

The Ethnographic Burlesque

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett



The Couple in the Cage documents the travelling performance of Guillermo Gómez -Peña and Coco Fusco, 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 record of their interactions with audiences in four countries dramatizes the dilemma of cross-cultural misunderstanding we continue to live with today. Their experiences are interwoven with archival footage of ethnographic displays from the past, giving an historical dimension to the artists' social experiment. The Couple in the Cage is a powerful blend of comic fiction and poignant reflection on the morality of treating human beings as exotic curiosities.

The Couple in the Cage restages repudiated modes of ethnographic knowledge and display. The flyer announcing the video explicitly

positions the staging in tabloid terms by faking the front page of the fictional *Natural Enquirer*. Indeed, the "ghosts of history" that the piece unleashes are still palpable in tabloids and tourism, which can be said to be "museums" of repudiated anthropological knowledge, as is *The Couple in the Cage*. Rather than offering a critique of contemporary (or even modern) ethnographic theory and practice, *The Couple in the Cage* uses the ethnographic burlesque in the service of a shameful ethnology, practices associated with the early history of ethnographic writing and display and with popular entertainment. Before the advent of public museums, such displays were largely in the hands of commercial showmen, who combined edification and amusement in various ratios (Altick 1978).

In *The Couple in the Cage*, those on display have staged themselves. That they are not what they appear to be is also part of the history of such exhibits. The foreign villages at world's fairs included not only performers from Turkey, Egypt, Ireland, and Germany, among others, but also college students, immigrants, and other employees, who stood in for Turks, Egyptians, Irish, and Germans. Not always, but not infrequently, those who exhibited and those who were exhibited were one and the same. In other words, both *The Couple in the Cage* and recent writing on primitivism more generally (Marianna Torgovnik's *Gone Primitive* [1990] is a case in point) have tended to simplify, in the spirit of repudiation, such "othering" practices. Repudiation is, however, constitutive of these othering practices, right from the start. I would therefore identify the theatricality of *The Couple in the Cage* as a "rehearsal of culture," to cite Steven Mullaney, and suggest that it is a double rehearsal. While *The Couple in the Cage* purports to rehearse a putative ethnographic reality, what it actually rehearses is a mode of encounter. Audiences assuming the former get caught in the latter.



But first, an explanation of "rehearsal of culture." During the royal entry into Rouen of Henry II in 1550, Brazilian villages stocked with Native Americans for the occasion and supplemented with appropriately attired Frenchmen were the scene of a mock siege and French triumph. Mullaney's analysis of this event focuses not so much on its re-creation as on its erasure: "The ethnographic attention and knowledge displayed at Rouen was genuine, amazingly thorough, and richly detailed; the object, however, was not to understand Brazilian culture but to perform it, in a paradoxically self-consuming fashion" (Mullaney 1983:48). He argues further that the interest in Brazilian culture displayed at Rouen served "ritual rather than ethnological ends, and the rite involved is one ultimately organized around the elimination of its own pretext." Such performances, he continues, are rehearsals, in the legal sense of the term, and are to be understood within a dramaturgy of power that first exhibits what it "consigns to oblivion" (48, 49, 52). Not only culture, but also art is subject to this regime, as can be seen in the Nazi Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich in 1937.

As Mona Ozouf demonstrates in her landmark book, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (1988), the Revolution entailed not only the rejection of the old cultural order, but also the systematic creation of a new regime of social experience. This process produced what Ozouf calls a "shameful ethnology" (1988:218). An instrument of the Revolution's "repressive militancy" (223), negative accounts of traditional practices measured the success of the Revolution in eradicating what it repudiated and the rebellious potential of what persisted. The process of negating cultural practices reverses itself once it has succeeded in archaizing the "errors." The very term "folklore" marks a transformation of errors into archaisms and their transvaluation once they are safe for collection, preservation, exhibition, study, and even nostalgia and revival. The World-Folklore Park planned for Guangzhou, China, is clearly in this mode: visitors are invited to "enjoy the splendour of the world's folklore by way of direct participation in the exotic life of people with outlandish customs and habits" (World-Folklore Theme Park 1996). The notion of an exhibition foreclosing what it shows is a reason why such displays are sites of disidentification. For example, reformers of Judaism in the early 19th century wrote in the mode of shameful ethnology under the rubric "Gallery of Obnoxious Abuses, Shocking Customs, and Absurd Ceremonies of the Jews" in an effort to distance their Jewish readers from their current practices through admonishment that rehearsed what it consigned to oblivion. By the mid-19th century, the ethnographic burlesque in Yiddish literature assumed a reader who could identify with the author's satirical rendering of an outmoded way of life and, soon thereafter, a reader who would share the author's sense of loss (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990).

What readers of such literature and visitors to such exhibits discover are the outtakes of colonization and absorption, reform and revolution, modernization and development. In this way, Catholic Europe became a source of fascination for Protestants eager to see what the Reformation had repudiated. Zones of repudiation, where the outtakes of a cultural

editing process are to be found, form a geniza of sorts, a place for keeping what has been discarded. Such processes create a large domain of cultural trash, which returns as parody, "folklore," or even "heritage." Display enables playful participation in a zone of repudiation once it has been insulated from the possibility of anyone going native. I take this argument up at length in *Destination Culture* (1998).

The Couple in the Cage shifts the locus of repudiation and admonishment from the "other" to the practices of othering. It does so through a process of entrapment enabled by two principles: first, the suspension of disbelief, whereby the audience is licensed to "play along" with the act; and second, the pleasure of confusion, whereby audiences already familiar with performance art are prepared to enjoy what they do not understand. Some may be said to "buy in" to the staging without realizing it, while others protest, whether they align themselves with the artists or object to the violence of the piece on the audience. As Diana Taylor so nicely shows, the video completes the process by explicitly reframing the piece to include the audiences at the live events and to show the piece thus reframed to new video audiences. The video makes explicit what was implicit in the live event, namely that the installation staged the viewer in ways that were unstable and untenable, as Taylor so cogently argues.

Were *The Couple in the Cage* purely didactic, an encounter group exercise in consciousness-raising, it would belong in the manuals for diversity workshops. An indictment of Western stereotypes of "primitive" peoples, the performance mode is closer to the *Natural Enquirer* than it is to ethnography, notwithstanding recent literary takes on primitivism in art and anthropology, which have dehistoricized ethnographic practices, a point to which I will return. As for the *Natural Enquirer*, it is an appropriate locus for uncertainty. Tabloids, particularly of the supermarket variety (some of them are actually send-ups too), operate at (and beyond) the threshold of credulity. They activate not only the "will to believe" but also the "suspension of disbelief." Like tourism, tabloids are a kind of "museum" of outmoded understandings, including anthropological ones. In their pages, an epistemological atavism converges with an historically formed iconography of the unconscious. But with a critical difference tabloids and tourism operate in relation to other kinds of knowledge, not in their absence, which is what makes *The Couple in the Cage* so disturbing. To buy into this performance at face value, when one should know better, is to fail dramatically. To "play along" with its subversiveness to accept the *donn,e* and act out the role of gullible viewer that is already scripted by the performance is to test the moral limits of theatrical representation. What distinguishes *The Couple in the Cage* from a sermon is precisely, as Taylor points out, the impossibility of an appropriate reaction. There is no tenable audience position.

In staging repudiated forms of ethnographic interest, knowledge, and display, *The Couple in the Cage* is actually closer to contemporary anthropology, which also operates in a critical mode, examines its own

past, deconstructs its practices, experiments with its theory and methods, questions the production and nature of anthropological knowledge, and insists that anthropologists be accountable to those they study. *The Couple in the Cage* does not engage contemporary ethnography, but rather mines the popular "museums" of its repudiated ideas and procedures. However, neither the artists nor their critics clearly articulate this point. It is 15 years since Johannes Fabian (1983) illuminated "how anthropology makes its object" through the peculiar temporalities of ethnographic writing. In that time, the possibilities and limits of "writing culture" and creating "objects of ethnography" have been set out repeatedly (Clifford 1988, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus and Fischer 1986, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991). Anthropology's colonial history has been thoroughly explicated and is firmly in the consciousness of scholars working today.

But, critiques from outside of the discipline have tended to reduce all of anthropology to a preoccupation with the primitive body. For example, Margaret Mead's most ambitious project was not dedicated to the Balinese or the Samoans, but to immigrants in New York City, and to the study of personality and culture. The Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures project of the 1940s was funded by the Office of Naval Research at the end of World War II to the tune of about \$250,000. Hallmarks of the project included, first, the inclusion of members of the community under study on the research team; second, the requirement that the anthropologists also examine themselves and their relationship to their subject; and third, in the case of the Jewish research group, that they write a book which their subjects would read and in which they would recognize themselves, with pride, in the wake of the Holocaust (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995).

As for Claude Lévi-Strauss and for that matter Bronislaw Malinowski, their concerns were not the "'primitive' body as object," but rather forms of social organization, worldview, values, personhood, and ways of being in the world. This is not to suggest that this work is without its problems or beyond critique but only that this and related work has been folded into a general critique of a repudiated anthropology of the primitive. Nor, as far as museums are concerned, are the shards and fragments they show restricted to the victims of colonial power. They also feature the "treasures" of antiquity Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Indian, Christian, etc. which are also fragments, no less than the "objects of ethnography." What distinguishes ancient fragments from ethnographic objects is how the fragments were formed, that is, the manner of detachment.

Because the terms of *The Couple in the Cage* colonialism, primitivism, savagery, exoticism are so overdetermined and the performance itself so over the top, the challenge is to find a way of commenting on it (and on the reframing of it that includes the audience and the documentation of their response) without simply restating the critique it has already incorporated into itself. After all, *The Couple in the Cage* is not a sermon, and outmoded ethnographic understandings (alive and well in

tabloids and tourism) are an easy target. Whatever its problems, the Museum of the American Indian also surprises the visitor not through making viewers complicit in a retrograde colonial scenario staged by unruly "natives," but by taking charge of the museum itself. A now largely Native American staff controls what is shown and how. In one show, labels were signed and there was more than one label for each object. Those who wrote the labels identified themselves by name, profession, and tribe (in the case of Native Americans). Photographs were rarely if ever identified, a comment in itself about their status in the exhibition they are about, but not by, those they represent. What visitors discovered in these galleries is what the objects on display mean to Native Americans today, and not what many were expecting and disappointed not to find, namely, a reconstruction of the lost contexts of extant objects. While not without its own problems, this is how this museum addressed the historic foreclosures of ethnographic exhibitions that the collection itself exemplifies. The contrast is useful, not to rank the two cases, but rather to offer several contexts for considering *The Couple in the Cage*.

First, this piece was part of a larger project, Year of the White Bear. This project included, among other elements, a museum installation, within which the video was shown. Second, besides the shameful list of ethnographic exhibits that Coco Fusco provides in "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," there are, as just suggested, serious efforts on the part of anthropologists and museums to address that history. Third, there is the legacy of ethnographic forgeries the Guatinaui fiction is not the first. One of the most celebrated "crimes of writing" was George Psalmanazar's totally invented ethnography of Formosa, written in the 18th century (Stewart 1991). In our period, Carlos Castenada comes to mind, to say nothing of Barnum's tricks in his 19th-century museum. Fourth, there are contemporary artists who are engaged in similar interventions the installations of Pepon Osorio and Renee Green, respectively, Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum (an installation at the Maryland Historical Society in 1993), and the Acre Theatre group's *Arbeit macht Frei* are some examples.

Finally, *The Couple in the Cage* is neither a serious ethnographic display nor a fake ethnographic display, however much it used dissimulation and "reverse ethnography," as Fusco puts it. It is a provocation, and the genre, for want of a better term, is performance art. While Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena documented the responses of audiences to their "reverse ethnography," it could be said that audiences that behaved "inappropriately" or offensively were responding to "performance art," something new for many of them. They fell into two traps and mistook a provocation for an invitation. This is yet another indication that the power of the piece is in the many ways it staged its audiences. In the guise of ethnographic display, Fusco and Gomez-Pena have subjected (even abjected) themselves to induce a homeopathic cure for the colonial disease afflicting their viewers. For those who had not previously been exposed to performance art, this event also served as an inoculation.

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Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is University Professor, Department of
Performance Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University.
Her most recent book is *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and
Heritage* (University of California Press, 1998).