of those on exhibit. The contemporary tourist industries and cultural ministries of several countries around the world still perpetrate the illusion of authenticity to cater to the Western fascination with Otherness. So do many artists.

Emerging at a time when mass audiences in Europe and America were barely literate and hardly cognizant of the rest of the world, the displays were an important form of public “education.” These shows were where most whites “discovered” the non-Western sector of humanity. I like to call them the origins of intercultural performance in the West. The displays were living expressions of colonial fantasies and helped to forge a special place in the European and Euro-American imagination for nonwhite peoples and their cultures. Their function, however, went beyond war trophies, beyond providing entertainment for the masses and pseudoscientific data for early anthropologists. The ethnographic exhibitions of people of color were among the many sources drawn on by European and American modernists seeking to break with realism by imitating the “primitive.” The connection between West African sculpture and Cubism has been discussed widely by scholars, but it is the construction of ethnic Otherness as essentially *performative* and located in the body that I here seek to stress.

The interest that modernists and postmodernists have had in non-Western cultures was preceded by a host of references to “exotics” made by European writers and philosophers over the past five centuries. The ethnographic shows and the people brought to Europe to be part of them have been alluded to by such writers as William Shakespeare, Michel Montaigne, and William Wordsworth. In the eighteenth century, these shows, together with theater and popular ballads, served as popular illustrations of the concept of the Noble Savage so central to Enlightenment philosophy. Not all the references were positive; in fact, the nineteenth-century humanist Charles Dickens found that the Noble Savage as an idea hardly sufficed to make an encounter with Bushmen in the Egyptian Hall in 1847 a pleasurable or worthwhile experience:

Think of the Bushmen. Think of the two men and the two women who have been exhibited about England for some years. Are the majority of persons—who remember the horrid little leader of that party in his festering bundle of hides, with his filth and his antipathy to water, and his straddled legs, and his odious eyes shaded by his brutal hand, and his cry of “Qu-u-u-aaa” (Bosjeman for something desperately insulting I have no doubt)—conscious of an affectionate yearning towards the noble savage, or is it idiosyncratic in me to abhor, detest, abominate, and abjure him? I have never seen that group sleeping, smoking, and expectorating round their brazier, but I have sincerely desired that something might happen to the charcoal therein, which would cause the immediate suffocation of the whole of noble strangers.<sup>3</sup>

Dickens’s aversion does not prevent him from noting, however, that the Bushmen possess one redeeming quality: their ability to break spontaneously into dramatic reenactment of their “wild” habits. By the early twentieth century, the flipside of such

revulsion—in the form of fetishistic fascination with exotic artifacts and the “primitive” creativity that generated them—had become common among the members of the European avant-garde. The Dadaists, often thought of as the originators of performance art, included several imitative gestures in their events, ranging from dressing up and dancing as “Africans,” to making “primitive-looking” masks and sketches. Tristan Tzara’s dictum that “Thought is made in the mouth,” a performative analog to Cubism, refers directly to the Dadaist belief that Western art tradition could be subverted through the appropriation of the perceived orality and performative nature of the “non-Western.” In a grand gesture of appropriation, Tzara anthologized African and Southern Pacific poetry culled from ethnographies into his book, *Poèmes Nègres*, and chanted them at the infamous Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1917. Shortly afterward, Tzara wrote a hypothetical description of the “primitive” artist at work in *Notes on Negro Art*, imputing near-shamanistic powers to the Other’s creative process:

My other brother is naive and good, and laughs. He eats in Africa or along the South Sea Islands. He concentrates his vision on the head, carves it out of wood that is hard as iron, patiently, without bothering about the conventional relationship between the head and the rest of the body. What he thinks is: man walks vertically, everything in nature is symmetrical. While working, new relationships organize themselves according to degree of necessity; this is how the expression of purity came into being. From blackness, let us extract light. Transform my country into a prayer of joy or anguish. Cotton wool eye, flow into my blood. Art in the infancy of time, was prayer. Wood and tone were truth...Mouths contain the power of darkness, invisible substance, goodness, fear, wisdom, creation, fire. No one has seen so clearly as I this dark grinding whiteness.<sup>4</sup>

Tzara is quick to point out here that only he, as a Dadaist, can comprehend the significance of the “innocent” gesture of his “naive and good” brother. In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford explains how modernists and ethnographers of the early twentieth century projected coded perceptions of the black body—as imbued with vitalism, rhythm, magic, and erotic power, another formation of the “good” versus the irrational or bad savage.<sup>5</sup> Clifford questions the conventional mode of comparison in terms of affinity, noting that this term suggests a “natural” rather than political or ideological relationship. In the case of Tzara, his perception of the “primitive” artist as part of his metaphorical family conveniently recasts his own colonial relation to his imaginary “primitive” as one of kinship. In this context, the threatening reminder of difference is that the original body, or the physical and visual presence of the cultural Other, must be fetishized, silenced, subjugated, or otherwise controlled to be “appreciated.” The significance of that violent erasure is diminished—it is the “true” avant-garde artist who becomes a better version of the “primitive,” a hybrid or a cultural transvestite. Mass culture caged it, so to

speak—while artists swallowed it.

This practice of appropriating and fetishizing the primitive and simultaneously erasing the original source continues into contemporary “avant-garde” performance art. In his 1977 essay “New Models, New Visions: Some Notes Toward a Poetics of Performance,” Jerome Rothenberg envisioned this phenomenon in an entirely celebratory manner, noting correlations between Happenings and rituals, meditative works and mantric models, Earthworks and Native American sculptures, dream-works and notions of trance and ecstasy, bodyworks and self-mutilation, and performance based on several other variations of the shamanistic premise attributed to non-Western cultures. Rothenberg claims that unlike imperialism’s models of domination and subordination, avant-garde performance succeeded in shifting relations to a “symposium of the whole,” an image strikingly similar to that of the world-beat multiculturalism of the 1980s. Referring to Gary Snyder’s story of Alfred Kroeber and his (unnamed) Mojave informant in 1902, Rothenberg notes Snyder’s conclusion that “The old man sitting in the sand house telling his story is who we must become—not A. L. Kroeber, as fine as he was.”<sup>6</sup> Rothenberg goes on to claim that artists are to critics what aborigines are to anthropologists, and therefore suffer from the same misrepresentation. “The antagonism of literature to criticism,” he writes, “is, for the poet and artist, no different form that to anthropology, say, on the part of the Native American militant. It is a question in short of the right to self-definition.”<sup>7</sup>

Redefining these “affinities” with the primitive, the traditional, and the exotic has become an increasingly delicate issue as more artists of color enter the sphere of the “avant-garde.” What may be “liberating” and “transgressive” identification for Europeans and Euro-Americans is already a symbol of entrapment within an imposed stereotype for Others. The “affinity” championed by the early moderns and postmodern cultural transvestites alike is mediated by an imagined stereotype, along the lines of Tzara’s “brother.” Actual encounters could threaten the position and supremacy of the appropriator unless boundaries and concomitant power relations remain in place. As a result, the same intellectual milieus that now boast Neoprimitive body piercers, “nomad” thinkers, Anglo *comadres*, and New Age earth worshippers continue to evince a literal-minded attitude toward artists of color, demonstrating how racial difference is a determinant in one’s relation to notions of the “primitive.” In the 1987 trial of minimalist sculptor Carl Andre—accused of murdering his wife, the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta—the defense continually suggested that her earthworks were indicative of suicidal impulses prompted by her “satanical” beliefs; the references to Santería in her work could not be interpreted as self-conscious. When Cuban artist José Bedia was visited by the French curators of the *Les Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in the late 1980s, he was asked to show his private altar to “prove” that he was a true Santería believer. A critically acclaimed young African American poet was surprised to learn last year that he had been promoted by a Nuyorican Poet’s Cafe impresario as a former L.A. gang member,

which he never was. And while performing *Border Brujo* in the late 1980s, Gómez-Peña encountered numerous presenters and audience members who were disappointed that he was not a “real shaman” and that his “tongues” were not Nahuatl but a fictitious language.

Our cage performances forced these contradictions out into the open. The cage became a blank screen onto which audiences projected their fantasies of who and what we are. As we assumed the stereotypical role of the domesticated savage, many audience members felt entitled to assume the role of the colonizer, only to find themselves uncomfortable with the implications of the game. Unpleasant but important associations have emerged between the displays of old and the multicultural festivals and ethnographic dioramas of the present. The central position of the white spectator, the objective of these events as a confirmation of their position as global consumers of exotic cultures, and the stress on authenticity as an aesthetic value, all remain fundamental to the spectacle of Otherness many continue to enjoy.

The original ethnographic exhibitions often presented people in a simulation of their “natural” habitat, rendered either as an indoor diorama, or as an outdoor recreation. Eyewitness accounts frequently note that the human beings on display were forced to dress in the European notion of their traditional “primitive” garb, and to perform repetitive, seemingly ritual tasks. At times, nonwhites were displayed together with flora and fauna from their regions, and artifacts, which were often fakes. They were also displayed as part of a continuum of “outsiders” that included “freaks,” or people exhibiting physical deformities. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of them were presented so as to confirm social Darwinist ideas of the existence of a racial hierarchy. Some of the more infamous cases involved individuals whose physical traits were singled out as evidence of the bestiality of non-white people. For example, shortly after the annexation of Mexico and the publication of John Stephens’s account of travel in the Yucatan, which generated popular interest in pre-Columbian cultures, two microcephalics (or “pinheads”) from Central America, Maximo and Bartola, toured the United States in P. T. Barnum’s circus; they were presented as Aztecs. This set off a trend that would be followed by many other cases into the twentieth century. From 1810–1815, European audiences crowded to see the Hottentot Venus, a South African woman whose large buttocks were deemed evidence of her excessive sexuality. In the United States, several of the “Africans” exhibited were actually black Americans, who made a living in the nineteenth century by dressing up as their ancestors, just as many Native Americans did dressing up as Sioux whose likenesses, thanks to the long and bloody Plains Wars of the late nineteenth century, dominate the American popular imagination.

For Gómez-Peña and myself, the human exhibitions dramatize the colonial unconscious of American society. In order to justify genocide, enslavement, and the seizure of lands, a “naturalized” splitting of humanity along racial lines had to be established. When rampant miscegenation proved that those differences were not

biologically based, social and legal systems were set up to enforce those hierarchies. Meanwhile, ethnographic spectacles circulated and reinforced stereotypes, stressing that “difference” was apparent in the bodies on display. Thus they naturalized fetishized representations of Otherness, mitigating anxieties generated by the encounter with difference.

In his essay, “The Other Question” Homi Bhabha explains how racial classification through stereotyping is a necessary component of colonialist discourse, as it justifies domination and masks the colonizer’s fear of the inability to always already know the Other.<sup>8</sup> Our experiences in the cage suggested that even though the idea that America is a colonial system is met with resistance—since it contradicts the dominant ideology’s presentation of our system as a democracy—the audience reactions indicated that colonialist roles have been internalized quite effectively.

The stereotypes about nonwhite people that were continuously reinforced by the ethnographic displays are still alive in high culture and the mass media. Imbedded in the unconscious, these images form the basis of the fears, desires, and fantasies about the cultural Other. In “The Negro and Psychopathology,” Frantz Fanon discusses a critical stage in the development of children socialized in Western culture, regardless of their race, in which racist stereotypes of the savage and the primitive are assimilated through the consumption of popular culture: comics, movies, cartoons, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> These stereotypical images are often part of myths of colonial dominion (for example, cowboy defeats Indian, conquistador triumphs over Aztec Empire, colonial soldier conquers African chief, and so on). This dynamic also contains a sexual dimension, usually expressed as anxiety about white male (omni)potence. In *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, Octave Mannoni coined the term “Prospero complex” to describe the white colonial patriarch’s continuous fear that his daughter might be raped by a nonwhite male.<sup>10</sup> Several colonial stereotypes also nurture these anxieties, usually representing a white woman whose “purity” is endangered by black men with oversized genitals, or suave Latin lovers, or wild-eyed Indian warriors; and the common practice of publicly lynching black men in the American South is an example of a ritualized white male response to such fears. Accompanying these stereotypes are counterparts that humiliate and debase women of color, mitigating anxieties about sexual rivalry between white and non-white women. In the past, there was the subservient maid and the overweight and sexless Mammy; nowadays, the hapless victim of a brutish or irrational dark male whose tradition is devoid of “feminist freedoms” is more common.

These stereotypes have been analyzed endlessly in recent decades, but our experiences in the cage suggest that the psychic investment in them does not simply wither away through rationalization. The constant concern about our “realness” revealed a need for reassurance that a “true primitive” *did* exist, whether we fit the bill or not, and that she or he visually identifiable. Anthropologist Roger Bartra sees this desire as being part of a characteristically European dependence on an “uncivilized other” in

order to define the Western self. In his book *El Salvaje en el Espejo/The Savage in the Mirror*, he traces the evolution of the “savage” from mythological inhabitants of forests to “wild” and usually hairy men and women who even in the modern age appeared in freak shows and horror films.<sup>11</sup> These archetypes eventually were incorporated into Christian iconography and were then projected onto peoples of the New World, who were perceived as either heathen savages capable of reform or incorrigible devils who had to be eradicated.

While the structure of the so-called primitive may have been assimilated by the European avant-garde, the function of the ethnographic displays as popular entertainment was largely superseded by industrialized mass culture. Not unsurprisingly, the popularity of these human exhibitions began to decline with the emergence of another commercialized form of voyeurism—the cinema—and the assumption by ethnographic film of their didactic role. Founding fathers of the ethnographic filmmaking practice, such as Robert Flaherty and John Grierson, continued to compel people to stage their supposedly “traditional” rituals, but the tasks were now to be performed for the camera. One of the most famous of the white impresarios of the human exhibits in the United States, William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody, actually starred in an early film depicting his Wild West show of Native American horsemen and warriors, and in doing so gave birth to the “cowboy and Indian” movie genre, this country’s most popular rendition of its own colonial fantasy. The representation of the “reality” of the Other’s life, on which ethnographic documentary was based and still is grounded, is this fictional narrative of Western culture “discovering” the negation of itself in something *authentically* and *radically* distinct. Carried over from documentary, these paradigms also became the basis of Hollywood filmmaking in the 1950s and 1960s that dealt with other parts of the world in which the United States had strategic military and economic interests, especially Latin America and the South Pacific.

The practice of exhibiting humans may have waned in the twentieth century, but it has not entirely disappeared. The dissected genitals of the Hottentot Venus are still preserved at the Museum of Man in Paris. Thousands of Native American remains, including decapitated heads, scalps, and other body parts taken as war booty or bounties, remain in storage at the Smithsonian. Shortly before arriving in Spain, we learned of a current scandal in a small village outside Barcelona, where a visiting delegation had registered a formal complaint about a desiccated, stuffed Pygmy man that was on display in a local museum. The African gentleman in the delegation who had initiated the complaint was threatening to organize an African boycott of the 1992 Olympics, but the Catalonian townspeople defended what they saw as the right to keep “their own black man.” We also learned that Julia Pastrana, a bearded Mexican woman who was exhibited throughout Europe until her death in 1862, is still available in embalmed form for scientific research and loans to interested museums. This past summer, the case of Ota Benga, a Pygmy who was exhibited in the primate cage of



the Bronx Zoo in 1906 gained high visibility as plans for a Hollywood movie based on a recently released book were made public. And at the Minnesota State Fair last summer, we saw “Tiny Teesha, the Island Princess,” who was in actuality a black woman midget from Haiti making her living going from one state fair to another.

While the human exhibition exists in more benign forms today—that is, the people in them are not displayed against their will—the desire to look upon predictable forms of Otherness from a safe distance persists. I suspect after my experience in the cage that this desire is powerful enough to allow audiences to dismiss the possibility of self-conscious irony in the Other’s self-presentation; even those who saw our performance as art rather than artifact appeared to take great pleasure in engaging in the fiction, by paying money to see us enact completely nonsensical or humiliating tasks. A middle-aged man who attended the Whitney Biennial opening with his elegantly dressed wife insisting on feeding me a banana. The zoo guard told him he would have to pay \$10 to do so, which he quickly paid, insisting that he be photographed in the act. After the initial surprise of encountering caged beings, audiences invariably revealed their familiarity with the scenario to which we alluded.

We did not anticipate that our self-conscious commentary on this practice could be believable. We underestimated public faith in museums as bastions of truth, and institutional investment in that role. Furthermore, we did not anticipate that literalism would dominate the interpretation of our work. Consistently from city to city, more than half of our visitors believed our fiction and thought we were “real”; at the Whitney, however, we experienced the art world equivalent of such misperceptions: some visitors assumed that we were not the artists, but rather actors who had been hired by another artist. As we moved our performance from public site to natural history museum, pressure mounted from institutional representatives obliging us to didactically correct audience misinterpretation. We found this particularly ironic, since museum staffs are perhaps the most aware of the rampant distortion of reality that can occur in the labeling of artifacts from other cultures. In other words, we were not the only ones who were lying; our lies simply told a different story. For making this manifest, we were perceived as either noble savages or evil tricksters, dissimulators who discredit museums and betray public trust. When a few uneasy staff members in Australia and Chicago realized that large groups of Japanese tourists appeared to believe the fiction, they became deeply disturbed, fearing that the tourists would go home with a negative impression of the museum. In Chicago, just next to a review of the cage performance, the daily *Sun-Times* ran a phone-in questionnaire asking readers if they thought the Field Museum *should* have exhibited us, to which forty seven percent answered no, and fifty-three percent yes.<sup>12</sup> We seriously wonder if such weighty moral responsibilities are leveled against white artists who present fictions in nonart contexts.

Lest we attribute the now infamous confusion we generated among the general public to some defect of class or education, let it also be known that misinterpretation fil-

tered into the echelons of the cultural elite. *Cambio 16*, a left-leaning news magazine in Spain, ran a newsbrief on us as two “Indians behind bars” who had conducted a political protest.<sup>13</sup> Though ironic in tone, the story only referred to us by our first names, almost as if to make us seem like the latest exotic arrival to a local zoo. The trustees of the Whitney Museum questioned curators at a meeting prior to the Biennial asking for confirmation of rumors that there would be “naked people screaming obscenities in a cage” at the opening. When we arrived at the University of California/Irvine last year, we learned that the Environmental Health and Safety Office had understood that Gómez-Peña and I were anthropologists bringing “real aborigines” whose excrement—if deposited inside the gallery—could be hazardous to the university. This was particularly significant in light of the school’s location in Orange County, where Mexican immigrants are often characterized by right-wing “nativists” as environmental hazards. Upon request from the art department, the office sent several pages of instructions on the proper disposal of human waste and the over thirty diseases that were transmitted through excrement. Interestingly, those institutional representatives who responded to our performance with moral indignation also saw us as dangerous, but in the more ideological sense of being offensive to the public, bad for children, and dishonest subverters of the educational responsibilities of their museums.

I should perhaps note here the number of people who encountered this perfor-



“Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Madrid,”  
a performance by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 1992.

PHOTO BY PETER BARKER.

mance. We do not have exact figures for Columbus Plaza and Covent Garden, which are both heavily trafficked public areas; however, we do know that 1,000 saw us in Irvine; 15,000 in Minneapolis; approximately 5,000 in both Sydney and Chicago; and 120,000 in Washington, D.C. Audience reactions of those who believed the fiction occasionally included moral outrage that was often expressed paternalistically (i.e., “Don’t you realize,” said one English gentleman to the zoo guards in Covent Garden, “that these poor people have no idea what is happening to them?”). The Field Museum in Chicago received forty-eight phone calls, most of which were from people who faulted the museum for having printed misinformation about us in their information sheet. In Washington, D.C., an angry visitor phoned the Humane Society to complain and was told that human beings were out of their jurisdiction. However, the majority of those who were upset remained so for only about five minutes. Others said they felt that our being caged was justified because we were, after all, different. A group of sailors who were interviewed by a Field Museum staff member said that our being in a cage was a good idea since we might otherwise have become frightened, and attacked visitors. One older African American man in Washington asserted quite angrily that it would have been all right to put us in a cage only if we had had some physical defect that classified us as freaks.

For all the concern expressed about shocking children, we found that young people’s reactions have been the most humane. Young children invariably got the closest to the cage; they would seek direct contact, offer to shake our hands, and try to catch our eyes and smile. Little girls gave me barrettes for my hair and offered me their own food. Boys and girls often asked their parents excellent questions about us, prompting ethical discussions about racism and treatment of indigenous peoples. Not all parents were prepared to provide answers, and some looked very nervous. A woman in London sat her child down and explained that we were just like the people in the displays at the Commonwealth Institute. A school group visiting Madrid told the teacher that we were just like the Arawak Indian figures in the wax museum across the street. Then there have been those children who are simply fascinated by the spectacle; we heard many a child in Sydney, where our cage sat in front of an exhibit featuring giant mechanized insects, yelling “Mommy, Mommy, I don’t want to see the bugs. I want to stay with the Mexicans!”

The tenor of reactions to seeing “undiscovered Amerindians” in a cage changed from locale to locale; we noted, for example, that in Spain, a country with no strong tradition of Protestant morality or empirical philosophy, opposition to our work came from conservatives who were concerned with its political implications, and not with the ethics of dissimulation. Some patterns, however, repeated themselves. Audience reactions were largely divisible along lines of race, class, and nationality. Artists and cultural bureaucrats, the self-proclaimed elite, exhibited skeptical reactions that were often the most anxiety-ridden. They sometimes expressed a desire to rupture the fiction publicly by naming us, or arrived armed with skepticism as they searched for

the “believers,” or parodied believers in order to join the performance. At the Whitney Biennial the performers of DanceNoise and Charles Atlas, among others, screamed loudly at Gómez-Peña to “free his genitalia” when he unveiled a crotch with his penis hidden between his legs instead of hanging. Several young artists also complained to our sponsors that we were not experimental enough to be considered good performance art. Others at the Whitney and in Australia, where many knew that we were part of the Sydney Biennale dismissed our piece as “not critical.” One woman in Australia sat down with her young daughter in front of the cage and began to apologize very loudly for “having taken our land away.” Trying to determine who really believed the fiction and who didn’t became less significant for us in the course of this performance than figuring out what the audience’s sense of the rules of the game and their role in it was.

People of color who believed, at least initially, that the performance was real, at times expressed discomfort *because* of their identification with our situation. In Washington and London, they made frequent references to slavery, and to the mistreatment of Native peoples and blacks as part of their history. Cross-racial identification with us among whites was less common, but in London a recently released ex-convict who appeared to be very drunk grabbed the bars and proclaimed to us with tears in his eyes that he understood our plight because he was a “British Indian.” He then took off his sweater and insisted that Gómez-Peña put it on, which he did. In general, white spectators tended to express their chagrin to our zoo guards, usually operating under the assumption that we, the Amerindians, were being used. They often asked the zoo guards if we had consented to being confined, and then continued with a politely delivered stream of questions about our eating, work, and sexual habits.

Listening to these reactions was often difficult for the zoo guards and museum staff people who assisted us. One of our zoo guards in Spain actually broke down and cried at the end of our performance, after receiving a letter from a young man condemning Spain for having colonized indigenous Americans. One guard in Washington and another in Chicago became so troubled by their own cognitive dissonance that they left the performance early. The director of Native American programs for the Smithsonian told us she was forced to reflect on the rather disturbing revelation that while she made efforts to provide the most accurate representation of Native cultures she could, our “fake” sparked exactly the same reaction from audiences. Staff meetings to discuss audience reactions were held at the Smithsonian, the Australian Museum, and the Field Museum. In all the natural history museum sites, our project became a pretext for internal discussions about the extent of self-criticism those museums could openly be engaged in. In Australia, our project was submitted to an aboriginal curatorial committee for approval. They accepted, with the stipulation that there be nothing aboriginal in the cage, and that exhibition cases of aborigines be added to our chronology.

Other audience members who realized that we were artists chastised us for the “immoral” act of duping our audiences. This reaction was rather popular among the British, and emerged also among intellectuals and cultural bureaucrats in the United States. I should here note that there are historical precedents for the moralistic responses to the ethnographic display in Britain and the United States, but in those cases, the appeal was to the inhumanity of the practice, not to the ethics of fooling audiences, which the phony anthropologists who acted as docents in American Dime Museums often did. A famous court case took place in the early nineteenth century to determine whether it was right to exhibit the Hottentot Venus, and black ministers in the U.S. in the early twentieth century protested Ota Benga’s being exhibited in the Bronx Zoo. Neither protest triumphed over the mass appeal of the spectacle to whites.

The literalism governing American thought complements the liberal belief that we can eliminate racism through didactic correctives; it also encourages resistance to the idea that conscious methods may not necessarily transform unconscious structures of belief. I believe that this situation explains why moralizing interpreters shifted the focus of our work from audience reactions to our ethics. The reviewer sent by the *Washington Post*, for example, was so furious about our “dishonesty” that she could barely contain her anger and had to be taken away by attendants. A MacArthur Foundation representative came to the performance with his wife and they took it upon themselves to “correct” interpretations in front of the cage. In a meeting after the performance, the Foundation representative referred to a “poor Mexican family” who was deeply grateful to his wife for explaining the performance to them. After receiving two written complaints and the *Washington Post* review, the director of public programs for the Smithsonian Natural History Museum gave a talk in Australia severely criticizing us for misleading the public. We have heard that he has since changed his position. What we have not yet fully understood is why so many of these people failed to see our performance as interactive, and why they seem to have forgotten the tradition of site-specific performance with which our work dovetails, a historical development that preceded performance art’s theatricalization in the 1980s.

On the whole, audience responses tended to be less pedantic and more outwardly emotional. Some people who were disturbed by the image of the cage feared getting too close, preferring instead to stay at the periphery of the audience. Barbara Kruger came to see us at the University of California, Irvine and went charging out of the gallery as soon as she read the chronology of the human display. Claes Oldenberg, on the other hand, sat at a distance in Minneapolis, watching our audiences with a wry smile on his face. The curator of the Amerindian collection at the British Museum came to look at us. As she posed for a photo, she conceded to one of our Edge Biennial representatives that she felt very guilty. Her museum had already declined to give us permission to be displayed. Others found less direct ways of expressing such anxiety. A feminist artist from New York questioned us after a public lecture we gave

on the performance in Los Angeles last year, suggesting that our piece had “failed” if the public misread it. One young white woman filmmaker in Chicago who attended the performances showed up afterward at a class at the University of Illinois and yelled at Gómez-Peña for being “ungrateful” for all the benefits he had received thanks to multiculturalism. She claimed to have gone to the performance with an African American man who was “equally disturbed” by it. Gómez-Peña responded that multiculturalism was not a “gift” from whites, but the result of decades of struggle by people of color. Several feminist artists and intellectuals at performances in the United States approached me in the cage to complain that my role was too passive, and berated me for not speaking but only dancing, as if my activities should support their political agenda.

Whites outside the U.S. were more ludic in their reactions than American whites, and they appeared to be less self-conscious about expressing their enjoyment of our



Maximo and Bartola, “the last Aztec survivors of a mysterious jungle city called Ixinaya.”

PHOTO BY CHARLES EISENMAN, COURTESY OF THE BECKER COLLECTION, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

spectacle. For example, businessmen in London and Madrid approached the cage to make stereotypical jungle animal sounds; however, not all the reactions were light-hearted. A group of skinheads attacked Gómez-Peña in London and were pulled away by audience members; scores of adolescents in Madrid stayed at the cage for hours each day, taunting us by offering beer cans filled with urine and other such delicacies. Some of those who understood that the cage piece was performance art made a point—in private—of expressing their horror at others' reactions to us, perhaps as a way of disassociating themselves from their racial group. One Spanish businessman waited for me after the performance was over to congratulate me on the performance, introduced me to his son, and then insisted that I agree that the Spaniards had been less brutal with the Indians than had the English. The overwhelming majority of whites who believed the piece, however, did not complain or express surprise at our condition in a manner that was apparent to us or the zoo guards. No American ever asked about the legitimacy of the map (though two Mexicans did), or the taxonomic information on the signs, or Gómez-Peña's made-up language. An older man at the Whitney told a zoo guard that he remembered our island from *National Geographic*. My dance, however, was severely criticized for its inauthenticity. In fact, during the press review at the Whitney, several writers simply walked away just as I began.

The reactions of Latin Americans differed according to class. Many upper-class Latin American tourists in Spain and Washington, D.C., voiced disgust that their part of the world should be represented in such a debased manner. Many other Latin Americans and Native Americans immediately recognized the symbolic significance of the piece, expressing solidarity with us, analyzing articles in the cage for other audience members, and showing their approval to us by holding our hands as they posed for photographs. Regardless of whether they believed or not, Latinos in the United States and Europe and Native Americans never criticized the hybridity of the cage environment and our costumes for being "unauthentic." One Pueblo elder from Arizona who saw us in the Smithsonian went so far as to say that our display was more "real" than any other statement about the condition of Native peoples in the museum. "I see the faces of my grandchildren in that cage," he told a museum representative. Two Mexicans who came to see us in England left a letter saying that they felt that they were living in a cage every day they spent in Europe. A Salvadoran man in Washington stayed with us for an extended period, pointing to the rubber heart suspended from the top of the cage, saying, "That heart is my heart." On the other hand, white Americans and Europeans have spent hours speculating in front of us about how we could possibly run a computer, own sunglasses and sneakers, and smoke cigarettes.

In Spain there were many complaints that our skin was not dark enough for us to be "real" primitives. The zoo guards responded by explaining that we live in a rain forest without much exposure to the sun. At the Whitney, a handful of older women

also complained that we were too light-skinned, one saying that the piece would only be effective if we were "really dark." These doubts, however, did not stop many from taking advantage of our apparent inability to understand European languages; many men in Spain made highly charged sexual comments about my body, coaxing others to add more money to the donation box to see my breasts move as I danced. I was also asked out on dates a few times in London. Many other people chose a more discreet way of expressing their sexual curiosity, by asking the zoo guards if we mated in public in the cage. Gómez-Peña found the experience of being continually objectified more difficult to tolerate than I did. By the end of our first three days in Madrid, we began to realize not only that people's assumptions about us were based upon gender stereotypes, but that my experiences as a woman had prepared me to shield myself psychologically from the violence of public objectification.

I may have been more prepared, but during the performances, we both were faced with sexual challenges that transgressed our physical and emotional boundaries. In the cage we were both objectified, in a sense, feminized, inviting both male and female spectators to take on a voyeuristic relationship to us. This might explain why women as well as men acted upon what appears to be the erotic attraction of a caged primitive male. In Sydney, our sponsoring institution, the Australian Museum of Natural History, was approached by a female reporter from a soft-porn magazine who wanted to do a photo spread in which she would appear topless, feeding us bananas and watermelon. She was refused by the museum publicist. Interestingly, women were consistently more physical in their reactions, while men were more verbally abusive. In Irvine, a white woman asked for plastic gloves to be able to touch the male specimen, began to stroke his legs, and soon moved toward his crotch. He stepped back, and the woman stopped—but she returned that evening, eager to discuss our feelings about her gesture. In Chicago, another woman came up to the cage, grabbed his head and kissed him. Gómez-Peña's ex-wife had lawsuit papers delivered to him while we were in the cage at Irvine, and subsequently appeared in a mask and bizarre costume with a video camera and proceeded to tape us for over an hour. While men taunted me, talked dirty, asked me out, and even blew kisses, not one attempted physical contact in any of our performances.

As I presented this "reverse ethnography" around the country, people invariably asked me how I felt inside the cage. I experienced a range of feelings from panic to boredom. I felt exhilarated, and even playful at times. I've also fallen asleep from the hot sun and been irritable because of hunger or cold. I've been ill, and once had to be removed from the cage to avoid vomiting in front of the crowd. The presence of supportive friends was reassuring, but the more aggressive reactions became less and less surprising. The night before we began in Madrid, I lay awake in bed, overcome with fear that some demented Falangist might pull a gun on us and shoot before we could escape. When nothing of that sort happened, I calmed down and never worried about our safety again. I have to admit that I liked watching people on the other side

of the bars. The more we performed, the more I concentrated on the audience, while trying to feign the complete bewilderment of an outsider. Although I loved the intentional nontheatricality of this work, I became increasingly aware of how engaging in certain activities can trigger audience reactions, and acted on that realization to test our spectators. Over the course of the year, I grew fond of the extremists who verbalized their feelings and interacted with us physically, regardless of whether they were hostile or friendly. It seemed to me that they had a certain braveness, even courage, that I don't know I would have in their place. When we came upon Tiny Teesha in Minnesota, I was dumbstruck at first. Not even my own performance had prepared me for the sadness I saw in her eyes, or my own ensuing sense of shame.

One memory in particular came to the forefront of my mind as we traveled with this performance. It involved an encounter I had over a decade ago, when I was finishing college in Rhode Island, where I had studied film theory. I had met an internationally known French ethnographic filmmaker in his sixties at a seminar he was giving, and told him I planned to spend time in France after graduation. A year later, I received a phone call from him while I was in Paris. He had found me with the help of a student from my alma mater. He told me he was going to begin production on a feature and might be able to offer me a job. After having spent part of the summer as a translator-salesgirl at a department store, I was excited by the prospect of film-related work. We arranged to meet to discuss his project.

Even though we were conversing in a language I had not mastered, it didn't take long for me to sense that the filmmaker's interests might be more than professional. I was not exactly prepared to deal with sexual advances from a man who could have been my grandfather. I thought I had protected myself by arranging to meet in a public place, but he soon explained that we had to leave the cafe to meet with the producers for a reading of the script. After fifteen minutes in his car, I began to suspect that there was no meeting planned. We eventually arrived at what looked like an abandoned house in a rural area, without another soul in sight. He proudly announced that this was the house he had grown up in and that he wanted to show it to me. I was by this time in a mild state of shock, furiously trying to figure out where I was and how to get away safely.

The filmmaker proceeded to go into a shed next to the house and remove all his clothes except his underwear. He emerged with a manual lawn mower and went to work on his garden. At one point he ran up to me and exclaimed that he wished he could film me naked there; I did not respond. At another point, he handed me a basket and told me to gather nuts and berries. While my anger mounted, my fears slowly subsided as I realized that he was deeply immersed in his own fantasy world, so self-involved that he hardly needed my participation. I waited for him to finish his playacting, and then told him to take me to the closest train station, which he did, but not without grabbing me and ripping my shirt as I got out of his car.

I got back to my apartment safely. I was not physically harmed, but I was

profoundly disturbed by what I had witnessed. The ethnographic filmmaker whose fame rested on his depictions of "traditional" African societies had projected his racist fantasies onto me for his own pleasure. What I thought I was, how I saw myself—that was irrelevant. Never had I seen so clearly what my physical presence could spark in the imagination of an aging colonialist pervert.

The memory of that ethnographic filmmaker's gaze haunted me for years, to the point that I began to wonder if I had become paranoid. But I, having watched behavior only slightly more discreet than his from behind the bars of our cage, can reassure myself that I am not. Those are the moments when I am glad that there are real bars. Those are also the times when, even though I know I can get out of the cage, I can never quite escape.

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AMERINDIANS: 1) *A mythical people of the Far East, connected in legendary history with Seneca and Amerigo Vespucci.*

Although the term Amerindian suggests that they were the original inhabitants of this continent, the oldest authorities (e.g., Christopher Columbus in his diaries, and more recently, Paul Rivette) regarded them as Asian immigrants, not Americans. Other explanations suggested are *arborindians*, "tree people," and *amerindians*, "brown people." The most that can be said is that *amerindians* may be the name of an indigenous American stock that the ancients knew no more about than ourselves.

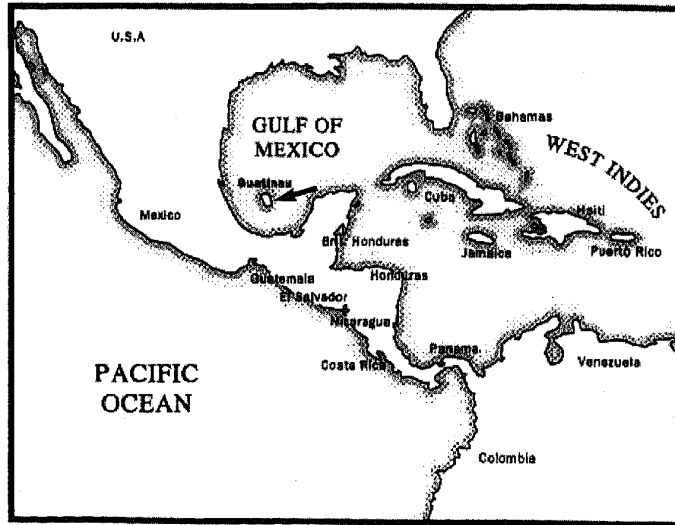
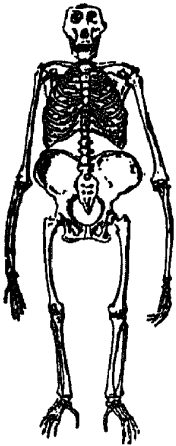
AMERINDIANS: 2) One of the many English terms for the people of Guatinau. In their language, the Guatinaui people's word for themselves signifies "outrageously beautiful" or "fiercely independent." They are a jovial and playful race, with a genuine affection for the debris of Western industrialized popular cultural. In former times, however, they committed frequent raids on Spanish ships, disguised as British pirates, whence comes their familiarity with European culture. Contemporary Guatinauis have only recently begun to travel outside their island.

The male and female specimens here on display are representatives of the dominant tribe from their island, having descended from the Mintomani stock. The male weighs seventy-two kilos, measures 1.77 meters, and is approximately thirty-seven years of age. He likes spicy food, burritos, and Diet Coke, and his favorite cigarette brand is Marlboro. His frequent pacing in the cage leads experts to believe that he was a political leader on his island.

The female weighs sixty three kilos, measures 1.74 meters, and appears to be in her early thirties. She is fond of sandwiches, pad thai, and herb tea. She is a versatile dancer, and also enjoys showing off her domestic talents by sewing voodoo dolls, serving cocktails, and massaging her male partner. Her facial and body decorations indicate that she has married into the upper caste of her tribe.

Both of the Guatinauis are quite affectionate in the cage, seemingly uninhibited

in their physical and sexual habits despite the presence of an audience. Their animist spirituality compels them to engage in periodic gestural prayers, which they do with great enthusiasm. They like to massage and scratch each other, enjoy occasional long embraces, and initiate sexual intercourse on the average of twice a day.



Left: Guatinauis Ancestor.

Anthropologists at the Smithsonian observed (with the help of surveillance cameras) that the Guatinauis enjoy gender role playing together after dark, transforming many of their functional objects in the cage into makeshift sex toys by night. Visitors who get close to them will note that they often seek to fondle strangers while posing for photographs. They are extremely demonstrative with children.

#### AFTERWORD

Over a year has passed since I wrote this chronicle and in that time, two major events have taken place that have radically altered my understanding of the perceptions and misperceptions of *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*... One pertains to the Latin American reception of the work. The other involves legal and ethical issues relating to the video documentary of the performances, *The Couple in the Cage*.

Throughout our tour of Europe and America, Guillermo and I were questioned by colleagues as to why we did not seek out opportunities to present *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*...in Latin America, to "our own community," so to speak. At first, we

responded by saying that we believed that the piece was designed primarily for first world countries, for places in which the practice of the ethnographic display had taken place as part of a colonial project. Several months after we ceased to carry out the piece, however, we received an invitation from the Fundación Banco Patricios to take the cage performance to Buenos Aires. Though we had already decided that the performance had run its course, we could not pass up the chance to test its possibilities in South America. Before heading south, we worried that performing the piece for the Porteños might be too much like preaching to the converted.

Our fears were completely unfounded. Our performance, which took place in the groundfloor vitrine of the cultural center at the busy downtown intersection of Corrientes and Callao avenues, turned out to be more convincing to the Argentines than to any other audience we had had. We received several letters from visitors who felt that our savage souls needed saving, and that colonization would have insured our conversion to the Christian faith. The docents told many audience members that they could attend a panel discussion after the performance, and several older people arrived, asking if a translator would be provided so they could finally converse with us. Several young men spent hours making lurid gestures at me, slipping me their phone numbers and poking fun at Guillermo. A man approached the cage on our first night on display, and hurled acid at Guillermo, burning his stomach and leg. The Foundation security guard who was subsequently assigned to watch out for us confessed his sexual fantasies about me with glee after the performance as I rode with him in an elevator. Another older gentleman told a docent that he was sure that I would perform sexual favors for an additional fee when the performance was over.

Our piece seemed to serve as an ice breaker in an extremely elitist cultural milieu, drawing street vendors, poor children and others who had never been inside the Foundation building in their lives, often to the dismay of the institution's regular patrons. Scores of mestizos and indigenous immigrants to the city from Bolivia, Peru and Argentina's northern regions watched us evening after evening with extraordinary sadness in their eyes. Meanwhile, dozens of Argentine intellectuals sat sipping coffee in the bar directly behind us, often pretending to ignore the scene unfolding before them. The many psychologists and anthropologists who attended were divided as to whether such a piece was too disturbing for the Argentine public, traumatized by the military dictatorship. With the exception of such older generation political artist luminaries as Leon Ferrerí and Marta Minujín, most of the local artists and intellectuals we met insisted our work made no sense there because Argentina was "really" European, because there was no racism in their country, and ultimately because American minorities' obsession with identity was parochial and it generated inferior art. Some even admitted that they had been disappointed to discover that we were not "real" American artists, meaning that we were not white. Much in the same way that the Spain we had visited was rabidly rejecting its association with its ex-colonies as it experienced a moment of intense yearning to break with its

undemocratic, economically underdeveloped past, Argentina seemed to reject us as a way of asserting its new status as an economically stabilized technocracy aspiring to attain the “American way of life.” Only a handful of people we met reminded us that Argentina had conducted its own highly successful extermination campaigns against its indigenous populations around the same time that Americans had conquered the West.

It is still suggested that our performance was an essay in fanciful self-indulgence, but the historical nightmares we allude to have become all too real for comfort. A current legal dispute regarding ownership of the documentary about our performance, *The Couple in the Cage*, has forced us to experience in the flesh the implications of ethical debates about cultural property and appropriation that have pervaded discussions of both documentary filmmaking and art by and about indigenous communities. After two years of conducting historical research and one year of performances, Guillermo and I had accumulated several hours of video documentation which included interviews with audience members that had been conducted under our supervision. In addition, we had compiled an extensive archive of photographs and sketches documenting the history of the practice, and I had written this chronicle to serve in part as a conceptual underpinning of the documentary.

After editing was completed, a dispute arose over whether our efforts were sufficient to establish sole ownership of the documentary. In the absence of a document with a few magic words, it was claimed that the arrangement of pre-existing elements created by Guillermo and myself so radically altered the integrity of the performance as to make it something else altogether. More to our horror, it seemed to us as if the cage performance and documentation of its historical antecedents were being interpreted as raw materials for an exercise in sampling.

Guillermo and I panicked, fearing, as do many artists working in ephemeral forms, that our only means of sustaining the life of our performance would be seriously damaged. The more legal opinions we sought, the more complex the issues involved became. How does one prove that our fiction, which only could exist in the live interactions with others, was a scripted event and that editing could have only reconstituted it? How does one impress upon documentarians that a performance artist’s likeness is not raw material but self-consciously constructed art?

Over the past year, I have felt trapped in a frightful chapter of history that had resurfaced before my eyes. There were the circus and freak show manager of yore, claiming that they had “made us” into Guatinauis and that without them we were nothing. There were the anthropologists of the early century insisting that we had performed our identity without knowing, that we had no proper concept of how to record our culture and represent ourselves and therefore needed them to find an order in our madness. And there were the myriad pseudo-liberal documentarians who believed that the “reality” they capture is always spontaneously generated, only to be formed into something meaningful by their magic touch. As performers, we

have no legal means to secure ownership of our time-based art form other than to claim its documentation as our property. As experimental artists, we hardly have the means to protect our rights, and face a legal system in which notions of aesthetic value must translate into money in order to make sense to those we contract to represent us. The so-called primitive superstition that photographers steal souls had become terrifyingly real.

As of this writing, the last trace of the Guatinauis is the subject of a pending lawsuit against me. In the age of ongoing copyright wars over rap music, sufficient ambiguities have been created so that an arrangement of pre-existing elements can be construed to prevail. After years of interrogating the implications of the ethnographic gaze, our having to suffer the legal implications of having someone claim to have “discovered” us has been the most painful and ironic lesson of the Guatinaui world tour.

## ENDNOTES

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### THE OTHER HISTORY OF INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE

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