

Coco Fusco

I Learned to Swim on
Dry Land



**MAC
BA**

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I Learned to Swim on Dry Land is the first sentence of the poetic micro-story *Natación* (Swimming), written by the Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera in 1957. With this title, the first monographic exhibition dedicated to Coco Fusco (New York, 1960) is presented in Spain. A key figure in video art and performance, activism within and outside the institutional sphere, and critical discourse associated with art theory and criticism since the late 1980s, her intellectual voice has acquired significant relevance given the current change of political paradigms, including the hardening of immigration policies, the rise of the right and the consolidation of certain structural paradoxes inherited from Western modernity.



Photo: Geandy Pavón, 2021.

As she herself states: ‘So much of my endeavor over the past three decades has been devoted to relaying, recalling, interpreting and embodying those who have occupied the place of the other in Western culture. ... Fictions that attract us also weigh upon us, and once we invest in them as truths they can never be completely dispelled. I carry their weight when I assume the role of an ethnographic oddity, or a posthuman scientist, or a survivor of colonial massacres, or prisoner of postmodern warfare, or a subaltern service worker peddling fantasies for tourists and assembling trinkets for insatiable consumers.’¹

The exhibition’s focal points are the word, the symbolic use of silence or its imposition, and the inversion of language and the historical and present-day confrontation between artistic expression and power. A critical place here is occupied by Cuban poetry and literature, present in the different exhibition areas. The lives and imaginaries of dissident creators who have endured or are enduring repression weave an audiovisual, performative and documentary journey that presents post-revolutionary Cuba to us within a complex formulation of ideas about revolution and homeland.

Cuba as an Empty Square

The exhibition begins with an open space, a physical imaginary of the public sphere that brings Fusco’s projects together on a topographical icon that is both a place – the Plaza de la Revolución – and a metaphor for the unfinished promise of revolutionary Cuba. Her projects observe the consequences of the economic embargo and revise the romantic visions of the Cuban revolution that persist in Europe and the United States three decades after the end of the Cold War. Fusco has been collaborating since the 1980s with Cuban artists, poets and filmmakers on the island and in the diaspora, focusing since the end of the Fidel Castro era in 2008 on conflicts that occur between artists and the state.

To Die Dreaming (2011) and *The Empty Plaza* (2012) foreground Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución in a meditation on public space, revolutionary promise and memory. In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring protests, Fusco questions why this square remains empty: what is lost with the institutionalization of revolution? Also exhibited are several videos about repressed poets – Heberto Padilla (*La Confesión*, 2015), María Elena Cruz Varela (*The Message in a Bottle from María Elena*, 2015) and Reinaldo Arenas (*To Live in June with Your Tongue Hanging Out*, 2018) – along with the project *Confidencial: Autores Firmantes* (Confidential: Signing Authors, 2015).

¹ Coco Fusco, ‘Introduction’, *Coco Fusco: Tomorrow, I Will Become an Island* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023), 9.

The Agency of the Other

During the years Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña realized their well-known performance *The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–93), they encountered two responses to their personification of characters from the fictional island of Guatinau. While the mainstream public believed that the Guatinauans were actual natives, intellectuals and artists insisted on discussing the piece's moral implications rather than the work itself. What was meant to be a satirical commentary on concepts such as exoticism and primitivism proved to be a revealing exercise about the role of cultural institutions and the exhibition event as a producer of the notion of otherness. Also exhibited is the installation *Mexarcane*

International (1994–95), a collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña on the persistence of colonial fantasies in contemporary consumer culture.

Fusco has collaborated with the artist and performer Nao Bustamante to create actions addressing the politics and imaginaries of identity and gender. Included in the exhibition are *Stuff* (1996–99), a commentary on globalization, tourism and sexism, as well as *Paquita y Chata* (1996), a photographic version of the Mexican papier-mâché Lupita dolls that traditionally represented wayward women and prostitutes.



Coco Fusco, *The Undiscovered Amerindians Tour*, 1992-1994/2019. Inkjet print on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brussels, Paris, New York. Photo by EstudioEmOmbra. © Coco Fusco, VEGAP, Barcelona.

Power and Prison

The Eternal Night (2023) is screened in a bespoke cinematic space. Based on the testimony of the poet Néstor Díaz de Villegas, imprisoned in Cuba in the 1970s, it recreates life in prison and the power of the imagination to transcend it. Also presented is *Aponte's Lost Podcast* (2025), an installation produced for MACBA with the artist and activist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, who is currently serving a sentence in a prison in Guanajay. Fusco connects his banned drawings to the revolutionary drawings of José Antonio Aponte, an Afro-Cuban activist who organised a slave rebellion in 1812. During the interrogation that preceded his execution, Aponte described the drawings that had been destroyed. 'To create the Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara project,' says Fusco, 'I recorded Otero Alcántara's descriptions of his drawings during a series of phone calls and sent those recordings to several of his artist friends.' Fusco asked them to adopt materials used by Cuban prisoners such as pens and cigarette packets.

In *Rights of Passage* (1997), made for the Johannesburg Biennale, Fusco created a checkpoint to access the enclosure, thus reflecting on the racist and discriminatory conditions of institutional power during Apartheid.

Civil Disobedience and Direct Action

The reenactment or reactivation of certain gestures and languages of power has been the subject of several of Fusco's works where she declares the futility of artistic practices that claim to exist outside a framework of institutional representation. In this 'inversion of the frame, or reversal of the



Camila Lobón, *Presade la libertad* for the Aponte's Lost Podcast project, 2025. Drawing made with a ballpoint pen on Cuban cigarette pack paper.



Coco Fusco, *The Feminine Touch*, 2008. C-prints on full aluminum mount. Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brussels, Paris, New York. © Coco Fusco, VEGAP, Barcelona.

gaze' – as the writer Anna Gritz reminds us – Fusco manifests the need for the creation of new institutions and new infrastructures that offer the conditions of possibility for an art that is critical of the system, operating within and outside of it.

This area addresses the ambivalence of that 'sanctuary' of freedom that once described the United States. A police infrastructure that denies civil rights to people deprived of their liberty and a dehumanizing order of individuals or specific groups are the subjects of projects such as *Bare Life Study #1* (2005), *Operation Atropos* (2006), *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2006–08) and *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert and Sightings* (2004). The same racial, cultural and class stereotypes are behind performances such as *Sudaca Enterprises* (1997),² executed with Juan Pablo Ballester and María Elena Escalona at the ARCO art fair in Madrid, *Eu Sou Um Consumidor* (I Am a Consumer, 2014), developed in a shopping mall in Rio de Janeiro, and *Your Eyes Will be an Empty Word* (2021), part of the MACBA Collection, which takes us to the Hart Island (New York) cemetery for indigent and unidentified individuals and those who died of aids and Covid-19.



Coco Fusco, *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2006-08). Photographic print on cotton paper. Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brussels, Paris, New York. © Coco Fusco, VEGAP, Barcelona.

Fusco Archive

It is rare for an artist to formulate their practice from such a multifaceted perspective that combines artistic research; the study of film language; the narratives derived from literature, poetry and theoretical analysis; political satire; criticism and social justice projects. A documentation space presents these different facets along with three newly created works made in collaboration with Loid Der: *Environmental Activists Assassinated Worldwide* (2023), *Journalists Killed at Work Worldwide* (2023–24) and *Artists in Prison Worldwide* (2024). Their names – embodying memories of resistance and protest – occupy the museum walls.

² *Sudaca* is a derogatory, racist term used in Spain to refer to Latin Americans.

It is sometimes reappropriated – and thus neutralized – by Latin Americans themselves.

This exhibition is curated by: Elvira Dyangani Ose, director of the MACBA.

Exhibition Coordinator: Meritxell Colina.

In collaboration with: El Museo del Barrio. **With the support of:** The Ford Foundation.

If You Would Rather Listen

Coco Fusco's voice and explanations will guide you through the exhibition, thanks to MACBA's free digital guide.

Expanded Exhibition

Opening Conversation

Thursday, 22 May at 6:30pm

Coco Fusco and the exhibition curator Elvira Dyangani Ose are joined in conversation by the Cuban-American poet and essayist Néstor Díaz de Villegas (the protagonist of Fusco's film *The Eternal Night*) and Sandra Ceballos, a Cuban artist, activist, and founder of the independent art space Aglutinador.

Public Programme

Memory is a Landscape in Ruins

Cuban Independent Film Series

7, 14, 21, 28 May, 7pm

Through films that explore exile, censorship and memory, this program features filmmakers who question official narratives and reinvent images of resistance with an intimate gaze.

Curated by José Luis Aparicio.

Quadern Portàtil

The *Quadern portàtil* no. 42, presents a Catalan translation of 'The Other History of Intercultural Performance', a 1994 essay by Fusco from *The Drama Review*, and one year later published in her book *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (The New Press, 1995), where the artist reflects on identity, authenticity and representation in intercultural exchanges. The edition can be consulted in PDF format on the MACBA website.

Tours, Opening Hours and Admission

Tours

From 1 June

Sundays, 12.30pm.

Free Entry.

For booking and additional information, go to **macba.cat**.

Friends of MACBA

Thursday, 12 June, 6pm,

led by Elvira Dyangani Ose.

Check out our exclusive guided tours for Friends of MACBA at **macba.cat**.

Opening Hours

Mondays to Fridays

(closed Tuesdays except public holidays)

11am – 7:30pm (25 September
to 24 June)

10am – 8pm (25 June to 24 September)

Saturdays: 10am – 8pm

Sundays: 10am – 3pm

Public holidays: please check the
website for opening times

Museum tickets are valid for one month.

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