

The Vicissitudes of Conduct

Daniel R Quiles

Coco Fusco's *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* is a unique endeavour: a sobering, Foucauldian analysis of a vibrant national art scene infiltrated by a repressive state. As a flip through the generous illustrations attests, the volume doubles as a historical overview of 'performance' in post-revolutionary Cuba more generally: from state-mandated spectacles for modelling conduct in the early 1960s to today's protests and hunger strikes on behalf of political prisoners; from the vernacular endurance practiced in religious processions to the packaging of bodily vitality for tourists at venues like the Tropicana Nightclub. With impressive concision, Fusco contextualises Cuban performance art and makes a case for it as a privileged site of critique since the 1980s. She advances something like a new, anti-aesthetic canon, grounded in confrontations with an official culture so pervasive that all but a victimised few evade some degree of artistic compromise.

'Performance', Fusco declares,

which emerged as a distinct art form on the island in the 1980s, has been the most important medium for challenging state control of the arts and testing the limits of public expression in Cuban civil society.¹

This claim calls to mind the author's background as a critic, curator and performance artist in her own right who emerged at the height of the Culture Wars, arguably the last time in the United States when artists waged a sustained and visible battle of words and images with government forces.² Her art and curatorial projects since the 1990s have consistently addressed political topics, from race to feminism to torture practices during the Bush years; as a writer, she has published an essential reader on Latin American performance art in addition to numerous critical texts.³ Given her personal background as a Cuban-American whose parents emigrated from the island six years before her birth, *Dangerous Moves* does not pretend to be a disinterested study. This is consistent with Fusco's underlying contention that for everyone involved with Cuban art and culture, even those living abroad, there are choices to be made with regards to a ubiquitous state and its interventions in cultural production. Perhaps anticipating the concern that her project might be misinterpreted as a political statement in its own right, she makes it clear that her goal is to offer an accurate picture of the realities artists have continued to face:

Whether one is on the island or elsewhere, the pressure to align oneself unequivocally for or against Cuba is often overwhelming and frustrating, as this forecloses a more nuanced understanding of how politics and culture are lived, created and resisted.⁴

Dangerous Moves is comprised of three sections: 'Scandalous Speaking Bodies', 'An Archaeology of Cuban Conduct' and 'Rebellion, Retrenchment and Retrieval'. These thematic chapters allow Fusco to freely navigate between historical periods and developments both within and beyond the field of art: the imposition of revolutionary conduct on the Cuban populace more generally in the 1960s and 1970s; the brilliant institutional provocations of the 'New Cuban Art' of the 1980s; the turn away from direct confrontation that attended the emigration of the 1980s generation and the privatisation of art during the 'Special Period in Peacetime'; and the heightened international scrutiny and networks of recent years. Fusco opens the first section by setting up Angel Delgado's performance *La esperanza es lo último que se está perdiendo* (Hope is the Last Thing We Are Losing), 1990, as a paradigmatic case. The artist defecated on a copy of *Granma*, the Communist Party newspaper, at the opening of a group exhibition at the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales in Havana. He first entered the gallery as a

visitor (having not been included in the exhibition) and laid out a series of prints in a circle. He then placed the newspaper, a hole ripped in the middle, in the centre of the circle, relieved himself, and distributed the prints to audience members. The artist was arrested six days later and ultimately served six months in prison.

There is a before- and an after-Angel Delgado... Between 1988 and 1990, numerous exhibitions were censored, artworks were confiscated and artists whose content, tactics or personal style tested the boundaries of revolutionary decorum were subject to mysterious retractions of invitations, intimidating interrogations and politically motivated rumour campaigns... Cuban artists in the spotlight understood that they had three choices: demonstrate proper conduct and reap benefits, leave the country or risk enduring various forms of internal exile: expulsion from professional organisations and jobs, social marginalization or incarceration.⁵

These panoptic conditions of artistic production, as Fusco sketches them, are extended trans-historically elsewhere in her book: ‘Cuban artists create with an awareness of the state’s power over them, regardless of whether they address that situation in their work directly.’⁶ However much Delgado helped produce a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in which many of the 1980s generation migrated from the island, he also served as evidence of a lasting condition that Fusco identifies with Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower: ‘the modern state’s “techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations”’.⁷

A close reading of Delgado’s work elucidates Fusco’s definition – and valuation – of a particular sort of ‘performance art’. In placing emphasis on a discrete event and the artist’s own body, she hews to aspects of RoseLee Goldberg’s foundational definition of the genre.⁸ Delgado’s performance relied on an irreducibly material, authentic trace of his body to produce an expression of dissent. Fusco traces his use of excrement to an avant-garde lineage dating back to Piero Manzoni, as well as to a Cuban expression for mocking anything sacred; yet it is essential that Delgado literalised the linguistic operation, all the better to posit ‘a symbolic refusal of the revolution’s power over his person and his artistic identity’.⁹ The work’s duration was followed – and effectively expanded – by the appearance of state power, effectively transforming the privileged moment (the ‘you had to be there’ school of performance) into a narrative of provocation or resistance whose importance supersedes that of the original.

The ‘before’ Delgado that Fusco details is the so-called ‘New Cuban Art’ of the 1980s, here filtered to emphasise the central role of performance. She locates origin points in the 1970s, with Samuel Feijóo’s ‘eccentric use of props during his public lectures’, Leandro Soto’s classes at the Escuela Nacional del Arte, and the *Festival de la Pieza Corta* in 1979 at an illegally rented beach house.¹⁰ The 1980s performances range between Delgado’s confrontational style and more oblique, sometimes pointedly humorous, gestures, as when Grupo Provisional (Glexis Novoa, Carlos Cárdenas and Francisco Lastra) performed as a country band to lampoon the official idealisation of rural types in *Rock campesino* (Peasant Rock), 1988, or entreated Robert Rauschenberg to sign a placard reading ‘Very Good Rauschenberg’ during his ROCI visit in Havana that same year. In what she sees as an act of critical recuperation, Fusco discusses the case of Juan Sí González and Grupo Arte-De (González, Jorge Crespo and Eliseo Valdes) in detail. González first appeared on the state’s radar with *Va a verde todo* (The Year Everything Turns Green), 1987, in which he picked up garbage in Havana’s Vedado neighbourhood with a cart painted the army’s signature shade of green – his punishment was to be forced to work on a real government micro-brigade, and employment in the arts thereafter became difficult. In 1988 he initiated several street-based performances around language which ultimately resulted in the arrest of the Arte-De members. González subsequently placed himself on display to

protest censorship at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de la Habana, turned Arte-De's public inquest at La Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba into an absurd performance, was arrested and forced to work in micro-brigades again, and ultimately fled the country after divulging information about censorship to Amnesty International.¹¹ González's case illustrates the turbulent experimentalism of the 1980s, which additionally featured interruptions of official events by Consuelo Castañeda and Humberto Castro, ArteCalle, and other groups that Novoa termed 'assault' interventions, after the state's own model for enforcing proper conduct. Other critical acts were less performance than 'performative', operating on the procedures and norms of art institutions. In 1988, ArteCalle refused to participate in the Bienal de Habana to avoid institutional co-optation, one among myriad choices made by the 1980s generation that Fusco terms 'professionally suicidal'.¹² A final performance, *La plástica joven se dedica al beisbol* (Young Fine Artists Dedicate Themselves to Baseball), 1989, preceded the departure of the bulk of the 1980s generation from the island. The key actors in New Cuban Art played a baseball game, literalising an expression in which the sport is used as a safe haven from illicit topics.

Dangerous Moves is most effective when what might be called Fusco's 'historical criticism' is explicit. She laments a drop-off in critical, confrontational approaches (not to mention performance art more generally) in the 1990s – the result of cautionary tales like that of Delgado on the one hand, and new possibilities for artists to make money from international sales of their work on the other – effectively positioning the 1980s as a superior era. She begins the book's third section with Grupo DUPP's *El pabellón del vacío* (Pavilion of the Void), 1999, a series of near-silent, movement-based performances by René Francisco and his students at the Pabellón Cuba that in some cases echoed 1980s controversies (Wilfredo Prieto, for example, pushed a street-cleaning cart, invoking González). '... [T]here was nothing antagonistic in the gestures presented by the young artists,' argues Fusco, '... these performances revisited gestures of a prior era but omitted the words that explicitly connected them to political postures and unconventional desires'.¹³ Elsewhere, Fusco's verdict is still harsher:

The more introspective and metaphorical performances elaborated by the Cuban art-student collectives in the 1990s represent another important counterpoint. Rather than staging street interventions designed to subvert the established order, these artists discreetly embellished public space as part of the 'restoration of aesthetic concerns' that marked a break with the political crisis of 1988-90 and paved the way for Cuban artists' entry into the global art market.¹⁴

Fusco makes one exception from Grupo DUPP: Sandra Ceballos, who obsessively copies and listens to Fidel Castro speeches in her work of the early 2000s, 'acts of metaphorical abjection to produce a social commentary about words that silenced her... evoking a Cuba where only Fidel talks and others listen'.¹⁵ Fusco's selections since the 1990s sample from a broad range of practices, but seem to share this retrospective glance toward the 1980s as well as Cuban history more generally. In *La bola perdida* (The Lost Ball), 2008, a group of young artists got drunk and searched for the baseball from *La plástica joven se dedica al beisbol*, staging a kind of missed encounter with the past. That same year, in a less melancholy bit of history work, a group of art students graffitied the names of every censored artist, curator and exhibition in Cuban art history, calling the project *En el medio de qué* (In the History of What) at Ceballos' home-based gallery Espacio Aglutinador. Neither this project nor Yeny Casanueva and Alejandro González's *Work-Catalogue #1*, 2009, are recognisably performance art, and indeed Fusco argues that much of the recent political art in Cuba more closely echoes Hans Haacke's style of 'institution critique'. The artists presented police surveillance of artists and visitors at the previous biennial that they had stolen off a state security agent's flash drive while he was inspecting their computer. The artists, who had already emigrated to Spain, claim they were subsequently 'shunned' by their colleagues still living in Cuba. It is worth noting that this claim, like many in the book, can

obviously only persist as hearsay, unsubstantiated by the unnamed artists accused of presumably capitulating to state pressure on this count.¹⁶ *Work-Catalogue #1* is one of the few works in the book by Cuban émigrés, begging the question of what a survey of such work might look like.

Fusco notes that some of the confrontational and subversive energies have migrated in recent years to the island's hip-hop scene – and here a richer array of examples, and perhaps a theoretical case for their relationship to a broader category of 'performance', would have been welcome. She does call attention to the interdisciplinary collective *Omni Zona Franca* (which includes spoken word performers and DJs) who have been repeatedly censored and arrested for conducting their outreach in marginal communities outside of apparently compromised official channels. '[S]uperstar [artist] Kcho (Alexis Leyva)', as she refers to him twice, one of the country's most visible contemporary artists in the 1990s, has apparently had his studio used by police to educate young upstarts like El Sexto (Danilo Maldonado Machado), who was arrested for attempting to stage a performance with 'FIDEL' spray-painted on a pig in 2014 (around the time of Obama's initial entreaty to normalise relations with Cuba on 17 December).¹⁷ One concerning omission in *Dangerous Moves* is Rachel Weiss's 2011 book *To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art*, with which it shares a number of artists from the 1980s to the present.¹⁸ Weiss, however, gives equal attention to painting, sculpture, photography and a range of other practices under thematic headings – 'Everyday', 'Laughing' and 'Museum' – resisting the temptation to isolate any particular genre or trajectory:

the new Cuban art was not a 'movement' per se. It never had a manifesto. It was spontaneous in its eruption, more a phenomenon than anything else... I want to insist that there is not a single, clean line of development: neither from utopianism to cynicism nor from naïve optimism to pragmatism, much less from fantasy to reality. The new Cuban art is not a palindrome, falling symmetrically to either side of a catastrophic fold.¹⁹

Fusco misses an opportunity to critique this position and undergird her claims to performance's priority over object making by not engaging directly with Weiss's pluralistic account. Fusco does, however, provide generous Spanish-language sources that back up her critical reading of the penetration of the Cuban state into its national art production, while critiquing previous English-language books on 1980s and 1990s art by Luis Camnitzer and Holly Block as neglecting this very factor to paint rosier images of government support for the arts. Camnitzer comes under particularly harsh scrutiny for downplaying the censorship of González and Arte-De by hinting that his work was lacking in quality, leading to perhaps Fusco's most important claim:

I am not attempting here to dismiss the question of aesthetic quality altogether, but rather to comprehend how it is used politically. In a country where the state exercises hegemonic control over the arts but also recognises the ideological value of presenting itself as a liberal benefactor in the field of culture, censorship is most effective when veiled, and most prevalent as the internalization of fears that prevent certain thoughts and actions from being expressed. Therein lies the full effect of Cuban panopticism... Arts professionals do not have to demean themselves by engaging in crude forms of censorship; they simply use their professional 'judgement' to determine that certain expressions are not 'good art'.²⁰

This nuanced, even painful reckoning with how 'aesthetic quality' itself is instrumentalised in Cuban art gets to the heart of Fusco's ambition in *Dangerous Moves*: to make a case, and perhaps a new value system, for artistic *ethics* – for the stakes of artistic conduct, beyond mere product.

There is another, partial omission that bears scrutiny: while Fusco acknowledges the existence of Tania Bruguera and her Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behavior Art School, 2002–2009) in passing, she

downplays its importance for linking a new generation of Cuban artists with international critics and discourse.²¹ Fusco's critiques of Bruguera's work, from *El susurro de Tatlin #6, versión de Habana* (Tatlin's Whisper #6, Havana Version, 2009), through to her recent six-month house arrest in Cuba, are well known.²² Regardless of what one thinks of Bruguera's highly visible role as a provocateur in Cuba and elsewhere, however, a more detailed account of Cátedra Arte de Conducta is warranted precisely because its aim was to provide something that Fusco sees as essential for the 1980s generation:

Precisely because the artists were beneficiaries of a cosmopolitan art education, they sought access to information about cultural movements beyond their borders, including currents that were considered 'outside the revolution'...²³

A photograph of construction workers interrupting Bruguera's contribution to the Bienal de Habana in 2015, a 100-hour reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, serves as the final image in *Dangerous Moves*, an acknowledgment perhaps undercut by Fusco's ambivalent remarks in the book's conclusion:

One might ask, given the persistent risks involved in challenging power structures and the limited gains that Cuban artists have attained, why any artist would continue to imagine possibilities for defying state authority. One might also wonder whether such endeavours were ever aimed at achieving anything more than securing a few moments in the spotlight for the artists involved. Each time I discuss the Cuban art scene with foreigners, these questions arise. There are no simple answers.²⁴

If even arrest might now double as a publicity tactic, what are *Dangerous Moves*' ultimate objectives in portraying an isolated art scene that is something of a fishbowl for the international gaze? On the one hand, Fusco's unsentimental demystification ideally produces a more accurate picture – and, I would argue, welcome critical re-evaluation – of the field at hand. On the other, regardless of Fusco's personal ties to the island, the reader cannot escape a somewhat uncomfortable sense that an artist and writer based in the United States is passing intensely strict judgment on a context in which there are few easy choices. In the end, however, Fusco does not abandon hope in performance as a source of artistic agency, pathway to ethical conduct, and insight about contemporary Cuba – precisely by holding onto her proudly opinionated position.

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¹ Coco Fusco, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba*, Tate Publishing, London, 2015, p 10

² Indeed, Fusco interviewed Serrano for these pages. Coco Fusco, 'Sublime Abjection: An Interview with Andres Serrano', *Third Text*, 16/17, Autumn/Winter 1991, pp 173–188

³ See, for example, Coco Fusco, *English Spoken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*, The New Press, New York, 1995, and *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, Routledge, London, 1999

⁴ Ibid, pp 14–15

⁵ Fusco, *Dangerous Moves*, op cit, p 22

⁶ Ibid, p 14

⁷ Ibid, p 35

⁸ RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*, H N Abrams, New York, 1988

⁹ Fusco, *Dangerous Moves*, op cit, p 28

¹⁰ Ibid, p 153

¹¹ Ibid, pp 91–97

¹² Ibid, p 168

¹³ Ibid, p 118

¹⁴ Ibid, p 34

¹⁵ Ibid, p 119

¹⁶ Other such unsupported claims are more impressionistic, as when Fusco writes, ‘The atmosphere at the Havana Biennial, an event that had begun as an anti-imperialist move to draw international attention to art from the so-called periphery, came to resemble that of an international art fair.’ Ibid, p 136.

¹⁷ Ibid, p 90, p 101, p 137. Fusco refers to Kcho as a ‘superstar’ twice, although her evidence for El Sexto’s visit to Kcho’s studio is, unsurprisingly, the former’s own account.

¹⁸ These books also include Rachel Price’s book on contemporary Cuban art in relation to the island’s transitions and crises, which was likely undergoing publication at the same time as *Dangerous Moves*. See Rachel Price, *Planet/Cuba: Art, Culture and the Future of the Island*, Verso, London, 2015.

¹⁹ Rachel Weiss, *To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011, p xiv

²⁰ Fusco, *Dangerous Moves*, op cit, p 101

²¹ This case may be made by judging from the many alumni of the program that Fusco mentions elsewhere in the book, including James Bonachea, Javier Castro, Hamlet Lavastida, Luis Gárciga, Celia González, Carlos Martiel, Adrián Melis, Amaury Pacheco, Wilfredo Prieto, Renier Quer, and Grethell Rasúa. See <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/492-0-Ctedra+Arte+de+Conducta+Behavior+Art+School.htm>.

²² See, for example, Coco Fusco, ‘Public Address’, *Artforum*, vol 48, no 2, October 2009, pp 38–40, and ‘The State of Detention: Performance, Politics, and the Cuban Public’, *e-flux Journal*, 3 January 2015, at <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/on-the-detention-of-cuban-artist-tania-bruguera-by-coco-fusco/>

²³ Fusco, *Dangerous Moves*, op cit, p 153

²⁴ Ibid, p 185