

UNCANNY HISTORY



Encounters with *The Museum of the Old Colony*

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Figure 1
Camión de la Autoridad de las Fuentes Fluviales con exhibición sobre el uso de electricidad. Photograph by: D. Bartolomei, Vega Baja 10/9/58, Biblioteca Digital Puertorriqueña, UPR. Colección de fotos del periódico *El Mundo*. Installation view from *The Museum of the Old Colony*.



“Electricity makes life more bearable and work easier” announce the signs that surge from the center of a traveling showcase for the benefits of widespread electrification in Puerto Rico, circa 1958.

In the center of the photograph, a man in a bow tie gestures to a didactic display: you can almost hear his charismatic delivery booming from the loudspeakers that run from overhead power cables. Yet the voice spilling out across the gallery space proclaims, instead, a series of lines spliced and looped from a 1965 Encyclopaedia Britannica Film, part of an adjacent video work:

In San Juan, the capital, the influence of the United States can be seen everywhere. And why not? For we are citizens of the United States, in almost every way . . .

Figure 2
Federal Aid Is
a Staple, AP
Newsfeatures.
Photograph by:
Gary Williams,
7/22/80.
Installation view
from *The Museum
of the Old Colony*.

In that small gap of semantics and sovereignty, the contingency of the *almost*, Pablo Delano's conceptual art installation — *The Museum of the Old Colony* — positions itself. Indeed, there's a wry irony in receiving instruction on the benefits of electrification from an image six decades after it was first circulated, at a moment when much of the contemporary Puerto Rican population is still without reliable power post-Hurricane Maria. [Figure 1]

Between this image and one in which a well-dressed couple examine an interactive electricity display lies another telling juxtaposition. Here, the winning smile of a white, blonde-haired Miss Teenage Puerto Rico 1969 (beauty pageants are an arena in which Puerto Rico proudly competes as an independent entity) is echoed by that of a darker-skinned supermarket cashier in the adjacent image. [Figures 2 and 3] Beaming for the lens of an Associated Press photojournalist, the cashier accepts a handful of food stamps over a large counter of consumer goods at a Pueblo supermarket (Perfecta white flour, pure white sugar), while shoppers look on in curiosity, judgment, disinterest. The caption on the verso of the photograph (and reproduced in the exhibition) references issues of debt and the uncertain economic promise of statehood, circa 1980. The author cannot resist a loaded pun: "Federal Aid Is a Staple."

Delano's installation abounds with these self-conscious decisions and time-traveling moments, when the past calls the present into question.

Figure 3
Coronación de
Pamela Hatley
como Miss
Teenager 1968.
Photograph by:
Eddie Vélez,
19 nov. 1968,
Biblioteca Digital
Puertorriqueña,
UPR. Colección
de fotos del
periódico *El
Mundo*. Detail
view from *The
Museum of the
Old Colony*.



FEDERAL AID IS A STAPLE

A customer hands over food stamps in payment for groceries in San Juan's Pueblo supermarket, the largest in Puerto Rico. More than half the island's population is eligible for federal food stamps, and, although there is a growing middle class, Puerto Rico maintains its lifestyle in good part on credit and federal aid. Supporters of statehood for the island say that Puerto Rico needs statehood to take it further on the road to prosperity.

jb-7/22/80 stf-Gary Williams jzcsil350



Figure 4
Old Colony
Beverage Timeline.
Original Old
Colony bottles and
cans, 1940s–2017,
Mayagüez, Puerto
Rico. Installation
view from *The
Museum of the
Old Colony*.

Named in part for the popular brand of soda Old Colony [Figure 4], manufactured on the island since 1940, *The Museum of the Old Colony* also alludes to the island’s complex political status in relation to the United States, and as arguably the world’s oldest continual colony (beginning with Spanish rule in 1493). The installation — conceived anew as a conceptual unit for each venue where the *Museum* materializes — is assembled from a continually growing collection of more than a century of archival imaging of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. Ranging from military scenes to newly established American schools [Figure 5] (in which children imbibe “American values” from dressing up as cowboys and pilgrims, or gathering reverently around a portrait of Abraham Lincoln) to the “native types” typical of anthropological inquiry [Figure 6], these images were largely produced by and for the U.S. and originally displayed, disseminated and interpreted in museums and magazines, newspapers and postcards, books and government reports. Each partakes in the construction of racialized, often primitivist stereotypes or the lauding of U.S. intervention, in turn naturalizing and legitimating U.S. rule.

MAKING A STRONG IMPRESSION

Moving through *The Museum of the Old Colony* unsettles you. Spending time in the installation, one feels, in turn, disgusted, curious, confused, indignant, charmed, or challenged by the images, for in their overwhelming accrual and scale, the rhetoric of colonial power becomes palpable, absurd. This power acts through recourse to the stereotype: a

widely circulated, reductive impression of a group of people based on a single characteristic and a term whose historical origin lies in the printing plates made for duplicating typography. In the case of Puerto Rico, Delano’s installation charts the (re)production and circulation of countless impressions of an “exotic” but poorly managed nation in need of material and moral uplift. Nowhere is this narrative more pernicious than in the images of children, from the stereoscopic print of naked toddlers on a beach arranged in a racialized chiaroscuro as they “[wait] for Uncle Sam,” [Figure 7] to the little boy who flexes his muscles in the hybrid garb of a *jibaro* hat and Roy Rogers shorts, enclosed by an exoticizing pineapple and palm trees and placed on a stool for the viewer’s visual consumption. [Figure 8] The caption, with unsettling eugenic undertones, proclaims that Kike Arostegui, the 4-year-old “Adonis,” was chosen by tourists at the Caribe Hilton Hotel as the “most perfect child.”

Figure 5
Installation view,
Village School near
San Juan, Porto
Rico, *The Mentor*
magazine, January
1921. A Trip to Porto
Rico — Three R’s in
Porto Rico: American
Teachers Training the
Young Idea.



Figure 6
Tipos de Mestizos.
Informe sobre el Censo
de Puerto Rico 1899,
Teniente Coronel J.
P. Sanger, Inspector-
General, Director,
Henry Gannett, Walter
F. Wilcox, Peritos en
Estadística, Traducido
del inglés por Frank L.
Joannini, Washington:
Imprenta del Gobierno,
1900.



As scholar and critical theorist Homi Bhabha has argued, stereotypes present a powerful “form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.” Stereotypes form a mainstay of colonial discourse, which actively “produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible ... [by employing] a system of representation, a regime of truth.”¹ Photography, with its claims to an unmediated reality through mechanical inscription, and the “biological ease of vision ... [which] naturalizes [ways of seeing that are], in fact, a cultural construct,” played a particularly persuasive role in the colonial rhetoric of representation.² Despite drawing on historical imagery depicting Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, the installation as a whole becomes an incisive portrait of the colonizing lens of the United States, darkly illuminating the socioeconomic and racial power structures that undergird lived experience both on the mainland and in its last remaining unincorporated territory.

TAKING A “CURATORIAL TURN”

The Museum of the Old Colony has been a collecting institution for decades. Although its institutional home is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Puerto Rico (MAC-PR), Delano — who playfully considers himself the director, curator, registrar and chief custodian of *The Museum of the Old Colony* — continues to expand its reach through new acquisitions, site-specific exhibitions, and satellite venues. Rather than risking the viewer’s passive consumption and romanticization of the small-scale, original materials that he has collected, however, Delano scans, enlarges, and reprints them, sequencing and stacking the reproductions spatially according to an intuitive logic of association and affinity. In doing so, he charts the complex cadences of his own relationship with the place where he was



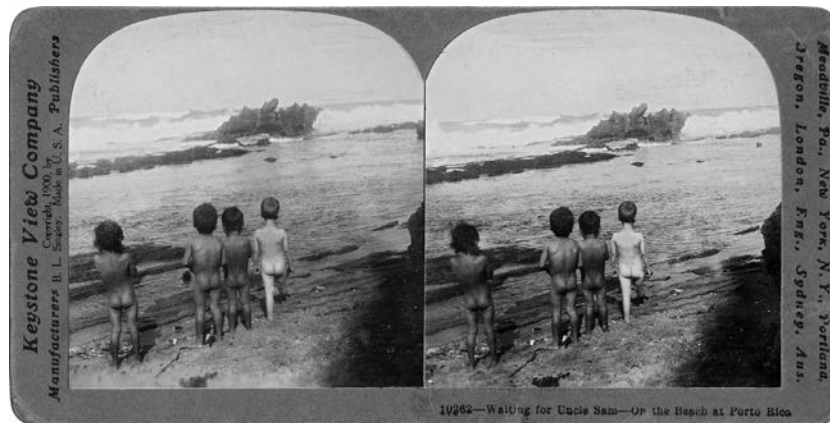
Figure 8
Healthiest, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1960, Hamilton Wright, New York. Installation view from *The Museum of the Old Colony*.

born and raised, and with the complicity of photography — Delano’s usual creative medium and that of his documentary-photographer father, Jack Delano — in the imperial enterprise.

Moreover, for Delano, the selection, reproduction, and sequencing of material is a curatorial act: the museum as both subject and medium. The “curatorial turn” in artistic practice has a rich history, as Jennifer Gonzalez explores in *Against the Grain: The Artist as Conceptual Materialist* (1999). Gonzalez traces the way in which artists throughout the twentieth century have engaged with collections, organizational taxonomies, hierarchies of value, and rhetorics of installation and interpretation. In the late 1980s and ‘90s, Gonzalez contends, contemporary artists (as well as scholars of postcolonialism) increasingly focused on the ideologies and exclusions inherent in museums.³ In the United States, the work of Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco and of African-American artist Fred Wilson (who identifies as being of both Caribbean and African descent) provides a contextual lineage for Delano’s *Museum of the Old Colony*.

In 1992, for example, Fusco, in collaboration with Guillermo Gomez-Peña, marked the global quincentenary celebrations of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas with the performance and documentary *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992). Fusco and Gomez-Peña presented themselves in a cage — as indigenous exponents of an undiscovered island in the Gulf of Mexico

Figure 7
Waiting for Uncle Sam — On the Beach at Porto Rico. Photograph by: B. L. Singley, Keystone View Company, 1900. From *The Museum of the Old Colony*.





Installation view
of *The Museum of
the Old Colony* at
Hampshire College
Art Gallery.

— for public display at several museums and historical sites associated with colonialism. Their satirical self-presentation (alluding to a long history of exhibiting the “exotic” other for the Western gaze) included a repertoire of rituals and utilitarian tasks and an invitation for viewers to interact with them or pose for a (paid) picture (which many did, utterly invested in the “truth” of the spectacle). The performance was also buttressed by extensive pseudoscientific interpretative materials. Using her own body, Fusco directly confronted viewers with the contemporary legacy of colonial forms of representation in museums, pointing up their absurdity even as she employed their foundational logics toward a performance of “authenticity.”

Rather than rendering his own body as artifact, Fred Wilson (re)surfaces the traces of marginalized bodies and histories in existing museum collections. Wilson is perhaps best known for *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society (1992), in which the act of “mining” operates on multiple levels. First, “mining” works to extract the unseen or buried to produce new forms of value; second, it is an act of personal investiture (“mine-ing”), activating untold and silenced histories of Native Americans and African Americans in the area. Using only existing museum materials, Wilson employed such strategies as the reinterpretation of traditional categories (a pair of crudely wrought slave shackles is set alongside the ornate silver objects that usually stand for period artisanship: “Metalwork 1793-1880”); jarring juxtapositions (a Ku Klux Klan hood in a baby carriage); and multimedia that encourage new ways of seeing (illuminating the unknown black figures in period portraits, for example, and overlaying them with audio tracks of a child asking personal questions, thereby asserting individual presence and history).

The current moment in the United States has led to a renewed sense of urgency in addressing the role of museums and archives as sites of ideological power and of potential social agency and change. With civic discourse often mired in an antagonistic stalemate and as “alternative facts” produce new regimes of truth that veil rampant racism, xenophobia, and climate injustice (all interwoven in the sluggish federal response to Hurricane Maria), #MuseumsAreNotNeutral has become a rallying call across the United States and internationally.⁴ The growing movement both “calls out” — highlighting inequitable practices, exclusionary narratives, and colonial complicity — and “calls in” — by asking cultural workers, institutions, and social organizers to engage with how the power of museums might be rendered visible, interrogated, redistributed, and mustered in the service of social change. Such change ranges from increased transparency about collection histories and interpretation,⁵ to the sharing of curatorial authority and recognition of broader forms of expertise, to new staffing and salary structures, to direct engagement in exhibitions and programming with controversial or provocative



Figure 9
Patriot Economy
Eraser. *The Museum
of the Old Colony.*



Figure 10
Installation view
with executive desk,
patriotic pen set,
and guest book.
*The Museum of the
Old Colony.*

contemporary issues about which museums have historically preferred to remain silent.⁶

Despite being crowded out of the news cycle by hurricanes in Texas and Florida and by debates over NFL kneeling, Hurricane Maria revealed extensive structural neglect and economic precarity in Puerto Rico. Delano’s installation surfaces several of these historical faultlines, prompting viewers to reflect, in turn, on the current relationship of the United States and Puerto Rico. In the absence of the “aura” of the original material, spectators must confront their own assumptions about value and authenticity. Without extensive interpretative aids, viewers must actively contend with the content and juxtaposition of each image, searching for and producing coherent relationships: working out a story to tell themselves.

What will they make of the series of monochromatic images that follow the buoyantly colored graphic dimensionality of the entryway’s

Figure 11
NASA astronaut Joe Acaba on the
International Space Station.
NASA/Twitter.

Figure 12
Juan José Martínez con su proyecto
de la Feria Científica. Photograph by:
Rafael Santiago Sosa, 1966, Biblioteca
Digital Puertorriqueña. Colección de
fotos del pedriódico *El Mundo*. From
The Museum of the Old Colony.



display timeline of Old Colony soda bottles and cans? [Figure 4] Will they notice the strong lines of the cannon [cover image] that have been reinforced by the hand of the original newspaper retoucher for reproduction and widespread dissemination, a common practice for strengthening visual effects long before the dawn of Photoshop? The reinforced lines, visible only through Delano's enlargement, underscore the rhetorical role of these images: here the graphic contrast further delineates a picture of progress versus stasis, industrial might versus agricultural humility . . . If they sit at the executive desk to record their response to the exhibition with the cheap patriotic pen set provided, might they catch sight of the unobtrusive *Economy Eraser* that lies, mockingly, in its rarefied miniature vitrine [Figures 9 and 10] or feel drawn to interact with the domino set that alludes at once to a popular Puerto Rican leisure activity and to the fragile contingencies of lived experience on the island, especially post-Maria? And how might each of the exhibition's many associated programs and partnerships inflect, extend, or activate *The Museum of the Old Colony* anew? For all Delano's careful curation, the installation is not static. Rather, it becomes an expansive framework, a series of suggestive starting points for critical conversations about race, history, photography, colonialism; then and now bound up in one another.

THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

We began with a time-traveling moment: a mobile exhibition of the benefits of electricity, circa 1958, from the vantage point of the longest blackout in U.S. history, circa 2018. While *The Museum of the Old Colony* purposefully denies any sense of closure or resolution, let us end with another: In January of this year, Joseph Acaba, the first NASA astronaut of Puerto Rican descent, held a Puerto Rican flag as he spoke to Puerto Rican schoolchildren in Manatí from the international space station, telling them that at night, after the hurricane, the island he loved and sought from space had become all but invisible. [Figure 11] Despite the lack of any official reference to his Puerto Rican heritage on the NASA website, which refers to him only as a "California native," Acaba has a strong Puerto Rican following. His Twitter feed reads as an informal clearinghouse for a nation of "frustrated astronauts,"⁷ aspirations grounded as they work to rebuild the island's decimated physical and economic infrastructure, and continue to navigate political precarity. We are met, in this moment, by the uncertain gaze of Juan José Martínez, holding the base of his cardboard rocket ship emblazoned with large letters spelling out "PUERTO RICO" and no NASA ensign, in a 1966 school science fair. [Figure 12] Set among orderly rock samples, dioramas, posters, and scale models, the makeshift rocket stirs the contemporary imagination. Its surging upward momentum seems set to break the upper limits of the picture plane.

References

1. "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism" in Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*. Routledge: London and New York, 1994 (2010).
2. Kliem, as cited in Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, and Wolfram Hartmann, "Photography, History and Memory". This was further bolstered, as Hayes, Silvester and Hartmann explore, by the "optical empiricism" of the late nineteenth century, during which the camera "formed part of a 'truth apparatus' being forged by science and police work in modernizing states in Western Europe." *The Colonizing Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History*. University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town, 1998.
3. Gonzalez, Jennifer, "Against the Grain: The Artist as Conceptual Materialist" in Doro Globus (ed.), *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, Ridinghouse: London, 2011.

References

4. While many individuals and institutions have, over many years, drawn attention to how the notion of “neutrality” in museums is largely a mechanism for maintaining an exclusionary (Eurocentric, patriarchal, heteronormative) status quo, the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral initiative can be traced to the work of cultural organizer LaTanya Autry and director of education and public programs at the Portland Art Museum, Mike Murawski.
5. The Worcester Museum, in Massachusetts, recently added new labels alongside the “traditional” ones in its early American portrait gallery, detailing how the individuals and institutions celebrated and pictured in their portraits (and the society in which they moved) benefitted from slavery. The new labels address the continued “historical amnesia” of the North (frequently buttressed by museums’ selective interpretation), in which “people consistently deny New England’s ties to slavery.” Bond, Sarah. “Can Art Museums Help Illuminate Early American Connections to Slavery?” *Hyperallergic*, April 25, 2018. <https://hyperallergic.com/439716/can-art-museums-help-illuminate-early-american-connections-to-slavery/>
6. Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary museum — which now includes an exhibition about contemporary mass incarceration — has actively engaged with how its “version of ‘neutrality’ was mostly taking the form of silence ... an excuse for simply avoiding thorny issues of race, poverty, and policy that we weren’t ready to address.” See Kelley, Sean. “Beyond Neutrality.” *Center for the Future of Museums Blog*, American Alliance of Museums, 23 August 2016. <https://www.aam-us.org/2016/08/23/beyond-neutrality/>
7. Acaba, Joe (AstroAcaba). “Finally a chance to see the beautiful island of Puerto Rico from @Space_Station. Continued thoughts throughout the recovery process.” 14 October 2017, 10:45 a.m. Tweet. Reply by Raul Diaz (diazraule), “Making us very proud Joe! For all us ‘frustrated astronauts’ down here, and for our enchanted island — ¡Dios te bendiga hermano ...!” 15 October 2017, 7:41 p.m. Tweet. Frances Colon (fcoloninFL). “We are so proud of you. We promise to fight for ur people down here so they can one day reach the stars like you.” 15 October 2017, 3:50 a.m. Tweet.



A COLORED BELLE OF PUERTO RICO
A picture of African with Spanish blood is not found in all of the people of this island. The
of white people hold themselves as strictly in their own society as in any other country.
The colored girl is of the higher type of that race.







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98 Porto Rican Boys in their Sunday Dress, near Alouba.
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... of the year 1952 and of the University ... an ... of ... that ... the ... of the ... that ... to ... of the ... were ...



... that ... to U.S. ... and ... to ... and ... the ... would ... code ... during the 1960s and ... or violent ... groups, ... also ... one of ... in the ... released ... after ...

