

Coco Fusco

**“On October 25-26 2008, the Centre for Postcolonial Studies at Goldsmiths organized a conference on the "Afterlives of Postcolonialism"- the 'after' referring both to its life/lives after the proclamation of its death, and also to its life after/outside the study of literature. In what ways can/has postcolonial theory been taken up by artists, architects and scholars of art and architecture, by those who study politics, anthropology and sociology, and area studies, and to what effects? Does it merely provide another way of 'reading' texts, to does it have the potential to destabilize and reconfigure practices and disciplines? And what happens to postcolonial theory when it moves into politics, art, sociology, and area studies; what mutations does it undergo, or need to undergo?”**  
(Goldsmiths website)

What became quickly apparent in this conference was the difficulty of speaking across disciplines... In a text you wrote in 2004 called *Questioning the Frame. Thoughts about maps and spatial logic in the global present* you call for ‘real engagement’ with people in other places or even in their own locale. I was wondering who were these people and who was this call going out to who is intended for and I wanted to link it to this basic difficulty found at the conference

Well there were like 6 questions there - which one do you want me to answer first?

**Just pull at one...**

Ok well can you read me the first one again?

**In *Questioning the Frame* you call for ‘real engagement’ with people in other places or even in their own locale. I was wondering who are these people and who is this call going out to?**

Well you know this is a hard one for me to respond to intelligently because I mean I remember the exchange but I don't really remember specifically what I wrote – it was several years ago. So its probably better if we start with the Postcolonial stuff because I also think that was a period when I was engaged and having a lot of discussions on Nettime\* but I feel like, Nettime was a very exclusive group of people and it is even more so and that they have very effectively kind of institutionalized themselves as a kind of

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\* “<nettime> is not just a mailing list but an effort to formulate an international, networked discourse that neither promotes a dominant euphoria (to sell products) nor continues the cynical pessimism, spread by journalists and intellectuals in the 'old' media who generalize about 'new' media with no clear understanding of their communication aspects. We have produced, and will continue to produce books, readers, and web sites in various languages so an 'immanent' net critique will circulate both on- and offline.

<nettime> is slightly moderated.

history:

0. the formation of the nettime group goes back to spring 1995. A first meeting called <nettime> was organized in june 1995, at the Venice Bienale, as a part of the Club Berlin event. The list itself took off in the fall. A first compilation on paper appeared in January 1996, at the second Next Five Minutes events (the so-called ZKP series). The list organized its own conference in Ljubljana in May 1997, called 'The Beauty and the East'. A 556 pages nettime anthology came out in 1999: *Readme! Ascii Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge*. Autonomedia: New York (ISBN: 1570270899).  
(From: <http://www.nettime.org/info.html>)

hegemonic presence on things and I don't really want to spend the rest of my life as an opponent of Nettime, you know - Its like let them be and do their thing and I'm off doing my thing do you know what I mean?

**If I remember correctly you were taking issue with a certain kind of valorization of the Internet and so called communities and so on...**

There are people who spend all day long on these conversations online and then there are other people who have to actually pay for their Internet usage and can't or who have jobs or other obligations that make it impossible to engage that way who aren't as cognizant of the terms and all of that and there was a lot of - in the early days of kind of net euphoria - there was a lot of talk about a global conversation but it didn't really seem very global to me or very democratic either because you had to be an insider to really be part of it and to really benefit from it so, you know, basically that was all I was kind of suggesting and also that you have to deconstruct what you mean by community because in different parts of the world it means very different things

**It seemed there was something in what you were writing about which was to do with an absent body, to do with a physical engagement...**

Yeah! Because a lot of the people who were involved in that whole Nettime world were not very interested in physically engaging with anybody outside or their own group, you know... they just... and it was just... I don't... I really don't want to kind of relive that moment because I also got very much sort of labelled as, you know, overly-obsessed with identity politics and all this stuff... very simplistic you know, so I would rather... lets not talk about Brian Holmes and his gang anymore

**How do you understand the relationship of art and politics?**

There are many ways that art and politics intersect with one another. I mean for me politics is about relationships of power and even within this sphere of art there are relations of power and within art institutions and within educational institutions that are involved with the study of art there are relations of power. There are artists who have attempted to address political issues in their work. There are artists who have attempted to engage in political projects in their work. I mean Reverend Billy, the performance artist ran for mayor in New York for a reason - to be able to bring a performative approach to engaging certain issues and then there are people who address political histories in their work and there are people who engage in institutional critique and look at the politics of museums in their work, there are so many different ways... but I think the saddest and most reductive view of it is this kind of art as propaganda, you know trying to quantitatively measure the effects of an art work on a particular social or particular situation by whether or not a collective... you know, large collectivity was compelled to think or change the way they live or what they do as a result of an art work and I think very little culture in the world actually has a measurable effect in that way but its also a very simplistic throw-away for why, you know... oh you can't... that's not art... then you're reducing art to something other than art... its this kind of simplistic... look! Most art students and most artists I deal with in the world have never studied political science or read political theory and they know very little about politics but what they do know is what they learn in art school that political art is bad. So, basically any artist who engages in political

issues has to confront a stereotype that's based on ignorance about the political, about the politics of art practice, about the politics of art institutions. Most students I deal with think of political art as something that happened in the 30s or in the 80s, that was bad, shouldn't be repeated... yet! I mean as a teacher I feel responsibility to try to open their understanding to more than that but that prejudice is THE prejudice that dominates the contemporary art scene. That it's some kind of reductive propagandistic thing that one should not repeat, right! And that artists who get labelled in that way - essentially it's like committing professional suicide in the states. You wouldn't want to be identified as a political artist because you would be understood as somebody who isn't really making very good art

### **Are you labelled as a political artist?**

All the time! All the time!

### **How do you deal with this?**

I say that I am a performance artist and a video artist and that I'm interested in politics as my material in the same way that you know, that Chris Burden is interested in relationships of force with his material, and that you know other people are interested in emotions as their material and other people are interested in colour as their material and other people are interested in... you know there's lots of different materials that can be used by artists in their practice. I have, you know, at certain points in my life been involved in activist endeavours but those are separate from and distinct from what I do as an artist

### **But is there also a kind of slippage that you work with in terms of the performance in MOMA for example or the...?**

Only in so far as, there have been times when, for example I was working on *Dolores from 10 to 10*\* that I was also involved with some mothers of the disappeared and trying to help them but I wasn't doing the video installation in Mexico for them, you know. I was doing the video installation as an artist and at the same time offering web support or you know graphic design support or helping them getting them in to see lawyers from the OAS or something like that but that wasn't what I was doing as an artist, I was doing that as a person, just helping them

### **It's a kind of by-product?**

Well sometimes you meet people when you're doing artwork that, you know, ask you if you can do this or that for them. And so, I do. I think it was more... when I was working on *Only Skin Deep*, which was a

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\*... "a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert," is an extraordinarily adept take on the history of racial politics in the U.S. and the harsh realities of global capitalism in the information age. The exhibition comprised three thematically related projects. A video projection, a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert (2004), was on view in the main gallery along with "Sittings," four contact sheets of images taken with a spy camera. *Dolores from 10 to 10* (2002), a three-monitor video display, was installed in the gallery's reception area.... Based on actual events, *Dolores from 10 to 10* explores the brutal exploitation of female labor. The video--its title perhaps an allusion to the classic Agnes Varda film *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1961)--similarly follows the actions of a female protagonist. The piece restages the 12-hour interrogation of a maquiladora laborer accused of attempting to unionize workers. Originally performed by Fusco and Ricardo Dominguez at Helsinki's Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art and shown via live Internet feed, the work was displayed here in video form to simulate closed-circuit television. Viewers watch Fusco's drawn-out questioning and intermittent idleness as she is deprived of food, water and telephone access." (From: Coco Fusco at the Project (Art in America, Nov, 2004 by D.C. Murray))

big photo exhibition about the history of racial representation in American photography. That to me felt like much more of a political project inside the art world where I was really trying to propose a different way of organising material on race and a different way of engaging audiences about these issues, it wasn't the way that museums handle Black history **month** or Hispanic heritage **fund (3/7.20)** or even the Black work in their collections. I wanted to propose a different way of reading and it was a real uphill battle and a challenge to convince people that that would be understandable or worthwhile. That to me was much more of a political endeavour inside an institution than the things that I've done as an artist

**Because of the kind of transformative potential...**

Because it was a direct confrontation with the way that museums handle these issues so as to make them non-issues, right!

**While I'm not sure what a political artist is, but I understand you much more as talking to the art world, and I see you as kind of angry with the art world and at times as disenchanted with the art world**

Well aren't you?

**No I'm not**

Well maybe in about 10 years you will be

**In *Questioning the Frame Thoughts about maps and spatial logic in the global present*, you talk about what's being left out - what we don't address as artists and "what has happened, for example, to institutional self-critique in the art world? Why has such examination become taboo in exhibitions or unpopular with artists who gravitate to political subjects? Why in the midst of myriad investigations of corporate control of politics and culture is there little or no attention paid to corporate control of the museums and of corporate influence in art collecting? Why is it acceptable to the art world for an artist to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but not to address the pressure put on the organizers of global art exhibitions to showcase a disproportionate number of Israeli artists? Why is it fine for black artists to celebrate the construction of black style but not to make visible the virtual absence of black people as arbiters in the power structures of the art institutions, galleries, magazines and auction houses where black art is given economic and aesthetic value?" and so on. This is very much an argument with the art world**

Yeah. And then other time I've also... you know in the 80s there was a different kind of agenda to be addressed. At that time institutional critique was very popular and there were entire regions of the world let out of Biennales. I was at a Documenta in 1987 and there were artists from Latin America saying you know the only Latin American who's ever exhibited in Documenta at that time was Alfredo Jaar. I mean when are you going to pay attention to an entire continent of people, right? But between 1987 and 2002 everything changed in terms of what was being put in museums, right. But certain questions about the politics of museum presentation had been suppressed in the late 90s at the point at which museum patronage in the States shifted to be much more heavily weighted toward private sector involvement,

right. So, you know... I mean I think I'm not angry at the art world, I think I get somewhat... there are times when I get irritated by duplicity and hypocrisy but I think I would be equally irritated if I found that in any area, any field, right. So, you know, I think that in some ways there are sectors of the art world, there are spaces within the art world that allow people a lot of latitude and a lot of relative freedom, and that, you know I think that's part of what attracted me to it was that there are ways in which you can do and say things within visual arts that you can't do in other areas, I certainly saw that in Cuba, you know from the 80s onwards and I think its still the case that people get away with murder in visual arts in Cuba and if they tried to do the same thing in literature or journalism they'd go to jail. So, you know, there are some ways in which the ambiguity of the image, of image-making allows for a certain kind of relative freedom and I appreciate that and I think also that there are attempts to engage in the art world that are, you know, much more... direct and heartfelt than in some other areas, but... I'm very... I don't think I'm an old fashioned Marxist but I do think economics plays a big role in how things are done and I think what... if there's anything that I find somewhat irritating in the art world is this kind of endless cat and mouse game that's played with the question of the economic because from the moment of teaching students in art school, all the way through to the big kind of art fair- Biennale thing, there's always this kind of attempt to, on the one hand hide how much money has to do with these things and then on the other hand, you know, there's an attempt to steer students and young artists towards practices that will generate income as opposed to art practices that wont so the economic determines the valuation of work and the prejudices of teachers but at the same time the same teachers are speling all this romantic notion of having to be inspired and you know and so on and so forth and they don't actually talk to students very often about the professional side of things and the economics of things and I don't mean economics in a strictly monetary sense, but even culture capital, social capital... so, I mean that I find, that kind of hypocrisy I find a bit taxing at this point in my life. I mean I've been at this long enough to know it inside out but I don't think I'm particularly angry at the world per se... I mean I make a living, I have a teaching job, I travel internationally, I show my work all over the place, I can't complain, right. I'm not a millionaire, but I'm not uncomfortable, or impoverished so why would I be angry when I've negotiated a space for my own existence within that world you know.

**and you acknowledge your own kind of complicity in the art world within the work ...**

Well what is that complicity, that I call myself an artist, I mean what is it?

**Maybe that you're part of that economy that you say is problematic**

I actually... if I can contribute to maintaining alive the possibility of surviving as an artist without having to you know lick the boots of every rich person around me, then I would... if that's complicity then I'm happy to be complicit, because the art world that I came into as a young person, what was interesting to me was the space that had been created by artists who were critical of the market place, who were interested in having a more laboratory-like atmosphere and a space for reflection and engagement that wasn't just about selling something attractive to somebody to put on their living room wall so if what I do contributes to the survival of that sphere then call me complicit, I think that's great

**Why the term came up in my mind was something to do with another piece of your work Operation Atropos\*... you write from a point where your motivations are clear and unambiguous....**

You're talking about the book, the guide... okay! But that's also a particular voice - epistolary, right! This kind of responding to Virginia Woolf, which also took a very particular tone in **3 Guineas\***, so it was a voice. I have to say, I was, when I started working on Interrogation I had made a very conscious, very pointed decision to work from my position as an artist against war, so in that sense I had a purpose, right. But when I got into my investigation what I ended up learning was how complicated the question of torture was in interrogation and that I learned a lot from my dialogue with professionals in the field that made me understand that there is a grey area, that even though I would always advocate for adherence to law in terms of, you know, of controlling interrogators so that they not practice torture, I also have to acknowledge that what we understand to be torture is not a fixed category and that why torture happens is also not... there's also not a fixed reason for why it happens. And that these ideas that civilians who have never been involved in the military have about the kind of people who torture are driven by some personal sadistic urge or are some kind of aberration is completely wrong and actually I understand torture as a kind of economy of power relations that we as civilians are totally complicit in and I... if anything I feel much more responsible for the practice of torture by Americans now than I did when I started my project.

**How do you feel complicit?**

Because the only way that torture stops is when the people who aren't torturing actually speak up and prevent it from happening

**Can you do that?**

We have! In the past. I mean after World War II, human rights law was created by people who weren't military people, by people who were responding to the atrocities of the Second World War. So the public - a global public responded to the practice of torture by attempting to control it and hey they were not the practitioners of torture, it wasn't the military that stood up against it. During the Vietnam War American civilians stood up in large numbers and said we don't want to go on with this insane thing. We have not done this in the US - yet in any significant numbers since the war began. There has been no mass-scale orchestrated protest against American practice of torture so it goes on because we allow it to happen. Not because individuals do it but that we allow it to happen.

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\* "...Interrogation is the subject of Operation Atropos, a new video by Coco Fusco, which makes its East Coast debut tonight at the City University New York Graduate Center... The idea for the video began when Ms Fusco an interdisciplinary artist [...] was preparing a performance piece in which she assumed the character of a female interrogator at Abu Ghraib. She realized that to continue the work, she needed training in interrogation techniques. Through an Internet search she found a source of instruction: the Prisoner of War Interrogation Resistance Program run by a private concern called Team Delta, based in Philadelphia. The organizers of the program are former members of the United States Intelligence Agency and self-described specialists in the "psychology of capture" In its original form the course was used to train elite soldiers to resist interrogation if captured, and to extract information from political prisoners. Ms Fusco solicited volunteers to join her - 6 women, 3 of them former Columbia students (it cost about 8,000 dollars for the group - Ms Fusco paid) She also arranged to have the course videotaped, with the artist Kambui Olujimi as director of photography." (From: Coco Fusco's Operation Atropos' : Fantasy Interrogation, Real Tension by Holland Cotter)

\* **3 Guineas**

### **Why is that?**

Because we don't really know what it is. Because it's very complicated. You have to know a lot about law and about war to understand how and why torture happens and what it is and most Americans couldn't give a damn because it's not happening to them.

**You talk about the Abu Ghraib images and what Susan Sontag calls the “pleasurable complicity for us as viewers”, noting that the “Abu Ghraib pictures were particularly disturbing because they created a place of pleasurable complicity for us as viewers, as lynching postcards once had. The amateurish snapshots of smiling sadists in uniform taunting and bullying their victims had an insidiously intimate quality to them”. I was thinking about you creating your own ‘character’ and how you say you “poured over” detainee testimonials and human right reports... And then still “hungry” for a “closer look” at how the language is spoken, “I took a group of young women...” and so on. I’m interested in your own growing fascination for this whole activity...**

Well I went to this as a performance artist not just as a thinking person but as a performer and I realized that if I want to embody something in a character or create a performance that has a physical dimension to it then I have to understand what it is and that I couldn't get it all from words, that I have to actually be with people and around bodies and see people doing things and see what happens to me - the chemistry of my own body when I'm in that world, right. And so, yes, so there's a part of it which is a personal artistic investigation as a performer but then there's another part of which is that – I think I maybe even mention it in the little book, that... between the attack on 9/11, so between 2001 and 2008, there was something like an 800 per cent increase in the quantity of images of torture in the American media, in television and in the news. So the American public was being force-fed with an enormous amount of data but it was all presented in images, not in text, right! TV shows, movies, news reports, Internet stuff, this was just like an explosion of media around the subject. That doesn't happen in a Capitalist society unless there's a demand, okay. We're not in a... This is not China, we're not force-fed our media, we consume what we're attracted to. Now there are ways in which marketing can create taste, right, can create similar desires but you have to be part of that dynamic in order for it to move forward and it did move forward during that period so yes there was a certain... my own fascination was probably, in a sense, an intensified version of what was going on, on a much larger scale

### **What do you think artists responsibility, if any, is today?**

Some people feel very irresponsible or just responsible to themselves. You know, I can't tell artists what to do because as soon as you tell an artist what to do, they're going to want to do something else, right

### **Does art have a responsibility?**

No I don't think art has a responsibility. I think that human beings who live in a world with others have certain ethical and moral responsibilities and that some of us seek to live up to that and other don't but I don't think that art in any kind of specific way has more or less responsibility than other fields of work. I mean I think there are people who try very hard to make an argument for that but it always backfires

**Chantal Mouffe divides art up into what she calls critical and consensual and it seems that critical art has a responsibility of some kind. She says “Clearly those who advocate the creation of agonistic public spaces, where the objective is to unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus, are going to envisage the relation between artistic practices and their public in a very different way than those whose objective is the creation of consensus...”**

Of course

**...even if this consensus is seen as a critical one. According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that forments dissensus, that makes visible what is the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of...”**

But do you somebody... do you want an external entity to tell you which one you have to do. Do you want an external institution to give you an order and say that you can only get a grant if you make agonistic art? I mean as soon as that happens you end up with a situation in which artists rebel and unfortunately the more you try to impose upon artists the responsibility to be socially engaged, the more egotistical and self cantered they become in response to that, so, you know I think its not strategically beneficial in the long run to start telling people that they have to be socially responsible because, they will... a lot of artists are you know somewhat ego-maniacal to begin with are just going to become even more that way. Does that mean I don't try to be somewhat responsible... I know... I'm a single mother with a fulltime job, I have only so much time. I want to use my time for art in the most productive way possible. I think that there are things that I can do, that maybe I'm not the only person... but that I might be able to do better than others and that would make me feel more satisfied personally but also in a kind of ethical moral sense so that's what I try to do. But I know that the minute that I try to impose that on another artist I'm heading for trouble. If they want to do it, great, if they don't want to do it, but then be... live up to it and own up to, you know, if you want to be consensual own up to and say that's all you want

**I thought that's partly what you were calling on institutions to do in your performance....**

Look, are you talking about the thing I did in MoMA\*? that was a 15 lecture. You have to understand the specifics of that context, okay. MoMA had never done a show on feminism. MoMA had never devoted an event, a public event to feminism. It was the first time in the history of the most prestigious museum in the country, the response, just the demand for seating in that space so radically exceeded the expectations of the organisers that they realised that they were addressing a major **lacuna**, right, in their thinking, okay. It was an inter-generational event with some of the, you know **grand dames from the Lindan Achlands** and the Lucy Lippards who'd started the discourse in the 60s and the **Griselda Pollock's** and the so on

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\* The Museum of Modern Art organized a symposium in January 2007 called “The Feminist Future,” and I was invited to speak. It was a landmark occurrence, the first time that MoMA publicly acknowledged the significance of feminist art and art history. The conference coincided with two exhibitions of feminist art: “WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and “Global Feminisms” at the Brooklyn Museum. These events generated an enormous amount of discussion in the media and in the academy about whether feminist art had “arrived,” and whether feminist art history had been mainstreamed. This view of the state of feminist art seemed somewhat out of sync with reality to me— first, the art world continues to be hostile to all practices that politicize aesthetic values and ruling tastes. Second, neither MoMA nor MoCA were committing to acquire feminist artworks, which would have constituted a much stronger form of recognition of feminism's “value.” I decided to use my fifteen minutes on a MoMA podium to perform as a visitor from the US Army who had arrived to congratulate my peers in the art world for their strategic containment of feminism and their effective use of women. (A FIELD GUIDE FOR FEMALE INTERROGATORS, COCO FUSCO v.10 C 02.11.08)

and so forth, all the way through to very young curators and artists of the present. I was on a panel in the morning with the Guerilla Girls right after Lucy Lippard. They put politics at 9 in the morning in the assumption I suppose that people wouldn't have shown up yet right. I decided to do a performative lecture because I figured in that environment it was the best way to make certain kinds of points without making people angry or boring them and also because MoMA would never invite you to perform so if I was going to ever perform at MoMA I would have to do it in the context of an educational departments event . I also wanted to say certain things to the people in that room. Not to the institutions in the art world, to the people in that room. That's all it was. It was to a number of curators and artists who had benefited themselves from the contributions of feminist art historians, the first generation and who had then turned around and decided that feminism was bunk and unnecessary. Once they were in, once they got their little bit of the pie, right, or who went in and were just acting out in very classically anti-feminist ways like the kind of **Tracy Emin** approach to art making. 'I'm a bad girl, I'm going to shock everybody by being drunk and out of control', and I wanted to be able to say that there was something strange happening there in the sense that the third wave, right because by this time we're in kind of third wave - was so complicit with institutions, in other words, that they had embraced power by wanting to be part of it so much that they had renounced the kind of first and second wave demand for institutional reform and institutional critique, okay. And they were in that room. Those women were there, right. And that's all. I just wanted to be able to find a way to say it so that that could become... because a lot of people were being very critical what was being said that day. There were many art historians getting up and saying, you know 'why is this all about the market, how come the Griselda Pollock's and the Lucy Lippards are talking about artist who never made it into the system and the younger people are only talking about artists who have been in Documenta' you know 'what does this mean, what's going on here?' 'Why isn't there politics any more', right! But I could get away with in costume speaking as a military official and have it go over fairly well. I mean it was one of the only performances I've done where I was very critical where people actually laughed and applauded and embraced me afterwards, you know, and invited me to the Whitney Biennale. I got a lot of mileage out of it. So, you know, but it wasn't like I'm angry at all the institutions or anything like that. It was a very specific calculated move in that context to say, you know, its not... the problem isn't just that MoMA haven't acquired enough work by women or that they're not going to acquire work by women as a result of the success of this event its that the women that are here gathering under the umbrella of feminism aren't even really feminists anymore and we need to at least address that shift in consciousness and what it has to do with having basically become more enamoured of being part of the power structure than of actually altering that structure

**And do you think there's an added urgency to that in relation to what you talked about in terms of a kind of female sexuality being used as an interrogation...**

But that's not an art world issue...

**But there's a kind of an analogy...**

The analogy I was trying to draw was between women in the military embracing power and then being complicit with oppression and women in the art world embracing power and then being complicit with oppression. I definitely wanted to make that parallel although I couldn't say it directly...