Volume 22 Number 1 $5.50 A magazine about issues of art and culture

FUSE MAGAZINE

Caribana & Carnival

"Photos & Phantasms"

Mehndi: Myth of Discovery

Christopher Cozier

Sergio Giral: Cuban Film

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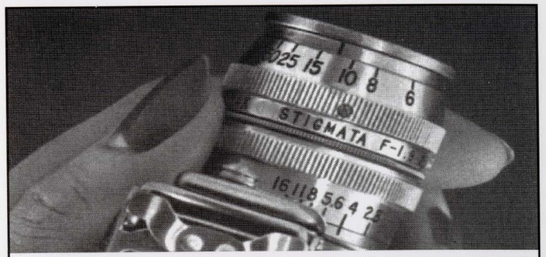

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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

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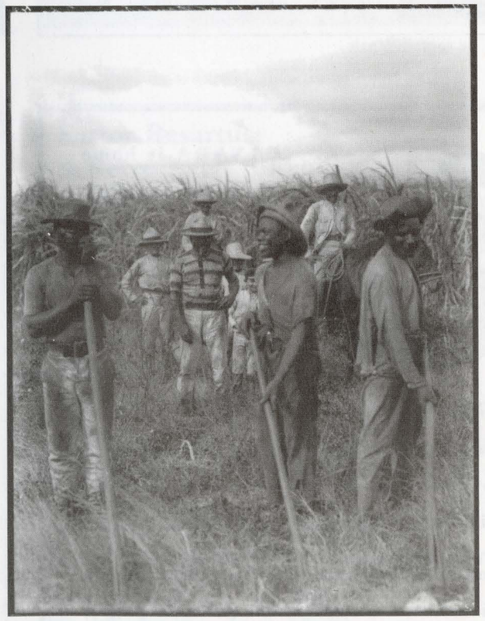

Photograph from the exhibition "Photos and Phantasms," *Negros at work in plantations. Cuba.*, Sir Harry Johnston, 1908–09.
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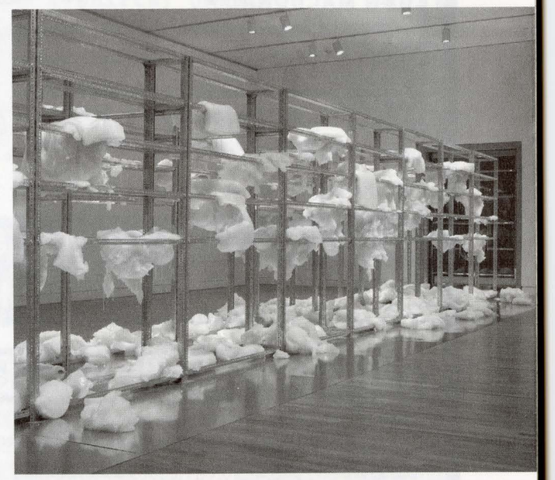

Atopia, Vong Phaophanit, 1997, four tonnes of polybutadiene rubber, galvanized metal shelving, galvanized metal sheet, string.
From the exhibition "Crossings"; see review page 44.

editorial

TOURISM AND IMMIGRATION.

PATTIES AND CARIBANA.

POLICING.

ARTS DEFINITION.

At this time of year when temperatures are at their lowest and the sun peeks only half-heartedly over the southern horizon, many minds and some bodies in Canada turn to the south. At the same time, many people in the Caribbean look longingly, if ambivalently, toward North America. The International Monetary Fund and other branches of global capitalism's police force have fostered large-scale un- and underemployment in the Caribbean, and have torn mercilessly at what little safety net existed. Even as those same forces batter working people here in Canada, "our" relative wealth is made familiar through the saturated images of American media—especially in the English-speaking parts of the region—and by the ubiquitous figure of the tourist. As Caribbean beach holidays increasingly become out of reach for ordinary Canadians, further straining Caribbean economies, we are again reminded of the complex imbrications of Canadian and Caribbean societies.

Just as North American cultural imperialism is evident everywhere in Caribbean life, the presence of Jamaican patties in Canadian corner stores, the pre-eminence of Caribana as Toronto's largest tourist event, and the popularity and influence of Caribbean musical forms such as reggae, soca and chutney, themselves products of intense hybridity, betray the cultural cross-pollination that the exchanges of tourism and immigration have produced. This issue of FUSE is dedicated to that back-and-forth circulation of culture and people between Canada and the Caribbean, the call and response inherent in the African-inflected arts forms of the Americas.

This is Carnival season and Trinidad will host thousands of returning emigrants for its national festival. Some of these will be band leaders and mas' designers for the diasporic Caribbean Carnivals in Britain, Canada and the United States. Toronto's Caribana is the largest of these celebrations in Canada and Ramabai Espinet traces its contentious history and complicated cultural politics.

Film critic and programmer David McIntosh interviews Miami-based Cuban exile filmmaker Sergio Giral, who traces his artistic development across the political changes in his former homeland.

Renuka Sooknanan charts the journey of henna inscription on the body from Africa and Asia toward its ultimate migration to MTV with Madonna and The Artist. Returning the gaze from the Caribbean, former FUSE editor Gabrielle Hezekiah, now located in Barbados, considers what happens when turn-of-the-century "scientific" images of Africans in the Caribbean, collected by a white British photographer, are assembled and returned to the Caribbean as an art exhibition. Finally, in the artist pages Christopher Cozier challenges the dynamics of nationalism, pedagogy and xenophobia from a Trinidadian perspective.

In the review section, Laura Marks critiques a landmark show at the National Gallery of Canada about the global movement of exiles and Peter Hudson continues this theme with an examination of *Transforming the Crown*, an exhibition catalogue addressing the history of African, Asian and Caribbean artists in Britain. Janet Creery visits the Symposium on the Artist and Human Rights in Ottawa and Lee Rodney critiques a public art exhibition in Toronto washrooms, "in lieu." Finally, as a counterbalance to diaspora, Marilyn Burgess focuses on "Reservation X," an exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization that addresses the "cross-pollinations of identity and culture" facing First Nations communities.

DEBORAH DOXTATER
1957–1998

Deborah Doxtator died of breast cancer on August 18, 1998, at the age of forty. In the course of her short life Deborah managed to make important contributions to contemporary theory about First Nations art, literature, history and culture. We became aware of Deborah through her catalogue essay for the exhibition Fluffs and Feathers, a groundbreaking critical examination of images of Indians. We first had the pleasure of meeting her at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery in the summer of 1995. At the time she already had a B.A. and two M.A. degrees under her belt and was just completing work on a Rockefeller scholarship and her Ph.D. in history. Her research at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery culminated in a catalogue essay for the exhibition Basket, Bead and Quill. In it she examined, with refreshing subtlety and insight, the complex and dynamic relationship between "traditional" Native cultural objects and contemporary life.

In the fall of 1995, Deborah began teaching at York University in the departments of English and Humanities. She also helped to establish a Native Bridging Programme at York to enable people without traditional academic backgrounds to make the transition to university study. To honour Deborah's intellectual generosity and pedagogical commitment, a scholarship fund for graduates of the Bridging Programme is being set up in her name. Contributions can be sent to York's Division of University Advancement, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3 (make cheques payable to York University and indicate "Deborah Doxtator Scholarship" on the cheque).

Reflecting on the legacy of Deborah's writing, her service as a board member of the Ontario Arts Council or her impact as a teacher, it is impossible not to be struck by the variety of places where her absence will be felt. Some of them have come as quite a surprise. We recently discovered that during her illness Deborah had taken a creative writing course for which she produced a number of short stories. They happen to be remarkably good and it turns out that she had been writing fiction in various forms since childhood (those who knew Deborah won't be surprised to learn that along with her serious works, she also found time for the occasional satirical comic strip as well). We can only imagine where her many interests would have taken her (and us) if she had been able to continue to pursue them.

When a life rich with accomplishment and promise is prematurely ended there is little to ameliorate the pain of loss. Our intellectual world is less bright and our friend is not with us to share her subtle humour and quiet but unwavering support. Diminished, we get along in her absence because—through her example—we remember how wit, intelligence and compassion can fill our lives with meaning.

—Richard William Hill and Beverly Koski

letters

December 18, 1998

The Editors,

Laura Marks' article about Inuit video production in your last issue requires an informed response. To my knowledge this is now the second long feature Laura has published in progressive journals (also *Afterimage* a few years back) without first travelling to an Inuit community or interviewing in person or by phone Inuit producers working in the field. Laura's information seems to come primarily from IBC's and TVNC's mostly non-Inuit Ottawa head office managers and government-financed public relations materials. This accounts for Laura's benign lack of analysis of Inuit television production's real political history.

Laura suggests it is mostly personality differences and differences of southern media perception that separate IBC from the Igloolik independent video makers in Igloolik Isuma Productions, Arnaiit Ikajurtigiit (Women's Video Workshop) and Tarriaksuk Video Centre. Downplaying political difference to focus on personality is a propaganda position advanced by IBC's Ottawa head office. In fact the real differences between IBC's southern management and Igloolik's Inuit videomakers are as profound politically as any in Canada, Algeria, Vietnam, Congo, Mexico or other post-colonial situations where grassroots empowerment threatened colonial infrastructures that had powerful vested interests already in place.

Laura's reference to Eric Michaels and his work on Australian Aboriginal media production also is misleading or uninformed. Michaels himself wrote forcefully about the serious political differences between Australia's 'white-fella'-managed, IBC-like 'aboriginal' TV agency approved and funded by the Australian government and the grassroots, community-based independent indigenous video productions in the community of Yuendemu where Micheals worked. Michaels' scholarly writing specifically examines these differences in terms of Australian colonial politics, not as personality styles or 'perceptual' differences by outsiders.

The difference between IBC and Igloolik Isuma Productions is not one of disgruntled personal relations among a few people who can't get along. This is a serious power struggle over the meaning and future of Inuit media production between organizations with fundamentally different histories, objectives, intentions and constituencies. IBC is run by non-Inuit managers in Ottawa to meet the needs and approval of Canada's Department of Canadian Heritage. Igloolik's video collectives are run by Inuit in Igloolik to meet the needs of Igloolik and Nunavut Inuit.

A serious political journalist first would ask Inuit producers both inside and outside IBC whether their bosses are Inuit or government 'white-fellas.' It's an easy question to ask the independent producers in Igloolik like Zach Kunuk, Paul Apak, Paul Qulitalik, Natar Ungalaq and Pacome Qulaut, all of whom formerly worked for IBC and quit. The same question can be asked of other senior former IBC producers like Blandina Makkik, Elisapi Davidee, Charlie Panagoniak, Peter Tapatei and Barney Pattungayuk, all of whom quit IBC in other communities.

IBC's non-Inuit Ottawa managers and Canadian Heritage's non-Inuit account managers have managed to keep their jobs since the mid-'80s. During this same period these ten Inuit producers have had to leave, representing a loss to IBC and Inuit audiences of over a hundred years of taxpayer-financed Inuit TV training and experience.

What explains these facts? Journalists who do not travel to Inuit communities or speak in depth to Inuit often get the facts wrong, and this skews their analysis. A serious analysis would follow the money and see who benefits. After Laura Marks' confusing and superficial article FUSE needs to inform its readers of who is who and what is what so people can make up their own minds what to think about this important political issue.

Sincerely,
Norman Cohn
Partner/Secretary-Treasurer
Igloolik Isuma Productions Inc.

Laura Marks replies:

I appreciate Norman Cohn's letter, and I am in complete agreement with his account of the colonial relationship between the IBC and Inuit producers. But in his fervour on this point he appears to have been searching for another article between the lines of mine. As a result he skews my argument. Nowhere do I suggest that the conflict between independent producers and the IBC is one of "personality conflicts." What my article attempts to do is restore a sense of institutional relationships to the southern discourse on Inuit video. This discourse is often reduced to the depoliticizing "auteur" approach of extracting personalities such as Zacharias Kunuk from the institutional and community framework within and against which they work. Against this discourse of personalities, I stated my goal of critiquing "the structural 'interpretation' by which only certain videos and certain names trickle down to a southern viewership." This requires "following the money" to the southern structures of exhibition, reception, and scholarship around Inuit video. This, not the relationship between independents and the IBC, was my article's focus. I simply do not understand why Cohn finds my article emphasizes personalities rather than structural relations, when the latter are the explicit concern of my article.

As for traveling to the Arctic, as I noted in the article, journalism by those who have traveled to or lived in the Arctic, such as Kathleen Fleming, Kass Banning, Peggy Gale and Sally Berger, is indispensable to the rest of us who cannot do so. I draw on these and other primary sources. But another interview with Inuit producers was not my goal. As a film and media scholar I am very mindful of the disinformation that results from southern audiences' selective exposure to Inuit media. For this reason southern reception, not Inuit production, was the focus of my research.

The article Cohn wanted to read, a history of the relations between IBC, TVNC and independents with the depth and rigour of Eric Michaels' work on Australian aboriginal media, is one I would love to see as well.

—Laura U. Marks

Editor's Note: Norman Cohn has been invited to write a column for the spring issue, vol. 22, no. 2.

Editors:

I have just received a copy of FUSE with my column "As Alternative As You Want Me To Be." Due to what I can only assume to be a design decision—it was never discussed editorially—a section title "Nostalgia," which was meant only to contextualize the first three paragraphs, was run as a header for the whole column, an error which is compounded by the way the column is listed in the index. I never envisaged my column as an errant piece of "nostalgia" and the use of the word as a global title considerably distorts the later points I was trying to make.

Yours sincerely,
Susan Kealey

Editor's Note: A production error led to the inadvertent transposition of the first section heading into a title tag line. FUSE apologizes for the error.

Cultural Markings, Cultural Appropriation

The Art of Mehndi

by Renuka Sooknanan

Inscribing the body has been, for centuries, a cultural tradition practiced worldwide. These corporeal markings texture the skin, ritualize and create a performance upon its surface. The body becomes transformed and layered by altering its exterior. Body modification incorporates techniques which both please and pain, purify and stain, glorify and shame. The body's surface is presented and represented, mapping its historic, religious, traditional, cultural and ethnic affiliations. Body markings reinterpret the landscape of the skin.

Mehndi is the painting of the hands and feet using a paste developed from the henna plant, otherwise known as *hawsonia inermis*, Jamaica mignonette, and Egyptian privet, which produces a red-orange dye. Historically, mehndi was best known for its healing qualities that purified and soothed the body. Yet recent appropriations of mehndi as fashion have romanticized and exoticized the art of mehndi, draining its specific contextual connections to religion, ceremony, rites of passage and narrative traditions of myths, stories, beliefs and spirituality. Hollywood elite priests and priestesses of cultural appropriation such as Madonna, The Artist, Mira Sorvino, Naomi Campbell, Liv Tyler and Gwen Stefani have all adorned their bodies with mehndi.

Mehndi appeals as a way of altering and staining the body without the longterm effect of tattoos, branding or other forms of bodily engraving. The temporary nature of this art form suits Hollywood's momentary obsessions. This purposeful disassociation of mehndi from its history, religion and ethnicity makes its appropriation easier, less anxious, for those who mark their bodies using this method of beautification. Such a detaching functions to wash and leach the very traditions in which mehndi is steeped. Its "discovery" by contemporary pop culture icons has simplified its meaning, glamorizing its aesthetic qualities above all others. Wearing mehndi as a "temporary tattoo" displaces its markings from traditional sites on the body, from the palms and feet, to a contemporary and more fashionable visibility on the arms, ankles, back, neck, thighs and chest.

Mehndi, for most people who practise, perform and teach it, is neither fetish nor preoccupation. Each henna design has multiple as well as specific meanings, depending on context, religion and geography. Its codes linger on the skin to narrate these differences. Specific markings are placed in certain areas of the body in homage to particular beliefs or religious teachings.

Tradition: Mehndi's Historical and Cultural Significance

For the past five thousand years henna has been used in various places in Africa and the Middle East. Originating in North Africa, the practice of henna as a beautification tool surfaced in India around the twelfth century, gaining popularity with the Mughals and the Rajputs. Mehndi, as it is called in India, is said to have healing qualities; it soothes the skin and releases the pressures of heat on the body. Henna is also thought to have medicinal properties when ingested. Believers espouse its magical and spiritual characteristics that deepen as the dye darkens. Historically and mythically henna is thought to be a protective measure, said to ward away evil and promote good omens.

Henna paste, once mixed, fills a container resembling a piping bag, which allow for very delicate arabesques to be drawn on the hands and feet. It is important to note that mehndi designs conform to religious norms as well as geographical/regional, caste/class and cultural specificities. The lotus flower, for example, is a popular design associated with the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, who is usually depicted as perched on a red lotus flower.[1] Swastikas are drawn on the palms of a bride's hands to symbolize good luck. The sun and moon also figure prominently in designs found in India. While mehndi

designs in India are a composite of flowers and vines (often referred to as a *jali*), the designs of Egypt and Morocco are often geometrical lattices resembling, at times, the architecture of the region. These patterns are usually larger, utilizing bold lines as opposed to the filigree of the Indian design.

Mehndi communicates the messages and symbols of culture. The ritual signs of culture are layered and designed upon the body. The hennaed skin is made boundary-less; the dye, design and process acting as a medium to psychic interiority. Mehndi destabilizes the binary opposition of inside/outside by accentuating the porousness of skin.

Performed by women on women, mehndi is a celebration of women's bodies as well as a celebration of women's communities. Mehndi has historically been the purview of women and defines both status and stages of life; it typifies transformation, transmission and transition. Mehndi allows for gatherings of women to join in celebration, music, dance and spiritual connection as well as providing the opportunity for expressing particular pedagogical and epistemological strategies. Mehndi provides a defined space for women to speak. It attends to the various ways in which women share knowledge, teach, and empower each other.

The henna process facilitates a dialogic of inspection and expression. The recipient of a henna performance may use this time for meditation and self-examination. For a bride-to-be, the mehndi ceremony is a time to educate and prepare the young woman for what lies ahead. While her hands are adorned, women gather to advise, to suggest tactical possibilities for relations with future family members, to provide guidance and instruct. However, in the course of these gatherings the celebration of the body can rise to racy heights where dances underscore elevated sexual innuendoes. Drumming and verbal sparing test and contest each other. Sometimes the bride's in-laws are the butt of sharp debasement and ridicule. These gatherings allow women to transgress "normalcy" and specified gender scripts.

Both young and old are present to enjoy the festivities associated with mehndi. By establishing no age boundaries, young and old learn the ways of communication at these functions. Young women participate in the events so to anticipate and garner knowledge in preparation for their own henna ceremonies. Equally as important is that younger generations carry on the tradition and symbolic language of mehndi.

These gatherings also celebrate mehndi as a form of artistic expression performed by women. The gender subtext associated with mehndi has excluded it as art. Such a historical omission has meant that mehndi is articulated as beautification rather than as a skill or art form.

While henna parties[2] can be held anytime, they are often held for special religious occasions. Young Muslim girls receive their first hennaed hands by the age of three, usually around the time of Ramadan. Two other times when a woman might have henna performed for her is at the time of her wedding and then towards the birth of her first child. Deborah Kapchan notes that in some cultural contexts henna is closely associated with female blood:[3] before the onset of menstruation, young girls have henna done; another henna ceremony closely precedes the sexual consummation of a marriage; just before the birth of a first child is a third time that henna may be performed.

On other occasions a henna ceremony might be performed in order to placate or stir *jinnis*, the spirits that abound. In many cultures the other world exists simultaneously with the present world. Linear temporality is effaced to entertain the presence of two worlds in dialogue. The hennaed skin pleases more than recipient and the gaze of an onlooker; it converses with spiritual forms present in the home.

The Politics of Cultural Appropriation and Hybridity: Mehndi's Changeability

Mehndi is currently experiencing a great deal of attention. Its recent appearance in North America is part of what Anne Bains calls "Indian chic."[4] However, its current celebrity status is more than just a mere borrowing or exchange between cultures; it functions within a neo-colonialist strategy of "discovery." North American fascination with mehndi as a pop culture art form buys into and feeds a treatment of this ancient cultural practice as something "new." Treating mehndi as a "new" cultural practice, as if it has not existed in the diaspora until now, is a form of cultural appropriation.

In her book *mehndi: the art of henna body painting*, Carine Fabius suggests that through Loretta Roome's[5] photographic installation, *The Mehndi Project*, and the organization of live henna demonstrations at the show's opening, henna was introduced to North America. Roome is heralded as bringing attention to mehndi as an art form. Yet the practice of henna has existed in the United States, in Canada and elsewhere for many years. Mehndi has existed everywhere South

Asian, Middle Eastern and African peoples have lived and migrated. In these communities the artistry is practised and carried on in beauty parlours, at home functions and at specific ceremonial events.

Fabius and her partner, who are art dealers and own a gallery featuring Caribbean art, decided to open their own mehndi studio. Fabius writes in her book, "after grappling with the question of why a *Caribbean* art gallery should get involved with an *East Indian* art form and coming up short, we decided to throw common sense to the wind and follow our instincts"[6] [author's emphasis]. They imagine the Caribbean without the presence of South Asians or "East Indians," conceptualizing art from the Caribbean through ethnocentric assumptions that produce the other as erotic and exotic.

A section in Fabius' book is devoted to the most frequently asked questions about henna. The first question is "Why is this five-thousand-year-old art form suddenly enjoying such popularity in the West today?" The answer Fabius gives is revealing:

> While it is true that mehndi might be the most recent ancient art form to be discovered in this day and age, for many well-travelled Europeans and Americans, mehndi certainly isn't new. Morocco and India have always been popular tourist destinations and the practice of mehndi is everywhere to behold, in marketplaces and outside of tourist attractions like the Taj Mahal. So when mehndi made the headlines in the States, then Europe, for many it struck a chord; one that brought back pleasant memories of exotic holidays in faraway places.[7]

Fabius dismisses and discredits the presence and practice of this art form in the United States by employing a language of discovery. In a significant example of "the absented presence of the other," class relations and colonial conquests are obscured in this travel narrative. Travel has been one way in which cultures have been exoticized and romanticized. It is only if one can afford to travel to "faraway places" that one would "encounter" the "exotic" other and his or her art forms. Fabius' account of mehndi is clearly premised on a notion that Americans are by definition white. Such an account denies the presence of Indian and other non-white Americans.

Cultural appropriation as exemplified by Fabius has its benefits and its costs. By opening the "first" mehndi studio, Fabius and her partner garner the advantages of the limelight created by newly "discovered" art form. Their studio profits from the cultural capital that should credit artists who have practised this work for years and for whom this is a tradition, tied to religion and cultural activity. Theirs is a neo-colonialist strategy dressed up in contemporary trendiness, a form of robbery.

Cultural appropriation is a complex issue. An important question in the debate on cultural appropriation centres on how to begin a dialogue on appropriation when the intermingling of cultures is part of a "multicultural" schemata. Cultures are constantly in contact with each other and as a result cultural expressions are shared in a process of fusion. Knowing this, it is quite possible to argue that there are neither "pure" cultures nor any form of cultural styling which have not been acted upon in some fashion. Culture is contingent in this sense, always in shift, in movement. It is not stable, fixed or unitary.

The difficulty in coming to terms with mehndi's current appeal lies partly in the simplistic way multiculturalism is generally read. Normative and idealized readings of multiculturalism as celebration or nostalgia for diversity allow appropriation to occur without any sense that interruption or damage is being done to someone else's cultural practices. "Stealing" is allowed, and without any associative guilt. Multiculturalism presents an anxiety-free alibi. When mehndi is extracted and purged of any historical associations what is presented is merely a myth. This myth encourages the thievery to continue. Multiculturalism thus aids and abets the explication of the exotic, of discovery and the spectacle of the other, and makes voyeuristic cultural practices acceptable.

Appropriation tends to stabilize and freeze particular aspects of culture, establishing a certain ahistoricity about culturally articulated presentations. In this way mehndi is "denied any cultural personality or dynamism."[8] Richard Fung has shown that the process of freezing or "fossiliz[ing] 'other' cultures, in opposition to the continuously developed modern and now postmodern culture of the West is, after all, the central and most insidious trope of multiculturalism."[9] A logic of display and authenticity, essence and timelessness, mark the way in which modern is juxtaposed to ancient culture.

Cultural appropriation, Kwame Dawes[10] argues, is a form of "robbery" where stealing is done without reservation, where no narratives of process and development of cultural forms shape the activity of appropriation. Cultural appropriation is closely associated with the problematic of historical (lack of) accountability and disrespect seen in processes such as conquest, discovery, colonialism and imperialism. The strategies of cultural

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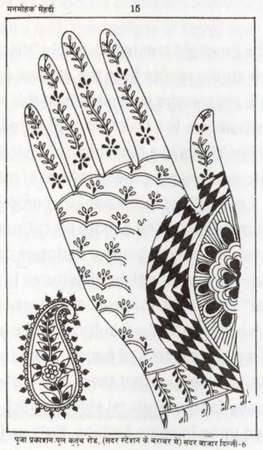
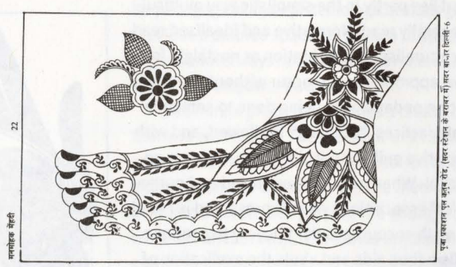
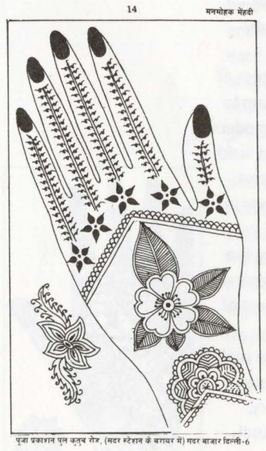






appropriation can be understood as modern modes of pillage by dominant cultures. Appropriation tends to be situated within the contextual relations of domination and subjugation where little attention is paid to sociality—the history, traditions, religions, economics—of the culture from which the appropriation takes place.

By isolating it as an exhibitionist art activity, mehndi is divorced from the ceremonies and rites of passage within which it is performed. Richard Fung has argued that, "the critique of cultural appropriation is therefore first and foremost a strategy to redress historically established inequities by raising questions about who controls and benefits from cultural resources."[11] Studio demonstrations and application of mehndi abstract and take away from the embodied experience of the work. The only connection between artist and recipient is one elaborated by a profit motive between worker and client; there are no traditional narratives of legends and gods and goddesses, no gyrating dance, no songs that mock and calm. What materializes is a commodified art form splintered and unconnected from its meaning and social signification.

In contrast, current discussions of hybridity, the mixing and blending of cultural forms, processes and styles, remark on hybridity's cultural crossover, its creative intertextuality, complexity, multiplicity, fluidity and variability. Hybridity prescribes ways of de-essentializing and de-naturalizing culture and makes culture more malleable. It tests and contests the boundaries of authenticity and homogenizing tendencies.

Mehndi's multiple usages throughout history suggests its hybridity rather than some essential quality. If we think of mehndi as a hybrid styling in the diaspora, then we can see the shifts in its forms, styles and designs reflect adjustments to life in the diaspora. Hybridity allows for a conversation between cultures to facilitate the borrowing process. To contemplate the various ways in which mehndi design has changed is to note cultural forces of diaspora acting on tradition, negating the idea of timelessness.

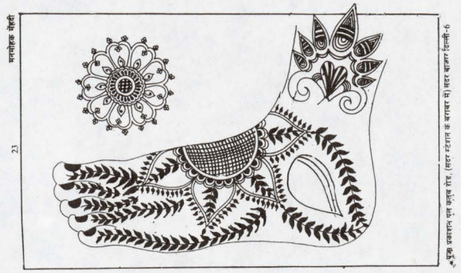
Contemporary shifts in the art of mehndi among its traditional practitioners suggest that this method of staining the body is becoming a hybridized beautification method. Young women for whom mehndi is a cultural tradition are attempting to re-invent the designs and customary arabesques to produce new stylings. Their refashioned filigrees re-imagine the text on the body to suit the new context of life in the diaspora. These young women are "re-creating themselves in their own image"[12] as well as advancing the art of mehndi.

The effects of reinterpreting henna in North America and elsewhere in the diaspora show that its usage is diversifying and being performed for more than just ceremonies and rites of passage. Hybridity becomes one way of recreating cultural connections, forging community and organizing collectives in order to deal with the shift and changes of daily struggles in the diaspora. The variability of the way in which henna is worn indicates a willingness to de-essentialize both its use and style. This also points out the extent to which those "of the culture" may also fetishize cultural forms in a way that attends to issues of identity formation and retention in the diaspora.

While some henna designs remain the same, there are new trends toward the decoration of a single finger and to one-handed designs. In some cases, the abstract markings of one hand flow onto the other. Also, whereas traditional drawings were mainly fashioned on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, nowadays the inclination is to paint any part of the body. One particular trend that is making its mark, so to speak, is the inscription of letters, usually the initials of the groom, in Arabic script, on the palms of the bride's hands. The most interesting shift in mehndi is its use by men. These shifts are not dramatic by any stretch of the imagination, yet these subtleties are marking more than just the body.

With mehndi designs being appropriated and revisioned, these hybrid shifts indicate a glaring difference between traditional and contemporary approaches to performing mehndi. In mehndi studios, mehndi is not so much a "performance" as it is an application. Traditionally, mehndi has meant both its application and associated festivities, a two- to three-day event. When mehndi is performed in the home for a wedding or a birthing, texts are more than just what is inscribed on the body; they are the performance of history through the voices of women, the presence of the spirit world converging to inspire the artist and to keep vigil for the days to come. In this sense, ceremony gets written out of the modern con/text of the mehndi performance. The relations of consumption negate particular social relations.

Against current attempts to interpret mehndi as simply design and against the disavowal of its religious and cultural properties, an examination of mehndi's traditions and hybridization "returns the gaze" to focus on mehndi's multiple meanings and the shifts in its contemporary usage. Cultural appropriation has a way of selling back to us what is already "ours." It is an insidious way of making culture.



Notes

1. The goddess Lakshmi is celebrated at religious functions, especially at the time of Diwali. On greeting cards, she is the most prominent figure, always depicted as emerging from the lotus flower. When paying homage to this goddess one bows to the lotus feet of Mother Lakshmi. To wear the lotus in mehndi design is symbolic of the purity and reverence signified by Lakshmi mata.
2. Maria Messina, "Henna Party," *Natural History* 97, no. 9, Sept. 1988, pp. 41-46.
3. Deborah Kapchan, "Moroccan Women's Body Signs," *Bodylore*, ed. Katherine Young, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993) p. 8.
4. Anne Bains, "Stealing Beauty," *This Magazine* 32, no. 2, Sept./Oct. 1998, pp. 36-39.
5. Since Roome's show she has authored *Mehndi: The Timeless Art of Henna Painting* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998). Her book, unlike Fabius', explicates in great detail the cultural significance of the art of mehndi and so is much more like a guide to the traditional and the contemporary shifts in mehndi.
6. Carine Fabius, *mehndi: the art of henna body painting* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.
8. Kyo Maclear, "Diss-Orient-ation," *Fuse Magazine* 16, no. 5&6, summer 1993, p. 25.
9. Richard Fung, "Working Through Cultural Appropriation," *Fuse Magazine* 16, no. 5&6, summer 1993, pp. 16-24.
10. Kwame Dawes, "Re-appropriating Cultural Appropriation," *Fuse Magazine* 16, no. 5&6, summer 1993, pp. 7-15.
11. Richard Fung, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
12. Kyo Maclear, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

I would like to thank Katarzyna Rukszto for her important contributions to this piece as well as Darien Taylor's direction, constructive comments and editing. This piece is dedicated in loving memory to my cousin Wayne Sooknanan.

Renuka Sooknanan lives and writes in Toronto and is currently at work on her dissertation.

Caribana

Photo by Pete Dako

A DIASPORIC DUB

by Ramabai Espinet

For some time, various Caribana committees planning the event have made the case for public financial support, and especially corporate support. Last year's influx of visitors into the city of Toronto is estimated to have translated into over $200 million in business revenue.[1] The committees have accused the businesses that profit from the event—hoteliers, restaurateurs, merchants, public and private transportation businesses—of grabbing their share and not giving anything back to the community that made it possible. They do have a point.

Caribana is now the largest North American cultural festival; it takes place in the city that the United Nations in 1991 dubbed the most diverse in the world; it is remarkable for the absence of crime during the festival and its masquerade takes place on the grandest of scales. A *grande z'affaire*, indeed! But under what rubric should its shimmering, protean nature be captured? Is it a parade? Is it a Carnival, a *carnaval*, *carne vale*, a movement of the carnivalesque, a festival of inversion, transvestism, the turning upside down of the order of the day—propriety, stuffiness, Anglophile values, no liquor on the streets, no fêting after a certain hour—is it really the don't-care-damn thing that erupts on the streets of Port of Spain, Rio de Janeiro or New Orleans? And can a festival that is cordoned off on the Lakeshore, ending at a precise point marked by the sign, "Music ends here," be thought of as taking over the "streets" of a city?

1. Estimate quoted by broadcast of Caribana 1998 on Channel 7, 6 August 1998.

Carnival it is, but Caribana is definitely a Toronto-specific festival. Its fabric is very different from other diasporic Carnivals and extremely different from that observed in its place of genesis, Port of Spain, Trinidad. It is worth noting too that many Carnivals now being celebrated in other islands are commercial, tourist-oriented ventures, fueled by cultural components of Trinidad Carnival—calypso, mas' costumes and steelband—hence their staggered dates on the yearly calendar.

To be sure, there are also islands with their own versions of Carnival occurring during the same pre-Lenten period: these tend to be the islands where French and Spanish, hence Catholic, influences were strong: Grenada, St. Lucia, Dominica, Cuba and Puerto Rico are some of these. An interesting and purely idiosyncratic form occurs on the tiny island of Carriacou,[2] just off the coast of Grenada. The pre-Lenten celebration in this island is called "Shakespeare Mas'" and consists of participants utilizing the text of Julius Caesar in a verbal duel. The whole event can be construed to be a form of linguistic stickfighting leading up to a real duel with real blows exchanged until one participant falls out.

In the case of Trinidad, perhaps its oil revenues and relative prosperity can explain the enormous scale of its Carnival celebrations (it is commonly held that the population of the island doubles during this period), and the presence of oildrums can provide some explanation for the development of the steelband, the only acoustic musical instrument developed in the twentieth century; but that would only be a fragment of the story.

The origins of the Caribana festival follow the pattern of most of the overseas Carnivals that have grown up around Caribbean diasporic communities with a significant Trinidadian component. The best known of these are Notting Hill in London, England, and Labour Day in Brooklyn, New York. Other Carnivals are now occurring in a number of North American cities: Montreal, Hamilton, Winnipeg and Edmonton in Canada; Boston, Baltimore, Miami and Atlanta in the U.S.; to name just a few. Typically the festival coalesces around a need to display one's culture at an event of importance to the city, and the production of a Carnival spectacle occurs, led by the vision of a few Trinidadians. If it takes off, it tends to become an annual event. Other Caribbean groups may unite around the initial event but, historically, they tend to drift away and create cultural sites specific to their own island cultures and to which they can bring their own cultural capital. This has certainly been the case in Notting Hill and Brooklyn. Caribana itself, for all of the wishful pan-African Caribbeanism of several Torontonians in public life, remains Trinidad-centric to its core, accepting—in the grand style of the Carnival in Port of Spain—all comers, all manner of motley and posturing, preening and creating a mock-heroic disturbance, but managing to remain unchanged in conception and in character by these added elements.

The differences in the varieties of Carnivals in the Americas are vital to the understanding of the phenomenon but cannot be dwelt upon here. Briefly, though, the Carnivals of Rio, New Orleans, Santiago de Cuba, Veracruz, Port-au-Prince and Port of Spain are the oldest and most significant. All of these are linked to a religious base of Catholicism and the highly ritualized "farewell to the flesh" (*carne vale*) that occurs in the immediate pre-Lenten period. In all these cities, the Carnivals have been transmogrified from the older European festivals (themselves deriving from the more ancient Graeco-Roman festivals of Lupercal and Saturnalia, incorporated into the Catholic/Christian calendar since medieval times), which took the form of elaborate masked balls on plantations and grew into street parades.

This transmogrification has been characterized by African religious and cultural elements, including drumming, verbal and musical jousting, mockery and rough play, costumery, and sacred and profane elements. Other migrant cultures in these specific places—South and East Asian, Middle Eastern and Portuguese—have added increasingly diverse elements in varying degrees over the years. In Rio, the "carnaval of the Cariocans" is linked to the *escolas de samba*[3] or samba clubs, the community associations of the urban poor, living in the favelas[4] above the city. The samba itself is believed to

2. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd ed., trans. by James Maraniss, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1996) p. 307. Benítez-Rojo's discussion draws upon the research being conducted in Carriacou by Joan M. Fayer and Joan F. McMurray.

3. J.M. Taylor, "The Politics of Aesthetic Debate: the Case of the Brazilian Carnival," *Ethnology*, vol. XXI, 4 October 1982. Taylor explains that these are the major festival associations of Rio's urban poor and are much more than a "carnaval club." Earlier in this century the *escolas de samba* were one of the bases of community organizing among inhabitants of the favelas and since the 1930s they have dominated the Rio Carnival.

4. J.M. Taylor, *ibid.* Taylor's note on favelas is very informative:
"Favelas, characteristically built on the steep rock outcroppings or *morros* of the city, traditionally have housed populations distinguished from middle and upper strata of Cariocan society not only by their economic status but by their ethnic identity as the mestizo and black bearers of elements of a distinctive culture inherited from African forebearers."

have evolved from *capoeira*, the African martial art brought to Brazil by slaves and disguised as a dance. In New Orleans the famous parade still retains its class, caste and colour distinctions[5] although in recent times these are becoming blurred.

The Port of Spain Carnival, the one most connected to Caribana, had deeply subversive, and even revolutionary, antecedents. In the late eighteenth century when French planters from other West Indian islands migrated to Trinidad in great numbers, lured by the promise of sizable land grants, Carnival celebrations began in the form of grand masked balls. There is no apparent history of celebration prior to this, when Spanish colonial domination held sway and the island was largely undeveloped. By the early years of the nineteenth century it had become a street parade of the French plantocracy together with many freed slaves and people of colour. It is estimated that at the time of emancipation in 1838 there were already close to 10,000 freed slaves in the colony, most of them congregating in the urban sector. This would have raised the level of participation by Africans in the masquerade to a significant, though unacknowledged, degree. It was the proclamation of Emancipation on August 1, 1838, however, that brought newly emancipated Africans directly into the street celebrations. The canboulay torches (legitimately used on estates as a means of fighting cane fires) were part of the festival at the first post-emancipation Carnival in 1839, as were the costumes of the *nègre jardins*,[6] the favoured attire for these masqueraders intent on celebrating by mocking their past condition. In a ritualized manner, perhaps this can be read as a means of reinvoking the chains of slavery so as to ensure that its death on Ash Wednesday would be absolute. The aristocracy's apparent passion for also playing *nègres jardins* is not as easily explained.[7]

At any rate, Carnival in Port of Spain kept its deeply subversive character throughout the years of the nineteenth century as the elites tried vainly to legislate against its occurrence.[8] The removal of white and near-white elements from the streets at Carnival time allowed the free development of Africanized elements of ritual and ceremony. Carnival became a product of the jamette[9] culture and sought to shock and invert the established order which, as the century waned, was marked by British colonial authority in terms of governance, but by colour and class in an infinitesimally more complex manner.

The literature of Carnival is replete with interpretations of a ritualized subversion of the established order. Common wisdom holds that the license to invert the prevailing order ritually releases systemic tensions inherent in the multiple inequalities of this order, allowing inequalities to be functionally redeployed once the excesses of the festival have abated. But interesting reinterpretations, such as that advanced by Benítez-Rojo, are now being debated. In *The Repeating Island* he examines three literary sites of the carnivalesque: Nicolás Guillén's "Sensemaya," Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours* and Alejo Carpentier's *Concierto Barroco*.[10] His examination reveals the transformative elements within the structure of the carnivalesque. In the *sensemaya* (serpent-killing) dance performed in Cuba, for example, Benítez-Rojo postulates that the act of killing the serpent (or the scorpion in the present scorpion-killing dance) is "a self-referential sign that speaks about its own paradox: that of receiving a sacred death in order to give civil life."[11] Benítez-Rojo sees the ritual act of serpent-killing as an exorcism of the violence of slavery, channelling the violence of plantation society into an arena that relieves it of the necessity for reciprocal violence, at least for the time being. These acts of exorcism are forced into disguises that can only carray[12] and ramajay[13] in the forms of dances, or other risible or non-threatening forms, yet the deep undertow of subversion and ritualized exorcism never leaves them, erupting where possible into other more direct forms. The ensuing "narrative ensemble"[14] creates rhythms, spectacles, pageants and masquerades that on the surface dazzle and entice, coercing onlookers into the act of participation but raising serious questions about what is occurring at other levels of subliminality.

Such sublimated levels of expression, deriving from subterranean streams that hundreds of years of captivity have not been able to dam up and subdue, are made

5. Michael P. Smith, "New Orleans' Carnival Culture from the Underside," *Plantation Society in the Americas: Carnival in Perspective*, (New York: Athens Printing Co., 1990).

6. Daniel J. Crowley, "The Traditional Masques of Carnival," *Trinidad Carnival*, a republication of *Caribbean Quarterly: Trinidad Carnival Issue*, vol. 4, no. 3 & 4, 1956, (Port of Spain: Paria, 1988). Crowley claims that "perhaps the most ancient traditional masque is that of the 'neg jade' the masque of the kanbule carnival." He quotes the *Trinidad Sentinel* in 1860 as describing how in an earlier period "princes and lords of the land paraded in sooty disguise of the *nègre jardin*" and how "even residents of Government House mimicked their 'garden niggers.'" C.S. Espinet, Michael Anthony and Donald Hill have all variously discussed the *nègres jardins* in similar ways.

7. An interesting perspective on inversion and "tosy-turvydom" is presented by Ana María Alonso in the article "Men in 'Rags' and the Devil on the Throne: a Study of Protest and Inversion in the Carnival of Post-Emancipation Trinidad," *Plantation Society in the Americas*, 1990.

8. Michael Anthony, *Parade of the Carnivals of Trinidad 1939–1989*, (Port-of-Spain, Circle Press, 1989).

9. Jamette is derived from the French "*diametre*" meaning the lower orders of society or literally, the other half which operates below the diameter of respectability. In time it came to mean prostitute but in the nineteenth century it signified a distinctive cultural entity. There were also jamette bands in Carnival as discussed in Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

10. Benítez-Rojo, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

11. Benítez-Rojo, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

12. Trinidad English. This is a term from stickfighting meaning to parade and exhibit oneself with great pride and style.

13. Trinidad English. Literally, to go wild. Used metaphorically.

14. A wonderfully expressive phrase employed by Benítez-Rojo, *op cit.*, p. 298.

possible by their emergence within a *community* of individuals who share a history of ideas, experiences and similar needs for cathartic or transformative ritual. In the Caribana context, questions do arise about whether this kind of *community* exists in Canada and about the specific needs that a festival like Caribana fulfills. For example, the street revelers in the Caribana parade are multi-ethnic in appearance, echoing the twin diversities of the Caribbean and the city of Toronto, yet this factor is consistently de-emphasized in the official discourse.

It is worth remembering that Caribana's origins are as arbitrary as those of any of the other overseas Carnivals that have sprung into existence over the last twenty years. Montreal, Canada, 1967: the site of a World Trade Fair named Expo '67. A group of Trinidadian dancers perform a wildly popular act; a group of Trinidadian students in Montreal stage a mini-Carnival. Canada's Centenary celebrations are held the same year and the students are invited to Toronto to stage the mini-Carnival along with other nationals domiciled there who form an organizing committee.[15] Some of these names still appear on the current Caribana scene: Charles Roach, Courtney Doldron, Peter Marcelline, Kenn Shah and Walter Elliott, one of those flashy dancers at Expo '67 and now a sought-after mas' designer.[16] The rest, as they say, is history. The August holiday weekend was chosen and since 1967 the event has been celebrated yearly. The nucleus of Trinidadians and Eastern Caribbean nationals has remained consistent. Though Jamaicans join in the festival, the event is not really marked by Jamaican cultural elements. According to Manning,[17] this can be explained by the recognition of the fact that Jamaican culture is strikingly dissimilar from that of the Eastern Caribbean and common ground can be hard to find.

The Trinidad-centric specificity of the event, its unabashed yearly borrowings from the Trinidad Carnival in its costumes, its choice of road music, its bandleaders and its participants, have posed something of an ideological problem for those responsible for its organization every year. The rhetoric describes a Pan-African Festival—a site for Africans in Canada to claim as a space of ownership and cultural affirmation. But this sleight-of-tongue does not take into account, and indeed it gives grave offence to, those bandleaders and participants who cannot claim these roots, such as Indians, Chinese and Portuguese people (Caribbean ethnicity being too complex an issue for discussion here) and who spend thousands of dollars yearly to play or produce mas'. Caribana 1997, the thirtieth anniversary of the festival, proved to be a crisis point for years of pent-up dissatisfaction, especially in the area of finance. Many bandleaders withdrew from the festival and the result was a spectacular non-event. But this dud Caribana did wake up the organizers, forcing them into another direction—that of revamping the committee structure, pulling together a new overseeing Board, establishing a separate Committee for the day-to-day running of the festival, and hiring a CEO from the corporate sector. Their primary concern was financial accountability. Ethnic and racial accountability, never really signalled in the discussions regarding what was wrong with the festival, was once more left for another day. It is an old Caribbean story.

On the other hand, the new structure may signal the community's apparent acquiescence to pushing the event solidly in the direction of a mainstream participatory event, a space which has the potential to be a real site for the play of the diversity that is Toronto, to be made more apparent in the next ten to fifteen years as the visible minority becomes the majority. This optimistic, indeed idealistic, new vision for Caribana is one fraught with contradiction, opposition and hope—all of the elements necessary for creating a socio-cultural practice that can truly reflect the pulsating, dynamic life of a megacity-to-be beyond the year 2000. Yet is this pie-in-the-sky or is it really an achievable goal? At the highest level, the dollars-and-cents expertise has been drafted. But, at the highest level, have the Carnival visionaries been drafted? I refer to the city's artists, those who work in that risky, undefined subliminal space of dream and shimmer and illusion; have they been drafted into the picture? Has Toronto's diversity or even the plurality of the Caribbean been drafted? So far, many doubts remain.

15. Cecil Foster & Chris Schwarz, *Caribana: the greatest celebration*, (Toronto: Ballantine, 1995).

16. R. Espinet, "Caribana in Perspective," *Indo-Caribbean World*, July 1993.

17. Frank E. Manning, "Overseas Caribbean Carnivals: The Art and Politics of a Transnational Celebration," *Plantation Society in the Americas*, 1990, p. 48.

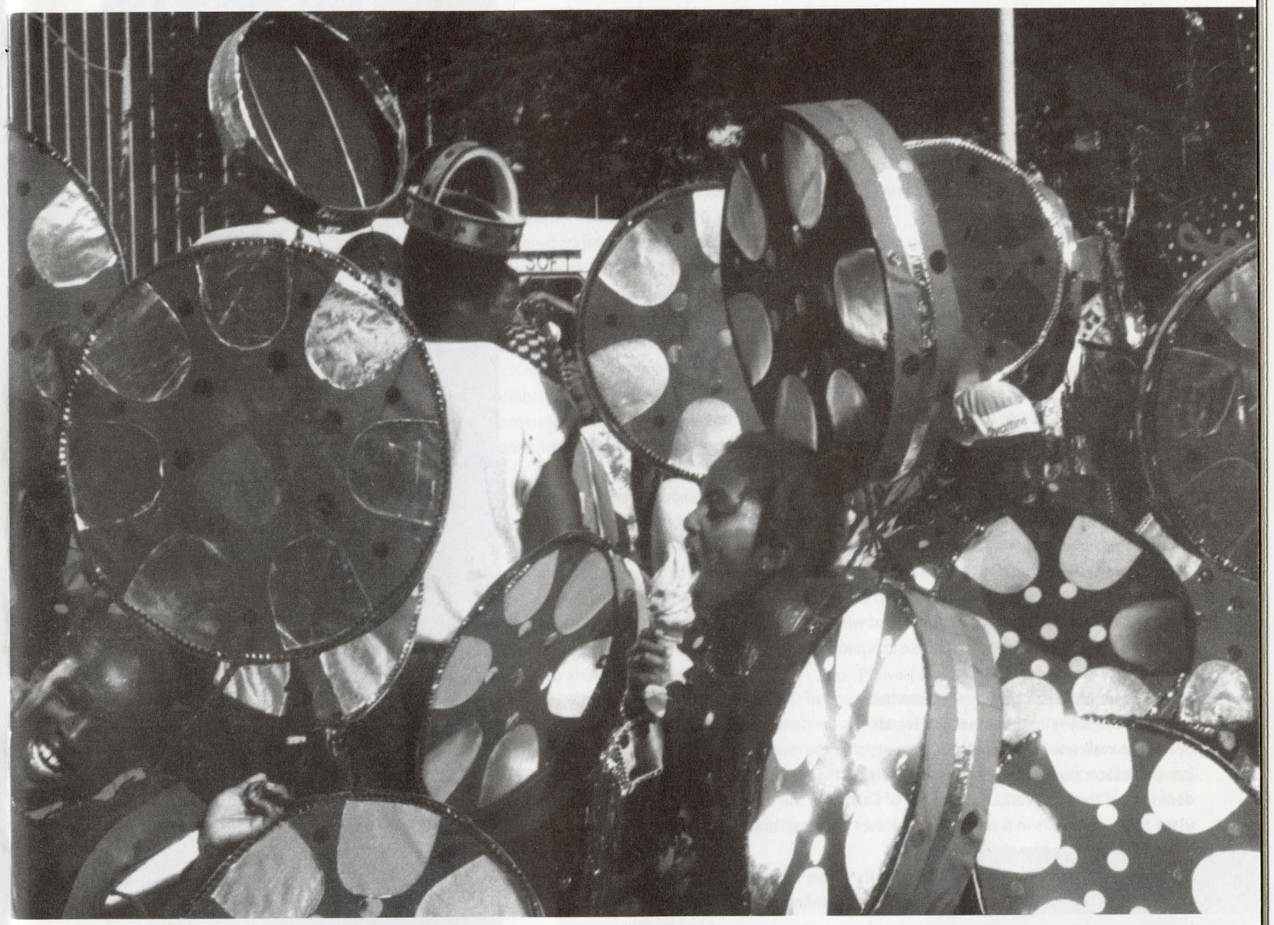


Photo by Pete Dako

The significance of the Carnival aesthetic (at least in the Toronto context) seems to have been lost somewhere in the diasporic transition from "home" to "overseas." This aesthetic is rooted in the call and response or Litany musical form,[18] West African in origin, which has given rise to so many New World art forms—calypso is the most obvious in this context, but jazz and blues, for example, and the range of their influences upon North American music from Elvis Presley to contemporary styles, is as evident. At the heart of call and response, though, is the tapping into a collective repository of response to the external environment. The role of the griot in such a transaction is paramount, but the griot functions in response to the community's perceived needs. S/he does not call the tune, not really.

This "Carnival aesthetic" is obviously an approach to artistic creation that is contrary to the dominant aesthetic of the West. By definition then, this response is contrapuntal, cussed and contradictory, while, at every level of interaction, it preserves

18. The "roots and traditions" of calypso are discussed extensively by Gordon Rohlehr in the first chapter of *Calypso & Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, (Port of Spain: Gordon Rohlehr, 1990).

engagement. It seems to me though, that in the transition to the metropoles the belief remains that *real life* still happens only at *home* and we must borrow a slice of its realness for the purpose of ensuring our well-being on these alien shores. This borrowing is a distinct shift in the deep structure of the event, a movement away from the centrifugal force that binds it and, instead, a peripheral gathering of random shards, memorabilia, echoes of nostalgia. It is no secret that bandleaders return home every year to see for themselves what shape things are taking there. Their particular costumes, researched for months before, it is true, and the gala launching parties to display them, only coalesce for public display after this pilgrimage. Often the names of the bands are similar to the point of déjà-vu; conceptually it is an understatement to say that they borrow freely. Yet is this plagiarism? To return to the mecca of Port of Spain, where the free play of ideas, irreverence, ribaldry and outrage still reinvents itself yearly, is this not allowed?

The question of *community* also deserves consideration. What community? Is it an imagined community (the ephemeral all-ah-we-is-one) that comes into being only at Caribana and happily disperses once the play of illusion has evaporated? The elements of Carnival remain rooted in a Creole aesthetic that is still mainly a marriage of Africa and Europe. Indians enter as if it were a borrowed space, as do other ethnicities who participate. They function as liminal figures, altering and recreating the space, but keeping the primary boundary lines intact.

If the masquerade that takes place at Caribana does not spring organically from the community's rootedness in the Toronto/Canadian environment, what does this event mean? And is change desirable? Do we want to stop the mas' if it is simply a carbon copy of the real thing? And what about Toronto's calypso contests? At the heart of calypso is commentary—often over the top, politically incorrect, full of racial sneers, class attacks, grievance, ridicule and wit, all performed with an undercurrent of gritty, tongue-in-cheek humour and an understanding that this is functioning at the level of play and is not, as in this year's Trinidad crop of politico-racial attack, a call to arms. Why then is this engagement with everyday issues not achievable in the Toronto context? And where are these calypsoes heard? Definitely not on the streets on Caribana Day.

Commercial success now seems to be one of the key goals of Caribana. Ritual exorcism not withstanding, the task for artists, artisans and producers must obviously be how to walk the tightrope that every artist in the world of global consumer capitalism must face: how to marry the artistic vision that produces representation with the demands of the real world. In the case of Caribana, the opportunity is now ripe to articulate these demands in a way that explicates the possibility of a hitherto unexperienced visionary approach.

The festival is now poised between its subversive, antagonistic, resistant-to-authority roots of struggle and courage, indeed defiance, in the face of struggle, and the possibility of a futuristic vision that will integrate a number of oppositional and discordant elements vying for centre stage. Unlike the other diasporic Carnivals in Notting Hill and Brooklyn, it has the potential to be swept into the mainstream in a way that no other North American Carnival has. Even New Orleans, with the advantage of its occurrence at the time of the year when excess before contrition and Lenten abstinence is a pervasive current even among non-Christians, does not have the rich possibility that the diversity of Toronto promises. But how can this be done and if it is, will it be art, spectacle, performance or parade?

This year, Caribana fell on Saturday, August 1, Emancipation Day. To mark the occasion, a group of academics and activists organized a conference at the University of Toronto's New College, celebrating Emancipation Day as a prelude to Caribana. This kind of initiative can serve to educate the wider community about Caribana's African-Caribbean and other roots and about the end of slavery in the British Caribbean colonies. It can also serve as a forum for debate about changing Carnival aesthetics and the integration of other communities and influences. The openness of such a discussion

Video stills of Caribana '97 courtesy of Richard Fung.

would go a long way toward providing the kind of expansive inclusion of Toronto's diverse communities that is the avowed objective of the new Caribana structure.

I venture to opine that Caribana has unlimited possibilities to become a real festival for performance art and street theatre on a scale, and with a degree of interculturation, not seen before in North America. But many petty agendas need to be cleared and one key element is the rhetoric of essentializing the event in terms of its African origins. While there is no question of the fact that a syncretic merging of Europe and Africa in the Americas—the process of creolization itself—created the distinctively Africanized Carnivals of the Americas, territorializing the Carnival may not really be the best strategy at this point, even with the limited aim of ensuring the survival of its earliest roots.

The theatre of the street that occurs on Caribana Day cannot really be called a *parade*. A *parade* cannot possibly incorporate so many unpredictable elements all at the same time. For example, there is music but no choreography except that which the masquerader improvises; there is spectacle but no particular concern for producing specific effects; there is unlimited theatricality with no rehearsal and no self-consciousness. As Peter Minshall[19] puts it, the masquerade invests the costume with body, spirit and self. Yet questions arise: does this improvised theatricality force new ways of seeing? What is the role of ritual exorcism, for instance, or excess to the point of euphoria, with the understanding that equilibrium will be regained tomorrow? Can performance art be a process that in its execution moves the whole community, and not just one special individual? And if not, why not? Who hands down these definitions?

If there is a downside to Caribana it lies in the direction of the absence of the call and response mode that provided the earliest underpinnings of the festival. Class, however, is a necessary factor to be considered in any such assessment. The Carnival of the jamette culture consisted of masqueraders who had nothing to lose and many points to be made against the establishment. But the Caribana ethos is fuelled by the interests of the middle and aspiring middle classes who don't really want to engage in mudslinging battles with the Canadian establishment. And, to be fair, this reluctance to criticize is apparent now in the J'Ouvert[20] or Ol' Mas' celebrations in Trinidad where real, physical mud, often brightly coloured, has now replaced the practice of mudslinging through political satire and invective. In Toronto, few calypsoes are bold and brassy in their critiques of Canadian culture. There is no J'Ouvert festival and only a few J'Ouvert bands that function as performers at public dances, and even these express only watered-down satire and almost no political commentary.

Caribana runs the risk of restaging the equivalent of grand masked balls again as the pre-emancipation planter class did, and as pretty bands full of local and foreign elites, bands whose sheer cost excludes the rabble, now do in Trinidad. The driving, scatological, subversive, dynamic force in Caribana, that would stand propriety on its head, has not made the diasporic journey. But perhaps there was no need for it to do so in Canada, as it still does in Notting Hill and certainly, in Brooklyn. For the past four years Brooklyn has had a J'Ouvert along with its pretty mas' on Eastern Parkway later in the day. Needless to say, the commentary this year was profane and Clintonesque. Stained navy blue dresses worn by stout, undeniably male figures, crude penile effigies in prayerful abjection, and saucily opinionated placards marked the J'Ouvert parade. An engaged community? Perhaps there is a greater impulse to subversion because of different social conditions, making the festival truer to its jamette roots. By contrast, Caribana is eclectic and mainstream-bound. A mainstream parade will, in the end, rid itself of the dissonant chords of subversion. Is this a real loss? Perhaps Jah knows; I dunno.

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19. As a bandleader Peter Minshall has been a major influence in redefining the aesthetic of the Trinidad masquerade since the '80s.

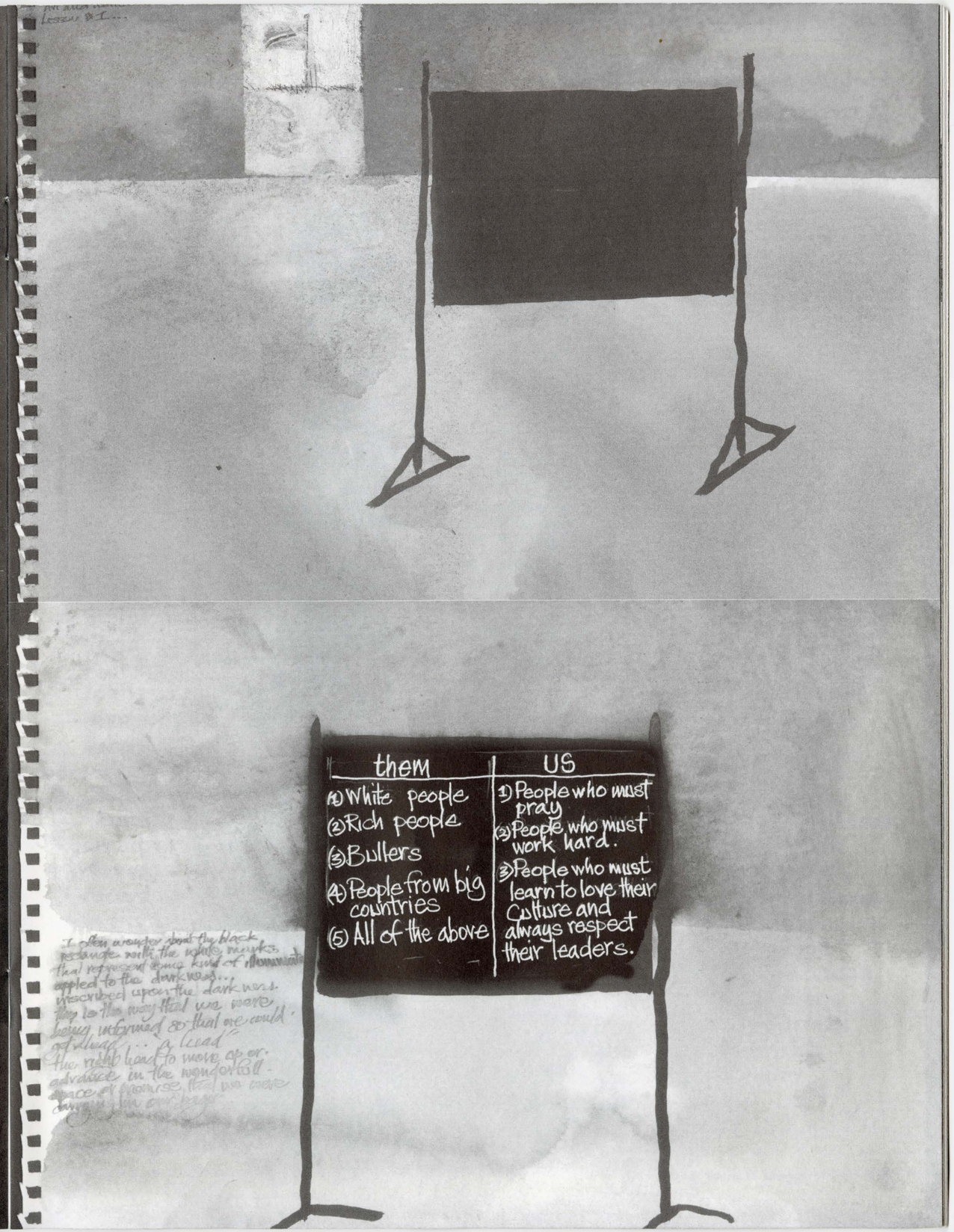
20. J'Ouvert signals the opening of the street festivities in Trinidad. The street theatre of Trinidad Carnival has several phases, among them: Dimanche Gras, J'Ouvert, Monday Mas', Night Mas' and Pretty Mas' on Carnival Tuesday.

Christopher Cozier is a Trinidad-based artist and writer whose work is exhibited internationally, most recently at the Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo in Spain. He is currently co-editing an issue of *Small Axe* about the visual arts in the Caribbean.

next spread

Why does this blackboard shape so intrigue me at this moment? I often wonder if it has something to do with the barriers between groups of people and also the way it functions as a frame like a view or reference point — like cinema in the old days and television now. Maybe not television as a television is a small object in the personal space. The group dynamic of viewing is not alluded to. - the "you" out there is an isolated body. The blackboard is about a forced or enforced space. The teacher's writing and diagrams that we must collectively focus on and individually learn through punishment and to "fit in" and to "get ahead/a head" is more like cinema. I have always been fascinated by the multiple uses of the word head. As in "what is your head?" "What head you on" "to get a head" "the right head" "real head" etc. To get ahead then implies two things, the surface meaning of movement - class mobility and self advancement and then also acquiring the "head" an identity; a mission to be part of or to have a self within a narrative about advancing and advancement. Is it a "self" or a "role" or "place" within. The blackboard with the enlightening white chalk marks - "out of the darkness comes light (?)" - illumination. The blackness, this nothing-ness was given form by these marks, these messages about religion, manners and how to be decent in general, etc. I was always fascinated by the almost ritualistic act or process of organizing the information on that black space - rectangle. It reminded of our enforcement of landscape painting as a cultural ideal.

Unlike the cinema screen, the black space provided no illusion of escape or open space. It was not a window to the prospect be an other world. It was a "point of view". Often one was punished by looking out of the actual window - or not paying attention - for drifting off into our personal or individual space which had no currency in the enforced group identity project called the "Rising Nation". I wonder about this dark space contrasted to these white marks and symbols. I wonder how I have been informed and formed by them. I wonder if this is why paintings or rectangles so disturb me especially the horizontal landscape with its almost corrective arrangement of marks and colours functioning as an illumination — the pursuit of light and the wonders of our world as it is supposed or ought to be. 18/09/88



"On the Outside Looking In?"

by Gabrielle Hezekiah

In 1908 and 1909, Sir Harry Johnston—British geographer, artist, diplomat, anthropologist, photographer and naturalist—travelled to the Caribbean seeking information on the political stability of Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica and Panama on behalf of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. Johnston was particularly interested in the industriousness (or not) of Blacks and their preparedness to meet the modern economic age. Johnston photographed the everyday lives of working-class Black people out of an interest in the comparative development of the "Negro" in Africa and the Caribbean. He was keen to investigate the "benefits" of colonialism, which supposedly gave Blacks in the Americas an advantage over their African counterparts, and the differences in slavery and colonialism under various European colonizers. Johnston recorded his journey in photographs, several of which were reproduced in his 1910 publication, *The Negro in the New World*. From May to October of 1998, seventy photographs from the original expedition travelled from their home at the Royal Geographical Society in London to museums and art spaces in Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Cuba and Haiti. This migration was a collaborative effort involving the Society, lecturer, critic and curator Dr. Petrine Archer-Straw, and the British Council. The exhibition was called "Photos and Phantasms: Harry Johnston's Photographs of the Caribbean."

Opposite: *Haitian Woman and Children.*, Sir Harry Johnston, 1908–09. Photo courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

The exhibition was a curious mix of agendas, artifacts and personal experiences that presented perhaps more scope for contradiction than the organizers had intended. Viewing the exhibition in Barbados, I was struck by an overwhelming sense of longing, nostalgia, sadness and joy. That I, a Black woman in my early thirties transplanted from Trinidad to Barbados, was able at all to move into a visual space of the turn of the century and experience nostalgia and longing is testimony to the fact that memory is somehow created vicariously, second-hand and in absentia. It also bespeaks the fact that the search for visual traces of the Caribbean is complicated and emotionally charged.

In these photographs I was first intrigued by distance within the composition, between the subjects within and outside of the frame, and in emotional and chronological time. The photographs I found particularly fascinating were of people: individuals posing for Johnston's camera or caught off-guard on their way to market. The posed portraits were simple and strong. As I gazed at the images I remembered that in childhood it was simply understood that we were never to pose for photographs to be taken by tourists. But what of Johnston's subjects? Who were these "natives" in Johnston's photographs, and how can we understand our present fascination with the other even when that other is ourselves? Can the gaze of the contemporary Caribbean person be anything *other* than *anthropological*?

As its name suggests, "Photos and Phantasms" was for me about ghosts and spectres, and my relationship to the past and present. The still photograph is essentially about looking. The photograph of the distinguishable past forces a confrontation with the self that is intriguing, harrowing and personifying, a confrontation that changes the object, the relic, the human and social artifact, into a living, death-defying breathing organism. There was something about excavation, memory and traces of the self in these photographs. These photographs were essentially about death.

Yet the exhibition was constructed as testimony of *a life*, documentary evidence of "the way it used to be," evidence of a Caribbean that the Caribbean itself had lost or denied and that, at all costs, had to be reclaimed. The contradictions and questions of examining the past in the present—the assumptions of Caribbeanness and Blackness engendered and propagated by the act of looking *in the present*—were not critically explored.

AGENDAS

"Photos and Phantasms" seemed intended to return patrimony to the Caribbean and to enable those living in the Caribbean to revisit and revision their history. In a region where history has long been constructed by a European other and where written and visual records are often institutionalized abroad, this return is significant. Yet the fashioning of a contemporary Caribbean identity based on excerpts of the past is quite a different project.

Petrine Archer-Straw's concerns revolved largely around the recovery of visual heritage, the discarding of colonial stereotypes, the exploration of Harry Johnston's biases and agenda, and the presentation of evidence of the ways in which the Caribbean's post-emancipation peasantry lived.[1] Archer-Straw curated the work using "thematic integration" rather than island by island geographical presentation since, she points out, the territories are unevenly represented in the originals, and this thematic focus is where some of the contradiction lies.

One of the main intentions of the British Council in mounting this exhibition for travel within the Caribbean, according to the Council's Deputy Director of Visual Arts, was "to generate debate about the nature of Johnston's imagery and allow local audiences to assess for themselves the contribution, value and legacy of Johnston's formidable output."[2] The Royal Geographical Society saw this exhibition as a way of sharing previously unseen work with the public and of enabling viewers to "develop some new understandings of the thoughts and feelings that both shape our past and present, and through this, to find opportunities of working together for the future of ourselves and our environment."[3] The Society also raised the question of what might be termed the geographic eye: "once the camera became more-or-less portable in the 1860s, it was rapidly adopted as a significant method of recording geography in the field alongside the diary and survey observations."[4] The Society's comments point to the ideas and social trends that shape the use of technology in the recording of people, places and events.

While some form of categorizing or organizing of the work is to be expected, the exhibition is accompanied by an educational kit aimed at teaching Caribbean history in Caribbean schools. This package includes hand-outs on architecture, genre scenes, religion, flora and fauna, Afro-Caribbeans and arts and culture. The hand-outs also utilize excerpts from Archer-Straw's captions. Beyond the recovery of heritage, the presentation of "hard evidence" and the reflections on colonial discourse there is the construction of a Caribbean identity that is reclamatory, and that can be packaged and inserted into the educational machinery.

THE RECOVERY OF CULTURAL AND RACIAL HERITAGE

In her catalogue essay, Archer-Straw seems to be guarding against arguments of absence and colonially structured visions. She exposes biases in ethnographic and documentary photography in general, and in Johnston's work in particular. Through her essay and the captions of the photographs she attempts to fill in the gaps that might show how the photographs were used to illustrate Johnston's theories of race and colonialism. As curator, she suggests that disowning the photographs because of the

A Market Place. Port au Prince, Haiti., Sir Harry Johnston, 1908–09. Photo courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

context in which they were produced detracts from an appreciation of their value.

The opening paragraph of the introduction sets the tone for the creation of the Caribbean as a unified postcolonial entity. The author's Caribbean includes Haiti and Cuba, of which there are many photographs on display and whose history is shared with, but at many points vastly divergent from, that of the anglophone Caribbean. The forced confluence points to an artificial sewing together, that in itself is not unacceptable, but that requires some examination of what it means to bring together divergent elements under the rubric of "the Caribbean." Some discussion of how this notion of unity works would have been extremely useful. While the author makes an attempt in an endnote to point out the problems of revisionism entrenched in so many of our nationalist rebuildings, she leaves the essential premises uninterrogated in the body of the essay. Given the linguistic, racial, cultural and socio-economic histories of Barbados, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad, how is one to make sense of a pan-Caribbean identity? And how does one raise these questions in light of the familiarity and similarities that one might encounter?

In its attempt to excavate what the words might have meant at the turn of the century, the project essentially creates an idea of Blackness and Caribbeanness in the late twentieth century. The exhibition employs an organizing framework that says "this is what it is" and not "this is what the Caribbean used to be, in some way." There is an assumption that the discovery of our "real" history will automatically lead to a revelation of who we are in the present. The project maintains a linear approach to the development of culture and identity that ends its questioning with the unearthing of the cultural artifact and posits the "we" and "our" as pre-determined. Archer-Straw suggests that the photographs raise questions about the ways in which whites and Blacks "negotiated each other's identities" during the

period (p. 10) and goes on to discuss "creolised history," accommodation and the interrelatedness of ideas. Yet there is no critical discussion of the ways in which Blacks negotiate and determine their own identities.

In discussing potential reactions to the photographs in the exhibition, the curator asserts that "not everyone will view these images comfortably" (p. 9) and that this discomfort arises out of a fundamental anxiety over colonialism and Blackness. Archer-Straw asserts that the viewer is presented with a Caribbean that is "predominantly Black." She does not suggest that it is precisely because Johnston's mission was to seek out and document the "ways of black folks" that we see these particular images. Nor does she account for the fact that while there are images of Indians, Amerindians, Chinese, Europeans and racial "hybrids" of the Caribbean among the 394 photographs and illustrations in *"The Negro in the New World,"* only Black images are presented in the exhibition. Instead, Archer-Straw contends that the photographs in the exhibition "defy post-independence political ideas that present the region as polyglot, multi-cultural and hybrid." (p. 9) While it is true that myths of race and culture abound in nation-building, defiance of ideas of hybridity and denial does not seem well-founded. Strangely, such defiance contradicts the British Council hand-out, entitled "Afro-Caribbeans," which asserts that "most Caribbeans of African descent have some Asian, Middle Eastern or European heritage." And for whom might these predominantly Black images produce a feeling of discomfort? Archer-Straw lives in Jamaica and London and seems to have positioned herself within the text as a Black Caribbean woman, yet there is no indication of what the photographs meant for her.

Archer-Straw asserts that the viewer is presented with a Caribbean that is "predominantly Black." She does not suggest that it is precisely because Johnston's mission was to seek out and document the "ways of the black folks" that we see these particular images.

Archer-Straw's argument relies on the assumption that the majority of the Caribbean's population might racially be described as Black and that these Black Caribbean people are in denial of their African past. She seems to regard the presentation of the photographs as a revolutionary act that challenges those who would call themselves "coloured" as opposed to "Black." She assumes that the absence of imagery of the Black Caribbean facilitated the development of self-hate among Black people in the region, though she does not point to the origins of this assumption. It seems, then, that one of the curator's objectives in putting together the exhibition in this manner might be the forced confrontation of African Caribbean people with their Blackness—with the visual evidence of themselves. This does not take into account the thousands of Black people in the region who have identified themselves as Black or African for quite some time, and it leaves hanging the question of ownership and spectatorship among the Indo-Caribbean and "other" populations. There is a tacit assumption that the "true" Caribbean, as revealed by the evidence of Johnston's photographs, is African in origin. Who then belongs to the Caribbean? If the photographs provide evidence of a definitive Caribbean visual text, who is created as the other?

Race is particularly interesting in these photographs because of the questions it raises about the present as well as the past. Though the images seem to have inspired reclamatory feelings for the curator, they drew me in as a viewer coming to terms with what I thought I knew of the Caribbean. In *Unripe Coconuts*, I found myself confronting ambiguity. I recognized that, growing up in post-independence Port of Spain, my understanding of "coconut vendor" was male and Indian. Is this man's racial identity truly indeterminable or is it simply clouded by my experience? If not, how does the photograph come to insert itself into a narrative of Blacks in the Caribbean? Is this man Indian, is he African, is he both, is he other? And how easily he fits into a narrative of "post-emancipation settlement." What is there of clothing or gesture or location that would indicate his racial identity to the viewer? Johnston's caption is "A Negro Coconut-Seller in Trinidad"—could he have been mistaken? Was an African coconut vendor an anomaly—was that the reason for his description?

Though photographs of this nature are not many in the exhibition, some discussion of their implications would have helped to move the text away from a contemplation of visual evidence toward an exploration of identity. How is this photograph viewed in a Jamaican context? By Indo-Caribbean men and women? It will not say the same thing to all people. Had the curator noticed what I had about this photograph? Had it challenged her notions of Caribbean identity at all? In *A Cuban Negro* she points out quite clearly the inadequate research on Johnston's part, noting that the Black labourer in Cuba dressed "after the fashion of Spanish peasants" is probably Jamaican or Haitian, based on migrant labour patterns of the time. Yet Archer-Straw suggests that the "purer African features" of the Jamaicans and Haitians "suggest little, if any, Spanish blood." It is not clear from Johnston's captions that he associates "the fashion of Spanish peasants" with indications of racial heritage and Archer-Straw's allusion is therefore puzzling.

Self-consciousness is curiously absent in Archer-Straw's formulations. She highlights *A Haitian Market* as a

Unripe Coconuts. Trinidad., Sir Harry Johnston, 1908–09. Photo courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

Haitian Soldiers., Sir Harry Johnston, 1908–09. Photo courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

chief example of the intrusion of the colonial gaze, of the voyeur and of the public spectacle that photography must have been at the beginning of the century. In this photograph, Johnston (or perhaps his assistant Arthur Greaves) and tripod are in the picture in shadow. So too are bystanders. This is apparently the only photograph in which the spectre of the photographer inserts itself into the image. The text from Archer-Straw accompanying this photograph indicates that the photographer here becomes participant and that "photography did not yet acknowledge the subjective eye in a period where it was used for ethnography, and where it was valued for its 'objectivity.'" The curator's eye is not acknowledged. Her perspective intrudes strangely, for example, in the Haitian *Peasant Women*, where she begins the caption with "A scene dominated by women, indicating their importance as informal traders in the network of markets established during and after slavery." This is typical of Archer-Straw's at-times sweeping generalizations, which may have some basis in historical fact but for which there is no visual evidence. The curator's emphasis on legacies provides an uneasy fit between the work and its interpretation.

LEGACIES

The returning cultural artifact is seen to fill in the gaps in the development and institutionalization of a legacy. The artifact becomes the missing link. The evaluation and assessment of that link may determine, in some measure, the position of the legacy. It is difficult to say how many Caribbean people actually saw and discussed this exhibition, although its location within traditional art and high culture spaces would have precluded access for many. The opening of the exhibition at Queen's Park Gallery in Barbados was accompanied by a public lecture by Archer-Straw, followed by a lecture in the next week by historian Trevor Marshall.

Marshall's argument followed the discourse of legacy and heritage quite closely. He presented a portrait of life in the Caribbean at the turn of the century as a way of contextualizing Johnston's images and pointing to the gaping lacunae in his oeuvre. The emphasis here was on the aspects of Black life in the Caribbean that Johnston missed or ignored at the level of community interaction, employment, productivity and art, and personal or intimate spaces.

In the debate on visual evidence and validation so ably set up by the organizers of the exhibition this argument fits neatly, but the discussion fails to move beyond questions of accuracy, authenticity and representation. In the search for meaning that will resonate with the *present* of "black folks," and point the way towards a true reclamation and evaluation of the *past*, we miss the opportunity to actually interrogate the imagery, to ask questions of the photographer, of the subjects and of ourselves. Given Marshall's focus on the photograph as a historical document to be challenged and contested, some attention to the viewer as challenger and to the construction and origin of the challenge would have been useful. The work is always/already here. Its inheritors—for this is what the organizers would have Caribbean people believe that we are—must now own it, disrupt it, co-opt it and manoeuvre it to suit new historical means and ends. The work must, at some point, be taken on its own terms and these will exist in tandem with the viewer's.

There was in my experience of these images a search for the familiar. "Who are these men? These Haitian men? These *Haitian Soldiers*? These ancestors? These familiars? How many of my ancestors had gone to war? And if I did not know of any did it diminish my kinship with these men?" And we know at once that there is something different about the location and history of Blackness because we know that Black men of Toronto and Calgary and Halifax and Vancouver, if they are not our ancestors, are not of us. We embrace them as our own but they are not "our Haitian men" with all of the contradictions that that proprietary term implies. That kinship can be so easily imagined is remarkable. That tears can so easily be shed. That I can speak so easily of "we." And "we" know at once that there is something about the location and history of all of our identities that provides access to some experiences and denies access to others. That this is as true of Blackness as it is of Caribbeanness.

Memory and desire are as much a part of legacy as the cultural artifacts themselves. The women in *Haitian Women*, arms akimbo, holding forth, discussing, doing, living on in death, produced a peculiar kind of nostalgia. This was a nostalgia for times gone but not directly experienced, for visual records that were accessible only retroactively. In an era of ubiquitous visual culture, memories are shared via visual documents. The stories of grandparents and relatives were not available for sharing at the time of telling in ways that are familiar to my contemporaries. Those days are present but lost. What one has gained is a richness in visual text, and some glimpse into "the way it used to be." But that glimpse is only partial and the way only fragmentary and subjective. This can only ever be one of the many ways "we" used to be. The object now at hand is at the same time lost—recaptured, regained and, inevitably, returned to memory.

CONCLUSIONS

"Photos and Phantasms" offered an opportunity for serious consideration of the relationship between the self and access to knowledge about that self. It presented the visual traces of peoples and populated spaces that force a critical and sentimental re-evaluation of history. The visual record exists as testimony to an era but its referent remains ethereal. The idea of Caribbeanness and of self is what is at stake in the presentation of these photographs. It highlights our own alienation and our inevitable second-handedness when it comes to Caribbean culture.

Haitian Woman and Children summed up, for me, much of what this exhibition was about. The woman responds directly to the photographer and, by extension, to the viewer, without even the courtesy of allowing the photographer to imagine that he might be intruding. The posture is smooth and self-assured. While Archer-Straw finds the woman to be "defiantly" breaking Western taboos about female smoking, I see a woman completely indifferent, perhaps with a set of cultural values that do not include an active eschewal of Western notions of femininity. I see a woman presenting one of the many signs of what it might have meant to be Caribbean at the beginning of the century. I see a woman who does not represent an age or an era or a region or a mode of being. I see a woman in the process of making her text and daring me to construct my own.

Notes

1. Petrine Archer-Straw, "Photos and Phantasms: Harry Johnston's Photographs of the Caribbean," *Photos and Phantasms: Harry Johnston's Photographs of the Caribbean* [exhibition catalogue], (London: The British Council & The Royal Geographical Society, with the Institute of British Geographers, 1998) p. 9.
2. Brett Rogers, "Preface," *Photos and Phantasms: Harry Johnston's Photographs of the Caribbean*, (London: The British Council & The Royal Geographical Society, with the Institute of British Geographers,1998) p. 5.
3. Joanna Scadden and Andrew Tatham, "Foreword," *Photos and Phantasms: Harry Johnston's Photographs of the Caribbean*, (London: The British Council & The Royal Geographical Society, with the Institute of British Geographers, 1998) p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*

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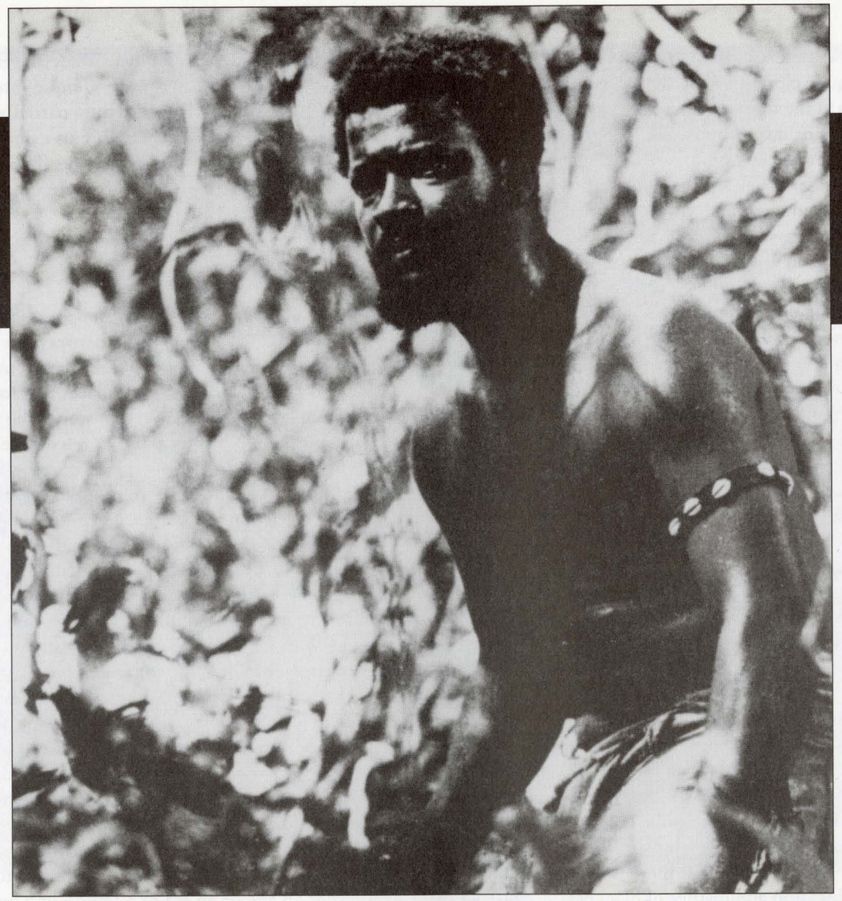
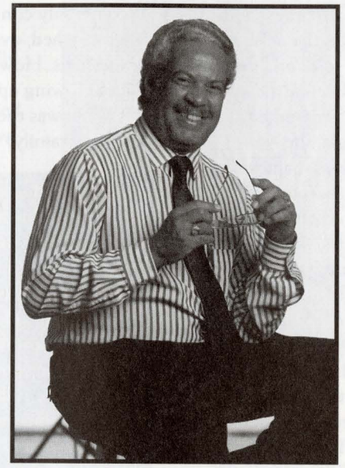


Samuel Claxton in *Rancheador*, dir. Sergio Giral, 1976.

In the last few years, Cuba has become a "hot" property. Hundreds of thousands of Canadian and European tourists visit each year for some fun in the sun and a feeling of engaging an "authentic" culture, as manufactured as that authenticity may now be. Through films like *I Am Cuba*, through the high-toned culture of cigars, through a renewal of sex tourism and through the cartoonish hawkishness of the Helms-Burton axis, Cuba seems to have re-entered popular consciousness as a nostalgia effect, as some sort of throwback pre-revolutionary playground. There is a sense that Cuba is a corpse being picked over by economic and cultural nostalgia vultures, and that countries like Canada, Italy and Spain are engaging in a new form of "social democratic imperialism," hoping to beat Miami to the punch for access to post-Fidel Cuba. One person who is in a position to help illuminate Cuba's complex history and present is Sergio Giral, acclaimed Cuban

Sergio Giral

Filmmaking Within & Beyond Fidel's Cuba



Interview with David McIntosh

filmmaker whose award-winning films *El Otro Francisco*, *Maluala* and *María Antonia* have recreated and reinterpreted Cuba from a committed artistic perspective. I first met Sergio in 1986 during the Toronto International Film Festival's "Winds of Change" series, a ninety-film retrospective of New Latin American Cinema programmed by Helga Stephenson and Piers Handling, which I managed the production of. Sergio and I were the only two men dancing alone at a party celebrating this series and soon we were dancing together. We've been friends ever since, spending time together when we could in either Toronto or Havana. Recently, I realized that there were many aspects of Sergio's very full and sometimes paradoxical personal and creative life that I wanted to know more about and I was also looking to him for some sort of orientation to recent events in Cuba. This interview, conducted by e-mail, by phone and in person, is the result.

DAVID MCINTOSH: You've spent a great deal of your life crossing borders and boundaries—personal, artistic and national. But perhaps one of the most dramatic transitions you experienced was the change from Batista's Cuba to revolutionary Cuba in the 1950s. What memories do you have of your life in pre-revolutionary Havana? How did your experiences growing up shape your later thematic concerns in your films? For example, how did you experience racism?

SERGIO GIRAL: I was born in Havana, an only child, and I lived there until I was ten. My father and his family were middle-class whites and I was raised in that environment and those traditions. Other than me, my mother was the only Black member of the family. She was born in New York, one of three daughters of a Hispanic American father and a Black Cuban mother. When she was young, my mother worked as a "prêt-à-porter" couturier, in Cuba and New York. She is an intelligent, practical woman and she now lives in Miami with me. My father was an artist, who worked as an accountant, but he really loved to paint, sculpt, and he loved politics and movies. I attended a Catholic elementary school, named LaSalle, run by a French order of Brothers. During my childhood I wasn't very aware of racial differences and their impact on society. I never felt any sort of direct discrimination, until I began to look at girls. Then, things changed. I couldn't aspire to those white girls that grew up next to me and were becoming my best friends, girlfriends. Also the private social clubs reserved for my social and economic class were also closed to my membership, even though my father and his family belonged. My religious education had told me that all men were equal in front of God, but never told me it didn't apply when it came to love and marriage. Both my parents took great pains to give me the best education and assure a good future for me. It is also important to know that Cuban racial culture, for lack of a better term, has three main categories—white, Black and mulatto. The mulatto category is a historical product of sexual relations between white masters and Black female slaves, starting over 300 years ago. People in this racial category achieved a better social and economic position starting in the colonial period and on through the Republican period, from 1920 to 1958. And having a white father as the head of the family meant even more. Mulatto was a privileged racial status in a racially prejudiced society. Yet, we have to understand that Cuban racism is mild compared to traditional U.S. racism. There were social and economic differences in Cuba, but never hate or scorn.

MCINTOSH: What role did santeria and Yoruba religion play in your life as a child?

GIRAL: I never had contact with any religion but Catholicism as a child. The Yoruba religion, or santeria, was considered back then as a low-class and profane cult. This religion brought by Black slaves to Cuba mixed with the Catholic religion, becoming the most popular belief system among Blacks and the poor, although many whites who belonged to higher classes were firm believers in this cult as the solution to their earthly adversities. When I returned to Cuba in 1959, my urge to learn and experience everything about Cuban culture lead me to investigate santeria, and I discovered it was one of the highest cultural and spiritual expressions of the Cuban people. Yet I don't practise any religion. I'm an agnostic.

MCINTOSH: Despite its heritage as the primary intellectual and economic centre of the Caribbean, Batista's Havana is commonly considered to have been highly decadent and impoverished, overrun by U.S. Mafia and the '50s version of sex tourists. How does this image relate to your own experiences growing up then?

What was the actual effect of the Batista regime on you and your family?

GIRAL: As I said, my father was an artist and a politician. He belonged to the Cuban Democratic Party that was overthrown by Batista's coup d'état. My father's best friend was a Congressman who had to flee to the U.S., as did the rest of his friends in the Party. He felt alone and frustrated and decided to leave Cuba too. That was my first exile. By then Havana was a very fast city, enjoying all the privileges of being the U.S.'s back yard. The latest cars and fashion were rolling around the city streets. Nightlife was something incomparable to any other at that moment, gambling everywhere from the luxurious hotel casinos to the dark streets of Chinatown, live entertainment everywhere from exclusive cabaret's to popular neighbourhood joints. Havana never slept, much as New York doesn't now. You could find in Havana whatever was prohibited in New York. Yes, there was prostitution and poverty, like in any other Latin American or underdeveloped Third World country, but there was light, music, dancing, hope.

MCINTOSH: Did you see a lot of movies then?

GIRAL: Because my father was a movie fan, I started going to movies with him when I was a baby. I've seen every picture shown in Havana during the '40s and '50s. Later in my life, when I've gone to an art cinema or a cinematheque to see what is considered an old classic film, I've discovered images that bring back visual memories from my childhood. Hollywood gave me a basic education and Europe, especially the Italian neorealists and the French realists, became my inspiration to become a filmmaker.

MCINTOSH: What was it like moving from Havana to New York? Was it a shock? How did you adapt?

GIRAL: Moving to New York was a wonderful experience. My parents began to work immediately and I had to learn English with a private teacher so I could go to school. We lived in the Bronx in the beginning and then moved to Manhattan. As a teenager I felt very comfortable in New York. I dropped out of high school to take painting classes at the Art Student League. Going to movies on Times Square was my favourite thing to do, until I met another young guy who invited me to Greenwich Village. I was seventeen then. Every dream and fantasy I had nursed in my mind became possible and real in that small town.

MCINTOSH: Who did you hang out with? Who were your friends?

GIRAL: Although I was still straight, I really enjoyed the gay scene. Many of my friends turned out to be homosexuals and I immersed myself in their world until it became my own private Village. I had a couple of girlfriends. Rachel was a Jewish girl from a wealthy family who used to hang around the Village and was fascinated with my paintings. We were lovers and used to hang out in bohemian jazz joints. Then came Corine, a Black American girl who was a model, and then Jerry, my first male lover and intellectual guru. I am writing a novel about my days in the Village, all the constant emotion and discovery. My real friends were bohemians, masters of illusion, alcoholics, nymphomaniacs, poets and dreamers. All crazy. I used to wait tables in the Playhouse Café and in an Italian café named Toni, just across from the San Remo Café. We used to meet every night and talk and drink till dawn. I remember the day Allen Ginsberg read his poems at the San Remo and he really enjoyed my paintings that were being shown there. We became friends and he got to know about Cuba through me. Years later he visited Cuba and was thrown out of the island by Castro's police. At some point I met Bob, who was my second male lover. Bob was my age, eighteen, an Irish American kid who was living in a rehabilitation house for dysfunctional youth, but he only lived there because it was free and secure. We moved in together and that was my first time living a completely gay life. After two years, the love affair ended and I made a U-turn. Nicole, a French model, used to visit the Playhouse Café. I met her there, we fell in love and married. We went to Cuba, but she didn't like it and returned to New York. We had a son, Michel, who I finally met twenty years later during the New York Film Festival. Michel died three years ago, and I still love him with all my heart.

MCINTOSH: What made you decide to stay in Cuba and work with the revolution in 1959 when Fidel toppled Batista. What were your hopes or expectations of the revolution?

GIRAL: As I mentioned, my wife Nicole had a bad experience in Havana because Cubans were not used to seeing a blonde, blue-eyed woman walking around with a "coloured" guy. She didn't like that and went home. Then the Revolution happened. My father was expecting, like the rest of the Cuban people, a change in the country's fate. The revolution seemed to be offering salvation and he decided to stay. I went back to New York looking for Nicole but I couldn't find her, and I returned to Cuba in 1959. My son Michel was born that year. To talk about the revolutionary experience is very contradictory. In the beginning, there was a lot of hope, founded on new laws and a new order. A revolution, French, Russian or Cuban, is a historical accident that in the beginning affects minorities and suits the majority, and turns around to be the opposite in the end. It is a paradoxical matter of convenience and dreams. In my case the revolution meant a change of life, a fascinating adventure. Like everyone else, I fell in love with the revolution. People in Havana, "The Last Flesh Spot in the Western World" as Post Magazine called it in the '50s, were immersed in joy and fiestas, unaware of what was about to unfold.

Miguel Benavides in *El Otro Francisco*, dir. Sergio Giral, 1974.

MCINTOSH: One of the first acts of the new Castro government was to create ICAIC, the Cuban Film Institute, and a film industry where previously there had been virtually no production. You began working there in 1961. How exactly did you start working at ICAIC and what was the mood there in those early days?

GIRAL: When I was waiting tables at the Playhouse Café in New York, I'd met a young Spanish Cuban man waiting on tables like me, who loved films as much as I did. His name was Nestor Almendros and he was as gay as me. Back in Havana I ran into him. Nestor was a director of photography

and a film director at the newborn ICAIC and he invited me to work with him there. Although I considered myself a painter I was tempted by the offer and followed him. What started as a love infatuation became a great friendship until he decided to leave Cuba and go into exile. I had to make new friends and companions at ICAIC.

MCINTOSH: What kind of training did you undergo? Who did you work with?

GIRAL: Sara Gómez, Nicolás Guillén and I were the only Blacks working there. I was basically self-taught. We had a few advisors like Chris Marker, Theodore Christensen and Joris Ivens, and the possibility to meet and interact with international filmmakers from the so-called "Western world." We were full of dreams and trying to make the most personal films. The creative atmosphere was positive. Everything seemed to be OK until there was a shift in the policies of the USSR toward its allies. Day by day freedom of expression was more and more limited by strange new government ordinances.

MCINTOSH: You experimented with a range of film forms in your early short films, from Godardian drama told from multiple viewpoints in *La Jaula* ('64) and constructivist anti-Vietnam War agitprop montage in *La muerte de J.J. Jones* ('66) to popular documentary in your homage to the great Cuban singer Benny Moré, *Que buena canta Vd* ('73). What kinds of institutional or intellectual processes did you go through in making these films?

GIRAL: Despite new government restrictions, at ICAIC we were still in contact with the best work coming from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, as well as the directors. I found in their films a free space to move inside the narrow limits of expression in a totalitarian regime. That didn't last for too long. In 1968 the Soviet tanks entered Prague and killed the illusion. I, like the others, had to learn how to move in quicksand. Because I cared a lot about African heritage in Cuban culture and society, I took that road that led me to most of my films' themes. Yet, I would have liked to venture into more universal subjects, as I did with my first fiction film, *La Jaula*, which was never released. I had to re-invent my passion for filmmaking, and so I made *The Death of J.J. Jones* and dedicated it to my son Michel, fearing that someday, as a young American boy, he would face the same soldier's fate. I always focused on emotional subjects where the individual took the main role, not society, as the rules then demanded. I managed to select themes that gave me the opportunity to depict human dramas in the most universal form I could imagine, successfully or not. My encounter with "History" was born out of personal need, and a professional one in order to survive as an artist. But the unexplored, dark side of human beings is the one that seduced me the most, and the one I always have wanted to reflect in my films. In Cuba, that was impossible. I had great ambitions of directing feature films but didn't get the chance until 1974, when Titón (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea) proposed that I write and direct the film that came to be *The Other Francisco*. Why it took me so long to arrive at my final goal, I don't know. Ask the wind.

MCINTOSH: Another aspect of life in Cuba in the 1960s was documented by Nestor Almendros in his film *Improper Conduct*. Considered dissidents, many gays were arrested and placed in work camps, or umaps. What impact did this state repression have on your life? How were you treated as a gay man?

GIRAL: *Improper Conduct* was and is a film banned in Cuba. When I saw it I was shocked, because I wasn't prepared to face the truth the way Nestor had. In Castro's system you develop a form of self-censorship that is also a form of self-protection. The film is striking and truthful. Since the late '60s the Castro government systematically persecuted homosexuals, creating an entire system of detention and incarceration, the UMAPs. In my story *Los hijos de Lot*, I describe the methods and consequences of the UMAPs, the humiliating destruction of human beings for their sexual orientation. I felt betrayed, scorned and defrauded. I thought of leaving the country, but I had married again in 1962, this time to a Cuban American government translator. We had a child, Sergio Jr., but our marriage was tormented. Finally she left, leaving me with the child, sort of like *Kramer vs. Kramer*. My parents and I took good care of him and Sergio grew up as a happy and well-loved boy. He's an artist now. When the UMAPs were established my son was three years old. I couldn't leave him behind and I couldn't take him with me. So I decided to live out my fate. Alfredo Guevara was director of ICAIC and despite his narrow personal links with the Castro brothers, he knew how to protect his institution from the gay pogrom. Because I was working at ICAIC and I wasn't "overtly" homosexual I didn't suffer persecution, but I had to watch valued friends and artistic personalities go to forced labour camps and stay there for years, until international public opinion pushed Castro to try to cover his mistake. *Improper Conduct* was an invaluable factor in destroying the UMAPs. Such a sad and almost unbelievable story.

Above: Still from *María Antonia*, 1990, 111 min.

MCINTOSH: The 1960s saw a virtual explosion in formally innovative and politically committed cinema throughout Latin America—directors like Glauber Rocha, Ruy Guerra and Carlos Diegues in Brazil, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in Argentina, Jorge Sanjinés in Bolivia, Miguel Littín in Chile. In Cuba, Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarollo* ('68) and Humberto Solas' *Lucia* ('68) established ICAIC as a major force in new Latin American cinema. It seems as though Che's vision of a continental revolution was becoming a reality at least in cinematic terms. What impact did this explosion have on you?

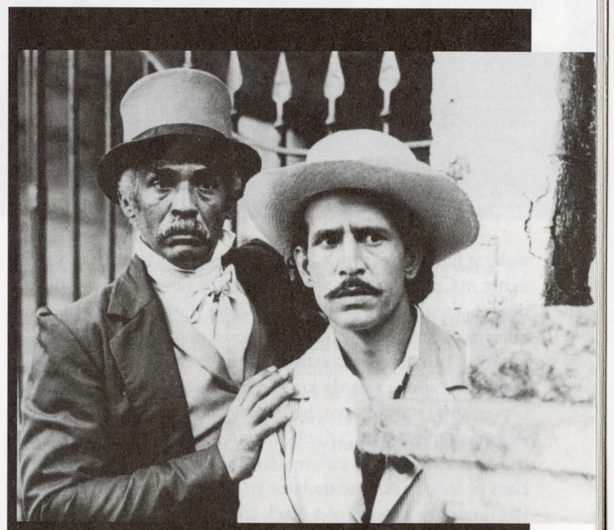
GIRAL: This explosion of Latin American films and filmmakers was basically inspired by the Cuban revolution and was politically supported by Castro's regime. ICAIC offered the infrastructure and facilities of a professional film industry to poor and anonymous filmmakers. Many directors finished their work at ICAIC or started new projects and achieved international recognition thanks to this political link. Of course, this has nothing to do with the Brazilian *Cinema Nuovo*. That current was authentically nationalist and existed outside of the Brazilian Military Junta and the Cuban Revolution. *Cinema Nuovo do Brazil* is one of the most important and seductive Latin American film currents. Argentina and Peru also brought their work and artists to Cuba, and after the Chilean coup d'état, many Chilean filmmakers came to Cuba as political refugees and finished or began projects. I've seen all those films. The best and the worst of them. And I've met all the directors. Some of them are my personal friends, others I haven't heard from since I came back to the States. Some don't care about me anymore because I've chosen to live under the Imperialist Eagle's wing.

MCINTOSH: After the initial burst of successful films in Cuba in 1968, it seems another wave occurred in the early 1970s, which you played a critical role in creating. In 1974 you directed *El Otro Francisco*, your first feature film and the first film in a trilogy of historical reconsiderations of slavery in Cuba in the 1800s. This trilogy, which includes *Rancheador* ('76) and *Maluala* ('79), was a massive undertaking that goes far beyond historical recreation. The films are innovative structurally and conceptually, they deconstruct global economic processes in complex but clear ways. They are such a welcome tonic to the cloying melodrama of American period films like *Gone with the Wind*. What were your objectives in delving into the historical conditions of slavery and presenting a critical view of this history to a contemporary Cuban public?

GIRAL: Race relations and Black Cuban culture were not only my themes, but life experiences. The Cuban government proclaimed equality of rights among races in 1959, and in practice it seemed to happen. Black Cubans were free to enter any place deemed "private" before the revolution, and there was no discrimination in housing or the workplace. But Black Cubans were not as well prepared as whites to claim a place in the new system of opportunism. Blacks stayed back, kept a well understood position of reserve. History had taught them to be suspicious and distrustful. As slaves, Blacks were an essential, determining factor in the accumulation of wealth in the nineteenth century, under the most degrading conditions for human beings. Masters freed their slaves and turned them into soldiers, and without these Black soldiers there would have been no independence from Spain. All of that was systematically forgotten and erased from collective memory. My trilogy vindicates that part of Black Cuban history that was marginalized for so long.

MCINTOSH: Another key filmmaker of this second wave of Cuban films in the mid-1970s was Sara Gómez, another Black director, whose only feature *One Way or Another* ('74) deals with many of the themes you have addressed, but in very different terms. What kind of relationship did you have with her?

GIRAL: Sara Gómez was a good friend of mine. She was anxious to interpret the role of Blacks in Cuban society. Because she was a woman and coming from a working middle-class family, her points of view were different than mine. I cared about the essence, she cared about the facts. In *One Way or Another*, Sara was the first to place contemporary



Still from *Plácido*.

Black characters in Cuban films and to focus on their social and cultural traditions, such as santeria, machismo and social exclusion. She was sensitive and extraordinarily intelligent, a loving mother of three children, but she was a chronic asthmatic and died of a respiratory arrest. I think she couldn't take it anymore and the suffocation of the regime killed her.

MCINTOSH: In the 1980s you made films that were never released, like *Techo de Vidrio*. What happened to it? Was it suppressed?

GIRAL: In 1981 I felt the need to leave history and deal with the present, so I made *Techo de Vidrio* (Glass Roof), which dealt with bureaucracy and corruption. The film was made under police surveillance and finally banned by Fidel Castro himself. That was a real blow below the belt. It took me a long time to recover, and only five years later did they allow me to continue my film career. I had to go back into history in order to protect my personal security and keep on making films. That's how I came to make *Plácido*. A tragic figure in Cuban history, Plácido was the nineteenth-century poet, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés. Born of an illicit affair between a Spanish woman and a mulatto man, he was left in an orphanage at birth and registered racially as "looks white." He didn't exactly know which world he belonged to. Out of this contradiction he became a member of the Reformist movement, which wanted Cuba to move beyond its status as a Spanish colony. To undermine the growing class of free Blacks and mulatto artisans, the colonial authorities raised the spectre of a Black conspiracy against whites, the spectre of the Haitian revolution. This apocryphal conspiracy of Blacks against whites was known as *La Escalera* (The Staircase) because the Blacks suspected of being involved were tied to a staircase and whipped to death. Because Plácido was a poet and part of a political current, he was scapegoated and accused of leading the conspiracy. He was tried, tortured, condemned to death and executed by firing squad. During his torture, the colonial authorities tried to get him to denounce those involved in the conspiracy, mostly the white aristocrats who were betraying Spain and the free mulattos who were creating a new economic class. As far as history tells this story, Plácido denounced others to escape death and then later retracted his statements. I empathized with his psychology and his fate. In my research I realized that Plácido was consigned to being an obscure historical figure because he was very contradictory. Some consider him a traitor and others a martyr. I decided to give my own artistic view of Plácido, and again the film wasn't well received by Cuban officials. One more contradiction to fill my bucket. Out of boredom and despair I decided to face consequences and I proposed the film *María Antonia*, an obscure and damned story about love, betrayal and death.

Homophobia = Dictatorship, community-based project, 1997.
Billboard in Miami to promote "Equal Rights 'Ordinance.'"

MCINTOSH: *María Antonia* was made in the economically restricted context of the "Special Period" that Fidel declared after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of Russian support and imports to Cuba. This is your most conventionally narrative work, a very sensual story set in pre-revolutionary working-class Havana. One of the unusual aspects of this film is that while it is obviously set in the 1950s, it captures the tone and ambience of life in contemporary Cuba, as if the two periods separated by almost forty years slide back and forth between each other. Can you explain this phenomenon?

GIRAL: *María Antonia* is based on a stage play, written by Eugenio Hernandez Espinosa. The play premiered in 1965, and it was a popular hit, attracting a wide general audience. Those were years of dogmatism and intolerance in Cuba though. The most outstanding artists and writers suffered persecution and ostracism, and because the play portrayed the marginal sector, dealt with santeria, and the characters were Blacks and mulattos, state censors shelved it for years. Year after year I proposed this project and was always turned down. When the worst of the "dogmatic" era had passed the play was released again, and I moved forward with the film. But so many things had happened since the play premiered, that the story seemed to be set at the wrong moment. Armando Dorrego wrote the script. He belongs to the post-revolutionary generation and he's less compromised with the past. He updated the story and situations to the present, but to avoid censorship I placed it in a period context, the '50s. The result is ambiguous, because the present and the past are mixed, much like in Cuba today. The characters' passions and despairs are very similar to those trapped in actual Cuban circumstances.

MCINTOSH: You and your partner Armando Dorrego decided to emigrate from Cuba to Miami in 1992, where you've lived since. How did you decide to move back to the U.S., almost forty years after first having left?

GIRAL: My son Sergio had married a French filmmaker and moved to Paris. During a trip to attend a film festival there I decided to apply for my American passport and it was granted. I was free at last and I came back to the USA. Since then I've been living in Miami, sharing an apartment with Armando, my best companion, and I've learned how to live in the Cuban exile community. I worked as an art and film critic for five years in a weekly local magazine, and I've started my own film and video company, producing my own shorts and documentaries, like *The Broken Image*, which deals with Cuban filmmakers in exile, and *Hope & Pride*, which documents the Miami gay community's struggle to achieve a human rights ordinance against discrimination in housing and the workplace. As you can see, I keep on being involved with minority struggles.

MCINTOSH: One of the few Cuban films to achieve wide international success in the last few years was Gutiérrez Alea's *Strawberry and Chocolate*, the story of the relationship between a homosexual and a Communist party militant, set in the 1970s. After you and other gay directors in ICAIC had presented film projects over the years with homosexual themes, only to be rejected, what impact did the making of this film have on your sense of a place in ICAIC? How do you see that film?

GIRAL: *Strawberry and Chocolate* is the story of an emotional and intellectual but not a physical relationship between a homosexual and a Communist party militant, and this is exactly what I resent about the film. The homosexual character is shown as an "effeminate" gay, in the most conservative homophobic sense. As opposed to the Communist boy, this character is refined, cultured and prejudiced. He can't stand the Cuban hot season and the streets full of Blacks. He's a perfect role model for how Castro's regime pictures "gusanos." As a human being he is effective enough to gain the confidence of a young Communist party militant, but not seductive enough to drag him into bed. Homosexual sex is condemned once again. I don't think that Gutiérrez Alea necessarily wanted to convey this message, but maybe he had to sweeten the plot in order to pass censorship. There was a need to rehabilitate the national image of the treatment of homosexuals and *Strawberry and Chocolate* offered the perfect opportunity. The young Communist remains immaculate and untouched, the gay man leaves the island. The film is well acted and stylish, as it should be coming from Titón, the most outstanding Cuban film director, but its effectiveness is just a mirage in the middle of the desert.

MCINTOSH: You are currently working as the director of Miami's Festival of the Americas, so you see a lot of work in the course of your programming. The movement that captured the world's attention in the 1960s and '70s has come and gone, has effectively become a part of film history, and new themes and approaches have emerged. What directions do you see work by young film and video artists taking?

GIRAL: I started the *Festival de las Americas, Cine Independiente de Latino America y el Caribe* (Festival of the Americas, Independent Film of Latin America and the Caribbean) in 1997 with "Made in USA," a festival of films and videos made by Cubans in exile. The second edition had a Pan American program and some work from the USA. It is sponsored by Alliance for Media Arts, the only non-profit film and video society in Florida. I show all sorts of work in any language, as long as they are independent and have something to do with Latin America or the Caribbean, yet local independent filmmakers are welcome too. It is a free space where filmmakers from all over the Americas can show their films, no matter the format or length. Most of the films we show are not mainstream, and don't necessarily respond to market demands. Most are based on personal points of view about life and human behaviour, and the social and political situation in their region. Last year I had a special Puerto Rican program and I also showed Ela Troyano's films for the first time in Miami. We also had films from Argentina, Martinique, Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Curacao, Mexico, and the premiere of three documentaries about Cuba including *La Patria es de Todos*, a deeply moving documentary shot in Cuba about the most significant voices of the dissident movement.

MCINTOSH: Is life good for you now?

GIRAL: I am happy enough to call myself a happy man. I don't do everything I want to, neither does anybody else. I would like to make another film, and I am writing a script now. For an artist to create, there is a unique sense of life required, yet most of my fellow Cuban directors remain on the island and sacrifice the best part of their life in hopes of making a film. I respect their decision but I don't share it. I am loved by my mother, my son, grandchildren and lover. What else can I ask for?

David McIntosh is a Toronto-based critic and curator who teaches Queer Theory at the Ontario College of Art and Design. He is currently writing a book on contemporary Canadian cinema.

Crossings

Curated by Diana Nemiroff
Catalogue essays by Diana Nemiroff, Nikos Papastergiadis, Hou Hanrou and Germaine Koh
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, August 7–November 1, 1998

REVIEW BY LAURA U. MARKS

Artists: Cai Guo-Qiang, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Carlos Capelán, Jimmie Durham, Mona Hatoum, Alfredo Jaar, Ilya Kabakov, Kcho, Lani Maestro, Vong Phaophanit, Yinka Shonibare, Jana Sterbak, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Xu Bing, Jin-me Yoon

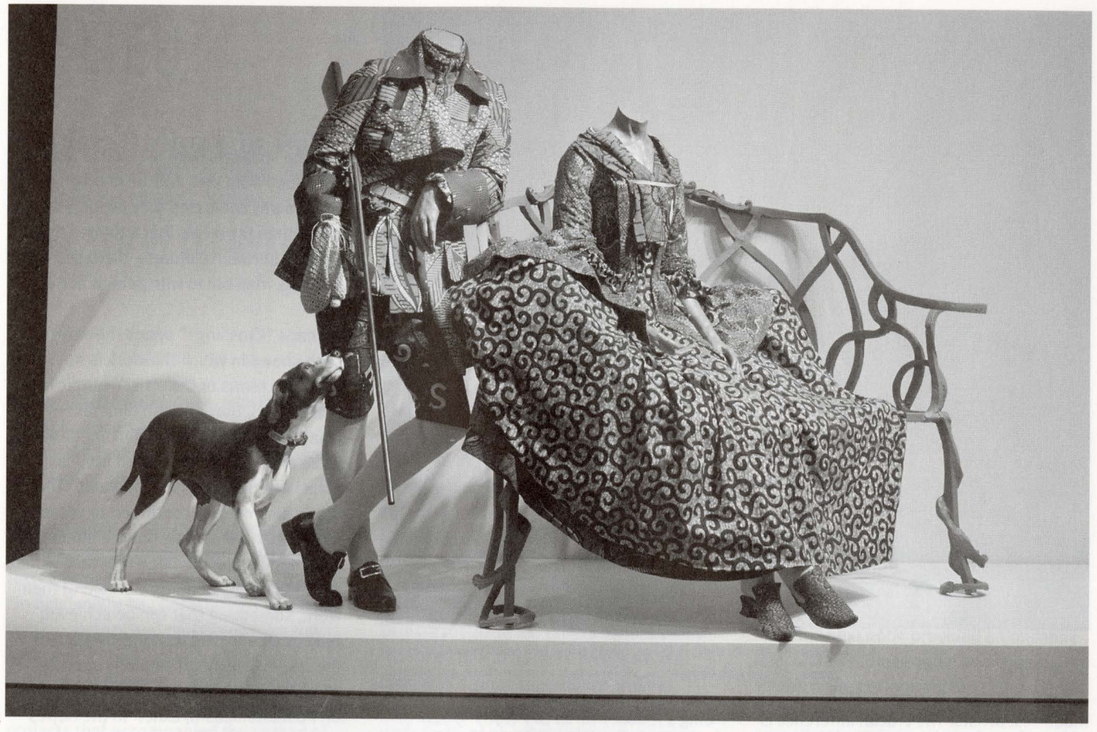
Over the last decade or so, a certain set of political dynamics that has shaped the tastes of the art world has shifted its terms from racial identity to ethnicity, to colonialism, postcolonialism and most recently to migration and exile. With each move the agents of these dynamics have become harder to identify. For the sake of analysis and action we may almost be nostalgic for the relatively clear dynamics of colonialism, where the power relationship in question was between relatively definable cultures. Now that the amorphous agent of power is global capitalism more than any particular group or nation, social change is the result less of struggles between colonized and colonizer, or more generally between two cultures (for such exchanges predate the European colonial period), and more of the deterritorializing relationship of multinational capital with all local difference.

"Crossings" addresses the global movements of exiles. The show has an ambiguous thesis because the relations it attempts to trace are ambiguous. Curator Diana Nemiroff has pinned the issue down somewhat by selecting fifteen artists who are (almost) all exiles themselves—that is, they live and work in a country other than where they were born—and whose work deals in some way with exile. Many of these artists, such as the Palestinian Mona Hatoum and the Russian expatriate Ilya Kabakov, can make the kind of work they do only from a position of exile.

More generally, the artists in "Crossings" likely would not have been as successful if they'd stayed. Many of them are now based in the international art centres of New York and London. Their migration reflects the economic power of the international art market, as well as political and cultural concerns. Hou Hanrou captures this when he writes that to recognize exiles as a group with common experiences and discourses is also to define them as a new commodity with a new market. This is not mainly a show about the suffering of refugees, meant to incite a reflex of postcolonial pain or guilt in the viewer. Many of the moves charted in "Crossings" have been extremely painful, but some indicate the mobility of an international, upwardly mobile middle class. For these world citizens, displacement creates not only the trauma of being neither here nor there, but the perceptiveness that comes from being both here and there.

Yinka Shonibare, for example, is perfectly placed to nip at the heels of a dying empire. The artist, born and now living in London but educated in Nigeria, has posed his Black self as a Victorian dandy fawned on by white servants, and has tweaked the seriousness of color-field modernism by painting canvases in the aggressively cheerful colours and patterns of African traditional fabrics (he points out that these originated as batiks from Dutch-colonized Indonesia, which the British sold to their African subjects, who then made them their own). In *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews Without Their Heads* (1998), a couple recognizable from a Thomas Gainsborough portrait is recreated in effigy, right down to the hunting dog, with their elaborate eighteenth-century clothing rendered in colourful batik fabrics, with no heads. Shonibare stages an insurrection by making visible the empire's dependence on its colonies: I got the impression that it was the clothes that decapitated their wearers.

It is significant that "Crossings" took place at the National Gallery of Canada, in a city where decisions are made about international aid and immigration quotas. The installations in the vast space of the gallery seemed to glance knowingly across the water at the Parliament buildings. In one case this glance is a literal acknowledgment: Ilya Kabakov's *Two Windows* (1998). Viewers follow a labyrinthine path that moves us from the graciously proportioned gallery into a small, low-ceilinged, unfinished room. A light box acts as a "window" onto a Russian church wreathed in snow. The room's ambitious two-tone paint job seems to have been abandoned mid-stroke, perhaps because the melancholy songs coming from an old radio sapped the painter's will. This, then, is one of the windows of the title; the other, passed on the way into the labyrinth, looks over the blue Ottawa River to the Parliament buildings. Such privilege!, Kabakov seems to be reminding us.



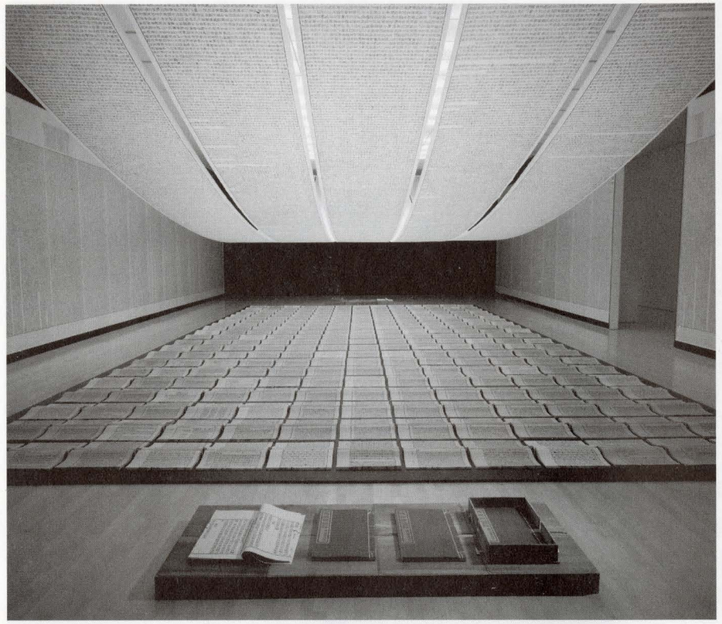
Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads, Yinka Shonibare, 1998, wax-print cotton costumes on armatures, dog mannequin, bench, gun, 165 x 570 x 254 cm (overall). Photos courtesy the National Gallery of Canada.

Kabakov made the space of the gallery his by building a nest in it. Other artists expanded to fill the walls. For example, in *Todo cambia* (Everything Changes, 1997) by Cuban artist Kcho, the huge wooden hull of a boat filling the room is lined on the inside with a library of books, which give off a warm, sour odour. The random contents of a Havana library, from *Discursos de Fidel* to *The Summer of Sassy Jo*, suggest the conflicting sources of knowledge available in this island nation. Certainly this work shows that one need not be an exile to ride the flow of global exchange, and that "everything can change" merely in the act of reading.

Others, like María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Carlos Capelán, filled their spaces by proliferation. Campos-Pons' *Spoken Softly With Mama* (1988) pays homage to her Black Cuban foremothers who worked as servants, by recreating their ironing boards and irons in silk and milky glass, and projecting their photographs and her own performance onto the boards. As one enters this dim, altar-like space, one passes a stack of folded silk cloths, painstakingly embroidered with words like "my mother/mi madre," "hope/esperanza." For me this simple component embodied the entire installation's themes of women's labour, memory and the perseverance of memory in material objects: the rest of the installation was a long, if lovely, footnote.

In Vong Phaophanit's *Atopia* (1997) large slabs of white, uncured rubber lie on galvanized steel shelving. As time passed, the work betrayed its elegant minimalism. In their initial state, the slabs suggested bodies sleeping not too comfortably in a dormitory, as though in a moment's respite from arduous travel. But a few weeks later, the slabs began to melt. They slipped through the steel bars, their flesh cut by the strings that had held them together, raw wounds opened in the material: the broken pieces piled under the "bunk beds" evoked carnage. The torn rubber slabs gave off fumes so powerful that gallery guards had to take half-hour stints in the room, and a friend of mine passed out in the room. *Atopia* evoked the troubled sleep of travellers who find themselves in a "no-place." Phaophanit's reminder of real bodies compares interestingly with *Quarters* (1996), Mona Hatoum's cross-shaped arrangement of austere steel bunk beds. There, the cold metal frames indicated that any bodies that inhabited them would be subjected to harsh regimentation.

Exile is a moment of suspension between worlds. What this moment loses in the capacity for action, it gains in a capacity for stark perception, as all that held true in either place is put into question. In its condition of knowing so much that one is no longer able to act, exilic awareness is comparable to the awareness sought by



A Book from the Sky, Xu Bing, 1987–91, bound books and wood engraving on rice paper, printed with Chinese ink, vitrines, 1930x1120cm (area, as installed).

modernist artists. The crucial difference is that this moment of suspension results from particular political and historical circumstances. As artworks, many of the works in "Crossings" can be defined as modernism with a historical conscience: they have the look of '60s and '70s minimalism and found sculpture, but they are explicitly informed by their intercultural context. Cai Guo-Qiang, for example, offers a brash and handsome installation of ninety stuffed sheepskins roped together with wooden paddles and sailed aloft in the gallery space by three chugging Toyota engines. The piece, which recalls works by Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Tinguely and the Fluxus artists, is called *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Art of Ghengis Khan* (1996): it also evokes the nomadic warriors who carried water in sheepskins and that modern conqueror, the Japanese car.

The exilic moment of suspension invites exhaustion, paralysis and ultimately, sleep, a theme of many of these works. While Phaophanit's and Hatoum's pieces evoke crowded refugee quarters, in Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* (1987–91), a canopy of printed paper sweeping across the gallery ceiling suggests a most sumptuous place to sleep. In Lani Maestro's *Cradle* (1996), a small forest of mosquito-netting tents, suspended from strings, fills the large gallery room. A visitor could crawl inside a tent and curl up on a palm mat to rest, inhaling its cool smell.

A far more prosaic sleeping space is Rirkrit Tiravanija's lumpy sofa bed filling the cramped room that is a reconstruction of an apartment he rented during a brief stay in Ottawa. Visitors could lounge on the bed and watch interviews with immigrant Ottawans on the black-and-white TV. This work continued Tiravanija's interest in food as a vehicle of cultural memory, for each of the interviewees speak (at great length) about their memories and experiences of cultural transition, concluding by offering a recipe and lecture-demo of a childhood food. Disappointingly, one would have had to watch a good seven hours of unedited footage to get the recipes (though conveniently they were also printed in a booklet to take away). What I questioned more was that the speakers were pressed to remember a food from their culture of origin, which many confessed they ate only rarely, rather than the meals that informed their passing between cultures—pierogies with ketchup, fried bread with peanut butter.

Perhaps "Crossings" opens the way for such shows in which the work is not seen mainly in terms of the artist's ethnic identity. In 1988, Black British filmmakers Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer edited an issue of *Screen* that was titled ironically "The Last 'Special Issue' on Race." The discussion on race continued to gather momentum, of course, but the filmmakers were expressing the hope that race would cease to be the defining element of their work, something that can be achieved only by a collective working-through of the issue. One might similarly subtitle "Crossings" "The Last Special Exhibition on Postcolonialism/Exile," in the hopes that audiences will internalize awareness of these global power dynamics to such a degree that the artists are relieved of bearing the burden of representation every time. During the panel discussions that accompanied the show, several of the artists, notably Jana Sterbak and Carlos Capelán, expressed some irritation at being categorized as exiles. Such irritation is understandable to the degree that the category effaces differences among the artists. The temptation, on both curatorial and audience sides, is to see each work as an exemplar of exile to the detriment of its own qualities. I would love to see Xu Bing's installation in a show about books, Kcho's in a show about boats. Indeed as I have said, "Crossings," slightly edited, would have been very successful as a show about sleep.

Laura U. Marks, a writer and curator of independent and experimental media, is assistant professor of film studies at Carleton University. Her book The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses *is forthcoming from Duke University Press.*

IN LIEU

Installations in Public Washrooms

SATELLITE PROJECT OF PUBLIC ACCESS CURATED BY EILEEN SOMMERMAN
SWAN RESTAURANT, VIENNA HOME BAKERY, BARCODE, TED'S COLLISION, TORONTO, JULY 2–AUGUST 22, 1998

REVIEW BY LEE RODNEY

Artists: Karma Clarke-Davis, John Dickson, Nestor Kruger, Francis LeBouthillier, Euan Macdonald, John Massey & Becky Singleton, Sally McKay, Kika Thorne

If it's possible to say that public art gives rise to some of the most seriously contested issues in contemporary art, then "in lieu" might be characterized as a lite version, breezy and pared-down for the summer. This isn't wholly a criticism. Public art is mired in a history of great expectation. From the post-war revival of projects that accompanied the spread of the International style with its claims to universality, to more recent site-specific works that consider submerged histories and local narratives, the promise of progress persists. Given this legacy, a site-specific show located in the washrooms of four local Toronto eating and drinking establishments seems almost irreverent.

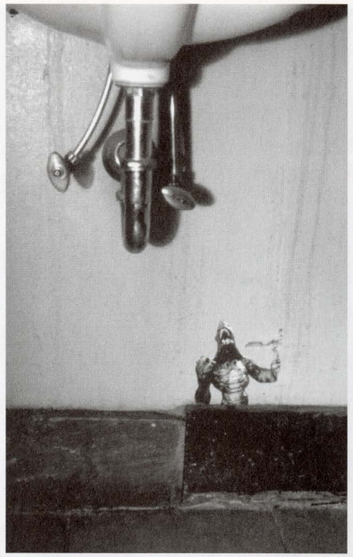
The public washroom is a curious site, conjuring a variety of associations in the popular imagination: ubiquitous and banal, it facilitates everything from basic excretion and sexual liaisons, to lurid crimes and other clandestine exchanges. Whether rest rooms in restaurants function like the highly trafficked venues found in mega-malls, parks, and transit stations is another question, as the ebb and flow in small commercial establishments is likely to be more controlled. Washrooms in restaurants are really only partially public and tend to operate on a sliding scale: the trashier the place, the more public the washroom.

"in lieu"'s most interesting sites were those that were somewhat squalid: places that were evidently inimical to the neutralized envelope of the white cube. Unlike most galleries, public washrooms characteristically stink, and in North America those found in gas stations usually offer the greatest olfactory dimension—though the itinerant experience of using a roadside loo differs substantially from that of a restaurant where we typically stay a while to socialize and eat. Here, the washroom functions as the underbelly of an establishment, bearing the bodily traces of those who have been there before us. A trip to the washroom usually means a trip to the basement—a journey that inevitably undercuts the purity of the dining experience. And so, often we're presented with the phenomenon of the decorated water closet (typically rag-rolled walls, dried flowers and a Monet poster) that resourcefully covers the reality of a stinking underground hole.

Swan Restaurant was the first place I visited. It also seemed the cleanest—even a bit too slick. A beautifully renovated diner, Swan is art friendly both for its clean lines and its patrons. In this site, Eileen Sommerman's clever analogy between galleries and washrooms was hardly a stretch. Swan may have been one of the more difficult venues in which to work, precisely because of its refined finish. John Massey and Becky Singleton's photographic series, *Afterlife*, lined the walls of the ladies' room with close-ups of anthuriums and passion flowers. These images initially seemed to imitate the kind of plush bathrooms that haven't been seen since the heady days of the '70s when no one mocked suggestive photomurals. However, the images, in their clinical framing and repetition, purposefully thwarted any kind of erotic reading.

Karma Clarke-Davis' video, *Swan Song*, installed next door, provided an uncanny effect. Clarke-Davis ogled and sneered on screen while performing her characteristic zany antics, creating an image that took on a slightly sadistic edge when viewed in the context of a men's room. Here, Clarke-Davis installed two monitors that confronted the viewer who stood directly before the toilet. Dressed in a campy blue number, Clarke-Davis diabolically writhed and leered on screen, playing up the figure of the temptress or tramp that is frequently adopted by female vocalists on MTV. However, the graininess of the image recalled well-worn video clips that serve as promos in the windows of sex shops and strip clubs.

Ted's Collision was most in line with what I've come to expect from a public washroom—a dirty, acrid cubicle filled with graffiti. I saw the work in this site last, and it was the only place where I stopped for a drink and took the time to actually use the facilities. Here, the work was sly and well suited to the dynamics of the space. Ted's Collision has duplex stalls, a feature that tends to make trips to the washroom less solitary and more public. This configuration facilitates the brief conversations, random glances and prosaic exchanges



Make Me Pretty, Sally McKay, 1998, electrostatic prints on vinyl. Photo: Francis LeBouthillier.

that take place while waiting in queue or washing your hands—situations that bring about a fleeting, yet uncanny, tension that sometimes arises when you see yourself and simultaneously see others seeing themselves in the mirror.

It was this tension that allowed Sally McKay's *Make Me Pretty* to lose its effect as a mere cute commentary on the beauty myth and take on more insidious dimensions. Dotted about the graffiti-covered walls of the women's washroom were stickers—images of a frenetic little monster wielding a hairbrush—reproduced from her multiple, *Beauty Toy*, featured earlier this year at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Despite the audacity of these images, they operated rather subliminally: you could easily pass them by if you weren't looking for them. The bizarre charm of this guerrilla aesthetic elicited commentary as the stickers were written over and in some cases peeled off. These images blended into the environment and became an integral part of the visual noise that already pervaded the washroom.

Swan Song, Karma Clarke-Davis, 1998, video installation. Photo: Francis LeBouthillier.

Euan Macdonald's piece, *Wasted Days, Wasted Nights*, was equally well integrated within the men's room. It was an extremely subtle sound piece that was timed to correspond with the duration of an average guy's trip to the can (about a minute). The sound was that of a few coins hitting a concrete floor—ostensibly after falling from one's pocket. Taken from the pop tune of the same name, the title seems less a moralizing commentary on the spending habits of a barfly than a satirical reflection on the clumsiness of his movements.

While "in lieu" was a tight show with no big surprises, the curatorial gesture was succinct and desperately needed after a series of warehouse shows that aimed at spontaneity and inclusiveness, but lacked any edge. "in lieu" provided the possibility of social encounters that were out of the realm of the usual art viewing experience. At Ted's Collision, for instance, one of the waiters acted as a self-appointed art custodian. I went there twice to see the art, and both times I was greeted by the same jaded guy stuck with the opening shift on a Sunday. The first time I couldn't even get past him inconspicuously before he yelled, "show's not up anymore; someone stole the tapes and tore down the stickers." After sorting out the tape problem, I returned the next week for a drink and light snack. Again I was greeted by the same charming waiter (bucket and rag in hand) who stopped me on the way to the washroom to take my order. I asked for a food menu and he replied curtly, "No food yet. I don't think you want me to make you anything, anyhow; I'm off to clean the toilets."

Lee Rodney is a writer living in Toronto.

Reservation X

The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art

Curated by Gerald McMaster and Arthur Renwick
Catalogue essays by Gerald McMaster, Paul Chaat Smith, Charlotte Townsend-Gault and Nancy Marie Mithlo
Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, April 23, 1998–March 7, 1999

REVIEW BY MARILYN BURGESS

Artists: Mary Longman, Nora Naranjo-Morse, Marianne Nicolson, Shelley Niro, Jolene Rickard, Mateo Romero, and C. Maxx Stevens

"Reservation X" gathers together emerging and established artists from around North America who share a concern with the cross-pollinations of identity and culture facing their communities. What was once a matter of learning to live with or under the dominance of Europeans has grown more complex with histories of dispersal and multicultural family ties. As the curators state in their catalogue essay, "We can no longer define ourselves as this or that, since we are now both and more." The more recent threat of global capitalism, with its accelerated rates of migration and increased demands on the land and its resources, further challenges traditional notions of community and identity. The task facing First Nations is therefore a formidable one and the artists of "Reservation X" take up the challenge with varying degrees of success.

If These Walls Could talk, C. Maxx Stevens, 1998, installation detail. Photo: Steven Darby, courtesy the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Tracing the contours of contemporary First Nations identities is not a simple task, especially after several hundred years of contact with European cultures and the consequent destruction of traditional knowledges. Not surprisingly, the seven installations presented in "Reservation X" share a concern for culture clash and loss of traditions and reinvoke traditional ways and knowledges in the context of lives lived in the postmodern present.

A surprising number of pieces use architecture as signifier both of identity and community. Architecture has the power to determine community activity and traditional architectures of home, village and meeting place have shaped the distinctive cultures of the First Nations. Marianne Nicolson's (Kwakwaka'wakw) *House of Origin*, uses photographs and paintings to form an enclosure reminiscent of a traditional "Big House." The interior photographs emphasize the intimacy of family relationships while the dreamy landscapes hung on the outside "walls" signal the expanded scene of people, house and land in this rather sweet evocation of community. Also celebratory is Mary Longman's *Strata and Routes,* which illustrates women's family ties, perhaps the fastest glue for any community, in the inverted roots of a tree.

These evocations of home are given a political dimension in *Gia's Song* by Nora Naranjo-Morse (Pueblo). In a sculptural installation of high spiraling adobe walls, Naranjo-Morse has attempted to create what she calls the "sense of safety and

Honey Mocassin, Shelley Niro, 1998, installation detail. Photo: Steven Darby, courtesy the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

organic enclosure offered by the traditional adobe home." The space at the centre of the spiral is quiet and intimate and a woman's voice can occasionally be made out singing "Gia's song." By contrast the starkly lit facade of *Gia's Song*'s adjoining low-cost government house is all hard edges and sharp corners. The tiny room visible through a window is sparsely decorated with kitsch "Indian" pictures and crafts, a few blankets and a television. A video that shows traditional ways of building adobe houses reiterates the point that choosing to live in government housing leads to alienation from Pueblo culture and identity while traditional adobe housing, built by the community in turn builds community.

Jolene Rickard's (Tuscarora) *Corn Blue Room* is also about the encroachments of non-Natives on her people's land and culture, though its tone is more ambivalent. Photographs standing in a row of metal frames out of which protrude small branches and dried bundles of corn hung from the ceiling form a long corn-shaped space similar to a traditional Iroquoian Longhouse. Inside the space, tranquil landscape pictures of a hydro-electric project that took one third of her people's land stand in puzzling counterpoint. Added to one end of the installation are projections of ironic computer-generated collages signifying urban hip. These seem even more at odds with the rest of the piece. *Corn Blue Room* has presence and its images are seductive. However, the representation of "past" and "present" cultures together seems uneasy and unresolved, much like the choice of technologies used to evoke them.

Unlike traditional sites of community, Western schools have played their own part in the changing experience of recent generations of First Nations children. *If These Walls Could Talk*, by C. Maxx Stevens (Seminole) is a moving installation about family, history and the many spaces of identity for women of her generation. Part residential classroom, part communitarian table set in nature, these seemingly separate spaces are brought together by people's stories told over loudspeakers and by the heavily glazed school books which seal in the artist's family history. More subtle and ambiguous than many works in the show, *If These Walls Could Talk* speaks to the power of storytelling for children caught in conflicting cultures and values.

Unfortunately the presentation of these works is compromised by sound problems. The very large installations are packed into a relatively small exhibition space and neighbouring soundtracks overlap. It is often hard to tell which soundtrack was intended for which piece as the stories, drums and songs playing throughout the exhibition are lost in a swirl of conflicting sound projections. To make matters worse, each respective volume is set irritatingly low, perhaps to create intimacy, or to avoid interfering with neighbouring works. Whatever the reason the general effect is of media technologies unhappily tacked on to a crowded show.

The show also suffers at times from oversimplified dichotomies of us and them, especially for an exhibition that purports to be about the complexities of identity and community. Works like the aggressive mural *Painted Caves* by Mateo Romero or the starkly divided dwellings of *Gia's Song* by Naranjo-Morse are heavy-handed and reduce Natives and non-Natives to familiar, neatly packaged identities. This risks re-inscribing the dominant culture's simplistic dismissals of our intertwined histories and the emotionally loaded political issues they give rise to today.

On the other hand, Shelley Niro's (Mohawk) irreverent treatment of pow wow costumes provides welcome humour to the show, bathed in the dramatic light of theatre spots punctuated by the winking irony of Christmas lights. *Honey Moccasin* includes a short excerpt from her film of the same name featuring men and women mugging for the camera as they sashay down a fashion runway wearing elaborate tongue-in-cheek pow wow costumes. These include a "punk" version made from such unlikely materials as sheets of rubber and a blue plastic broom brush (for a "mohawk" hairdo) and a dress topped by a hat made of small wicker baskets, including one shaped like a chicken. The playful tone and ironic commentary on ethnographic conventions of display are a welcome reminder of the fundamental place of humour in Shelley Niro's work, and in the everyday lives of Native people.

"Reservation X" is a timely and welcome comment on the daily lives of people caught in uneven and shifting relations of power and appropriation. By their evocation of long histories of cultural and technological appropriations, the artworks presented in this show ground First Nations communities in the shared present of postmodernism and "post"-coloniality while insisting on the specificity of everyday life on and off the rez. It is therefore truly a disappointment, in an exhibition with such an important theme, that many of the works don't go beyond re-articulating old and familiar oppositions of oppressor and oppressed. In doing so, they concede fixed notions of centre and margin to white society all over again.

Marilyn Burgess is a writer and curator living in Montreal. She is co-curator of "Indian Princesses and Cowgirls: Stereotypes from the Frontier," which is currently on tour across Canada.

Representing Rights

The Symposium on the Artist and Human Rights

Sponsored by the Human Rights Research and Education Centre, University of Ottawa, and the National Arts Centre
Ottawa, July 23–25, 1998

REVIEW BY JANET CREERY

The Symposium on the Artist and Human Rights, held in Ottawa's plush National Arts Centre, started with all the usual formalities: a performance by Native Canadian dancers, speeches praising John Humphrey, the Canadian who fifty years ago drafted the Declaration of Human Rights, and an address by the scientist, outspoken human rights advocate and Nobel Prize winner John Polanyi on the bond between artists and scientists advocating human rights. The voices of actual artists were a little thin, but they weren't threatened until the next morning when journalist Gwynne Dyer announced, to a rather startled audience, that the media could take sole credit and responsibility for the transition of societies from autocratic to democratic forms.

Sounding as much like a 1950s anthropologist as a journalist, Dyer argued that studies of human evolution prove that it is only when media are absent that humans depend on strictly enforced rules to tie together their earlier cultures. According to Dyer, developing countries dealing with human rights issues are not so much responding to pressures from outside as unfolding exactly as all cultures do in the presence of media. Dyer was clearly aiming to answer not only the question posed of his panel—"Does culture override rights?"—but also its unwritten subtext: "Does the West, and particularly the Western media, have the right to judge human rights in other cultures?" Of course they do, he implied, since they are just helping others down an inevitable path of natural evolution.

Persecuted Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin, who had just regained her seat on the stage after a stirring talk on her often painful role as an artist in a modernizing traditional society, looked a little skeptical. She had spoken of trying to introduce new ideas to a traditional culture while at the same time protecting many elements of that culture in the face of a barrage of "new values" from the West. She expressed sadness at having to live in exile in the West since the Muslim faction reigning in Bangladesh not only fails to share her commitment to a living, changing Muslim culture, but actively persecutes anyone who does. Dyer's sweeping generalizations were in stark contrast to her highly personalized remarks, and his simple answer of a kind of "inevitability" of human rights did not really address the issue of how artists and media can be sensitive to traditional cultures and at the same time oppose human rights violations.

To their credit, symposium participants, including other journalists, lined up at the microphone to question Dyer's hypothesis. Variations on "What about the homogenizing effect of media on different cultures?" were the most frequently asked questions.

These tensions between journalistic and artistic approaches to human rights were typical of the symposium. For some odd reason, this Symposium on the Artist and Human Rights had journalists on every panel, and had only one homogeneous panel—a panel of journalists. Presumably the organizers, who aimed to mark the

fiftieth anniversary of the drafting of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, wanted to bracket the somewhat anarchistic contribution of artists within the more structured public discourse of journalism. After all, this is Ottawa, and the conference was sponsored by an academic research institute (the Human Rights Education Centre at the University of Ottawa) and a bevy of government departments.

Interestingly, the artists ended up putting the journalists in context at least as much as vice versa. The Latin American artists were wry about the media's influence. "On television, we only see black hair and black eyes when it's some sort of charity; otherwise it's all blond, fair skinned people; it's completely unreal," said Jorge Coulon Larranaga, member of the Chilean musical ensemble Inti-Illimani, who was an outspoken critic-in-exile of the Pinochet dictatorship. Poet and PEN president Homero Aridjis, whose organization relies heavily on the media to publicize its campaigns to free imprisoned writers, concluded with a call to silent reflection:

> In the world's packed marketplace
> the last political action
> will be to hold our tongue.

Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell cautioned artists who would work for human rights here and abroad to be mindful of the media they use, and their tendency to wear away at the community on which their efforts depend. "You can't really engage in activity for human rights unless you can make a human connection, can you?" he asked. His remarks were in stark contrast to those of Spencer Reiss, senior editor of the California new media magazine *Wired*, who saw no unfortunate side effects to the new media: artists interested in human rights should just go and contribute some work to a human rights Internet site, he said.

This stalemate between media enthusiasm and a more careful, introspective perspective was somewhat resolved by the thoughtful analysis of a third panelist, the art historian Patricia Smart. She has researched and written on the *Refus Global*, an artists' manifesto which had a riveting effect on Quebec society when it was released in 1948, the same year as the Declaration of Human Rights. Society is too diffuse and fragmented for any sort of "refusal" to carry much weight right now, she said, but artists can effectively use the media for social criticism by carefully combining personal perspective with social concern. Chinese video artist Shuibo Wang, whose work was shown outside the main program and seen by few attendants, embodied this technique. With a sequence of drawings by himself and Chinese propaganda artists, overlaid with a personal narrative, he intermeshed his own biography with the progress of Chinese society under Communist rule.

To their credit, the members of the panel on journalism took an interest in this issue of bringing a more personal and committed approach to the journalistic trade. Oakland Ross, freelance writer and former correspondent for the *Globe and Mail* in Latin America and Africa, told a revealing story about the time that he and some fellow journalists decided to go beyond just reporting, and searched out a group of children who had been "disappeared" by the military. After one journalist spotted them in a police station and closely questioned the police officials, the children were released. Canadian journalists Francine Pelletier and Bob Carty joined Belgian journalist Jacques De Decker in denouncing journalism's unfortunate tendency to use the Human Rights Declaration to criticize other countries rather than their own.

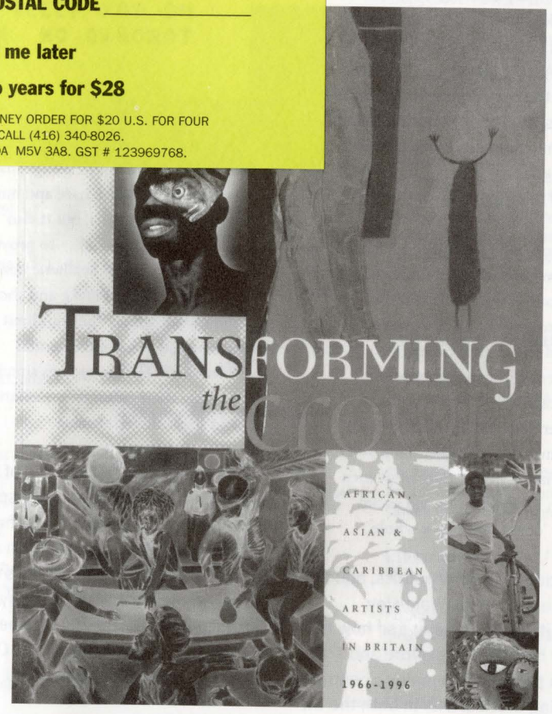
Concerning Canada's commitment to human rights, keynote speaker John Ralston Saul asked: Are we really more committed to humans than to things? Do we pay strong attention to health and other quality of life issues, or are we obsessed with economic imperatives? But it was the Canadian artists featured in the "Reconciliation Symphony" at the end of the program who most incisively questioned Canada's commitment to the Declaration of Human Rights. With a piano piece dedicated to his brother who died of AIDS, playwright Tomson Highway denounced the lack of attention to people with AIDS as a violation of human rights. Playwright René-Daniel Dubois asked whether the Declaration becomes nothing but a Hallmark Card banality when Canada feels free to follow its principles selectively.

With spellbinding presence author Denise Chong read from her book *The Girl in the Picture*. She described photographers adjusting their equipment and bearing in for the best shot as a mother and child stumble out of a bombed-out village in Vietnam. Even as the photographers are shooting they are thinking of the editing process: separating out the frames where the woman is still alive from those where she is dead, picking the moment of maximum impact for their viewers. Chong's reading illustrates the growing consciousness among artists that the media is a dangerously double-crossing ally of people in quest of human rights. Sure, it will bring their concerns to the masses, but will it grind their culture into oblivion in the process? Far from being the one true and certain guarantor of human rights to developing peoples, media emerged at the symposium as an environment in which artists have learned to operate, a weapon they have learned to wield carefully lest it go off in their hands.

Janet Creery is a writer/editor/publicist living in Ottawa.

...56–1996

...in 1997 at the Center, the Bronx Museum of Arts and the Studio Museum in Harlem as part of the ccc's twentieth anniversary celebrations. It continued the ccc's tradition of mounting exhibitions on the cultural history of the Caribbean diaspora—previous exhibitions have focused on individuals ranging from Black nationalist Marcus Garvey to dancer Katherine Dunham—but it also extended this tradition by including, for the first time, work by people who were not of Caribbean descent.



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fiftieth anniversary of the drafting of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, wanted to bracket the somewhat anarchistic contribution of artists within the more structured public discourse of journalism. After all, this is Ottawa, and the conference was sponsored by an academic research institute (the Human Rights Education Centre at the University of Ottawa) and a bevy of government departments.

Interestingly, the artists ended up putting the journalists in context at least as much as vice versa. The Latin American artists were wry about the media's influence. "On television, we only see black hair and black eyes when it's some sort of charity; otherwise it's all blond, fair skinned people; it's completely unreal," said Jorge Coulon Larranaga, member of the Chilean musical ensemble Inti-Illimani, who was an outspoken critic-in-exile of the Pinochet dictatorship. Poet and PEN president Homero Aridjis, whose organization relies heavily on the media to publicize its campaigns to free imprisoned writers, concluded with a call to silent reflection:

> In the world's packed marketplace
> the last political action
> will be to hold our tongue.

Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell cautioned artists who would work for human rights here and abroad to be mindful of the media they use, and their tendency to wear away at the community on which their efforts depend. "You can't really engage in activity for human rights unless you can make a human connection, can you?" he asked. His remarks were in stark contrast to those of Spencer Reiss, senior editor of the California new media magazine *Wired*, who saw no unfortunate side effects to the new media: artists interested in human rights should just go and contribute some work to a human rights Internet site, he said.

fully combining personal perspective with social concern. Chinese video artist Shuibo Wang, whose work was shown outside the main program and seen by few attendants, embodied this technique. With a sequence of drawings by himself and Chinese propaganda artists, overlaid with a personal narrative, he intermeshed his own biography with the progress of Chinese society under Communist rule.

To their credit, the members of the panel on journalism took an interest in this issue of bringing a more personal and committed approach to the journalistic trade. Oakland Ross, freelance writer and former correspondent for the *Globe and Mail* in Latin America and Africa, told a revealing story about the time that he and some fellow journalists decided to go beyond just reporting, and searched out a group of children who had been "disappeared" by the military. After one journalist spotted them in a police station and closely questioned the police officials, the children were released. Canadian journalists Francine Pelletier and Bob Carty joined Belgian journalist Jacques De Decker in denouncing journalism's unfortunate tendency to use the Human Rights Declaration to criticize other countries rather than their own.

Concerning Canada's commitment to human rights, keynote speaker John Playwright René-Daniel Dubois asked whether the Declaration becomes nothing but a Hallmark Card banality when Canada feels free to follow its principles selectively.

With spellbinding presence author Denise Chong read from her book *The Girl in the Picture*. She described photographers adjusting their equipment and bearing in for the best shot as a mother and child stumble out of a bombed-out village in Vietnam. Even as the photographers are shooting they are thinking of the editing process: separating out the frames where the woman is still alive from those where she is dead, picking the moment of maximum impact for their viewers. Chong's reading illustrates the growing consciousness among artists that the media is a dangerously double-crossing ally of people in quest of human rights. Sure, it will bring their concerns to the masses, but will it grind their culture into oblivion in the process? Far from being the one true and certain guarantor of human rights to developing peoples, media emerged at the symposium as an environment in which artists have learned to operate, a weapon they have learned to wield carefully lest it go off in their hands.

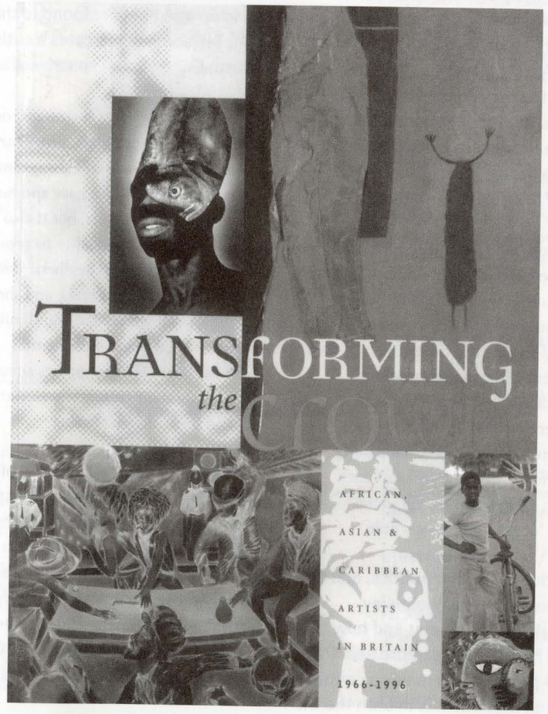
Janet Creery is a writer/editor/publicist living in Ottawa.

TRANSFORMING THE CROWN

African, Asian, and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966–1996

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE EDITED BY MORA J. BEAUCHAMP-BYRD AND M. FRANKLIN SIRMANS
NEW YORK: CARIBBEAN CULTURAL CENTER/AFRICAN DIASPORA INSTITUTE, 1998
DISTRIBUTED BY UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 160 PAGES

CATALOGUE REVIEW BY PETER HUDSON



The exhibition "Transforming the Crown: African, Asian, and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966–1996" was organized by New York City's Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center (ccc) and held in 1997 at the Center, the Bronx Museum of Arts and the Studio Museum in Harlem as part of the ccc's twentieth anniversary celebrations. It continued the ccc's tradition of mounting exhibitions on the cultural history of the Caribbean diaspora—previous exhibitions have focused on individuals ranging from Black nationalist Marcus Garvey to dancer Katherine Dunham—but it also extended this tradition by including, for the first time, work by people who were not of Caribbean descent.

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Wilson Harris to withdraw from the organization for fears of the potential creative compromises inherent in CAM's explicit politicization.

Kobena Mercer's contribution, "Bodies of Diaspora, Vessels of Desire: The Erotic and the Aesthetic" indirectly responds to Small's urging by offering a critique of CAM's unacknowledged sexism. "Among visual artists associated with the Caribbean Artists Movement," writes Mercer, "...the prevalence of portraiture and expressive protest reflects political priorities that seemed to occlude the erotic." He goes on to point out the double irony of this "absence of the erotic":

> For, not only did the desire for black liberation coincide with the sexual revolutions of the 1960s, but the phallic imagery of Black Power's clenched-fist aesthetic drew its popular potency from a highly sexualized vocabulary in which political empowerment was equated with the most symbolic part of the male body rather than with the unity of women and men in constituting the social body of "community" as a whole.

This question of art and politics, and the related question of, as Walmsley describes it, "what to paint and how to paint, and how best to explore and articulate such problems" remains a central issue among Black artists in both the UK and Canada. Gilane Tawandros' essay "Hunting with the Hare and Running with the Hounds" skillfully negotiates both the terrain of this problematic, as well as the contradiction of trying to make "black" art that isn't reduced to an essentialist gesture, while white art institutions ignore you because you are seen, essentially, as Black. Discussing Rasheed Araeen's landmark 1989 exhibition "The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post War Britain," Tawandros writes, "while such initiatives play a vital role in exposing the gaps and omissions of recent art history, they also fall prey to sustaining an essentialist discourse that perpetuates misleading demarcations and false separations between black art history on the one hand and a white art history on the other."

Instead of succumbing to a liberal paralysis in an attempt to respond to this question, Tawadros demarcates a critical, and unusually generous, space:

> As curators and art historians, our responsibility to black British artists of all generations will always involve us running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, but it also involves a responsibility to provide an intellectual and aesthetic context for these artists to make and show their work which does not limit them to singular and essential "blackness" but recognizes simultaneously their cultural particularity and their universal value.

In his essay titled "A Question of Place: Revisions, Reassessments, Diaspora," Okwui Ewenzor demonstrates the possibility of this kind of theorizing in a meditation on diaspora and the politics of the imagination in the work of Tchiaya U. Tam'si, Arthur Nortje, Olu Oguibe, Uzo Egonu and Rotimi Fani-Kayode. Of Egonu, Ewenzor writes that he provided

> a sophisticated mode of thinking that hinged on two, not necessarily irreconcilable methods, on one hand, one which was radically circumspect in its considered intentionality, in its usage of modernism as a central, animating language at the disposal of all avant-garde artists, irrespective of race or origin, and on the other hand, the use of the same modernist language to fiercely interrogate its peripherilization and nominalization of African subjectivity within twentieth century art.

Judith Wilson also takes up Tawadros' challenge. In her unfortunately titled essay "Surfing the 'Black' Diasporic Web: Postcolonial Art and the Decolonization of U.S. Visual Culture," she speaks of the "hypertextuality" of Black vernacular culture and urges an interdisciplinary understanding of Black art that views non-traditional spaces and practices as crucial to the development of Black aesthetic language. In this regard, the fact that "Transforming the Crown" was held in "black" spaces and communities is notable.

For anyone with more than a casual acquaintance with Black art and the politics of race and nation in England, the *Transforming the Crown* catalogue may seem like too much of an introduction. In its self-conscious effort to promote the artists and their work, it contains the type of prose typical of catalogue essays: theoretical, but more celebratory than critical. And occasionally, such as in Deborah Willis' essay "Talking Back: Black Women's Visual Liberation Through Photography," it uncritically invokes the kind of all-too-prevalent rhetorical clichés (in this case "talking back") that, in their lack of historical specificity, do little to describe how or why specific aesthetic strategies are employed.

Despite this lapse, the range of critical possibilities that *Transforming the Crown* presents provides a model that Black artists, their white allies, and forward-thinking cultural institutions in Canada would do well to adapt to their own uses.

Peter Hudson is the editor of North: New African Canadian Writing, *a special issue of* West Coast Line, *and is a former editor of* Mix *magazine.*

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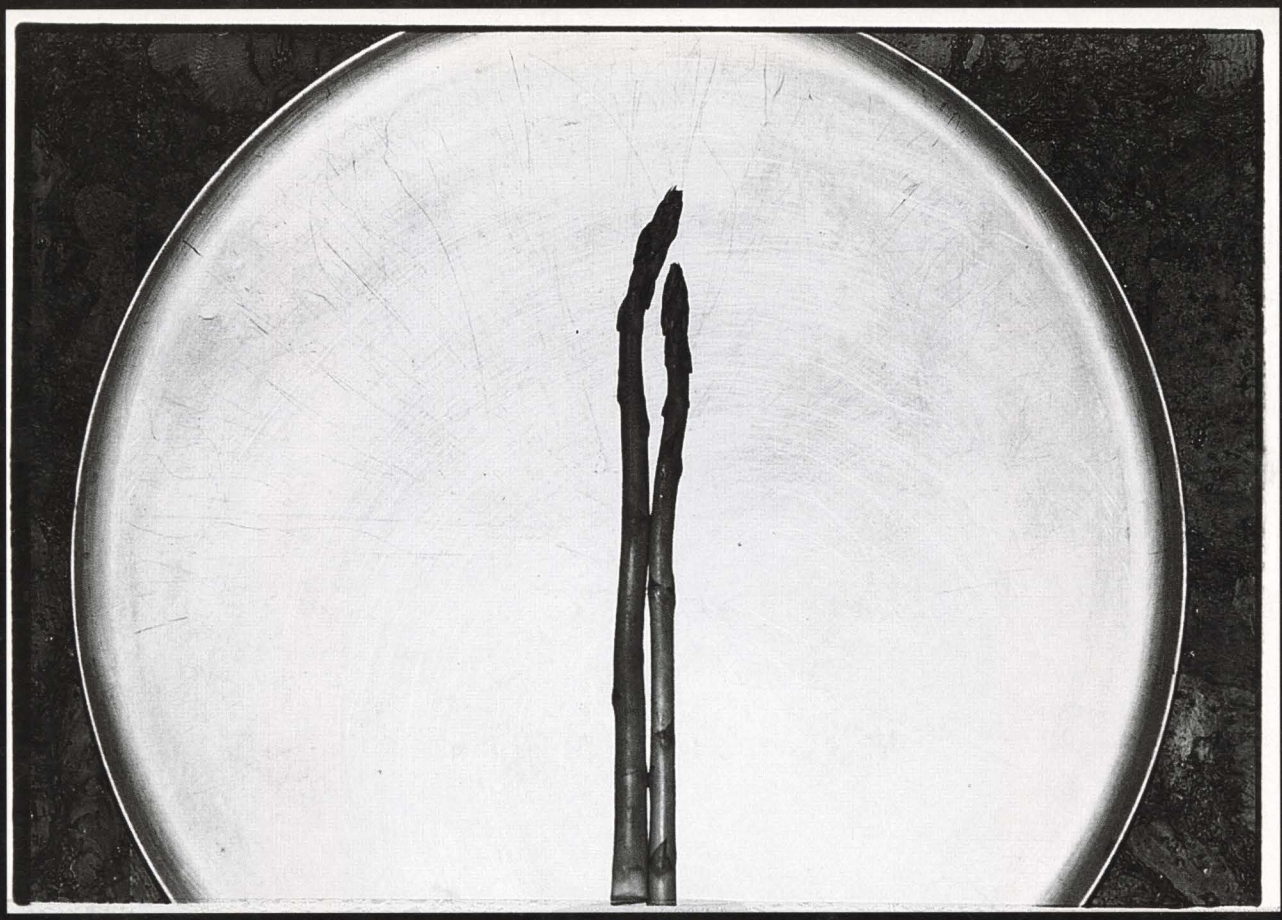

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