

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

grand exhibitions held for the most part in metropolitan centres. [1] The circumstances and experiences that gave cause for the essay are no longer the same; the global context has been tempered by a strategically concerted effort on the part of the competent authorities to admit greater numbers of works of art formerly regarded as subordinate to those circuits of cultural diffusion and circulation. The long-established and especially the numerous new biennials the world over or the thematic macro-exhibitions held nowadays champion the concept of multiculturalism or the plurality of expression and open their arms, on occasion with apprehension, to the artists of the South. While it represents a repositioning within the ideological hegemony, the strong attraction shown towards “otherness” does not exactly redress so many years of contempt for peripheral cultures. That is why Gerardo Mosquera advises wariness in relation to the new generation’s adopting a spirit of openness and tolerance. “Pluralism can be a prison without walls”, cautions the Cuban critic.

I referred in the beginning to the words of Morais, because they hark back to a time of acute marginalisation for the Caribbean visual arts, a situation that is only just now, in the 1990s, beginning quietly to be supplanted. His essay offers a detailed dissection – with statistics included – of the curatorial principles applied to selecting works of art and awarding prizes at the grand sanctuaries of art promotion: Kassel’s *Documenta*, the *Venice Biennial*, the *Paris Biennial*, and the *São Paulo International Biennial*. In the case of the first three shows, there figured few Caribbean names in the lists of participants. For the organisers of the *São Paulo International Biennial*, promoters in the western hemisphere of the same ideology instituted by the principal international exhibitions that

preceded it, the function of Latin American art was “...almost always that of filler, used to round out the statistics of foreign participants. Useful for this purpose were countries like the Netherlands Antilles (six participants), Barbados (1), El Salvador (5), British Guyana (2), Haiti (8), Honduras (2), Jamaica (1), Nicaragua (6), Panama (6), the Dominican Republic (7), Trinidad and Tobago (6)...” [2]

This situation extended to other exhibitions within and without the hemisphere, whenever mechanisms of asphyxiating hierarchical structuring and stratification were brought to bear. It is not surprising that *Arte Fantástico Latinoamericano*, paradoxically so well acquainted with one of the most exploited facets of the Caribbean, should open its doors only to Lam, Arnaldo Roche, or José Bedia. Or that *Los Magos de la Tierra*, also in tune with concepts much bandied about when it comes time to try to define – or to pigeonhole – the Caribbean spirit, was much more “exclusivist”. Omissions apart, the plastic art was expounded in accordance with certain approaches quite close to guidelines established by *Arte Fantástico*. These tagged them artistic offerings centred on Afro-Caribbean myth, on a marvellous reality, or a magic realism, defining a particular vein of creation based on the “cult” or the reinterpretation of the mythical, cosmogonic, and philosophical systems of African tradition, in effect situating the art of the Caribbean somewhere between myth – the rock – and a hard place. Then, conditioned by market forces, criticism promptly latched onto this interpretation, precipitating a stampede towards the mythological, linking it to the syndrome of the Caribbean identity.

Within the interregional ambit of the Caribbean, geo-political and

linguistic-cultural fragmentation was a historically prolonged process. The resultant national isolation is readily apparent on analysing promotional efforts in the arts. Immediately after the exhibition *Art of the Gulf and Caribbean*, organised in 1956 by the Houston Museum of Fine Arts [3] and something of a pioneering effort with regard to its collective sway, the region was inundated in small and rather unambitious projects to sponsor mostly individual exhibitions, group shows, or reciprocal exchanges of artists and exhibitions – dependent, as a rule, on the umbilical cord of the mother country – which, in the last analysis, reinforced the notions of insularity or geographic dispersion that keep them attached to some continental territories.

Nowadays the Caribbean boasts a vigour of visual creativity practically unknown outside the region. Isolated figures like Wifredo Lam, Hervé Télémaque, Peter Minshall, or the movements of Haitian popular art, or the intuitive art of Jamaica, are enjoying better luck, and have in fact become paradigms of a genuineness that apparently exists nowhere else. Hence, the appreciative comments of Waldemar Januszczak: “...the western world lives in perpetual ignorance about the painting produced in the West Indies. There are only scraps of Caribbean art – no more”, had the glimmer of unsurpassed truth. [4] This explains, for example, why it was necessary for the world to wait until 1986 for the exhibition *Caribbean Art Now*, the first show of contemporary art of the English-speaking Caribbean to be patronised by the Commonwealth Institute in London, or 1989, when the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam organised *Bida y Colo*, with works by 27 artists from the Netherlands Antilles.

Nevertheless, since the 1980s timely initiatives have been subverting the rules



Laura Facey (Jamaica). *Goddess of change*, 1996. Installation.

of play. By way of countercurrent, some projects with a markedly contentious or alternative emphasis on occasion vitiated the impact of the exhibitory centres, bringing into question western standards of polarity and exclusivity. I put forth as evidence *Al Sur del Mundo, La Otra Historia*, or *Otro País. Escalas Africanas*, shows that did a far better job propagating the artists of the West Indies, Guyana, French Guiana, and Suriname. In 1992 there appeared *1492-1992, Un Nouveau Regard Sur le Caraïbe*, a substantial look at the Caribbean through the eyes of French curators (Espace Carpeaux) as part of observances marking the quincentenary of the discovery and evangelisation of the New World.

In 1990, Curaçao's International Trade Centre served as venue for *Gala de Arte*, with works by artists of Aruba, Curaçao, Suriname, Saint Martin, Saint Lucia, as well as by artists of French or Dutch origin resident in those territories. Two years later, in 1992, saw the blossoming of two timely initiatives for the region. I refer to the *Bienal de Pintura del Caribe y Centroamérica de Santo Domingo* and to *Carib Art*, a group exhibition held in Curaçao that embraced in one go an extensive but controversial range of thematic preferences, tendencies, styles, expressions, and artists. The Caribbean visual arts, in the past consigned to oblivion, all of a sudden seemed to attain to the coveted capacity for diffusion in this endeavour to construct the "common destiny of the Caribbean". [5] The truth of the matter is that indecision and uncertainty hampered the cultural efficacy of these two offerings.

Carib Art, a project of the UNESCO National Committee for the Netherlands Antilles, sent out invitations to 35 countries in the region. Its tenets granted each country an equal opportunity to take part by setting a maximal quota of

five original works to be included in a travelling exhibition to be reprised in Europe and Central America. The conceptualisation of *Carib Art* is weighed down by an old maxim stating that "the use of gaudy colours constitutes one of the most important characteristics of the artists", [6] thereby lending credence to a tiresomely mistaken stereotype of quaintness that in effect does the region more harm than good.

Santo Domingo gave promise of better results. Despite whatever drawbacks that were incurred by its having been organised as part of the ancillary fanfare in observance of the quincentenary orchestrated by then president Joaquín Balaguer's government (the biennial was established by Decree N° 171-91), it had its genesis in the Caribbean proper, on the island with the strongest tradition of national biennials in the West Indies. The event embraced the entire Caribbean basin and, like *Carib Art*, aimed at equitable representation by asking invitees to submit the works of between six to twelve artists. Following the third edition of the biennial, its serious shortcomings and contradictions began to become apparent. Old-fashioned rather than modern in conception, it harboured an inherent flaw: the jury, rather than exercising due rigour, threw its doors open to all artists, in the manner of exhibitions held in the Salon Carré in the Louvre at the time of the Revolution, precipitating a crisis among artists, public, and critics, as recounted by Francisco Calvo Serraller.

To foster its growth as a pluralistically representative biennial of fine quality, the selection and review committee of this acclaimed visual arts event, Quisqueya needs: to rethink curatorial assumptions and revise selective criteria; to abandon false yearnings for massiveness and

egalitarianism, which in the long run reinforce the abysmal disproportions historically extant between territories possessed of a tangible tradition – Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba, Jamaica – and small enclaves with a cultural continuity in the making – Antigua, Aruba, Barbados, Bermudas, Curaçao, Granada –, and therefore not to fear budgetary constraints imposed by limited guarantees of financial support; to unify the selective criteria of the national curators with the aspirations of the biennial committee in order to avoid the piecemeal anarchy of micro-selections unsustained by any co-ordinating principle; to examine the performance of the judges entrusted with conferring the awards, who might be expected – witness the last edition – to demonstrate more careful consideration; and to envisage better the theme and scope of each edition. Also, it should drop the outmoded museological practice of exhibiting works according to country and likewise eliminate incongruities posed by the unification of zones possessed of distinct cultural physiognomies, e.g., the Central American isthmus, the Caribbean mainland, and the West Indian archipelago.

The complexities that Santo Domingo has not been able to resolve were manifest in a different way in *Caribbean Vision*, mounted at the Miami Center for the Fine Arts (Florida) in 1995. It was the emulator of grand exhibitions of Latin American art organised on North American soil, and attempted to be the first great collective show of Caribbean art. The catalogue came accredited with texts by Derek Walcott, Peter Minshall, Shifra Goldman, and Rex Nettleford. Francine Birbragher criticised *Caribbean Vision's* curators' approach in starting from an inadequate

definition of the Caribbean in geo-cultural terms. "According to the catalogue's introductory essay." Birbragher states, "the Caribbean includes sixteen independent countries, five British colonies, a republic or commonwealth, a United States territory, and six semi-autonomous members of the Netherlands (Kurlansky, 1992). In another definition, there are included also the countries of Central and South America that border the Caribbean Sea or the Atlantic Ocean, to the extent that these share the same colonialist history and cultural identity as the islands (Lewis G., 1969)." The critic concludes that in the last analysis the selection of the eleven participating nations adheres to neither of the definitions. [7]

More contradictions appear in the catalogue proper. *Caribbean Vision* limits itself to the islands and Guyana. Likewise, it makes its base of operations the English-speaking Caribbean, which I suppose must mean Jamaica, and of the 56 artists selected to be shown, 34 are from that area. The exhibition also reduces the number of nations involved. Its organisers invited Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago, and represented a smattering of small islands like St Thomas and St Vincent, and then turned around and ignored Martinique, Guadalupe, and the Netherlands Antilles. Within this selection there were at the same time unjustifiable disproportions. Jamaica had the advantage of having 14 artists chosen, while on the contrary Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Haiti were restricted to just six participants. The Dominican Republic appeared with only four.

The criteria for the selection of artists proved less explainable, since in some cases the context of native country and transnational experiences was

revised, whereas in other cases, such as that of Cuba, for example, only émigrés were admitted, irresponsibly passing over the substantial artistic panorama that has survived the contingencies of life on the largest of the Antilles.

A different reading attaches to *Ante América (Cambio de Foco) y la Biental de La Habana*. Held in 1991, *Cambio de Foco* was catalogued by Luis Camnitzer as the first large-scale Latin American exhibition to be created in Latin America. In its encyclopaedic effort to design a model of coherent intercultural interpretation for the region, conceiving of America as "a highly flexible conception, as a multicultural metaformation united, moreover, by historical, geographical, economic, and social ties," it included the Caribbean (André Pierre, Haiti; José Bedia, Cuba; Everald Brown and Milton George, Jamaica; Martín Loópez, Dominican Republic...). [8]

In 1984, the *Biental de La Habana* shone forth in the firmament of the great exhibitions as a third world alternative to the international biennials. Its profile soon had repercussions on the world's perception of the visual productions of the South; it favoured a theretofore unusual change in the diffusion of the arts and artists of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean. More in this sense of laboratory, as Luis Camnitzer dubbed it, than in its vocation as an inferior imitator of established events, the Havana Biennial engaged in debate on the question of otherness from the point of view of its very own otherness and contributed to the appearance of transformations in conceptions and guiding principles vis-à-vis the tensions between centre and periphery as perceived from a frankly subordinate standpoint. This venue gave space to art that commented on society, politics, and history, touching on issues

and problematic aspects whose ideo-aesthetic zigzags did not turn their back on North-South relations but redressed the balance of South-South dialogue, inverting the previously typical northern dominance of South-North exchanges, which had ultimately served to widen the communication gap.

The event shone forth as an experience of liberation from the thralldom of centralism, outside the domineering pre-eminence of "Euro-American centralism". A new wave of biennials would be unleashed in Havana's wake: there followed those of Johannesburg, Kwangju, and Istanbul, which sought to model themselves on Venice and São Paolo, as well as regional events such as those of Lima's Mercosur or Santo Domingo's Mesótica.

The Cuban initiative was much more beneficial for certain zones of the third world that had nothing to lose and much to gain, like the Caribbean. [9] In the western hemisphere, the geo-cultural delimitations were well defined. North America was the guarantor of the mainstream whereas Latin America (that is to say, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela) maintained a subordinate position though it did not suffer from a deficiency of exhibition space: *The Fantastic Art of Latin America*, Indianapolis, 1987; *Hispanic Art in the United States*, Museum of Fine Art, Houston, 1987; *The Latin American Spirit. Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970*, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1988 (on tour up until 1990); *Art in Latin America*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989; *Lateinamerikanische Kunst*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 1993; *Latin American Arts of the Twentieth Century*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1993. As a concept, the Caribbean was then a sorry invention, a collection of the staked



Francisco Cabral (Trinidad). *Out house*, 1998. Sculpture: wood and photographs.

out remnants of colonial, neo-colonial, and post-colonial powers, and consequently a zone beset by fragmentation.

The Cuban forum never established denigratory distinctions for Caribbean inclusion. A simple glance at the statistics relative to participants in the preceding six editions shows a total of 390 Caribbean artists invited to the event. From a peak of 141 attendees in 1984, the number of participants from that zone has visibly fallen off in the last three biennials (21 in 1991, 39 in 1994, and 31 in 1997) in response to an understandable tightening of curatorial criteria over the course of time. These numbers include such famous artists of the area as Mirna Báez, Carlos Irizarri, Antonio Martorell, Jaime Suárez, David Boxer, Everaldo Brown, Milton George, Stanley Greaves, Michel Rovelas, Victor Anicet, Ernest Breleur, Silvano Lora, Raúl Martínez, Marucha, Mario García Joya, to name but a handful.

Also making its appearance, especially starting from the Fourth Havana Biennial in 1991, was an emerging generation whose offerings function as turning points of theme and language in favour of an innovatory image, put forth in intertextual terms, a hybridisation of contents and manifestations, with a problematising attitude, a recuperation of the critical meaning of art (Andreas Huyssen) that connected practically the whole of the Caribbean: the islands and the lands along its shores, territories great and small. I refer to Osaira Muyale, Elvis López, Alida Martínez, Glenda Heileger (Aruba); Annalee Davis, Ras Akyem, Ras Ishi (Barbados); Belkis Ayón, Sandra Ramos, Abel Barroso, Los Carpinteros, Alexis Leyva (a.k.a. Kcho), Carlos Garaicoa (Cuba); Yubi Kirindongo (Curaçao); Thierry Alet (Guadeloupe); Edouard Duval-Carrié, Mario Benjamin

(Haiti); Petrona Morrison, Omari Ra, Laura Facey (Jamaica); Marc Latamie (Martinique); Pepón Osorio, Anaida Hernández, Víctor Vázquez, Juan Sánchez (Puerto Rico); Marcos Lora, Raúl Recio, Martín López, Belkis Ramírez, Tony Capellán (Dominican Republic); Remy Jungerman (Surinam); Chris Cozier (Trinidad)... The effect that works by these Caribbean artists have on critical perception is noteworthy. In 1994, Wolfgang Becker, curator of the Ludwig museums, expressed delight at what he had seen in Havana and praised the art in an interview appearing in the Cuban capital's newspaper *Granma*.

Given its successes and its limitations, the *Havana Biennial* has become the most suitable space for fostering the Caribbean visual arts; it came into being at a time when these were scarcely promoted beyond its seacoasts. On Cuban soil, the particular qualities of Caribbean art interact and enter into dialogue with productions arising from different contexts. As a result of this feedback, Caribbean art has come to display a greater receptiveness to and closer contact with contemporary tendencies. The biennial removes Caribbean artists from the regionalist ghetto, discarding the Cubanisation of the Caribbean commented on by Alana Lockwood; replaces perceptual schemes of colour, landscape, and folklore with issues of ethnicity, marginality, and evolving identity in a configuration that transcends national, regional, or hemispherical borders in favour of an spiritually receptive dynamic. A show recently inaugurated in Spain, *Exclusión, fragmentación, paraíso. El Caribe insular*, will no doubt be able to shed further light on these matters.

Beyond mistakes and imperfections, the events and expositions analysed represent in one way or another attempts

to gain an understanding of and to promote the diffusion of the Caribbean visual arts, contributing to the Caribbean's being not only the place "in which men's tremulous memories collide so that they mingle and settle." but rather the possible nation dreamt of by Edouard Glissant. Of all the shows, the Havana Biennial acts as a sort of *Eleggúá*, the lord of the cross-roads in Yoruba mythology, the god who "opens and closes paths and doors." Havana opens up new horizons for Caribbean art, fostering its expressive success and growth as an integral part of the international cultural fabric.

NOTES

- [1] Federico Morais. "Ideología de las bienales internacionales e imperialismo artístico". in *Artes Plásticas na América Latina: do transe ao transitório*. Civilizacao brasileira, Rio de Janeiro. 1979, pp. 41-65.
- [2] *Op cit*, pp. 48-49.
- [3] Eva Cockcroft mentions this exhibition in her essay "The United States and Latin American Art of Social Commitment: 1920-1970" in *The Latin American Spirit. Art and Artists in the United States, 1929-1970*. The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, 1988, p. 202.
- [4] Waldemar Januszczak. Quoted by Emma Wallace in *Caribbean Art Now*. London. Commonwealth Institute, 1986, p. 5.
- [5] In 1992, I published the article "El Caribe a la vista", *Fentana. Litín Diario*, Santo Domingo, 11 October 1992, p. 2. when, on the eve of its second edition, I optimistically evaluated the role that the Biennial of Caribbean and Central American painting could play. In the same article I pointed out that this initiative was linked to other precedents in the cultural field, such as the *Carifesta*, the promotive measures of the Casa de las Américas, or the *Festivales del Caribe* held in Santiago de Cuba.
- [6] *Carib Art* programme, p. 4.
- [7] Francine Birbragher. "Visiones caribeñas. Pintura y escultura contemporánea". *Art Nexus*. Bogotá, N° 19, January/March 1996, p. 100.
- [8] Gerardo Mosquera, Carolina Ponce de León, Rachel Weiss. "Presentación". *Ante América*. Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango. Bogotá. 1991, p. 10.
- [9] In 1986, the *Second Havana Biennial* dedicated its international symposium to the *Plastic Arts of the Caribbean*. with Robert Farris Thompson, Gerardo Mosquera, Juan Acha, Rita Eder, Yolanda Wood, Adelaida de Juan, Denis Williams, among others, as rapporteurs.