



Maria Fernanda Cardoso Fashion and Mimesis

Rodman Hall Art Centre December 19, 2009 - May 2, 2010

Maria Fernanda Cardoso: Fashion and Mimicry

By Gary Genosko

A few years ago I had the opportunity as guest curator of the exhibition *Bug City* (2005-2006) at the Winnipeg Art Gallery of including an important piece by Maria Fernanda Cardoso, a video installation (*Cardoso Flea Circus*, made with partner Ross Rudesch Harley) of her flea circus. Maria's efforts to regain the 'lost' tradition of training fleas not only proved to be difficult and time-consuming, spanning some 6 years, but intentionally made a mockery of animal training.

Later in 2006 I found myself in Sydney, Australia, and much to my delight in the company of Maria and Ross. Together Maria and I wore giant living stick insects on our heads and wondered about the entomological imaginaries that have possessed both of us from our early years onward. I had already discussed at length with the American photographer Catherine Chalmers, another denizen of *Bug City*, the conversion of her studio into an incubator of life forms, the industrial provision of the lower orders (mail order ladybugs), and the staging of inter-species encounters which are evident in the photographic works of her *Food Chain* series, so I was prepared for Maria's converted garage-studio which was teeming with specimens, both dead and alive, of tropical stick insects, katydids, beetles and butterflies, not to mention residual mice from an earlier breeding program. Little did I know that nestled among the frozen bread and juice in the family refrigerator would come to be found freeze-dried emu legs.

In the course of the interview with Sonja Britz, Maria dwells on the significance of insect mimicry involving leaf butterflies and stick insects:

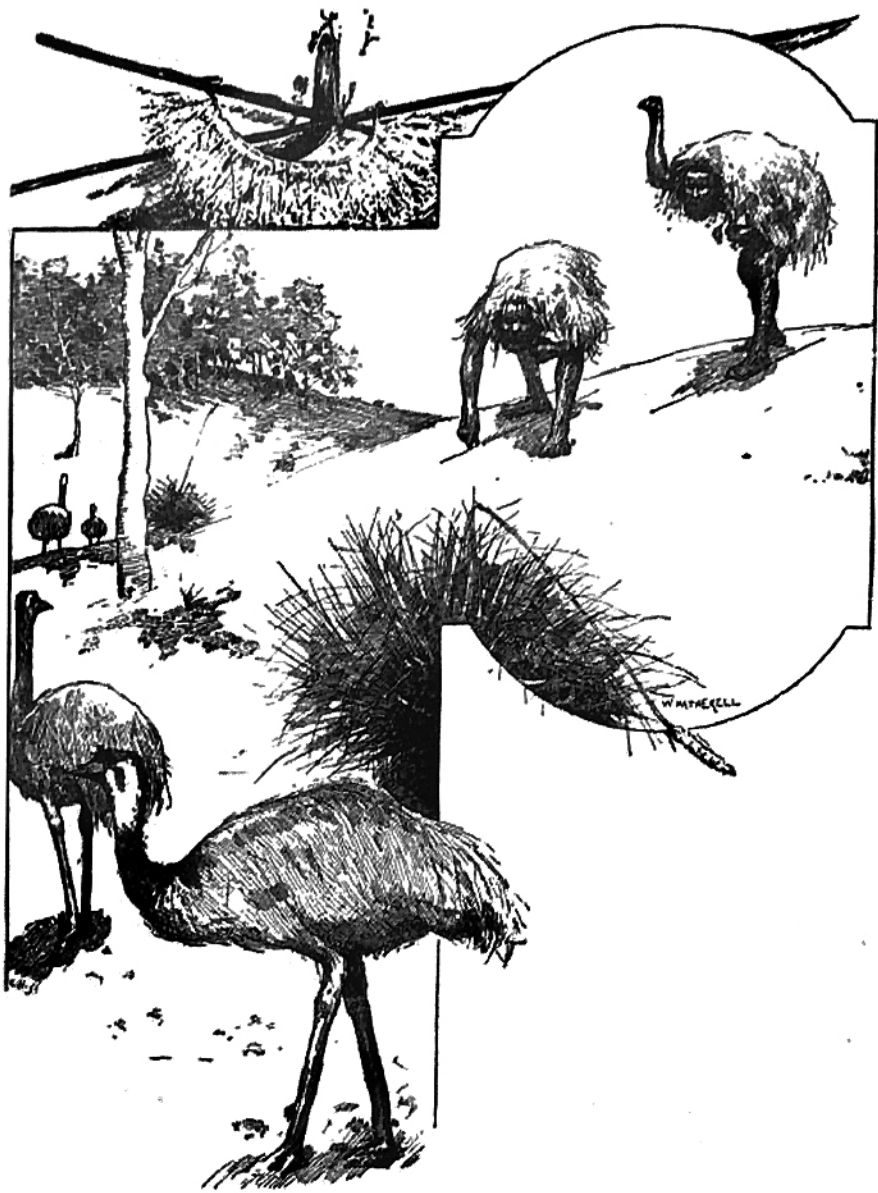
I worked a lot with the *Kallima inachus* or Dead Leaf Butterfly to create a series of works about mimicry, invisibility, and the intelligence required by insects to mimic plants. I made the work 'El Arte de la

Desaparición' (The Art of Disappearance), and a piece titled 'A Garden of Insects that Look Like Plants', which also utilized master mimics such as stick insects and bright green Katydid to recreate branches and foliage. That body of work had many potential readings and blends formalism with behaviour, and could be read metaphorically for our desire to blend in, to camouflage or to disappear, but with the option to be loud and attractive (stick insects also have bright red wings used to scare predators). I couldn't have developed one body work without the other... so to me, as a personal metaphor, butterflies are both the possibility of beauty and visibility, or invisibility and deception, both options achieved through an excessive degree of perfection.¹

Whenever I listen to her frank accounts of wonder before insect intelligence, its extravagance, and power to affect human experience, I am reminded not of anthropomorphic figures of speech but, instead, of what a remarkable legacy this approach has in radical twentieth century thought. The line between French surrealist Roger Caillois and Maria Fernanda Cardoso is that of an inverted anthropomorphism that finds in mantises, dead leaf butterflies and stick insects an objective lyricism whose potential to elucidate human behaviour constitutes a rich resource for a poetic sensibility and artistic imagination.

In the anti-Darwinian and anti-utilitarian thought of Caillois, the idea that nature does everything in vain is perhaps best realized in his reformulation of mimicry. Caillois thinks through mimicry in terms relevant to both insects and humans, and insists that the three typical functions of the phenomenon – disguise (imitation of another), camouflage (blending into the background) and intimidation (appearance producing fright) – each have something to tell us about disappearance and dissipation, that is, about the struggle for inexistence and the role of biological inutility.

Disguise has little value, Caillois claims, for survival, citing the phenomenon of accidental mutual grazing among camouflaged members of the same species, and high counts of camouflaged insects in the stomachs of their predators; rather, it is a slow-moving adoption of a fashion, a kind of irrepressible love. Without causing a scientific scandal, imitation in this context neither answers to natural selection nor ensures survival. Likewise, camouflage



is the desire for invisibility, loss of identity and fixed boundaries. This environmental similarity is, Caillois thought, excessive because it is dangerous and aimless. Finally, intimidation rests largely on the periodic display of abstract eye patterns, signifying terror, affecting paralysis or flight of enemies. The problem here for Caillois is that of the mask, an accessory, quite ornamental, and deployed to dramatic effect: the strength of the weak to overwhelm or even attract the strong. Mimicry is a luxury (perfection is excessive) and a condition of deterioration, under what he called an *instinct d'abandon* (instinct of letting go).

Maria's work crosses many species and media beyond the entomological reference. She is both an artist and a scientist. Visual mimicry remains at the heart of her aesthetic preoccupations. She is our lady of mimicry and much of her work is situated in the complex and disorienting space of mimesis. Disguise and deception in birds find expression in her work presented here as *Fashion and Mimesis*, in which feathers from the flightless national emblem of Australian fauna are used as organic materials for the construction of women's fashions and accessories; but not only women, as she is fascinated by the fact that male emus look after the eggs and chicks. Emu feathers mimic the colours and textures of the arid bush terrain in which they live. The feathers she uses are, to be specific, from domesticated emus raised as a food source. Camouflage is not in this context an issue for the birds. While for us eating emus may seem as odd as eating reindeer, the connection with food, waste and insects is strong as one recalls the beetle carapaces retrieved from Indonesian restaurants used as ornamental wall coverings by Jan Fabre. Maria likes to work with more than feathers; rather, her preference is to use all parts of the animal and she approaches the materials meticulously. Presented like an over-the-top fashion shoot in large-scale photographs of female models wearing the extravagant emu outfits, together with a video installation by Ross Harley that underlines the gestural and postural economies of human-emu correspondences, and one of a kind sculptural pieces, these works play with the tension between disappearance, in which an animal's coloration allows it to blend in with its surroundings as an allegedly protective measure, and the heightening of appearance through display in order to seek or even dispense rewards. Lest one believe that the insect reference has been left behind, in Maria's emu hats, wraps, socks, undergarments, and elaborate outfits, traces of an entomological detailing is persistently present in the cicada-like draperies of flightless wings and the

sculptural effects of feathers, emphasizing both quill and vane and edges, mounted in folded nylon mesh.

Disappearance seems protective even if it perilously slides into subjective detumescence, while the display mode mingles attraction with the intimidations of beauty. This is not Maria's first venture into the avian world as her *Chicken Face* photographs speak directly to fashion and fascination, the opposite of what Caillois thought of as sterile usefulness. Maria has been using emu feathers as a sculptural material for about five years, developing heavy patterned hats, caps, flags, and squares during 2004-2005; these heavy textiles gave way to the whimsical emu feather flowers the following year, which marked a major breakthrough in lightness and glam absurdity; Australian critic and art historian Susan Best once dubbed Maria's art "tropical Dada." When she first moved to Australia and wanted to work with animal materials, Maria was reticent about working with/on emus and other clichéd animals of the Australian bestiary. This changed a few years later as the bureaucratic difficulties involved with accessing materials from wild animals proved insurmountable, and the kind of research species available to her were taxidermic specimens held in natural history museums. While these were great for research purposes, they did not constitute a source of materials. Domesticated species provided the sources she needed.

Maria's *Butterfly Drawings* circa 2004, made with the wings of Australasian and Peruvian species, place her firmly in a stream of international interest in the medium of colorful powdery wings in decorative context. The use of butterfly wings in toile motifs on installed wallpapers for domestic interiors was developed by American Jennifer Angus and included the 'discovery' of apocryphal new species by the artist. Angus, too, dabbled in tableaux inspired by the circus with barbell and umbrella hoisting beetles (*Bug Circus*, 2001). After spending a few days riding up and down in an elevator that Angus had 'wallpapered', I began to experience textured insect walls everywhere, not in a menacing way as in a buggy B-movie or bad drug trip, but very much like avid collector and novelist Vladimir Nabokov must have felt when he wrote to Hugh Hefner in 1968 pointing out how much the bunny ears of the *Playboy* emblem looked like "a butterfly in shape, with an eyespot on one hindwing."

Maria's menagerie is populated by species as diverse as piranhas, emus and walking sticks. She is like a collector in this regard – acquiring new specimens, new knowledges, and

new methods of exploration. Sometimes she even puts herself in the collection, as blood host to her fleas. Her sculptural production has over the course of her career found a balance with photographic and video work; from her beginnings with water sculptures and corn cobs, to her latest experiments with the penises of tiny creatures under electron microscopes, modes of visual reproduction have remained key parts of the process. Glossy fashion photography mixes comfortably with scientific modes of visualization.

The emu works are circulating in a new hemisphere, a far northern zone where the excess of the emu fashions will signify differently against the background of Amerindian traditions of feather work, the symbolism of eagle feathers, and in the absence of Aborigine myths and practices encompassing emus, intersecting with another zoomorphic aesthetic defined in these parts, and with exceptions, by specific types of fur as much as by feathers. Although Maria was not inspired in the first instance by Australian Aboriginal practices around hunting emus, her intuition about the space of mimesis was confirmed by her recent discovery of a nineteenth century ethnological text written by travel writer Maturin M. Ballou, *Foot-Prints of Travel* (1889), in which emu hunting is illustrated. Remarkably, Aboriginal hunters not only pose and move in emu-like ways, but wear on their backs emu feather shawls that are hitherto unrecognized precursors to her own works with the same materials. In the same vein Maria's interest in the sculptural qualities of emu legs is displayed in her assemblage of them as boomerangs, absurdist tools not so much for hunting but for capturing singularities and distributing them to those who view her works. In this way the emu works on display transport us into a supercharged space of mimesis that challenges our everyday universes of reference.

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Maria Fernanda Cardoso

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Curated by Gary Genosko

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Images:

Front: Maria Fernanda Cardoso, *Ruana* (detail),
2008, Lambda print on photographic paper
mounted on Dibond, 180 x 120 cm.

In text: *Emu Hunting in Australia*.

In: Maturin M. Ballou, *Foot-prints of Travel*; or,
Journeyings in Many Lands, Boston: Ginn
and Co., 1889, p. 64. *Project Gutenberg*.
Web. 8 Dec 2009.

Reverse: Maria Fernanda Cardoso, *Emu Wrap*
(detail), 2006 – 2008, Lambda print on
photographic paper mounted on Dibond,
180 x 120 cm.

Gallery Hours

Tuesday & Wednesday: 11 am – 5 pm

Thursday: 11 am – 9 pm

Friday: 11 am – 5 pm

Saturday: 10 am – 5 pm

Sunday: 11 am – 5 pm

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