Theory and critique of art in the Caribbean

*Sharing essential texts on Caribbean contemporary art*

*Aica Caraïbe du Sud and the Fondation Clément*

**Theory and Art Criticism in the Caribbean**

During the 1980s, the artistic development in the Antillean archipelago went hand in hand with a will to analyze and contextualize in a critical manner the artistic activity in the region. Gerardo Mosquera, Sara Hermann, Annie Paul, Kobena Mercer, as well as Christopher Cozier and Yolanda Wood, attempted to redefine the notions of art criticism in the Caribbean. In so doing, they broadened the horizons of artistic practice in the region. This stance made it possible to transcend the frontiers of the Caribbean archipelago, and help bridge the gap between the different artistic disciplines.

This movement expanded thanks to the creation of reviews and magazines such as Arte Cubano, Small Axe, Arte Sur and Arc Magazine, which facilitated the development and diffusion of critical writing.

Beyond the art world, a group of Caribbean thinkers became attuned to the vitality of the region, adding their vision to the theoretical corpus of the time. Benita Rojo, Stuart Hall, David Scott, Edouard Glissant and Michael Dash developed a new analysis of the Caribbean, placing it at the heart of the cartography of contemporary thinking.

This project, initiated by two members of L’Aica Caraïbe du Sud, Dominique Brebion and Carlos Garrido, has the aspiration to provide access to fundamental theoretical texts to researchers, students, critics, curators, art lovers and visual artists from the three language areas. The project’s goal is to encourage exchanges thanks to the development of such a shared theoretical base.
L’Aica Caraïbe du Sud, www.aica-sc.net, a section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), intends to help enlarge the influence of visual artists from Martinique and the Caribbean, and create a network of connections between the different cultural partners of the Caribbean, thus overcoming the linguistic and geographical fragmentation of the region.

The Fondation Clément, the corporate foundation of the Groupe Bernard Hayot (GBH), aims to help stimulate the arts and the cultural patrimony of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. It supports contemporary artistic creation by organizing exhibitions at the Habitation Clément, it builds a collection of recent artworks representative of the Caribbean creation, and co-publishes artists’ monographs. The Fondation Clément also manages an important documentary collection composed of private archives, a library on the history of the Caribbean, and an image bank. It also contributes to the protection of the Creole patrimony by stressing the value of traditional architecture.

Together they will guide this evolving project forward, making available a corpus of theoretical texts and critical essays on contemporary Caribbean art in their individual sites.

Each text will be inserted in English, French and Spanish, accompanied by:

Key words.

An abstract.

A contextualization within the corpus of theoretical texts (what is its importance regarding other texts).

A biography of the author (10000 characters)

The precise reference of a work (title, author, editor, date of publication, ISBN and eventually an order form).
Antillean subject photographed

SACHY LABRADA ARMAS

Artistic photography first burst onto the scene in the Antillean region in the 1960s. The islands that form the Spanish-speaking Caribbean took the lead when it came to the development of this genre, essentially Cuba, which has a vast and important photographic tradition. In these territories it had an important social outreach function serving as a reflection of their complex socio-political situations. Gradually, other insular enclaves merged paths with Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, equally rich in their formal quality and conceptual depth. In a certain way, contemporary photography burst forth in those years from the historic and artistic difference that characterized the development of photographic art on the Caribbean islands. It reached a great degree of homogeneity on the most important islands, also apparent in the artists’ subject matter. These were generally linked to common issues in the region’s territories, considering their logical-historical differences.

In the 1980s, photography underwent a process of vindication and was eventually acknowledged as an artistic expression in itself. The Havana Biennial acknowledged this thinking early on and included photographic art beginning with its first exhibition in 1984, putting photography on the same level as other fine arts. This highly important event emerged as an alternative to the lack of visibility in the rest of world for the artistic production of the Third World. It became an essential platform for exposing and promoting the region’s art on an international level, particularly from the Caribbean, a region characterized by its particularly peripheral nature.
The development of the Havana Biennial saw the prevalence of a photographic practice that functioned outside of its traditional mediums and spreading through other art forms, more in keeping with the discursive needs of contemporary Caribbean artists. However, this did not rule out the work of artists who used traditional photography as a means of expression, and did so with originality, using the language proper to photographic art to communicate social issues.

Photography on the Caribbean islands was characterized by a shift in themes, from important subjects associated to social and political issues, to the portrayal of historically marginalized sectors. This allowed Antillean photographers to broach fundamental human issues that affected the Caribbean islands’ society, such as identity, remembrance, migration and marginalization. The academic world in the Spanish-speaking had institutions that specialized in this form of expression, while the process was more drawn-out in the rest of the islands, where art galleries provided spaces for photography exhibitions.

Photographic art has played a key role in the creation of the Caribbean’s visual image. Advertising and tourism photographs feature the sea, beaches, sun and landscapes as the main attractions and most unique aspects of the Caribbean islands. However, for the island-dwelling artists, these are not paradisiacal places. For them, they are areas of extreme complexity that became the subject of investigation and visual representation.

The common man, with his everyday conflicts, became the focal point for Caribbean island photographers. The individual becomes a subject when he carries out certain subjective processes, that distinguish him from others, and belonging to a particular place and contexts. The visual make-up of the Antillean subject – a symbolic entity par excellence of this Antillean region – is a response to this in some way, but in an inverse way. From specific aspects, the artists have gone on to describe and discuss the subject’s individual identity in a critical dimension. In turn, there is a shift to collective identity, insofar as the images portray symbolically the close relationship between the subject, his surroundings and society. Identity is depicted as a complex and subjective construction.
process, with the subject as its conscious, yet unaccomplished messenger.

The Antillean photographers that participated in the Havana Biennials and whose works focused on the subject explored their contexts and fundamental issues. Through their work, they established different levels of relationship with the subject, his surroundings and society. In some of the works by several of the artists exhibiting at the Havana Biennial what stands out is an emphasis on thematic and visual aspects that acquire a new dimension relative to the socio-historical, artistic and cultural contexts from which they originate.

Disguises: the discourse of identity

In the fine arts, particularly in contemporary photography, the body functions as a metaphor for the reality in which the artist lives. It becomes a favorable subject for experimentation and acts as a means of penetrating other areas beyond the limits of the body itself. The body is given various meanings, with each of its parts acting as an allusion to the world in which the man lives. The body itself becomes a vessel for society’s and the subject’s own identity. Each part is explored individually, bestowing it with a greater symbolic meaning, which alludes to matters of life, religion, sexuality and identity. [1]

Through disguise and transvestism due to festivities or everyday activities, the artists question the boundaries between identity and dis-identity. In a certain way, the play between the image of the face and that of the body is seen in Polibio Diaz’s photographic works, which allude to a visual element characteristic of rural areas in the Caribbean countries, namely the scarecrow. These works portray a utilitarian object dressed in human clothing, whose fundamental objective is to scare. These objects are buried in the ground, are immobile, and their image scares those who fear the human form. Far from merely representing a scarecrow, Polibio addresses the role of the subject in society from a critical point of view.

As their name suggests, the Espantapájaros del Sur No 71, which were displayed at the 2nd Havana Biennial, are figures dressed as humans in order to keep birds away from the sown fields. Their
clothing alludes to man’s own life, and their faces, made with various elements, suggest a disfiguration of the subject and his identity. To some degree, they become a representation of the human image and the creation of an-other being. The dual function of a scarecrow – to scare birds and protect crops – makes this character something of a symbolic depiction of the subject himself, of his real role in society and of the real image portrayed.

Black and white. Broaching the subject of race

Caribbean culture originates from a complex interaction of various cultures that derive from a colonizer/colonized binary structure. One of the most important and characteristic elements of the region’s socio-cultural and historical make-up is a strong African component, which manifests itself in various ways: religion, some popular traditions rooted in African culture [2] and, the most obvious to the eye, skin color. The convergence of cultures issued from the “Discovery of America” has resulted in what defines the Caribbean today, namely its vast cultural diversity. Despite the number of years that separates the period in which the process of abolishing slavery was first set in motion and the present, racial discrimination still runs rife in Antillean societies, particularly in urban areas.

The Dominican-born Fausto Ortiz is one of the photographers exploring the African component in Antillean societies. His work Descendiente carries an extremely complex semantic load. The work is congruent with the use of shadows as a metaphor for emigration. Descendiente is more specifically anchored in the collective history of the Dominican Republic. Mass murders of Haitian immigrants living in the Dominican Republic took place during Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship with the objective of “cleansing” the country of people of Haitian origin. This tragic chapter of the island’s history has remained ingrained in the Dominican conscience.

Ortiz aims to depict in a certain way the effects of this event on the social imagination of these countries. A black boy, half naked and bare-footed, holds in his hands a domino tile with the numbers six
and five showing. His own shadow and a larger one, probably that of an adult, appear on the wall behind. The child represents the new generations, while the six-five-domino tile [3] serves as a metaphor for inequality and the power held by majorities over minorities. This is precisely conveyed through the positioning of the tile. However, the child has the power to change its orientation. He has the potential to alter the path of destiny. Ortiz uses dominoes, a game of chance, to represent life and the course of history.

The child’s clothing, which covers only the top half of his body, along with his bare feet and the urban surroundings, allude to the world of poverty and marginalization. The ancestors and the protection of adults are conveyed by the shadow in the background. In addition to its portrayal of a specific event in Dominican and Haitian history, Descendiente reflects the historical presence of African roots in Caribbean culture.

Only shadows? Discrimination and marginalization

Shadows convey numerous meanings when referring to allusion and representation, and they have become a symbol used in the language of art and culture. As mentioned before, Fausto Ortiz is one of the artists from the insular Caribbean who turns to this symbol to conceptualize fundamental issues in society today. The meaning that shadows acquire in many of his works is often closely linked to social suppression, in regard to the process of migration, more specifically in the effects it has on the human groups involved. The social suppression of the immigrants, portrayed by Ortiz with the use of shadows, establishes a relationship between being and not being, belonging and not belonging. These issues reach further than the Dominican border, and are pertinent on a universal level. This universality is represented by shadows which themselves lack an understanding of discrimination, race and social classes; shadows that serve as a symbol for individuals who for various reasons were forced to emigrate.

His work titled Tatuajes Urbanos depicts the close relationship between shadows and the city. Fleeting silhouettes whose only trace
is precisely the image captured by the photographer. For Fausto Ortiz, all human immigrants turn into mere passing shadows, regardless of where they come from. They become human ghosts in constant movement, with blurred undefined identities, victims of the passing of time and forgetfulness. Shadows without qualifications, crossing the urban space and projecting the viewer into a marginal world, determined by man’s passage through the world, in constant migratory flux, going from one place to another.

*Tatuajes Urbanos*, part of the *Ciudad de Sombras* series, alludes to the relentless passage of time, which leaves traces of memories in city spaces. Ortiz uses the idea of a tattoo as an indelible mark on the body, thus realizing a conceptual conversion between the body and the city. The city becomes an “urban body” in whose spaces are engraved and tattooed the subject’s and the society’s history. This work suggests images that recall specific moments in the socio-political history of the country which once took place in those urban spaces. Signs for advertisements or other more serious matters, fixed to the walls and worn away by time, slowly lose their importance and meaning in the city.

*Atlantis? On cities and life in the Antillean territories*

The landscape, both natural and man-made, is a constantly recurring theme used by photographic artists. Its main significance lies perhaps in the close relationship established between the landscape and the subjects living in it. It is, in fact, an individual’s social dimension. It depends on his attention (in regard to natural landscape) and it is he who is responsible for its construction (in regard to urban landscapes). Starting in the 1950s, artists refocused their lenses on their surrounding environment, which had mostly been overshadowed in the past. This renewed interest in the importance of the habitat, where individuals evolve, reflects the recognition of its importance in the day-to-day of human existence.

The challenges faced by man throughout history are reflected in his space, which is why contemporary photographers take an interest in lifestyles and situations, as well as cultural characteristics of human groups. One such photographer is Roberto Stephenson, who explores the dynamics of life in the cities. Of Italian origin, Stephenson focuses his attention on Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti.
Migration from rural areas to cities, mainly capital cities, is a phenomenon that characterizes Caribbean societies. Overpopulation, overcrowding and unhealthy conditions are just a few of the direct consequences of the migration process. Haiti is a very significant case due to its distinctly high levels of poverty and the continuous scourge of natural disasters that have heightened the complexity of this area. The chaotic life of this city and its residents is reflected to a certain degree in the photograph “Untitled” (9th Havana Biennial) [4]. Stephenson uses the technique of collage, digitally superposing various images. These composites, with their overlapping visual elements and blurred outlines, create a masterful synthesis of Haitian social life, the complexity of its society and the challenges faced by individuals on a daily basis.

*Scented cushions. The faces of memory*

Memory, which is not erased by the passage of time, is closely linked to the development of an identity. This idea is highlighted in some of the works of the Trinidadian photographer Abigail Hadeed. Whether it is affective or historical, memory leads to the subject’s feeling of possessing identity values, both individually and collectively. This theme has been explored by many visual artists in the Caribbean islands. Photography has the advantage that it possesses documentary, testimonial and historical qualities, making it an essential archive for the safeguard of memory.

Hadeed reconstructs the collective Caribbean memory from an anthropological point of view. Focusing on Antillean immigrant communities, she undertook a photographic research project about the migratory processes that link the English-speaking parts of the Caribbean with the Caribbean Basin titled *Trees Without Roots* [5] (9th Havana Biennial). Her photographs capture the habitat as well as various characters living in those growing settlements, revealing the strong links between Africa, the Caribbean and Central America. These connections are a representation of both an ancestral past and a more recent one – a present day based on cultural survival. This series of photographs reveals the fundamental issues of discrimination and marginalization that affects these communities.
Abigail Hadeed aims to vindicate and validate these people, who have historically been marginalized due to their color, beliefs, language and their condition as Caribbean immigrants. To achieve this she focuses on real people and their everyday life, creating a visual, documentary testimony.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when the banana industry monopoly first began to grow in size and importance in Central America, hundreds of men and women traveled to the continental part of the Caribbean, in search of a better economic situation. The United Fruit Company, the construction of the Central American railway, and the Panama Canal, provided a plethora of job opportunities. The passage of time and the search for new areas where Antilleans could provide cheap manual labor, led to the creation of small, Anglo-Caribbean communities in Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama. In her photographs, Hadeed’s addresses both the collective and the individual histories of the members of these communities. She not only aims to revisit their past, but to refresh its memory and reconstruct its history.

The use of black and white photography accentuates various aspects that make up the individual and collective identities of the subjects living in this community, such as the close relationship between the past and the present. That is, the present seen in documentary images made in a real context in Costa Rica, with a culture that is closely linked to the affective and historical memory of the past. The strong Afro-Caribbean component that characterizes the members of this community is accentuated through the use of high chromatic contrast.

Additionally, these works share a common structural element based on the use of the diagonal line. The instability that this creates on a visual level perhaps alludes to the lack of definition in the history and identity of these isolated communities. These growing settlements originated with past migration processes that still exist today, though disconnected from the insular Caribbean due to their geographical location, and from Central America due to socio-cultural situation and historical prejudice. In the same vein, the work titled *Dive Canal* depicts a youth diving into the sea from a bridge. His body acts as a boundary, a dividing line between the two spaces: the bridge, which
symbolizes *terra firma*, and the sea, which represents the Caribbean, insularity and migration.

The diaspora is a phenomenon characteristic of the second half of the 20th century. The mobility of artists themselves, who study in other countries and may or may not return to their country of origin, has a lot to do with the internationalization of art, which was of great importance at that time. The artists owe their temporary or permanent displacements for the creation of a diasporic Caribbean subject – a given for them, who experience the contrasts between one shore and the other. Much like Caliban, who has become the symbolic representation of the Antillean subject, artists not only determine their resources, codes and norms, but also acquire legitimization in the prevailing artistic circuits of the world.

Along with some of Abigail Hadeed’s works (such as the aforementioned Dive Canal), Elia Alba and Polibio Diaz exemplify the creation of a diasporic Antillean subject. Elia Alba places her characters in borderline locations on the edges and frontiers, alluding to the constant displacements that take place through them, and the issues that they spark. Alba uses masks to raise the question of an individual’s identity and dis-identity, an aspect that characterizes the diasporic Antillean subject. Her work titled *Gantry* represents Antilleans that conform to this diaspora, who, in this case, have “settled” in large North American cities in search of the “American dream”, while nevertheless having a distorted identity.

In his *DominicanYork* series (2007-2008), Polibio Diaz focuses on Dominican immigrants in the United States, describing with a questioning and ironic viewpoint the situation and idiosyncrasy of a Dominican in the North American territory, particularly New York City. His daring use of cut-up photographs, collage and stereoscopic photographs is characteristic of this photographic series. The series *Reunificación familiar* presents an ironic representation of a phenomenon characteristic of immigrant communities belonging to the Caribbean diaspora, particularly in the United States. The most striking element of this photograph is the slicing of the image into two parts that do not fit together, that do not meet – a suggestive allusion to the complexities and drawn-out processes of family reunification that the diasporic Antillean subject aims to achieve after having left his loved ones behind.
With the use of the human form, real or suggested, individual or collective, insular Caribbean artists are exploring reality via formal and conceptual experimentation. Their work investigates, questions and displays the fundamental conflicts that the Antillean subject faces today, as represented primarily by the subjects themselves. In both documentary and artistic photographs, charged with symbolic meaning, their most important accomplishment, relative to socio-historical and art and culture contexts, is validated by the artists presence in various spaces, be it by origin or residency. Through the use of symbolic resources, the photographers aim, with a critical posture, to unravel the great complexity present in the creation of an identity, whether it is individual, collective, national or regional, one that is constantly changing and is otherwise threatened by numerous circumstances.


[2] The carnival, and masks that characterize it, is one of the elements inherited from African culture, which underwent the process of hybridization with elements from other cultures, such as the Hispanic one.

[3] This is a very popular game in the Caribbean. In the case of double dominoes, the tiles can reach the double nine, whereas in single dominoes they reach only double six.


Sachy Labrada Armas was born in 1990, studied at the University of Havana and works at the ICRT (Cuban Institute of Radio and Television)