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 Caraibe 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 Caraibe 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).
Islands in other maps

Yolanda Wood

Our geography is tempestuous, and I am not referring to the hurricanes, which, despite their ferocity, are not the greatest of our misfortunes.

Antonio Martorell

The map of the islands in the Caribbean Sea is a visual representation of a fragmented geography. The peculiar shapes of the island territories create visual poetry out of the unique cartography of the Antilles. Even though each island is isolated in its archipelago or in itself, the Caribbean map counteracts the insular inevitability of dispersion and lack of communication thanks to territorial proximity, without ignoring the complex regional issues of interconnectivity between the islands and between the islands and the continent. Maps upon maps have been superimposed through time and they have multiplied in our era due to recent advancements in broadcasting (advertisement included), transport and communication. However, regardless of the nature of its outlines, the main importance of the map of the Antillean Caribbean is the conscience of the insular mind, of distances and proximities while the sea establishes the frontiers and the currents delineate the routes and shipping lanes. This is also where politics and strategies of association and integration are drawn out. Geopolitics are described, as well as endless conjectures and contemporary utopias of relationship and alienation. The map provides a super-nature for the Caribbean meta-archipelago, with its many “repeating islands” – in Antonio Benitez Rojo’s words.

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1 This text is an excerpt from the book Islas del Caribe ::naturaleza-arte-sociedad (Yolanda Wood)
Editorial UH y CLACSO, Havana, 2012
Contemporary art appropriates this image of the islands in their natural surroundings, and discovers the numerous historical, social and cultural meanings in the map of this territory. Art validates this unique cartography and from it develops new debates, metaphors and allegories. The maps are subject to numerous artistic manipulations. Their land, seas, edges and boundaries define this basin of scattered, floating islands, which the sea impacts and penetrates through the symbolic permeability of their coastal borders. In 1982, John Stollmeyer from Trinidad and Tobago created a unique work titled *Caribbean Basin*.

The artist used an enameled metal washbasin as a metaphor for this area, its geography and its contemporary history. The washbasin is an isolated item; a container reserved for domestic use, associated with daily practices in a humble home, a utilitarian object. Describing its qualities, Trinidadian artist and critic Chris Cozier has stated that, in many ways, it is an object that shares many similarities with the Caribbean (Cozier, s/f: s/p). By placing this object as an artwork in an art gallery, giving it a title and placing images in it, Stollmeyer has changed its meaning. His work has a profound critical and circumstantial character; the washbowl is placed on the gallery floor with three huecos ("cavities") pierced through its bottom – images of the territories of Cuba, Nicaragua and Granada. Through these three holes, with their obvious shapes of territories, water can run out of the washbowl. The perforated object has lost its role as a container. What does this piece allude to, which from geography constructs a metaphor for a qualitative shift of the “Caribbean Basin?”

The President of the United States at the time, Ronald Reagan, coined the term “Caribbean Basin Initiative”, which became law in 1983 and outlined a political relationship with the region, that he said would benefit this economic program. Upon announcing this project, President Reagan specified that only the countries that met the requirements established by the CBI Law would only benefit from it. This excluded Cuba, Nicaragua and Granada, countries that were in the midst of revolutionary change. Stollmeyer’s work depicts these countries, made invisible by the program, brought to foreground in this simulated Caribbean basin by virtue of being perforations. In his commentary, Chris Cozier highlights the importance of the work’s timing regarding the events that taking place at that time – since it was created
before the CBI was passed into law. Its appearance coincided with the negotiations and presented the artist’s critical stance in the face of the exclusion of those three countries – turned into holes that would drain the water from the Caribbean Sea in his symbolic washbasin. This work is an interesting example of how geography and cartography have been used by artists of this region to explore other aspects of its historical and contemporary issues.

Caribbean art could not escape the region’s unique geographical circumstances, with its numerous neighboring and scattered islands, big and small. Each island is caught in its topical singularity, with its own unique physical appearance that stems from geological origins that have made some of them greener, some more arid, some more eruptive and seismic than others. It was in this geography that the process of colonization began, and where peoples of such diverse origins met. This geography has influenced contemporary artists, and the map has served as a starting point for an investigation of artistic and cultural identities. On the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ arrival, there were many discussions prompted by the so-called discovery of America. Using the map as his inspiration, Puerto Rican artist Antonio Martorell reflects on this theme in a work entitled Casaribe Caricasa (1992), which combines the term Caribbean with the one for home, giving it a domestic, familiar quality. Throughout his work, Martorell e has focused his interests in both the home, and the Caribbean. Recognized in Puerto Rico and abroad as a major graphic artist, he has skillfully used a diverse range of mediums and materials, particularly in installations such as Casaribe Caricasa. His particular love of maps has, in his own words, “[…] sealed a romance that continues, a love triangle between my eyes, the map and the hand. I want to bring closer that which is far away, make the vast small, travel without leaving home and then, now as then, draw my own maps, turning them upside down, putting myself inside of them, like Jonah in the whale […]” (Martorell, 2008:2)

The visiting public felt uncomfortable stepping on Casaribe-Caricasa– the beautiful and luminous polychrome mosaic on the floor that represented the cartography of the Antillean islands. Therefore, the artist invited visitors to “[…] tread on us, as it has been done for centuries” (idem). The map was encircled by “mournful walls, studded with mirrors,” which both reflected and broke up the image of the viewers inside the
installation. The numerous mirror fragments were composed into letters on the black background walls that spelled out the words: Discover, Uncover, Recover, Cover up. The mirrors broke up each member of the public into a multiplicity of fragments that gave off a “balkanizing” kaleidoscopic effect. The work reproduced in visual terms the aftermath of 1492. This way of understanding art is only possible, or can only be understood, if one is able to live life as an adventure and allow every moment to stimulate the imagination. This is why Martorell specifies that “[…] we visual artists specialize in delineating territories with our glance, decolonizing what has has tread on, liberating through images was lies captured in geography […]” (idem). With his great ability to intertwine playful and controversial subjects, Martorell made a very unique map of the Caribbean islands combining words and images in an original way. Martorell created two additional pieces depicting the cartography of other regions of the world, naming the group Mundillo desencajado (1996), using the traditional art of the “mundillo,” a beautiful and laborious lace-weaving technique traditional to Puerto Rico. These maps woven in “mundillo” technique by expert hands, in accordance with the pattern designed by the artist, depicted a completely distorted cartography where, in the case of the Caribbean Sea, none of the islands is in its right location. The chaotic quality of a map does not reflect the geography correctly, but makes use instead of a dislocation of those territories “[…] to create a geopolitical document that reflects the changes in geographical and political borders through the division and reunion of territories and peoples. Massive migrations caused by political, economical, racial, religious, linguistic and military reasons, have made the world smaller, fracturing it and putting it in new configurations that may not necessarily be permanent.” The ability of these maps to communicate ideas puts them at the center of the critical debates of our time. Mundillo desencajado depicts the islands as if they have become tangled up in the very same network that holds them together – the fabric itself – so that, even if they are not in their proper place, they will remain on the map. The same geographical nature of the Antillean cartography which since the era of navigation, centuries before humanity conquered the skies and the cosmos, has been needed for traveling and essential to avoid danger. It was in the days when the sea was the main communication route, that they became essential links to connect territories. In
Mundillo desencajado, Martorell does not deny the “macro” scale of global conflicts, but manifests them with confidence and conviction, by strategically inserting this region as the crossroads of the world, both in earlier and present times. In this vein, the artist weaves a complex reality from a visual, cartographical resource. The impact of Mundillo desencajado is due to its conventional and conceptual coherence. This imaginary geographical world uses the chaos of its disrupted spaces in a large three-dimensional and transparent web of maps, to depict a world in crisis and convey the fragility of the circumstances the world is going through.

The Caribbean islands have been the subject of many myths and legends. These inventions have facilitated their importance in the new maritime leisure circuits, portraying them as a tropical island paradise with attractive colors – greens, yellows and blues – that are so useful to the advertisement of the new leisure industry. During the 10th Havana Biennial (2009), Barbadian artist Annalee Davis presented a map of the Caribbean transformed into a vast golf course entitled Just beyond my imagination (2007). This phrase, according to Sarah Cunis, is a publicity slogan for tourism in Barbados, the most popular Caribbean destination, where 52% of the income and 11% of the workforce is linked to the tourism industry. The map of the Caribbean constitutes a large golf course; an elite sport associated with first-class holiday destinations. The artist uses a game to convey a serious message. Satirically and ironically she approaches the subject of tourism and of the way it appropriates space, uncovering the vulnerability of its implications. The map shows each island as a place where a golf ball can sink, yet the space seems to be incomplete. The western half of an island, where Haiti should be found, is nowhere to be seen. Haiti does not play this game. Although the country recently launched a campaign to develop tourism on the island as part of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals Annalee Davis portrays Haiti as an empty space in the golf course that is the touristic archipelago, where the sea has become a lawn of artificial grass. This esteemed Barbadian artist has an international reputation for her conceptually mature designs and her deep ideo-aesthetic conception of the fundamental themes of the social life of the region today.
Geographical drawings made of the Caribbean and its islands have been carriers of the insular imaginary from the time of the oldest maps to the present day. The contemporary artist accepts these territorial configurations, not just as mere physical boundaries of an area, but also as spaces to address current critical issues. Contemporary art uses maps as metaphors, which serve to create poetry and controversy around the notion of identity and other themes that are pertinent to the world today. One of the forms used in this discussion, is the use of the analogies suggested by insular geography. This creates a visual culture of insularity, which may appear to contradict the intense globalization that blurs borders, posing a complex problem for an island and the sea that surrounds it. Virtual cyberspace has provided a real-time connection between these disconnected spaces surrounded by water. Using an island as an example does not always stem from the morphology of territories, since not all insular elements display unique features that can be associated with symbolic images. The exceptions to this rule are the island of Guadeloupe, a butterfly with its wings outstretched, and the island of Cuba, which is long and narrow and can be seen like a crocodile or an alligator. The morphology of the island of Cuba has been frequently used by contemporary artists, and has given place to what we could call, the insulomania in Cuban art today. The shape of the island, so individual and easily recognizable, has been the subject of numerous visually striking works not just from artists living in Cuba but also from those that have emigrated for whom the shape of the island has been highly influential. Never before had the image of the territory been so much a part of the critical dialogue on national identity for Cuban artists, confirming its territorial integrity and visually ratifying the phenomenon of insular a-isla-miento (“isle-solation”). Its use by young Cuban artists can be seen as a vehement and reflective strategy, which can also be present in a more evocative form, producing images of an island, suggested and recreated in a variety of ways.

In the Antilles, insularity and its problems are of common interest, even when the image of the territory doesn’t have the visual personality it has gained in contemporary Cuban artists’ works. This is perhaps due to the fact that not all territories have such a suggestive morphology, or perhaps because the symbolic dimension of the geography does not have the same connotations as those of Cuba. Nevertheless, insular references are commonly used to address various issues in the
Caribbean countries, where the islands and their map can acquire other interpretations and meanings. Hervé Beuze from Martinique has developed an interesting series of works that uses the form of the island territory, titled *Matrices* (2007). Reclaimed materials, like electrical circuits, metal parts and newspaper cuttings, are overlaid on an image of the island. Commenting on this group of works, Sophie Ravion-d’Ingiani called these unique maps “matrices of identificatory anthropometry”, emphasizing their pluridisciplinary quality and the diversity of the artistic techniques used. The Clément Foundation, an old sugar plantation now a distillery, is home to a sizable art exhibition space. It houses Beuze’s installation titled *Machinique*, which sounds like Martinique thus creating a greater link to the territory both through its title and phonetically. This work-island, situated within the landscape, is five meters long and looks like a container, with 6-inch tall brass edges. The map is filled with sugarcane leaves and husks, making it “a mould of consciousness that questions the place” – namely the distillery – confronting both natural and built-up space, and harking back to the historical memory of plantations and slavery.

Artistic conscience creates very diverse visions from the periphery of those undeniable margins that define the edges of the coasts that make up these territories. Insularity is a subject in contemporary Caribbean art that continues to stir up many emotions, as new versions give a sense of permanence and importance to the insular unease. The realms for creation and invention that the islands provide, lead to new and diverse paths of discovery. For the artists of the region, the Caribbean islands are not paradisiacal places for holiday getaways. Perhaps it is in the islands’ lack of innocence that the artists find their true uniqueness. Time has made them socially and culturally complex. The islands are in the process of building and rebuilding their memory, seeking to lessen distances through bridges of communication and rapprochement. Meanwhile, the Caribbean Sea oscillates between high and low pressures, blowing winds, cyclones and hurricane threats. Economic crises and anthropological traumas contradict any notion of identification with paradisiacal islands and insular utopias, which are difficult to visualize amidst the conflicts created by the plantation legacy and colonization. It is only so as not to betray the eternal hope of the shipwrecked, that these islands have not been shipwrecked. Everything seems to have been designed for extermination and desolation.
The artists dream their islands by living them intensely and confronting them with their contextuality and circumstances. They have used everything: the morphology of the territories, the cartography of old and new seamen, the mythological maps of believers and non-believers, the monsters and the mermaids. The mysteries of artistic creation renew the insular dimension and place it on today’s axes of controversy. Perhaps nobody preserves the legacy of a lost profession, that of discoverers of real and imaginary islands, as much as the Caribbean artists. Their expeditions are critical investigatory adventures, and with their maps the cartography of the Caribbean renews its spaces for our present day stories, as we begin a new millennium.

This text is an extract from Yolanda Wood’s:

**Islas del Caribe: naturaleza-arte-sociedad**

UH editor, Facultad de Artes y Letras, Havana University

Yolanda Wood Pujols was born in Santiago de Cuba in 1950.

The recipient of History of Art (1974) and a Doctorate of Art (1993) degrees, she is a professor, researcher and art critic.

Ms. Wood is a tenured professor in the Department of History of Art at the University of Havana. She is the founder of the History of Caribbean Art program at the University of Havana (1985).

Yolanda Wood has participated in numerous national and international symposiums and has been published in many specialized journals. Her most important publications include: De la plástica cubana y caribeña (Letras Cubanas, 1990) and Artistas del Caribe hispano en Nueva York (Letras Cubanas, 1998), Artes Plásticas del Caribe: Praxis y contexto (La Habana, 2000), L’Art de La Caraïbe T 1 (Fondation Culture Création, 2000), Proyectos de artistas cubanos en los años treinta (Editorial Letras Cubanas, La Habana 2007).
She has made several study and research trips to Europe and America, and has given lectures and conferences in Mexico, Valencia, Jamaica, Haiti, Martinique and elsewhere.

She has taken on various academic responsibilities, such as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Literature at the University of Havana and Vice-President of the Higher Institute of Art in Cuba. Between 2001 and 2006, she was appointed Cuban Cultural Advisor in France. She is presently the Director of the Centre for Caribbean Studies of the Casa de las Americas of Cuba and of the Anales del Caribe de la Casa de las Americas Review. She continues to teach Caribbean art at the University of Havana and other university centers in the country.