

Article | Whose Reality?: Performance and Politics in Two Works by Claudia del Fierro

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Claudia del Fierro, *Idéntica*, Optica, Montréal, 2008. Photo: Bettina Hoffmann, courtesy of the artist & Optica

Whose Reality?

Performance and Politics in Two Works by Claudia del Fierro

By Zoë Chan

With practices that build on Allan Kaprow's happenings, many performance artists today are concerned with breaking down boundaries between art and life, and art and audience, as they question the relevance of making work that does not fundamentally engage with everyday concerns. Critiquing classist divisions between high and low culture as well as the elitist notion of art made only for an exclusive cognoscenti, these artists aim, in various ways, to create work that is more accessible, if not more pertinent, to a larger public.

The performance-based works by Chilean artist Claudia del Fierro suggest this approach, as evidenced by her exhibition at Optica that featured two short videos titled, respectively, *Políticamente Correcto/Politically Correct* (2001) and *Idéntica* (2000).⁽¹⁾ *Políticamente Correcto* is a looped three-minute projection that signals its populist principles from the very beginning. The work is introduced by a short text written by the artist explaining that the video was shot in an industrial neighbourhood in Santiago. Del Fierro writes, "Day after day, over several weeks I attended lunch time at a garment factory,

where a large number of women worked as sewing operators. . . . The little time for recreation and lunch allowed such limited interaction among them, that nobody ever noticed I did not work there."

Composed of crudely shot footage of the entrance to this factory, the video features mostly women, dressed in plain smocks, walking in and out of this drab scene, apparently unaware of the camera. Images of the women at work or of their actual working conditions are not depicted. Rather, there is an emphasis on the sartorial. Alongside the video projection in the gallery, del Fierro has installed a stack of neatly folded uniforms. They are material traces from her daily performances; they evoke the ubiquitous, instantly recognisable attire of those "unsung heroes" who keep society's wheels turning: nurses, butchers, and, in this case, factory workers. The cheerful colours of their dress—a pastel palette of pink, yellow and blue—belie what is surely the daily drudgery of their jobs.

The viewer quickly begins to recognize the artist, not because del Fierro looks any different than the other women (she is after all dressed like them in a series of similarly shapeless frocks), but because she keeps turning up. To a soundtrack of nervous clicking sounds, del Fierro makes her point again and again: these women are undeservedly unrecognised members of society; their uniform only renders them invisible and underscores their lack of—to borrow a term from Bourdieu—"social -capital." In the video's final sequence, del Fierro strides back and forth down the street alone; she is apparently just another dowdy model on the dreary runway of these women's lives.

Shot with a handheld camera, *Idéntica* (2000) shows del Fierro participating in a tacky television talent show. Disguise is once again of importance in this work, though here the artist is more obviously engaged in dress-up, acting out the role of small-town secretary with big-city dreams, a kind of Everywoman decked out in cheap suit, heels, and bouffant hairdo. The viewer (and TV audience) watch the deadpan del Fierro in a series of uncomfortable moments on stage that involve a tuneless duet with the show's host—all fake smiles, smarmy charm, and besos—and the loss of the artist's ill-fitting wig. Unfortunately, it is hard to feel much for her principally, perhaps, because del Fierro plays a "type" rather than a person. The viewer has no specific sense of her character's identity or her fellow contestants' respective stories, their reasons for participating, and—at the risk of being maudlin—their hopes and dreams, trials and tribulations.

Moreover, as deeply entrenched as we are now in the era of reality TV and American Idol spin-offs, it remains difficult to feel much in response to del Fierro's (or her alternate persona's) public embarrassment. We are after all accustomed to the fact that many are willing to humiliate themselves for their fifteen minutes of fame and maybe some money; in any case, talent is not necessarily the point in such cases and applause is more or less guaranteed, the prevalent attitude being one of "it's all in good fun." Finally, the fact that the video is shown on a small-screen television set—mimicking the usual visual conditions of domestic viewing—only serves in fact to augment the overall aura of ordinariness that

envelops this work.

In *The Return of the Real*, (2) Hal Foster argues that the avant-garde has typically aligned itself, both artistically and politically, with society's so-called marginalised—the proletariat, the impoverished, the persecuted—as a strategic anti-establishment, anti-bourgeois positioning. In this light, what makes a work like *Políticamente Correcto* frustrating is the way it sidetracks its supposed subjects and focuses the viewer's gaze on the artist, specifically on her (embodied) commitment to the working class and women. And though this commitment in itself can be seen as admirable, one never actually learns more about the personal or professional lives of her "colleagues." They literally remain in the background, mere proof of the reality of the situation depicted. The very act of walking in and out of the factory during the breaks in the workers' schedule serves more than anything to highlight del Fierro's freedom—artistic and otherwise—to do so. In effect, viewers are left with a sense of her audacity more than any knowledge of her subjects of study.

If del Fierro's original objective was to bridge the gap between artist and "other," it would seem that these two works have failed. Rather, she appears merely to reiterate the romantic vision of the artist as transgressor and free spirit, while coasting on the realities of those who lack the luxury to play out similar roles, or the liberty to come and go as they please. Her choice of titles, particularly in the case of *Politically Correct*, suggests that del Fierro is aware of the potential pitfalls faced when making work that addresses political and social issues. Is this reflexivity enough however, when the work barely ventures beyond the artist's own performativity, remaining instead—despite its doggedly unspectacular aesthetic—within the realm of artistic gesture and authorship?

NOTES

1. This self-titled exhibition was presented in Optica's smaller gallery space from September 6 to October 11, 2008.
2. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 4th printing, 1996, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 2001).