

## Coco Fusco

January 9 – February 6, 2016

Alexander Gray Associates presents an exhibition of work by interdisciplinary artist and writer Coco Fusco, screening for the first time together a survey of her seminal videos created over the past two decades. Premiering is her latest installation *Confidencial, Autores Firmantes* (2015), which examines Cuba's systematic censorship of key literary voices during the 1970s. Featuring works from the early 1990s through the present, the exhibition focuses on Fusco's critical examination of the politics of identity, military power, the history of racial thought, and post-revolutionary Cuba.

Presented for the first time in New York, Fusco's most recent videos on Cuba, *La Confesión* (2015)—created for the 56th Venice Biennale, Italy—and *La botella al mar de María Elena* (2015)—premiered at the 2015 Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden—explore the cases of Cuban poet Heberto Padilla and writer María Elena Cruz Varela, respectively deconstructing official narratives of political oppression. Cuba has been a subject of study for Fusco for three decades, during which she has produced videos; exhibitions; performances; cultural exchanges and numerous texts, included her recently published book, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (2015, Tate Publishing).

Fusco's thirty-year exploration of difficult subjects through performance, video, and research presents a body of work that evinces a nuanced, informed and open-ended approach to sensitive issues. In an interview between Fusco and Dr. Guerra, the latter explains, "One story—regardless of its source—is never representative of the multiple dimensions of any lived reality." Fusco's work brings depth and multifold meaning to complex investigations of the human condition.

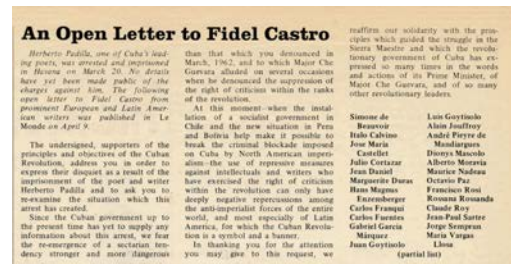
## CONFIDENCIAL, Autores Firmantes (2015)



Coco Fusco, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates (2015)



Le Monde (Paris, France). "La lettre des intellectuels à M. Fidel Castro." May 22, 1971.



"An Open Letter to Fidel Castro," the New York Review of Books 16, no. 8 (May 6, 1971).

Fusco's research on Cuba led to her collaboration with Dr. Lilian Guerra (professor, University of Florida), which resulted in the mixed-media installation *Confidencial, Autores Firmantes* (2015). Through this work, Fusco further explores the Padilla affair by presenting twenty-one facsimiles of official memorandums and letters from 1971—found by Dr. Guerra in the archives of the Cuban Ministry of Culture. The documents detailing orders and methods by which to censor publications by intellectuals deemed "anti-Cuban" due their open disagreement with the government's detainment of the poet Heberto Padilla, and their skepticism regarding the motives of Padilla's ensuing "confession" that he had betrayed the revolution. The documents are presented alongside original Cuban editions of books by authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa who signed two open letters to Fidel Castro that were published in *Le Monde* in 1971 in protest of the Cuban government's treatment of Padilla. This room-size installation is an archive of a key historical moment that redefined Cuba Revolutionary government's relationship with progressive intellectuals of that era out and inside the island, and cast a long shadow over its relationship with its literary cadre. *Autores Firmantes* mirrors a moment in time both past and present, in the artist's words, "A state may produce the absence of its own archive while retaining its own contents for a future exercise of force."



*The Empty Plaza (La Plaza Vacía)*, 2012  
12 minute single channel video

**Tuesdays and Thursdays: 11:00 AM / 2:00 PM**  
**Saturdays: 11:00 AM**

*The Empty Plaza / La Plaza Vacía* is inspired by the organized public protests in the Middle East beginning in 2011. Fusco took note of the communal spaces around the world being utilized and, in contrast, those left empty. The empty Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, Cuba becomes the protagonist in the artist's meditation on public space, revolutionary promise, and memory. Intermittent close-range views bring the plaza's architecture into focus and long shots documenting Fusco's passage through the vacant square are punctuated by vintage archival footage depicting scenes from Post-Revolutionary Cuba. Throughout the video, a Spanish narration, written by Cuban journalist Yoani Sanchez, describes what appears—and does not appear—in view. "The absence of public in some plazas seemed just as resonant and provocative as its presence in others," Fusco recalls. "Cuba's Plaza of the Revolution is one such place—a stark, inhospitable arena where all the major political events of the past half-century have been marked by mass choreography, militarized displays and rhetorical flourish. I decided to create a piece about that legendary site—an empty stage filled with memories, through which every foreigner visitor passes, while nowadays many, if not most, Cubans flee."



*La confesión (The Confession)*, 2015  
31 minute single channel video

**Tuesdays and Thursdays: 11:20 AM / 2:20 PM**  
**Saturdays: 11:20 AM**

*La confesión* is Fusco's reflection on the most significant crisis in the intellectual history of the Cuban Revolution – the public confession by poet Heberto Padilla that he was a counterrevolutionary. Padilla's confession, which was pronounced in April of 1971 after the poet had been held for five weeks in Villa Marista prison, shifted the terms of the international leftist community and the role of culture in revolution, and reconfigured the relationship between European intellectuals and Cuba's nationalism. The video is not a dramatic reconstruction of the event, but rather a consideration of the ways in which Padilla's performance as a repentant counter-revolutionary reverberates to this day. Fusco concentrates on the documents that form the material residue of the case, including a fragment of the filmed confession that was made public only recently.



*Y entonces el mar te habla (And the Sea Will Talk to You)*, 2012  
45 minute single channel video

**Tuesdays and Thursdays: 12:00 PM / 3:00 PM**  
**Saturdays: 12:00 PM**

*Y entonces el mar te habla* is Coco Fusco's exploration of problematic emigration policies between Cuba and the United States. In the film, Fusco weaves accounts of journeys from Cuba to the United States through the Straits of Florida, juxtaposed with a woman's description of her attempt to bring her mother's ashes back to Cuba from the United States. These poetic testimonial commentaries on the sea, and voices of Cuban exiles recounting their journeys are set against images of the Caribbean Sea and skies, which evoke the feeling of being adrift, culminating in a viewing experience reminiscent of the physical journey between countries.



*La botella al mar de María Elena (The Message in a Bottle from María Elena)*, 2015  
44 minute single channel video

**Tuesdays and Thursdays: 1:00 PM / 4:00 PM**  
**Saturdays: 1:00 PM**

*La botella al mar de María Elena* examines the case of Cuban poet María Elena Cruz Varela, winner of the 1989 National Poetry Prize. In 1991, María Elena spearheaded an effort by ten Cuban intellectuals to issue a public declaration calling for political reforms. The Declaration of the Cuban Intellectuals alluded to the critical situation that Cuba faced with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the dramatic drop in imports and trade. Cruz Varela and several other dissidents were sieged by mobs and arrested for their efforts. In the video, Fusco contrasts the poet's recollections of the events with those of a Communist party militant who was involved in the mob attacks.



*The Couple in the Cage: A Guatimale Odyssey*, 1993  
31 minute single channel video

**Wednesdays and Fridays: 11:00 AM / 2:00 PM**  
**Saturdays: 2:00 PM**

*The Couple in the Cage: A Guatimale Odyssey* documents the traveling performance *The Year of the White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–1994) of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez -Peña, in which they exhibited themselves as caged Amerindians from an imaginary island. While the artists' intent was to create a satirical commentary on the notion of discovery, they soon realized that many of their viewers believed the fiction, and thought the artists were real "savages." The video, a record of their interactions with audiences in the United States, Australia, Spain, and the United Kingdom, dramatizes the dilemma of the cross-cultural misunderstanding. Their experiences are interwoven with archival footage of ethnographic displays from the past, giving a historical dimension to the artists' social experiment. *The Couple in the Cage* is simultaneously a comic fiction and a reflection on the morality of the treatment human beings as exotic curiosities.



*Els Segadors (The Reapers)*, 2001  
22 minute single channel video

**Wednesdays and Fridays: 11:35 AM / 2:35 PM**  
**Saturdays: 2:35 PM**

In 2001, the president of Catalunya decreed that the national Catalan hymn, *Els Segadors*, be taught in all of the region's public schools as a reaction to increased immigration from other regions in Spain, and other countries around Europe. Fusco's video, *Els Segadors*, depicts people who consider themselves Catalan singing the hymn and discussing their personal experiences with the language, their feelings about the intricacies of cultural identity, and their relationship to the song. The diversity of experiences expressed in the testimonials, as well as the range of styles in which the hymn is sung, illuminates the prejudice implicit in attempts to define a singular national identity. As Fusco states about regional nationalist movement, it "is extremely difficult to discern is the difference between a historically rooted defense of Catalan identity against encroachment by Spanish State and burgeoning Catalanist protectionism in the face of the hybridizing forces of globalization."



*Operation Atropos*, 2006  
59 minute single channel video

**Wednesdays and Fridays: 12:00 PM / 3:00 PM**  
**Saturdays: 3:00 PM**

In July 2005, Fusco took a course led by former United States military interrogators designed for people in the private sector who want to learn their techniques for extracting information. Fusco took a group of six women with her and filmed their workshop. The video, *Operation Atropos*, is about the group's experience. The training involved an immersive simulation of incarceration as prisoners of war: the women were ambushed, captured, stripped searched, thrown in the pen and subject to several interrogations. Afterwards, in a classroom scenario, the tactics used against the group were analyzed and the women were taught to employ the same strategies.



*TED Ethology: Primate Visions of the Human Mind*, 2015  
49 minute single channel video

**Wednesdays and Fridays: 1:00 PM / 4:00 PM**  
**Saturdays: 4:00 PM**

In *TED Ethology: Primate Visions of the Human Mind*, Fusco revives and embodies the chimpanzee animal psychologist Dr. Zira from the original *Planet of the Apes* films of the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to stage a simulated TED Talk. The chimp psychologist returns after twenty years in hiding to share her observations about the predatory practices of members of the homo genus. Dr. Zira's filmed lecture draws from primatology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology to address human aggression and predatory behavior for the accumulation of resources in post-industrial societies.