

# MODERN PAINTERS

September 2006



## PERFORMANCE CINDY CARR

### GET REAL

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Fusco told Team Delta she was a performer who "wanted to learn about interrogation as a political drama." They were intrigued. "We see ourselves as actors," they said.

### Politics via torture and trade in art from New York

In another victory for the Bush administration, a midsummer Harris poll reported that 50 percent of Americans now believe that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction when the US invaded in 2003—up from an already depressing 36 percent in February. Maybe a political world increasingly in the thrall of fiction demands political art that's increasingly real. This fall, two New York-based artists, Coco Fusco and Michael Rakowitz, deliberately blur the boundaries between art and life in works that address the consequences of the so-called war on terror.

Throughout her career, Coco Fusco has investigated power, politics, and the condition of being other. When she decided to create a performance based on the abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, she took as her point of departure the gleeful participation of military women in the sexual humiliation of prisoners. In 2005, an Arabic translator who'd worked at Gitmo revealed that female interrogators there sometimes dressed scantily, rubbed their bodies against detainees, and wiped fake menstrual blood across prisoners' faces. A devout Muslim man considers

it taboo to have contact with menstruating women or any woman not his wife. This use of "emancipated" women as weapons, says Fusco, is a right-wing perversion of feminism that erodes the female soldier's control over her body.

To understand "how the military imagines itself, and how the military teaches soldiers to imagine the enemy," Fusco sought out realistic training. In summer 2005 she enrolled in the Prisoner of War Interrogation Resistance Program run by Team Delta, a company created by ex-Army personnel offering "authentic military experiences," from battle tactics to boot-camp fitness. Team Delta specializes, however, in interrogation, training law-enforcement officers and appearing regularly as experts on the subject. The course Fusco selected is Team Delta's toughest, modeled on the Army's SERE school for special-ops personnel; the initials stand for Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape.

When Fusco approached Team Delta, she told them the truth, that she was a performer who "wanted to learn about interrogation as a political drama." According to her, they were intrigued—"We see ourselves as actors," they said—and gave her permission to film. But before Fusco could learn to coerce, she had to be coerced herself: Team Delta requires all would-be interrogators to learn first

what it's like to be a captive. She recruited a group of abductees, including three of her former Columbia MFA students, and picked up the tab—about \$1,400 per participant for the four-day course, plus hotel, transport to the Pennsylvania mountains, and a cameraman.

Team Delta gave the women a code word, a mission, and the name of a contact their captors would try to extract: they would be prisoners for one day, as documented in Fusco's video *Operation Atropos* (2006), named for the Greek Fate who cuts the thread of life. While they knew they'd be kidnapped, they didn't know when. They look shocked when six men in ski masks and fatigues pounce on their van with a lurch of too-real violence: the Delta operatives wave guns, scream orders, and handcuff them. Fusco narrates the day's subsequent fugue: "I get freaked out. I get strip-searched. I am given a number. I'm totally disoriented and walking under a hood for hours. I'm in a barbed-wire pen. I'm rolling in the dirt. I'm sweating. Or I'm hungry. Or I'm cold. I'm in a room with this creepy guy screaming at me." She was forced to drink a gallon of water nonstop, and was occasionally struck at pressure points—under the jawbone, under the ribcage—to cause temporary, disabling pain.

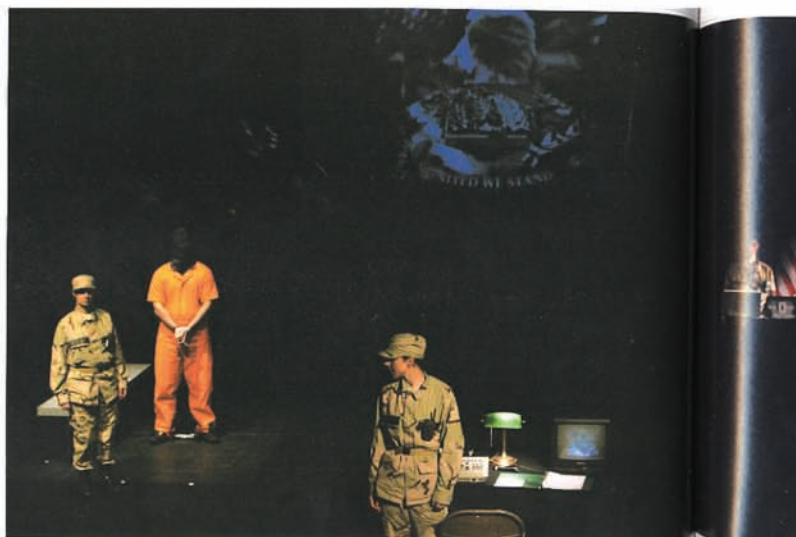
*Operation Atropos* makes clear that even a simulated detainee experience leads to real discomfort, real stress, and real vulnerability. In the end, four of the seven women broke, in each case under a technique called Love of Comrade. Hooded most of the day and separated from one another, the members of Fusco's party were made to believe that the interrogators were hurting another member of the group.

After the captivity ended, Team »



MICHAEL RAKOWITZ  
*RETURN, 2004-  
DETAIL OF SHIPPING  
BOX, 2005*  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
FORWARD-FRONT PROJECTS





COCO FUSCO  
A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN:  
WOMEN AND POWER IN  
THE NEW AMERICA, 2005  
PERFORMANCE STILL  
PHOTOGRAPH BY A. COOK  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
CREATIVE TIME, NEW YORK

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Rakowitz will ship items free to the Iraqi diaspora, advertising this service in an Arab-American newspaper.

Delta spent three days presenting their analysis of the experience, evaluating each woman's "performance" and teaching them some 15 interrogation techniques sanctioned by the Geneva Convention.

Informed by her ordeal in an orange jumpsuit, Fusco created *A Room of One's Own: Women in Power in the New America* (2005), in which she plays a US Army interrogator briefing prison visitors. Defending torture, Sergeant Fusco gives a PowerPoint lecture on techniques women can use to sexually harass prisoners, arguing that this responsibility represents an advance for women in the military and a key to winning the war on terror. Occasionally she exits to confront a prisoner in another room while the audience watches via closed-circuit television. A female MP brings in a dog. Fusco screams at the man in pidgin Arabic and douses him with water. Together, the two women begin to strip him.

While Sergeant Fusco's power—and her room—are far from anything envisioned by Virginia Woolf, the sadistic role is a radical departure for the artist: in perhaps her best-known piece, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–94), she and collaborator Guillermo Gómez-Péna exhibited themselves in a 10-by-12-foot cage as anthropological specimens from a fictional island off the coast of Mexico. But playing a detainee would have been too easy, she decided. Nor would it have been quite right. The artist, who once identified herself as Yoruba-Taino-Catalan-Sephardic-Neapolitan-Cuban-American, acknowledges a fact of life in the US, c. 2006: "My cultural connection is to the victimizer side. I'm American."

Like Fusco's oeuvre, Michael Rak-

owitz's latest project bears the imprint of his history, albeit in a more direct fashion. Rakowitz's maternal grandparents were Iraqis who lived in Baghdad until 1946, when they fled a climate in which Jews were increasingly disenfranchised. Relocated to New York, his grandfather opened Davisons and Company in midtown Manhattan, importing everything from carpets to spices—including, as Rakowitz puts it, "the Cadillac of dates." United Nations sanctions stopped that traffic in 1990. Though sanctions ended after the US invasion in 2003, the disaster that is everyday life in Baghdad has made for a de facto embargo ever since.

Rakowitz's *Return* (2004–) revives

his grandfather's import-export business in a Brooklyn storefront, where he too will specialize in transactions with Iraq. Much of his artwork exists in this fashion, "passing" in the nonart world. In 1998, for example, he began giving inflatable shelters to homeless people in New York, Baltimore, and Boston. Called *paraSITES*, the structures attach to external architectural heating vents, both responding to a societal need and serving as a visible sign of societal neglect.

At the end of July, Rakowitz made contact with Iraqi merchants through the Baghdad Business Center. Now, from an office near Atlantic Avenue's Arab commercial strip, he plans to

offer samples and take orders—not just for the famous *barhi* dates but also for cumin, sesame seeds, sumac, and date syrup, which has special resonance for the artist: he remembers his grandfather pressing his own syrup, used by Iraqi Jews instead of honey during Rosh Hashanah. As for the export half of his "business," Rakowitz will ship items free to the Iraqi diaspora, advertising Davisons & Company's gratis service in the Arab-American newspaper *Aramica*. He's offered the service in earlier incarnations of *Return* at Jamaica Center for the Arts in Queens (2004) and Longwood Art Gallery in the Bronx (2005). This time Rakowitz will also provide shipping for American soldiers' families, though they can of course use the military post; and technically, Iraqi-Americans could just use the US Postal Service, which does connect to its Iraqi counterpart. (FedEx and DHL deliver only to Iraqi ports.) But the fees are exorbitant. In 2004, for example, he mailed an 8x10 photo to Ramadi in the usual flat envelope—for \$48.

Like Krzysztof Wodiczko, with whom he studied, Rakowitz is interested in bringing visibility to marginalized populations and fostering cultural exchange outside a strict art context. He fantasizes about getting an Iraqi family and an American military family into the storefront at the same time. "I'm not just looking to have the business exist on a pragmatic level," says Rakowitz, "but also to scandalize that pragmatism."

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN and RETURN are presented this fall in New York City by public art organization Creative Time as part of the series WHO CARES. Fusco performs at P.S.122 September 27–October 1. Rakowitz presents RETURN through October.



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MICHAEL RAKOWITZ  
RETURN, 2004—  
ITEM FOR EXPORT  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
LOMBARD-FREID PROJECTS