

Performance in the Archive: María Magdalena Campos-Pons

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María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water, is coming to the Bass Museum in Miami Beach this coming September. The show, which premiered at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, under the curatorial guidance of Lisa Freiman, is the first large-scale survey of Campos-Pons's work. The exhibit features 34 paintings, sculptures, new media installations and large-format Polaroid photographs which were all produced after the Afro-Cuban artist left Cuba in 1990. The title, which was borrowed from one of her sculptural works, alludes to the physical, geographical and emotional barriers encountered in diasporic experiences.

In the mid-1990s, she completed a series called *When I Am Not Here/Estoy Alla* (1994-1997), consisting of a series of 20x24 Polaroid photographs. This series consists of performance-based photographs, utilizing the artist's own body as the primary subject. She draws upon memory and Afro-Cuban religious iconography and ritual to illustrate her experiences of migration and longing. Through her performance-based photographs Campos-Pons combines the past and the present, invoking the archive and the repertoire.

The "archive" in this instance means documents which are understood to be factual and permanent, and the "repertoire" consists of embodied knowledge, such as a dance; things or actions which are thought of as ephemeral. The particular kind of work Campos-Pons produces leads to this dialectical relationship because it sits neither comfortably in the archive or the repertoire. While she portrays embodied knowledge in her performances, these performances are private, and it is only through its documentation that they become part of any performance tradition. But, through the artwork's production as a photograph, it becomes a kind of performative document within the archive; one that is capable of expressing embodied knowledge. In this way, we can see how through Campos-Pons's work we can envision a new kind of archival repository and further our understandings of what constitutes history.

The photographs produced by Campos-Pons present us with an interesting challenge to what constitutes history, and what can be produced as an intervention into the archive. As Michelle Wallace argues, in Western discourse we are often led to believe that what is written or recorded, as in video or photography, is a fact; that the documentation somehow provides us with evidence of the acts occurrence (2004: 5). She explains, however that black visual artists "make things and make visions" (ibid. 191). The goal of black visual artists is to "re-envision vision" and to "begin to understand how regimes of visibility enforce racism, how they literally hold it in place" (ibid. 191). Thus the "problem of visibility," as Wallace explains it, is to connect who produces and reproduces vision so that we have an end product which forms both material and popular culture. The tension Wallace unearths is ultimately one of the disjuncture between the historical and the contemporary, the real and the constructed, or the archive and the repertoire.

The tension between the archive and the repertoire is that the archive is given historical weight and authority, while the repertoire takes on an air of impermanence. Diana Taylor (2003) attempts to articulate better what constitutes the archive and the repertoire: The archive is composed of materials which are supposed to "stand the test of time." These include such things as texts, documents, bones and buildings. The repertoire consists of more ephemeral acts, such as performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance and singing. These ephemeral acts are thought of as "nonreproducible knowledge" (2003:20). However, myths surround the conceptions of both the archive and the repertoire which tend to solidify their apparently fixed boundaries. The myth about the archive is that it is unmediated, and is impermeable to modifications, corruptibility and political

manipulation. It is thus assumed that something in the archive is stable and something in the repertoire is malleable. However, performance can enter the archive through documentation. Taylor asserts that once a performance is taken out of the “live” context, and captured or transmitted through the archive, it is no longer a performance (2003:20). “A video of a performance is not a performance, though it often comes to replace the performance as a *thing* in itself” (ibid. 20, emphasis in original). This means that the repertoire reproduces itself, not based on the archive, but on the transmission of embodied knowledge. How do we then separate what is a performance from what we understand as a performance? Further, how do performances, such as the ones in the photographs of Campos-Pons fit into the schema? Are performances necessarily limited to a live encounter?

Performances rely on behaviors and framing to construct the act as a performance and then to transmit knowledge. Framing is important because what constitutes a performance in one context does not also correspond to a performance in another. On the one hand, performance *is* constituted by the object or process of analysis, such as a theatrical performance, a political rally or a funeral. On the other hand, to understand and analyze something as performance forms the basis of an epistemology. Taylor draws specific attention around the “is/as” function of “performance.” As she explains, the “*is/as* underlines the understanding of performance as simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘constructed,’ as practices that bring together what have historically been kept separate as discrete, supposedly free-standing, ontological and epistemological discourses” (2003: 3). Whereas performance theory had been used to either study the act of performance or something as performance, what is needed is a resolution to the “is/as” dialectic through an articulation of performance as both embodied knowledge and as history.

Looking at one of Campos-Pons’s pieces, *Susurro in Sustenance* (1997) from the series *When I Am Not Here/Estoy Alla* (1994-1997), as a way to think through this tension we can see how the archive and the repertoire are able to cross over their apparently fixed boundaries. The tension that exists is a matter of what constitutes archival material, what constitutes a performance, and how performance-based images such as this one subvert our current notions of the archive and the repertoire.

Susurro in Sustenance (Whispers in Sustenance), presents the artist’s profile portrait in a 20x24 Polaroid diptych. The diptych is presented in such a way that the artist faces herself. She is photographed against a blue background and a yellow background. Her torso, from her waist to her head, is included, from a profile view, in the frame of the photograph. In the photograph against the blue background, her face is painted in stripes of yellow paint. Her arm is placed diagonally across her chest, and in her hand she is holding a small wooden branch with a wooden yellow bird perched on top. With fingernails painted yellow, she holds the small wooden branch close to her ear. Her hair is adorned with small plastic sunflowers. On her torso, she is wearing a velvety like gold, short sleeved shirt. In the photograph against the yellow background, her face is conversely painted with blue stripes, and there is a wooden blue bird perched on top of the small wooden branch near her ear. Her hair is similarly adorned with small plastic sunflowers, though there are fewer in this portrait, and her fingernails are painted blue. On her torso she wears a burgundy short sleeved shirt. The colors and the objects in the photograph reference Afro-Cuban religious symbols of Santeria and Yoruba traditions. With her eyes shut, and her torso facing away from the lens of the camera, she subverts the viewer’s gaze.

Like in much of her work, she is at once revealing and protecting herself. She reveals the embodiment of *orishas*, and she protects herself by closing her eyes and turning away from the camera. According to Sally Berger, “[Campos-Pons] is simultaneously bared to the world and contained, her actions specific and deliberate. Protective eyes cover her back like shield, flowers . . . hide and protect her . . . closed eyes and an expressionless face maintain a distance from familiarity” (Berger *in* Firstenberg: 2003) This is a similar approach utilized by two other black female photographers, to whom her work is often compared: Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems.

While her work is understood in the context of the politics of portraying a black female body in a photograph in the 1990s, it is also positioned historically in relation to such representations as those of Saartjie Baartman (the “Hottentot Venus”). The position of her body, in profile view, and the subversion of her gaze also reference archival racial imagery. Primary examples are the slave daguerreotypes by Louis Agassiz, a scientist, in the 1850s. Like Campos-Pons’s work, the images were produced in a series of diptychs, and created in a lengthy and labor intensive process.¹ In these images, black African slaves are pictured in frontal and side views in a type of racial science project designed to analyze the physical differences between African blacks and European whites. Agassiz’s purpose was to ultimately prove the superiority of European whites (Wallis 2003:165). It was argued that such images were needed to “improve social organization by helping to catalogue the needs of the citizens,” but it also served to dehumanize slaves to flat statistical and analytic representations (ibid. 168). By referencing the archive through her deliberately embodied actions, Campos-Pons’s work exemplifies how such actions can in fact reenter the archive and serve to transform it from within.

Thus, it is possible to imagine how embodied performance can make available a wide spectrum of sentiments, not only for the repertoire but also for the archive. In this way, performance, even in the form of a photograph, can “offer another aspect of history, one grounded in the repertoire as well as in the archive, focused on embodied practices that distill meaning from past events, store them, and find embodied modalities to express them in the here-and-now, yet with an eye to the future” (Taylor 2006:71). The power of this kind of archival representation is that it is not constrained to recount history chronologically, or in any other linear fashion. This allows for an expanding authority within the archive that is not restricted to written documents. Further, what this allows for is the expanding sense of identity which is increasingly questioned in a postmodern world.

This article is an excerpt from a lengthier paper about the history of Cuban art after the Revolution, specifically as it pertains to the “second generation” and the women in that generation of artists. Additionally, there is a fuller examination of the meaning of diaspora, the politics of location, and the use of cultural production as a means of understanding migration. The research questions I have raised here are central to issues which I hope to address further through dissertation research. Should you have any commentary, feedback, or information, please do not hesitate to contact me. Your contributions to more nuanced understandings of art, artists and migration would be greatly appreciated. I may be contacted by email at ispardo@umich.edu.

¹ The daguerreotype is an early form of photography. The image is exposed directly onto a silver surface which has been coated with silver halides. The positive print is made directly from this material, rather than through a negative. Similarly, the process of using a 20x24 Polaroid camera, produces only a positive print, and no original negative. In both processes the photographs are usually carefully planned because each frame is quite expensive and there will only be one copy of the image after the shot has been taken.

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