

I recall an American comedy where the main character turned up his nose at the recommendation of taking a few days' break in the Caribbean as, according to him, he would only find islands for dentists. This apparently naive observation deprives the region even of its best trump card: its paradisiacal value, its utopian potential. The perception, so typical of Hollywood, takes me deeper into Caribbean reality. If in 1991 BÉLGICA RODRÍGUEZ considered that you can go right through Central America from Mexico to Venezuela practically without touching it, I have to say that the Caribbean is to be travelled through, enjoyed and abandoned, being historically a good stopover and stocking up ground. Two different archetypes, though with similar histories.

However, amid a supposedly adverse panorama, a new "wave" of fascination and expectancy regarding Caribbean visual art is being unleashed at the turn of the century. What seems to be a good omen coincides in aesthetic terms with a vitality and diversity that are unusual to find in artists committed as they are in the 90s to the modern day dilemma, in the process of rewriting their codes of expression and launching new manoeuvres to secure a place for themselves on the international art scene. We are entering a period of ideological crisis, of a shift away from the centre and an attack on the generalising accounts provided by history, politics or the economy; a period in which "identities are now not only built in relation to single territories, but from the multi-cultural intersection of objects, messages and persons" from different parts, according to Néstor García Canclini, and in which "the flows arising from technologies and corporations that operate transnationally... multinational

**THE MODERN
DAY DILEMMA
IN CARIBBEAN
ART**

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JOSÉ MANUEL NOCEDA

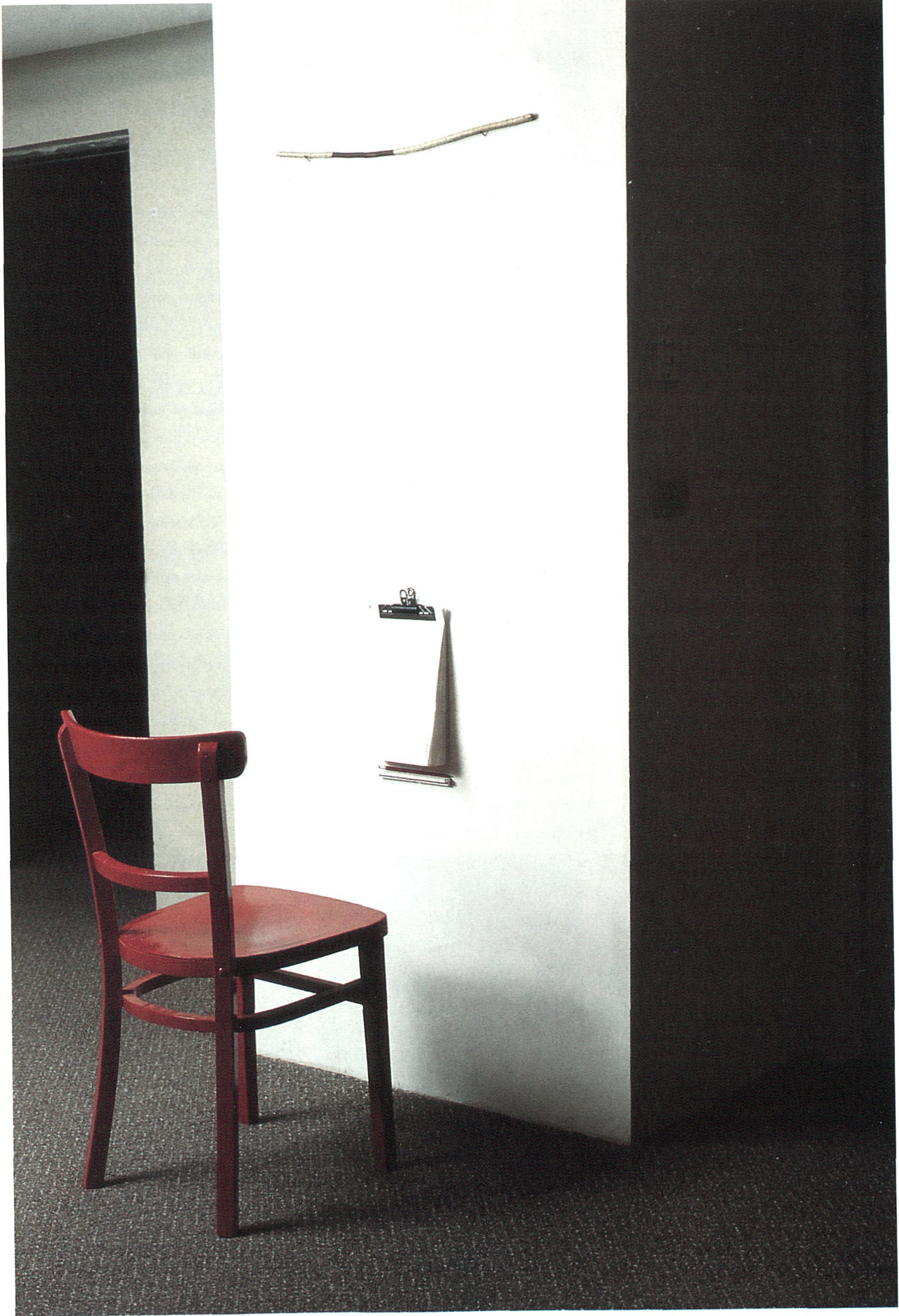
swaps... the repertoires of images and information distributed across the planet by dailies, magazines and television channels..." penetrate and devastate traditional definitions of individual identities. [1] While the echoes of this global fabric of finance, telematics, communications, which involuntarily reaches all corners of the earth, scarcely alter the peace and quiet of a life dependent on the tourist industry, Caribbean societies do not escape the contradictions engendered by their own history, the snares of their own past, or their own modernity. Artistic activity does not give itself up to ontological considerations of false identities or to the ghosts of fragmentation: it does not want to be left by the wayside during the contradictory but fertile evolution of its own circumstances.

What historic and current factors interact in this explicit will for dialogue? How is the strategy manifested? The first thing that is patently obvious in the Caribbean art scene is the heterogeneity and inequality one comes across when attempting to apply an "avant-garde" standard that embraces the whole string of islands, Surinam, Guyana and French Guyana – the continental enclaves. The diachronic emergence of novel forms of

language or concept is compromised by anachronisms such as the production-circulation and consumption circuit, the lack of attention to, or limits imposed on, the system of art teaching, the difficulties inherent to the very act of creation, and the absence of a professional infrastructure of galleries or museums in many of these countries. [2] To give an idea, in the twenties Cuba was the only country to be affected by the emergence of modern Latin American movements. In the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica and Puerto Rico opposition to the academy or to the remnants of 19th century criteria did not flourish until almost the beginning of the 40s or, in the case of the latter, the 50s.

The historical conditioning of these and other inequalities underlies the behaviour of visual art in our times. The 90s brought a breath of fresh air, with the explosion of a "new avant-garde" that connected the whole of the area synchronically. For the first time, it was valid to conceive of a "movement" which could be located both in the territories favoured by tradition – Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Haiti – and those small enclaves where avant-garde artists appeared for the first time almost at the threshold of the new millennium – Aruba, Barbados, Curaçao, the Virgin Islands and Trinidad.

The symptoms of this new trend were expressed in a series of events that did not marginalise Caribbean visual art. Particularly noteworthy among these are a group of exhibitions aimed as never before at capturing significant aspects of the artistic activity of the Antilles and the continental territories, making them interact with forms of expression belonging to the international context (*Caribbean and Central American Painting Biennial*, Museo de Arte



Christopher Cozier (Trinidad). *System of control*, 1992. Installation.

Moderno, Santo Domingo; 1492/1992 *Un Nouveau Régard sur les Caraïbes*, Espace Carpeaux, France, 1992; *Carib Art*, International Trade Center, Curaçao, 1991; *Caribbean Visions*, Art Services International, Virginia, 1995, or *Arte del Caribe: exclusión, fragmentación, paraíso*, to be opened shortly, with María Lluisa Borrás and Antonio Zaya as curators). But the essential characteristic was to trace out a new map for artistic expression in the region. The designing of what, by 1994, looked set to be the new image of the Caribbean does not necessarily entail denying the existence of movements or isolated initiatives which appeared before the 90s, whose universal repercussions or significant areas of breaking with the past acted as precedents to this new regional yearning for transcendentalism. Precedents that were both far and near. As far as Lam and the Cuban avant-garde of the 20s and 30s; Jamaican modernism led by Edna Manley; the artist of Haitian origin, Hervé Télémaque and his foray into French pop art; or the visceral attitude of Puerto Rican Raúl Ferrer; Dominican Silvano Lora's vindication of marginal life; the expansive and multimedia art of Antonio Martorell of Puerto Rico; the impression of the Fwomajé group on the island of Martinique; Peter Minshall's performance art, in Trinidad; Michel Rovelas's paintings of overlapping temporalities in Guadalupe; or much nearer, such as the dissemination of "new Cuban art" in the 80s, a considerable movement in that it was both an immediate precedent and pioneer of the current renovation of the art scene.

The turning point of this movement came when the primacy of Afro-Caribbean ancestral spirituality, which situated art somewhere between myth – the rock – and a hard place, for the sake of reality. In the 80s Caribbean visual art

embraced a rhetoric of form stemming from the interpretation of Caribbeaness. This was at times misunderstood, and at others entailed glimmerings of Africa in the Diaspora –blackness, the Rasta movement, the aesthetics of syncretism or the "ideology of miscegenation". It tended to avoid social issues typical of multi-marginal contexts and to concentrate on "the tropical problem" described by Hollister Sturge, or to take up the "problems of artistic expression".



Elvis López (Aruba). Series *Playing with the Gods*, 1994. Detail. Installation.

It is therefore not strange that this group of artists from the scattered islands and "dry land" should coincide – for this is not a movement but simply a convergence – in shedding this line which had been exhausted and was proving to be an ineffective means of addressing the socio-cultural needs of the Caribbean context. Nor is it strange that they should intervene to remedy the loss of thoughtfulness and embrace the possibilities of re-integrating art into the society re-defined by post-modernism and recover its "critical potential", applying the "cynical reason" of post-

modernist sensitivity, as illustrated by Fredric Jameson. We thus have a link with the "Trojan Horse" put into practice by Wifredo Lam, in the Cuba of the 40s, to combat socio-cultural banalisation. [3]

Caribbean art today interacts with epochal circumstances, and identifies with a type of representation that is devoid of innocence – the Spanish theorist José Luis Brea considers that nowadays there is no such thing as "innocent representation". His philosophy agrees with René Louise's cultural fugitivism, which aspires to foster a new modernity with its roots in tradition, its sights set on everyday life, on a new universal, futurist, robotic, telematic, biotechnical civilisation... [4] It is this interplay which defines many of the issues addressed.

Landscapes, such a useful fallback, serve as show-cases for restructuring genres. Stan Kuiperi, of Aruba, paints vast canvases charged with matter, which provide a symbolic interpretation of the island's cultural identity; Elvis Avilés, from the Dominican Republic, incorporated the visual sign language of urban graffiti into his paintings; Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa displays an archaeological syntax based on the deconstruction-of-the-deconstruction of the city, which restores the symbolic power usurped from areas and environments of the urban context of Havana.

Another salient feature is social marginalisation, which is addressed in the urban aesthetics of the Rastas of Barbados, Ras Akyem and Ras Ishi, or the portrayal of the black man as a legend in the work of Jamaican Omari Ra; it is also present in the photographs of alienation of Néstor Millán from Puerto Rico; in the colourist expressionism of Stan Burnside of the Bahamas, or in the photos of young convicts in Los Angeles by Denis

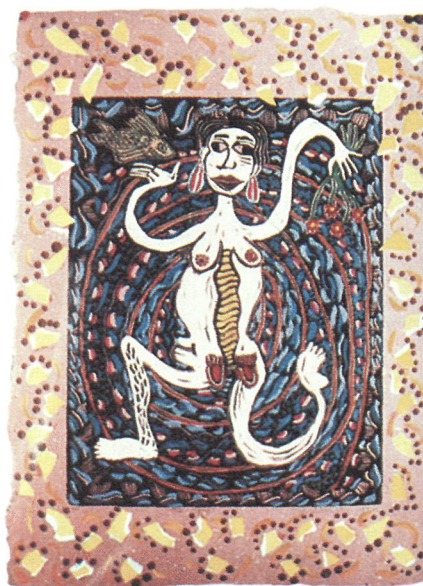
Callwood, of the US Virgin Islands; the theme of modern lack of communication is addressed in the work of Osaira Muyale, from Aruba, or in that of Dominican artist Belkis Ramírez, whose figures or emblems always place areas of silence between them; degradation of the collective human condition in a society which is at the mercy of consumption, a society that treats people like things, appears in some facets of Puerto Rican Enoc Pérez; by contrast, in the social commentary of Dominican Tony Capellán, the theme is lack of alternatives.

Gender alienation is also decoded by a group of female artists: the intellectual "feminism" of Annalee Davis of Barbados, who dismantles the double subordination of race – as a white woman – and gender – as a woman in a country like Barbados; women as victims of sexual violence in Puerto Rico, by Anaida Hernández; the existential dissection which characterised certain areas of the oeuvre of another Puerto Rican, Mari Matter O'Neill; Jacqueline Fabien's unravelling of the patterns of masculine representation; or the questioning of the female identity by Irene Shaw of Trinidad, Joselyn Gardner of Barbados and Alida Martínez of Aruba, or, in the case of Cuba, the vastly different alternatives that range from the visceral inquisition of Sandra Ceballos to the apparent hedonism of Aimée García.

Power and violence find a place in the installations of Puerto Rican Carlos Rivera: in the work of Christopher Cozier, of Trinidad, which ranges from a symbolism of power through the metaphor of monitoring school pupils to two-dimensional pieces that address juvenile violence; in the depersonalisation of the secular power of the thrones by another Trinidad artist, Francisco Cabral; in the ideas of Thierry Alet, of

Guadalupe, first in *La caída del Rey*; and then in structures that can be read as the strata of a power which is abstract, indecipherable, perhaps inherent both to art and to society; or in the supposedly much more obvious sculptures of Haitian Patrick Vilaire.

The ever unresolved dilemma of displacement which, for many, is inherent to the Caribbean condition, was frequently expressed in the first half of



Annalee Davis (Barbados), *Torn Apart*, 1993.

the 90s in Kcho's *Regatas*, the series *Migraciones I* and *II* by another Cuban, Sandra Ramos; in the drawings of Dominican Raúl Recio, and in his tribute to his country's *yoleros* who lost their lives in the Mona canal. In dealing with these problems, two artists, Dominican Marcos Lora and Cuban Tonel, have focused on the origins or implications of voyage rather than physical characteristics. In *La calimba*, 1994, Lora dealt with the historical arguments which define the exclusion from, and control of immigrants in, mother countries; Tonel is concerned with

insularity, the devices which multiply the island, the bridges which connect fragmentation.

Other artists prefer to take a look at their own identity, combing personal or national history archives; the influence of the media, endless unresolved themes and problems in places that are far removed from the natural beauty, sensual dance and contagious music that the tourist is offered; problems which constitute the daily harassment of the inhabitants of the ghettos of Kingston or Bridgetown, Cubans, Haitians in Puerto Príncipe, or black immigrants in San Nicolás in the easternmost part of Aruba.

However, this new art trend is also linked to a turning point in language references which marks a shift from modernist patterns of representation to post-modern permissiveness, from the aegis of Picasso, Max Ernst, Klee or Lam to the operational ability of neo-dada avant-garde, the art of ideas, Beuys, Boltanski, Sherman or Bourgeois. Installations, video-art, a tendency to use objects and multimedia are gaining ground, co-existing side by side with the traditional disciplines.

From this viewpoint, the dominant conventions of the two-dimensional medium in painting, drawing or graphics have been transgressed. The era of installations has arrived, of vast spatial constructions, such as those of José Bedia, Marcos Lora or Kcho; works of art were freed from the bounds of material, sometimes by recycling and borrowing from bizarre materials rearranged according to a new syntax, from the basically archaeological recycling of Carlos Garaicoa to the somewhat more orthodox recycling of Jamaican artist Petrona Morrison; parts of the oeuvre of René Francisco y Ponjúan, from Cuba, which borrows from popular and, at the same time, cultural theory; the popular

sociological recycling of Pepón Osorio, a Puerto Rican based in New York, or the simulated self-recycling of Cuban Carlos Estévez.

Techniques and forms also took on a new importance in their own right. It became difficult to speak in purist terms. Printmaking, for example, witnessed a change of direction. Artists became more interested in the possibilities of expression offered by the medium than in multiple and serial reproduction, preferring to exploit the original woodcut, such as the Cubans Belkis Ramírez or Abel Barroso. A variety of devices were adopted, with a tendency to draw from multimedia, lacking as it is in inhibition, complementing the story with video or photography, sometimes on account of their documentary value – as witnessed in the work of the Jamaican Albert Chong and Osaira Muyale of Aruba – or auto-referential lyricism – Elvis López, of Aruba, or Joselyn Gardner, of Barbados.

The figurative dimension in a context of multimedia and objects can also be achieved through matter, as evidenced by Marc Latamie, an artist from Martinique based in New York; through the simulation of Haitian Mario Benjamin or in the level of sophistication of the late artist of Cuban origin, Félix González Torres.

This advance party, who are shaping a new era in the symbolic work of the region with a view to the new millennium, act as an escape valve, delving more deeply into the universe as evidenced in the ongoing attempts to “keep up with the times”. Thus, the patterns of today’s art are screened and established as benchmarks for local expression, from an inter-textual point of view; there are no prejudices against borrowing from mainstream models, very much in line with the theory of “cultural

pillage” outlined by Carolina Ponce de León. These artists transcribe their hostility towards current conventions by taking possession of more or less sophisticated languages and testify to the fact that they live in today’s world. Their morphology is international, but the execution is Caribbean; Edouard Glissant interpreted the use of languages in the Antilles in a similar way; they emerge from their respective Caribbean societies or through the deterritorialised experiences of sporadic or prolonged forays into the mother countries. The interactions between the two poles strengthen the tendency towards openness and commitment to the context of the country of origin.

The new Caribbean avant-garde artists concentrate the dilemmas of the present into a sort of “melting pot”, very much along the lines of the considerations of Alejo Carpentier in one of his dissertations on the Latin American novel which, despite the passing of time, continues to be persistently valid. Carpentier said at the time that “this act of freeing of local prejudice set out to demonstrate to itself and to others that being a Creole did not make one oblivious to what was going on in the rest of the world... lack information or be incapable of understanding and using techniques which are producing excellent results in other places. [5] This is similar to what we are witnessing today throughout the Caribbean area, on a much more plural level; this trend does not appear in the form of a game of moving in and out of modernity, which Canelini saw signs of in Latin America, but rather as a strategy of adaptation to contemporary life – as in the culture of space flight–, an intrepid endeavour not to be left outside the sphere of post-modernity this time around.

NOTES

- [1] The ideas for this essay were outlined for the first time in the address entitled “Towards a new image of the Caribbean” given at the II Biennial of Caribbean and Central American Painting, Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo, October 1994. Néstor García Canelini. “Rehacer los pasaportes”, Revista de Crítica Cultural, Santiago de Chile, no. 8, May 1994, p. 32.
- [2] Yolanda Wood has mentioned the decisive factors for arriving at a better understanding of the contradictions inherent in the inner logic of the region’s geo-political, socio-economic and cultural development. Many of these factors determine and influence the limitations and behaviour of Caribbean visual arts. See “Procesos histórico-artísticos en el Caribe”, in *De la plástica cubana y caribeña*, Havana, Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1990, p.135-147.
- [3] Wilfredo Lam used the allegory of the Trojan horse to express both an aesthetic and social desire for rupture. “...My painting”, he confessed, “would not be equivalent to a pseudo-Cuban music [...] I yearned, as hard as I could, to paint the drama of my country, but expressing in depth the spirit of the blacks, the beauty of the plastic of the blacks. I would thus be like a Trojan horse from which amazing figures would spring, capable of astonishing...” In Max Pol Fouchet, Wilfredo Lam, Barcelona, Ediciones Polígrafa S.A., p. 188.
- [4] René Louise. “Manifiesto del cimarronismo moderno”, Havana, Fourth Havana Biennial, Centro Wilfredo Lam, 1991, pp.44-54.
- [5] Alejo Carpentier. “La novela latinoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo”. Siglo XXI Editores, 1981, p. 171.

CARIBBEAN ART AND THE ALLEGORY OF ELEGGUÁ

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JOSÉ MANUEL NOCEDA

In 1979 Brazilian historian and art critic Federico Morais published a text that nowadays is a classic about the ideology of international biennials, and the consequential exclusion at that time of Latin America and Caribbean art from the