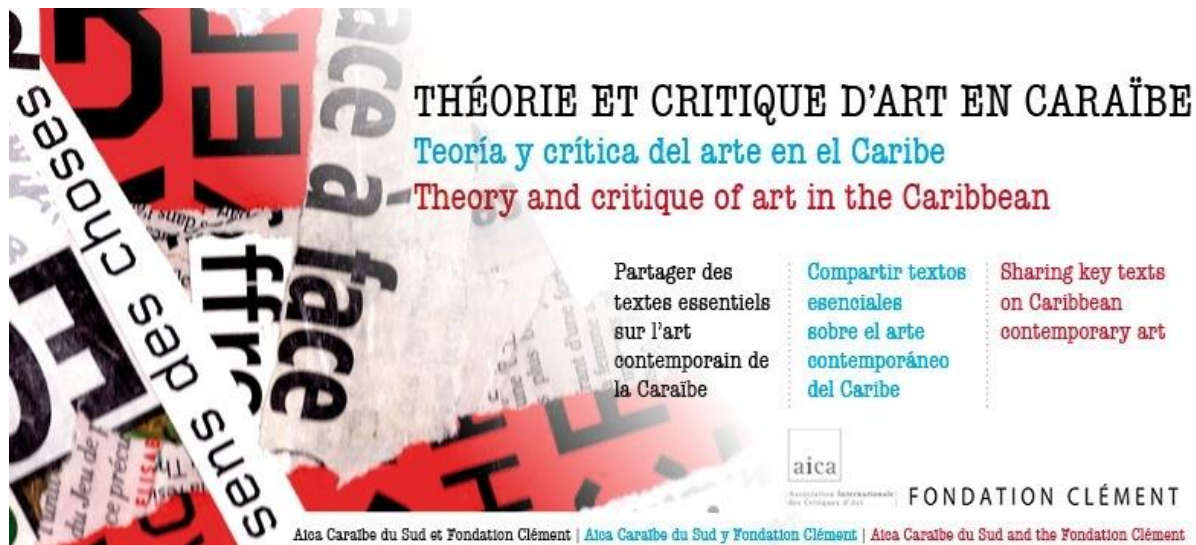


Theory and critique of art in the Caribbean

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:

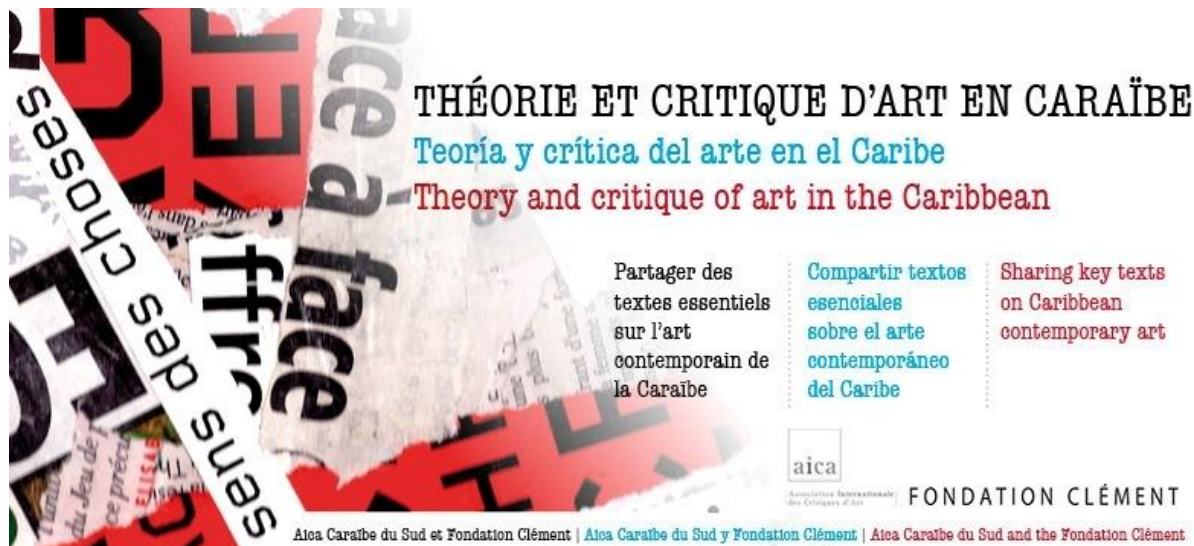
Key words.

An abstract.

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

A biography of the author (1000 characters)

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



Arrested Transmission: Art that Stays at a Global Periphery

Leon Wainwright

Key words: art, Caribbean, web, online, reception, United States, Alicia Alleyne, Carl Anderson, painting

Abstract: A pattern has emerged in recent years not only of new art coming to the United States from the Caribbean, but a migration of a kind by artists from all over the region. The Caribbean and the United States share a distinctively relational geography that has tempted some Caribbean artists to stake almost everything on the power of the web, leading to a form of practice that operates almost entirely in a digital register. Tackled in this article are the alternatives to this trend, which highlight some counter responses among artists (Alicia Alleyne of Barbados; and Carl Anderson of Guyana) to the challenges of trying to meet with a spectrum of public attention that slides along a scale from local (Caribbean) contexts of exhibition display, to more global modes of reception by means of the internet.

Contextualisation:

This essay speaks to and from art historical analysis of the contemporary Caribbean. It outlines a critical argument about the limitations of web-based encounters with the region's art, balanced against the wide enthusiasm surrounding the digital presentation of artworks and the new opportunities for artists to become 'visible' outside the Caribbean.

Arrested Transmission: Art that Stays at a Global Periphery

Leon Wainwright

An unprecedented number of New York-based exhibitions took place in summer 2012 focusing on the Caribbean. (1) They were part of a growing pattern of interest shown toward art of the region by United States galleries and museums, and a corresponding rise in travel and migration among artists from all over the Caribbean.

The typical first stage of movement to the United States for an individual artist (or, increasingly, a freshly-formed artists' collective) takes place by means of a digital format, when their artworks that are presented online. Indeed, Caribbean artists are widely placing their trust in the web to bring themselves into 'global visibility'. Of course using the web as a means of promotion isn't unique to the Caribbean; digital self-marketing has become the default method for visual creativity the world over.

The production and reception of art of the Caribbean is consequently undergoing a sea-change, in the drive to bridge some significant spatial distances and take art to market. But what interest me more are the counter-patterns and alternatives to this trend. How are we to understand those not- insignificant numbers of artists who are choosing to sit out the general rush to the internet? Is theirs a stance of defiance when Caribbean artists decline to transmit their art entirely along cyber channels? What of those artists who hedge their bets, shuttling more deliberately between media, and maintaining the breadth of their practice? What blend of approaches are being found for presenting artworks on and offline? More importantly, what challenges do artists encounter in trying to draw public attention and 'recognition', along a sliding scale from local reach to global transfer through the web? But the Caribbean and the United States share a distinctively relational geography that has tempted some Caribbean artists to stake a great deal on the web, even to the point of operating almost entirely in a digital register.

(...) Amid all these gymnastics there is a small number of practitioners who have paused to disengage from contexts of display and reception outside the Caribbean region and to reconsider their options. The works of two artists in particular -- the Barbados artist Alicia Alleyne, and Carl Anderson, based in Georgetown, Guyana -- exemplify this approach and are revealing of the circumstances I have described. Alleyne takes photographs, which are then made into photocopies, and turned from there into delicate painted shapes. She unfolds a layered garden of textured forms, where exquisitely crisp,

hard-edge lines run steadily through cut-and-paste assemblages. There is a surprising frequency to those translations and her particular handling of colour. Such pieces have lost (if they indeed ever had) any colour, although this is hardly a matter of limited resources for an artist who has so many technical tools at her fingertips. Shunning a more varied palette as Alleyne has done, is a means to strike a certain posture. It happens in the face of Caribbean peers who otherwise revel in hyper-coloured compositions. Alleyne employs the digital record of the web as a window onto her works, and yet she is at pains to make clear that the medium is a poor substitute for apprehending the originals.

(...) The Caribbean has too often and for too long been overlooked and dismissed as a locus for contemporary art; so it would be disastrous if the works that the region is now producing were somehow included or assimilated in dominant art spaces and wider markets without those negative attitudes toward the Caribbean being faced head on. Alleyne's rationale for how much of her works to give over to a digital medium is part of a refusal to be co-opted or subsumed into art spaces whose arbiters of value have for too long disadvantaged the Caribbean. The presence of this art online is not their final destination -- it falls short of delivering the impact of her art in the flesh. Her more sparing use of the web is a prudent way of reminding its users that her pieces should not be taken as detached from their Caribbean provenance, or to assume that the misrepresentation of Caribbean artists is a thing of the past.

The same may be said for pieces by Carl Anderson. I would flag up the virtues of seeing them as I did first-hand in Guyana. In his Ribbon paintings, Anderson has reached new ground for a technique that exploits the photograph and that same cut-up arrangement that Alleyne is drawn to. The evolution of his technique began with extensive reading at a library in Venezuela thirty years ago, when he saw artists who had emerged in the 1960s working with machine mesh and cloth with holes. His early Ribbon pieces were charcoal drawings, some very large indeed: "I made a big piece, 13 by 77 square inches ... another 13 feet by 6 feet," he told me. The later results are impeccably presented and photorealist. They tend to start out as sketches of maquettes that are in turn scrapped if the artist finds them unsuitable, before he returns to restart the process anew.

The issue is that art of the Caribbean calls for an audience that is fully prepared to try and see this art without electronic mediation. the material particularities of this art are

easier to appreciate when looking at the works themselves. Take, for instance, Alleyne's way of progressively reformulating a single shape over successive presentations of it, so that what seemed to start out as a moonscape or liquid on glass will turn a corner and end up entirely somewhere else. Or note how Anderson follows that same concern with the purpose of elaborating a lengthy series of works. His paintings dwell on how to interrupt the picture plane with grids that derive from a formula that the artist has devised for himself. These take the shape of viewing channels onto an impossibly long, twisting ribbon that fills frames with an oddly rotating geometry, clustering and clumping blocks of colour -- the absolute and random poetics of the ribbon form. In places, these build up into human figures. The composition is uneasy and in motion and, like ribbons, the whole painting seems to flutter at its surface.

(...) What I suspect is happening is that the more 'global' scene that some Caribbean artists have entered does not serve the interests (aesthetic or critical) of artists like Alleyne and Anderson. It is at odds with their ambitions and irrelevant to what lies beneath their art. The inadequacies of such global networks are responsible for what I would call an 'arrested transmission' of artistic vision, which is all the more surprising given the proclamations of sharing and openness that go along with art's digitization.

(...) Indeed, the Caribbean has never really been absent from the history of art. There is evidence in the countless biographies of artists who have moved between that region to live and work on the many other shores of the Atlantic. The recent spate of Caribbean art exhibitions in the United States should not be mistaken for a world that is suddenly being transformed by migration and flows of images and ideas, as if never before. Nor should the boasted fluidity, freedoms, and borderlessness of the contemporary art networks be taken on face value.

(...) Caribbean artists have tended to be seen as not at all apace with the 'leading' edge of contemporary art, and so relegated to a secondary or backward position, 'out there' at a perceived periphery. In the operation of such descriptors there is a cross-matching or entwining of spatial thinking with a prevailing concept of time, one that has resulted in Caribbean artists being displaced from the spaces and temporal category of contemporary art. Artists have endured the disadvantages that ensue from those representations in which the Caribbean is always 'outside' and 'behind' contemporaneity. As I have described it, they have been continually timed out of art

history.² And where such art is included in art's globalizing field, it is according to terms and categories that are externally contrived and on the basis of negotiation and compromise.

Have the inadequacies and inequalities of the situation even been registered? Probably not: what I hear instead is the promotion of digital modes of transmission which are themselves part of the problem. Viewers outside the region looking at this art are under the misconception that something of the Caribbean is being adequately understood. Certainly there is diversification and development in art of the Caribbean. But a clearer vision of it is clouded by the myth that we live in a transnational, borderless environment, where access to novel technologies means only absolute freedom for artists and an unquestioned good.

1. In June of 2012, staged at three museums was Caribbean: Crossroads of the World (El Museo del Barrio, Queens Museum of Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2012). It followed a five-year period of exhibitions highlighting work from the Caribbean: SSV4KY, a collaborative sound installation (University of Kentucky Department of Art and the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, 2012); Into the Mix (Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, 2012); Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions (World Bank Art Program and Art Museum of the Americas, Organization of American States, 2011); The Global Africa Project (Museum of Arts and Design and the Center for Race and Culture, Maryland Institute College of Art, 2010); Rockstone and Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art (Real Art Ways, 2009); and Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art (Brooklyn Museum, 2007).

2. Leon Wainwright *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester University Press, 2011).

Leon Wainwright is Reader in Art History at The Open University, UK and author of the book 'Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean' (Manchester University Press, 2011).

