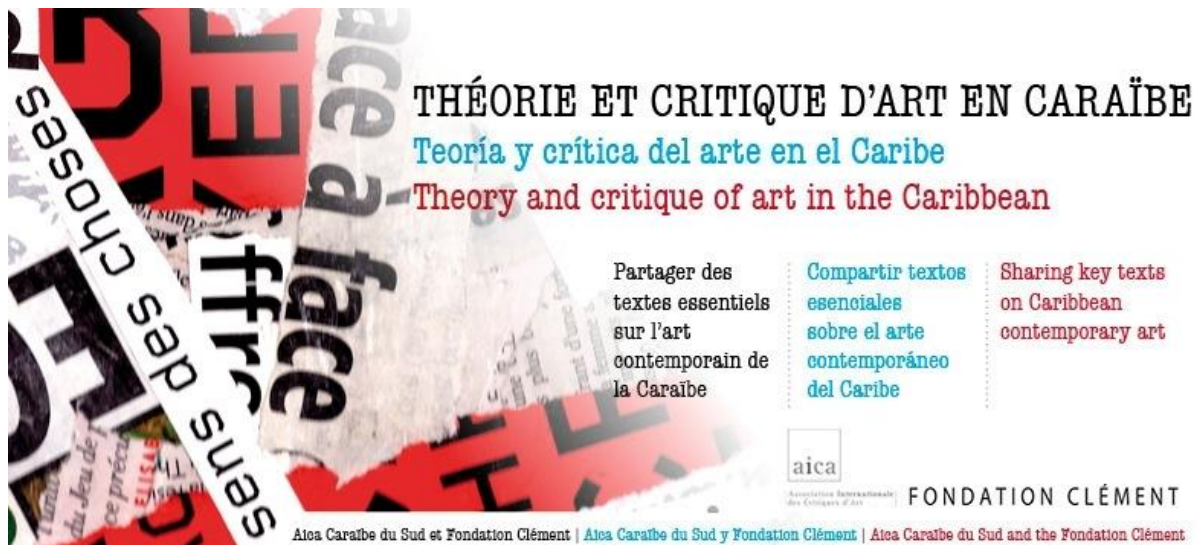


## Theory and art criticism in the Caribbean

*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](http://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:

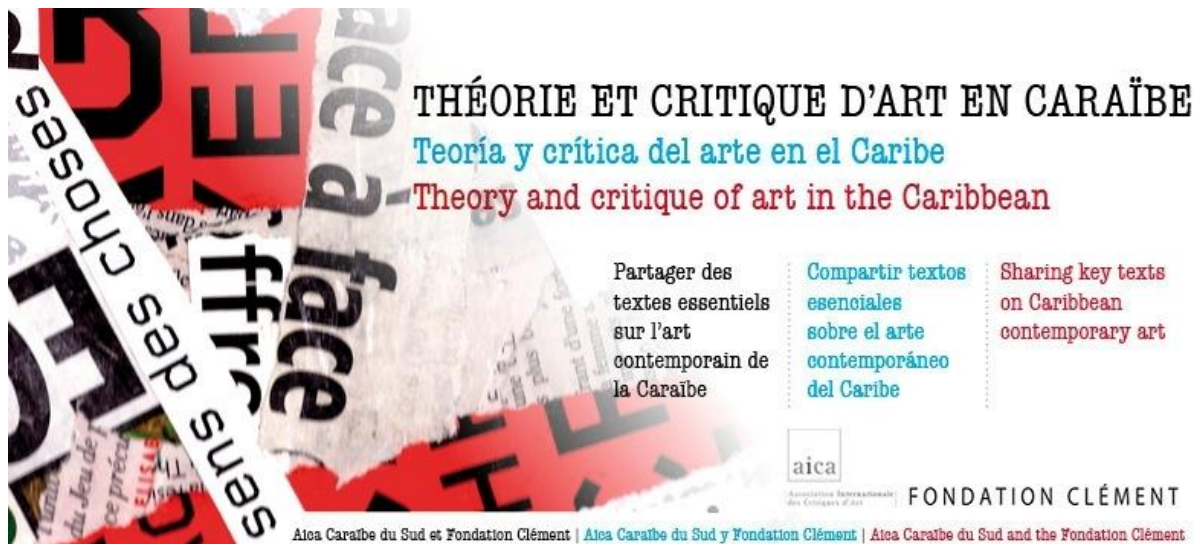
Key words.

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).



## Keywords

## Abstract

In this inter-ethnic epoch of the late second millennium, identity appears as an active construction in opposition to essentialism and monocultures. Two artists, André Pierre of Haiti and Everald Brown of Jamaica, embody this active creation process and participate in the transformation of the Western concept of art. Officiants of syncretic religions, voodoo for the former and Rastafarianism for the latter, they each develop an artistic practice imbued with a personal mystical experience which is neither ritual art endowed with religious functions nor independent activity centred on aesthetics. Their art is a new creation, free from tradition and founder of a new identity.

### Art and religion in the Caribbean: inventing identity Gerardo Mosquera

At the end of the millennium is the inter-ethnic epoch. The problematisation of the centre-periphery polarity, the great migratory movements, the boom in telecommunications and economic and cultural globalisation processes in general have brought about a new awareness of cultural diversity and a more polyfocal sense of the world. This has made discourses on culture much more complex, producing more dynamic and pluralistic interpretations.

Thus, the good old identity is thought more of as an active construction through invention, appropriation and even play, into permanent change, reducing the importance of the fundamentalist continuity of traditions. We could say that there is a «caribbeanisation» of the concept, the Caribbean as a paradigm of the dynamic understanding of identity, opposed as much to essentialism as to the monocultural narrative. James Clifford, one of the figures of

«postmodern» anthropological thought, went as far as saying that, «now we all are, I believe, Caribbean in our urban archipelagos».

There are few better examples for this vision than Haiti and Jamaica, whose cultures have been characterised to a large extent by inventing out of the loosest syncretism. Based on the above, I will comment on the works and personalities of André Pierre (Haïti, 1916-2005) and Everaldo Brown (Jamaica, 1917-2003), two artists-priests. They are good examples of active identity construction processes and, at the same time, of a qualitatively diverse approach to art practice.

Voodoo is an African-American religion born in Haiti from the integration of African sources and Creole inventiveness. The main branch is the religion of the Ewe and Fon peoples, who inhabit Benin, Ghana and Togo. There, in their temples, one can see mural paintings that constitute a singular case in traditional African plastic arts, because they are the result of the painters' «naive» spontaneity rather than strict morphological canons dictated by tradition. Together with the inclusion of texts, this gives them a flavour that one associates more with urban popular culture than ancestral heritage. The whole of Fon contemporary religious art is generally more open to «pop» fantasy and syncretism than the rest of traditional African art, to the point of approaching the freedom inspired imagery of *Umbanda* and other African-American religions. It must have been propitiated by the existence of a certain Creole culture in Benin's coastal cities, and by the comic-style iconography of the reliefs, sculptures and textiles of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, a tradition that fits with the unbound and imaginative forms of popular culture in contemporary cities.

Apparently, the Fon tradition of painting their temples was preserved in Haiti within voodoo. Its original flexibility was increased by creolisation - which freed and added baroque elements to African morphologies in America -, giving rise to painting dominated by the artist's individuality, seen only through conceptual canons. We find a kind of «naive» painting in voodoo temples as well, in a traditional religious function, very much in keeping with the new creation character – creole and syncretic – of the religion of which they are a part. Other creations are the vèvès and the flags representing the gods. The former are sacred emblems that are traced with flour on the ground in ceremonies or are painted in other places to identify the deities. They belong to the sacred/magical symbolism developed in America from Kongo sources, which includes the *Pontos Riscados* of Brasil, the *Firmas de Palo Monte* and the *Ereniyó* system of Cuba, as well as the drawings on the ground of the *Shouters* of Trinidad.

The work done by the Centro d'Art de Port-au-Prince Art Centre – founded by US artist Dewitt Peters in 1944 – which originated the phenomenon of «primitive» Haitian painting, was based on all this religious and other forms of popular art. Voodoo priest André Pierre had painted magnificent murals in temples and vèvès and images of the gods in ritual güiras when he met US filmmaker and anthropologist Maya Deren, who persuaded him to paint with an easel and put him in contact with the Centre in 1949. Although the work he produced as part of the Haitian naïfs was not functionally religious, it remained rooted in voodoo and in his personal spiritual experience. Despite being made to be sold to strangers, its connection with the original spirituality preserved it well enough from the sterilisation brought about by the commercial boom of primitive Haitian art.

According to Pierre, the paintings are dictated to him in dreams by the gods themselves, and then ritually approved and consecrated by them. Selling is justified by saying that it is a way to expand the religion. As human as those of ancient Greece, the gods seem to have a special

predilection for themselves, so much so that Pierre's work becomes an extensive gallery of the voodoo pantheon. The deities appear frontally in the portraits, in hieratic postures, as if posing for the artist adorned in their best attire.

With this, Pierre develops the original religious implications of Haitian folk painting, since he has constructed a voodoo iconography by conceiving images for the great majority of the gods. In Africa, divinities are scarcely represented; traditional imagery is rather referential and attributive, or it embodies ancestors, «spirits» or other entities. What just stated is less true for the Fon (as part of the singularity already noted in their art), and in the murals of the voodoo temples in Haiti are images of the gods, perhaps also encouraged by Western influence. But in both cases, these are not essential to the cult, which is carried out in «spirit», centred around the possession of the believer by the god, in the midst of the dance. The active ceremonial representation of voodoo deities is done through the emblematic abstraction of the vèvès, necessary for the process that culminates in possession.

Pierre is an inventor of icons. If the word iconoclastic has become quite common in an expanded meaning and is frequently found in art-based discourses, the Haitian priest could introduce its opposite, for we are before an iconodule. He created the images of gods without images, devising their appearance based on the personality and attributes of each deity and from his own experience as a man of his time. The gods have a contemporary look, unlike ancestral entities, which matches with their participation in people's daily lives. The representation is only canonical in terms of the character and attributes of each deity; the rest is the artist's pure fantasy. It mixes mythology and current concerns in a carnival of imagination and Eastern costumes. A god of darkness can wear dark spectacles, a god of the river can take the form of a European siren.

This iconopoietic process corresponds to the theopoiesis of voodoo. Unlike other African-American religions, voodoo does not carry over a pantheon from Africa. With the exception of some Ewe-Fon deities, it has fundamentally Creole gods, born in America by re-adaptation and synthesis of African deities, deification of real characters or contextual invention. Also unlike the traditional African religions and their manifestations in America, the voodoo pantheon is totally open and dynamic, with new gods continuously being created from real life or fantasy. This is one of the traits that differentiate syncretic Creole African-American religions (*Macumba*, *Umbanda*, *María Lionza* culto...) from traditional African-American religions (*Santería*, *Candomblé*, *Regla Arará*, *Casa de Minas*...). It clearly shows the new creation character of the former set, free from traditional precepts, as well as their dynamism, inclusivism and inventiveness in response to the complexities of the «New World».

Pierre's work stands within voodoo and enriches its culture even when it is no longer ritual or functionally religious art. In this case, a «naive» painting made to exhibit and sell contributes to the imaginary of a very active religious culture, which moves along with everyday reality. Pierre, who also paints scenes of voodoo ceremonies, does not just visually document this religion, as stated, but also produces it. Here therefore is a mutation of the Western concept of art as an autonomous activity within its own boundaries. It is produced through a different spiritual genesis and its participation in popular religiosity, without art integrating again with religion, as it did in its origins.

The painter's language corresponds with the character of his work. Pierre possesses a unique personal style, looser and more «primitive» than Haiti's «naive» painters do in general. Unlike many of them, it lacks that perfectionist zeal that on occasion invests their paintings with excessive sweetness, especially under the pressure of luxury consumption. Let us say

that it is antiacademic *naïf*. Its coarseness and stroke and blow solutions place it next to *graffiti* and render authentic his office of portraying the gods that the people dream about.

Religion is very important in the life of Jamaica, so much so that it is the country with the proportionally highest number of churches in the world. Many of them are invented on the spot. Everaldo Brown's art comes from this naturalness in creating religions.

A carpenter of peasant origins, he settled in the island's capital in 1947, where he joined the Rastafarians. Albeit very diverse and unsystematic, this religious, cultural and social movement of the poorer strata generally affirms the pride – and indeed superiority – of being black and the divinity of Haile Selassie – King of Ethiopia, named Ras Tafari before his coronation –, seeks repatriation to Africa, leans on the Biblia, especially the Old Testament, and identifies black people as children of Israel and White people with Babylon. The plastic arts are surprisingly vigorous in Jamaica, and Rastafari art, like music before, constitutes one of the strongest and, unfortunately, least known productions, although it provided the motivation for a great exhibition presented some time ago in Germany. Brown was not included because, in general, he is considered too unorthodox a personality to stick this label on him.

Rastafarianism was built on the peculiar interpretation of free haphazard information, the result of an «incorrect», inventive appropriation, which likens it to some artistic processes in Latin America. Many Rastafarians showed interest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church - the Church of Abyssinia, one of the oldest Christian rites - such that some appointed themselves priests, opened churches and began to practice their own version of that cult, following the indirect information and irregularities they possessed.

Brown was one of them. He began making paintings for his church, carved ceremonial objects and architectural elements and built musical instruments of his own invention which had sculptural forms and were profusely painted. He invented a sacred art for a religion also practically invented and personal. This work led him to make paintings that no longer had a religious functionality but were a sort of transcription of the visions he experienced during his intense spiritual life. These works had scenes in them or were emblematic, based on cryptic symbolism, with Rastafarian, Biblical or Abyssinian signs or others that alluded to Jamaica's African-Christian religions, like Pukkumina.

In response to requests coming from the Rastas, a very curious event took place in 1970: the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was officially established in Jamaica. It encountered contradiction with local expectations very soon. Brown and his family joined, but the Church refused to ordain him priest, same fate reserved for the others who had begun the rite in the country spontaneously and each in their own way. At the beginning of the decade he moved to Murray Mountain, a very secluded place, where he kept to that religion. But over the years he became disappointed and concentrated on mystical meditation, his visions and his transcription into paintings and sculptures. He also kept making his musical instruments, to fulfil a mission to build a total of thirty-three; really extraordinary creations that unite the plastic arts with organology, for they are not decorated instruments but symbolic in their own structure – with dove or star shapes –, besides being organological creations. We are reminded of his instrument for four people, including melody, rhythm and harmony, which must be played both collectively and individually.

Brown dedicates himself to contemplating the rocks, the forest and the leaves, in which he discovers mystical messages. It is a dialogue of revelations with nature, a cosmic communion. In his meditation places, he built wooden structures with emblems, which he calls «mystical antennas». Sometimes he paints the rocks to accentuate the forms that are revealed to him, the «mysteries of the stones», as in the title of some work. When these visions are moved to the paintings, composed of what David Boxer described as metamorphic imagery, forms shift establishing a web of unfixed, ambiguous forms in a dynamic of transformation. Boxer also showed a certain surrealistic automatism in some paintings. Brown's visionary powers allow him to divine by reading leaves. This practice was used on some paintings, «portraits» on whose faces the cosmos manifests itself. Everything is ascribed to what Verlee Poupeye-Rammelaere – author of the fundamental study on this Caribbean mystic, published in 1988 in the Jamaica Journal – considers an underlying philosophical principle, «His pantheistic faith in the unity between the inner being and the universe».

His imaginary and language are very personal, even when he uses familiar symbols, which he combines in complete freedom. At other times he creates his own symbols. Each element has a meaning, which combines with the others in a dense code, typical of religious symbolism. But it also works as a pattern for contemplation and meditation. The works usually have esoteric messages, which sometimes the author himself cannot explain, since they always come from his visions, which he calls «trips», like the possession phenomena in the Afro-Christian religions of the Island, in which tours are made through the «land of the spirits». Brown's art stands out for its unorthodoxy compared to any canon, its active and unprejudiced syncretism, which make it a brother to the eclectic invention of religions so usual in Jamaica.

His work does not correspond to the current western concept of art as an independent activity, concentrated on aesthetics. Whether his version of the Abyssinian priest's prayer staff is a painting or a sceptre, it appears in terms of the spiritual experience that occupies the author's life. It is part of his personal mystic-religious practice, and was born as worship paraphernalia, always through visions. His works are revelations, and he, «an artist of the vision», as Poupeye-Rammelaere described him.

However, we are not facing a total integration of art into religious activity, as in other cultures or in the times prior to its autonomous definition in the West. It retains its contemporary sense of specific activity and of free, subjective creation, not bound by norms, but only as a means to facilitate, witness and communicate a vaster experience. Brown himself affirms it when he says that art is his true religion. But this is the result of and integrates a real mystique, not the other way around, as happened with the Cuban Juan Francisco Elso and the Cuban-US Ana Mendieta.

Brown's and Pierre's examples show an issue of artistic practice and its concept that affiliates itself to the active syncretism of the Caribbean culture, its inventive disengagement and its construction of identities. They are of great interest for aesthetics and art theory and point to the conceptual complexity that will be brought about by the diffusion of contemporary Third World art and its knowledge.

## Biography

Gerardo Mosquera (b. La Havana 1945) is an independent curator, art critic and historian and writer of Cuban origin. He was one of the organisers of the first Havana Biennial in 1984 and headed the research department of the Wifredo Lam Centre until his resignation in 1989.

Since then, his business has been mainly international: he has travelled, given lectures and organised exhibitions in more than 70 countries.

Mosquera was also assistant curator at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art for fifteen years, from 1995 to 2009. Since 1995, he has been an advisor at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunst in Amsterdam.

His publications on art and art theory are innumerable. He is the author of more than six hundred articles, reviews and essays, published in magazines such as *Aperture*, *Art in America*, *Art&Text*, *Art Criticism*, *Art Journal*, *Art Nexus*, *Atlántica*, *Cahiers*, *Casa de las Américas*, *ArtForum*, *Kunstsforum*, *La Jornada Semanal*, *Lápiz*, *Neue Bildende Kunst*, *Oxford Art Journal*, *Parkett*, *Pluriel*, *Poliester* and *Third Text*. To name just a few of his best-known publications, ***Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*** (Cambridge, MA and London: INIVA and The MIT Press, 1995) ***Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*** (Cambridge, MA and New York: The MIT Press and New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004).

Mosquera was artistic director of **PHotoEspaña**, Madrid (2011-2013), and chief curator of the 4th Poly/Graphic San Juan Triennial, (2015-2016).