Subjects Matter: The Repeating AlterNATIVE and the Expat Gaze

In a fascinating 1968 document on the genesis of art discourse in Trinidad and Tobago, Hans Guggenheim cited a local newspaper article which talked about the suitableness of the West Indies as subject matter for the artist. The article announced the first exhibition in 1944 of the newly formed Trinidad Art Society. Guggenheim summarized the argument made by the article:

“Two points are made: the first is that local subject matter favors the development of a unique style, that is, that the visual arts in Trinidad are, and can be, different because what is available to be painted looks different. The second point is that racial characteristics contribute to the uniqueness of the ‘approach of the Trinidad artist’. The stereotype that the ‘Negro races’ were gifted musically but not in the visual arts was stressed. Such ideas, remnants of a colonial tradition, have been internalized by many Trinidadians and have perhaps prevented many talented individuals from turning to painting. The development of the Negro painters in Trinidad and elsewhere, therefore, is an important aspect of the declaration of independence. The very act of painting on the part of Negroes dramatizes their victory over the social and cultural boundaries that a colonial society had invented for them.”

The business of who and what might constitute suitable subjects for art and artists was one that bedeviled early attempts at art practice in the ex-slave colonies of the West Indies. In a useful article charting the gradual transformation of colonial imagery in Jamaica art historian Krista Thompson documents the fact that when Jamaica’s first Portrait and Picture Gallery was established in 1891 (‘the first permanent display of art on the island’) “Anyone entering the gallery in the early twentieth century would have been greeted almost entirely by a pantheon of white countenances, and more specifically, by white male faces”. On the other hand the black body was a much more commonly represented photographic subject in Jamaica, with the image of the black market woman dominating tourist ads as well as being used to promote the idea of an industrious black population. Early photographs and postcards representing the island often featured black market women as their subjects so that “The realm of colonialist and tourist photography was dominated by black women and white men ruled in painting. Certainly some representations transcended such dichotomies, but for the most part racialized subjects belonged in their separate mediums of representation.”

Thompson describes how local artists such as Albert Huie and Edna Manley made it their mission to adapt metropolitan art practice to Jamaican conditions which they did largely by a kind of import substitution, inserting the black body into a frame once exclusively reserved for white subjects. As innocuous as this move may seem today, at the time it engendered a revolution in local notions of art and became the head cornerstone of what is referred to as the Jamaican art movement. In Manley’s case the story is told of her encounter with a schoolgirl’s rendition of a blue-eyed, blonde market woman.

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2 Guggenheim, Ibid. p. 45.
woman. It was this ‘visual racial hybrid’ that set Manley on her lifelong mission of convincing black Jamaicans that they were worthy of artistic representation.

Of course merely changing the subject of portraiture and ‘art’ generally would have a limited effect on a deep-seated problem nurtured by centuries of representational neglect. In 1968 almost 30 years after Manley’s encounter with the schoolgirl, Walter Rodney, the black power advocate, observed that:

> The adult black in our West Indian society is fully conditioned to thinking white, because that is the training we are given from childhood. The little black girl plays with a white doll, identifying with it as she combs its flaxen hair. Asked to sketch the figure of a man or woman, the black schoolboy instinctively produces a white man or a white woman. This is not surprising, since until recently the illustrations in our textbooks were all figures of Europeans. The few changes which have taken place have barely scratched the surface of the problem.

Walter Rodney, Black Power in the West Indies, 1968.

In discussing Huie (‘one of the first black Jamaicans to take up a career as an artist in Jamaica’) Thompson makes a similar point to the one made in the article quoted by Guggenheim about the revolutionary nature the very act of painting represented for black people (‘...given the rarity of blacks as subjects in art, much less as its producers’). Responding to critics who argue that “despite the air of nationalism and anticolonialism in Jamaica in the 1930s and 1940s, artists [such as Huie] remained confined to traditional and even outdated trends in European art” Thompson advanced the thesis that despite the recurrence of such critiques across the postcolonial world:

> “…in Jamaica in the 1930s, artists’ adoption of ‘staid academic forms’ served potentially subversive political purposes. Local artists’ use of the colonial canon of ‘art’ furthered rather than truncated a colonial critique and aided the cultural nationalist project. By infiltrating the world of art with signifiers of blackness, artists challenged many of the ideologies associated with and maintained by ‘art’ in the island. As an axis where colonial authority met black dependency, where white prestige met black primitiveness, where presence met representational nonexistence, where historical subjects met visual objects, ‘art’ became a medium through which artists could destabilize the hegemony of the colonial state.”

It is useful to keep these caveats in mind while looking at art production in countries like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in more recent times. The world has changed considerably since the 1930s or even the late 1960s. The international artworld has changed even more. The anti-colonial task of switching the representational subject from colonizer to colonized has been substantially achieved. Postcolonial times pose new problems, frame new questions.

**Between Local and Global…**

The nineties saw a shift taking place in the art firmament of the Anglophone Caribbean. Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago constituted two major sites of art production in the region with the former always having enjoyed preeminent status because of the existence of institutions such as the National Gallery of Jamaica and the Edna Manley School of the Visual Arts. Writing of 1962, the year of Jamaica’s independence, Gloria Escoffery felt obliged to “put on record my awareness of the tremendous improvement that has taken place in the status of the Jamaican artist since Independence. The self confidence of the artist today is, of course, underpinned by the availability of good professional training in his own country, and by a national Gallery which confirms
Jamaica’s artistic primacy in the English-speaking Caribbean.” Nevertheless, by the end of the twentieth century, it was clear that fundamental changes were taking place in both locations that would place Trinidad rather than Jamaica at the forefront of art discourse in the Caribbean.

The nineties were a period that saw seismic shifts take place in global art discourse. These shifts were the ripples from cataclysmic world events that erupted on the eve of the decade. 1989 saw the death of legal apartheid as well as the fall of the Berlin Wall; Tiananmen Square, as that ugly episode in Chinese history is referred to, also happened in 1989. Walls were falling left, right and center. The so-called international art world, hitherto an exclusive Euro-American club was now forced to open its eyes to art communities from the rest of the world. The Havana Biennale and the Sao Paolo Biennale had for some time provided venues for art from elsewhere but the nineties saw more such fora opening up with a focus on alternative, hitherto occluded, circuits of art. The Johannesburg Biennial, the Queensland Triennial, the Dak’Art Biennial and the Cairo Biennale are just some of these.

Even giants of the mainstream art scene were forced to adapt to the exigencies of a postmodernizing world. In 1990 the Venice Biennale (founded in 1895), that venerable ancestor of all biennials, which had for practically the entire twentieth century invited only Western nations to participate, invited Nigeria and Zimbabwe to take part; in 1993 the invitation was extended to Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire and South Africa. The quinquennial Documenta, referred to by the New York Times as “the Olympics of the international art world”, first saw the inclusion of non-G-7 artists in the early 90s and by the end of the decade had appointed its first non-european artistic director, the innovative and enigmatic Nigerian curator, Okwui Enwezor, to mastermind Documenta11 in 2002.

Enwezor’s Documenta appointment marks an important moment. The natives were now not only being curated into mainstream megashows, they were curating them, period. If postcoloniality had delivered virtual membership in a Westernized brotherhood of Man, the postmodern ‘now’ we live in has made it possible to demand--and receive--full rights commensurate with this membership. Needless to say the inclusion of new peoples/populations would transform global art discourse just as the advent of new media did. To quote Enwezor:

Postcoloniality, in its demand for full inclusion within the global system and by contesting existing epistemological structures, shatters the narrow focus of Western global optics and fixes its gaze on the wider sphere of the new political, social, and cultural relations that emerged after World War II. The postcolonial today is a world of proximities. It is a world of nearness, not an elsewhere.

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5 Interestingly not all European art had entrée into this exclusive club. The countries of the ‘second world’ -- Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Bloc-- not being (credit) card-carrying members of the capitalist system, were no less invisible on the so-called international stage than countries from the third world.
What Enwezor is suggesting when he talks of a world of proximities and nearness incompatible with a liminal elsewhere is that no land is an island anymore. The trope of the invisible island is not available anymore in this age of the World Wide Web and instant and constant communication. Against the resulting background of increased visibility for art and artists from non-metropolitan locations how has art in the Anglophone Caribbean fared? What has the impact of new networks and circuits of art production and reception been on the field of art here? To what extent have art interests in Jamaica or Trinidad and Tobago taken advantage of burgeoning opportunities?

At first glance both locations would seem to have performed creditably, with different milestones marking high points in each instance. In Trinidad and Tobago there was the creation of CCA7 (Caribbean Contemporary Arts) “an international arts organization that works with contemporary visual artists, curators, writers, historians and art educators from the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora to exhibit, publish and document our region’s art practices, influences and ideas”. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the Reed Foundation, the Prince Claus Fund and the Triangle Arts Trust among others, CCA7 has the resources to make decisive interventions in the landscape of Caribbean art.

For Jamaica on the other hand the high point (in terms of engaging with an international) was marked by its participation in the 2001 Venice Biennale, not as part of a larger Latin American or Caribbean contingent but in a pavilion of its own. Jamaica was also represented at Platform 3 of Documenta11, the workshop on Creolité and Creolization held in St. Lucia in January 2002.

**Jamaica in Venice**

Jamaica’s participation in the Venice Biennale registered strongly on the radar of a wide range of art-related individuals and institutions internationally. Yet it hardly attracted any attention in the country itself and most Jamaicans remain unaware of this significant milepost in the history of Jamaican art. The Jamaican media as far as I’m aware did not carry any information on the Jamaican pavilion in Venice and certainly the art sections of the local newspapers failed to take note of this historical event.

Why was this? One plausible reason could be the fact that the three artists representing Jamaica, sculptor Arthur Simms, painter Keith Morrison and photographer Albert Chong, were all residents of the Jamaican diaspora and in that sense not ‘local’ artists at all. Whereas Chong has frequently represented Jamaica at major international art exhibitions, the Havana Biennale and the Sao Paolo Biennale among them, and Keith Morrison had been working on the West Coast of the USA for a long time, few had heard of Arthur Simms, the sculptor from New York, who was born and brought up in Jamaica.

Yet if it hadn’t been for Simms Jamaica would never have reached the Venice Biennale. Simms applied for and got a Guggenheim Fellowship expressly for the purpose of assisting his campaign to mount a Jamaican pavilion at the next Venice Biennale. With admirable determination and single-mindedness he pursued and achieved his objective and the story of how he did it should be of use to other small countries interested in penetrating the global art scene and institutions such as the Venice Biennale. The

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importance of mediating organizations such as OPEN cannot be overstressed, and the need for artists to play an active role not only in exhibiting their work but in networking and seizing opportunities that present themselves.

Despite the signal achievement it represented, the Jamaican art establishment (represented by the National Gallery of Jamaica, the School of Art, auction houses and commercial galleries) seemed indifferent to rather than elated by Jamaica's inclusion in the Venice Biennale. Perhaps as a result of this no press releases or other information seemed to have been relayed to the local media. The Board of the National Gallery expressed dissatisfaction at not having been consulted or allowed to make decisions about who should represent Jamaica. Yet no one from the local art infrastructure had taken the initiative to do what Simms had done. Nor were the top contemporary so-called avant garde artists in the country considered to be making the kind of work that would make an impact at the Biennale. Despite expectations to the contrary resident Jamaican artists are not involved in and have contributed very little to ongoing regional and international conversations on art, a fact that has not gone unnoticed internationally.

Catherine Amidon who wrote the Venice Biennale catalogue essay chose the metaphor of language to explain the absence of what she referred to as ‘on-island’ artists from the exhibition. According to Amidon though Chang, Morrison and Simms did not reside on the island they had “developed a vital contemporary visual language” which could pull Jamaica out of the ‘zone of silence’ it had relegated itself to. According to her, since Independence (1962), it was “foreign-educated Jamaicans who had developed an international and trans-cultural perspective that is different from that of the artists who stayed on the island.” In Amidon’s view while the trio’s work employed a visual vocabulary rich in symbolism from the island, “their art no longer ‘speaks’ in the native patois. Their language is a more universal one.”

No doubt the National Gallery-sanctioned group of artists who normally represent Jamaica at international art events would object to being referred to as speakers of a native patois. Locally it is often claimed that their work is on the ‘cutting edge’, ‘avant-garde’ and internationally ‘relevant’. Yet though this work has been shown at a range of venues from the Sao Paolo to the Havana Biennale it is a fact that such exposure has failed to excite further interest in so-called Jamaican avant garde art and has not resulted in these artists being curated into other international exhibitions. The artists themselves have failed to take the initiative and make the kind of linkages pounced upon by Arthur Simms when he was given the opportunity to show in the OPEN exhibition in Venice.

One can also find support for Amidon’s point that it is foreign-educated, non-resident Jamaican artists (rather than resident ones) who are at the forefront of international trends in contemporary art, in the book, Caribbean Art by Veerle Poupeye. In its final chapter “Recent Developments” the new generation of Caribbean artists is discussed

9 Amidon, personal communications.
10 See Felix Angel, Three Moments in Jamaican Art, exhibition catalogue, IADB Cultural Centre, 1997, p. 6. Edward Lucie-Smith also notes in his introduction to the book “My Jamaica” that the Jamaican art scene has remained impervious even to the major art events taking place next door, in Havana, Cuba.
and Cuban artists quite rightly dominate the picture presented. Of the five or so Jamaican or Jamaica-connected artists mentioned, Omari Ra ‘African’, Albert Chong, Nari Ward\textsuperscript{13}, Eddie Chambers and Eugene Palmer, only the first is a resident Jamaican. The others are all members of the Jamaican diasporas in the United States and Britain and as such represent a similar pool of artists to the ones who went to the Venice Bienale.

Of course the local art establishment has not been completely inert. A number of “on-island” artists participated in a show called Soon Come: The Art of Contemporary Jamaica, which toured Nebraska, Colorado and Miami in 2001-2002. To a public that is largely unaware of the contours of the international art scene a show like this can be and often is portrayed as evidence of the international currency of local artists. Yet no one can deny that the end of the twentieth century finds the local Jamaican art scene in a shambles, with only one functioning commercial gallery to speak of, no critics, and a National Gallery rarely visited by average members of the public. During the recently held Young Talent 2002 show a visitor from Trinidad and Tobago noted with surprise that none of the featured artists were experimenting with new media, virtually all exhibits falling into the categories of sculpture, painting, photography and assemblage. In Trinidad on the other hand it was possible to see younger artists flirting with multimedia, videography, performance and site-specific work, the new media that dominates international exhibitions such as Documenta and the Venice Biennal. Under the circumstances it seems appropriate to ask whether the curriculum taught at the Edna Manley School of Art should remain largely dedicated to teaching traditional media in an era when performance, video and multi-media dominate the international scene.\textsuperscript{14}

Amidon makes a similar point saying that the school of art “…the time-honoured island hub of visual arts…remains an institution bound to traditional media like painting and sculpture when video, computers and new media are taking on a dominant role at the international level”. She further points out that partnerships with institutions such as the University of Technology “which could provide the technical and conceptual framework needed to bring the EMSVA into the twenty-first century” have not happened.

It seems then that there may be some truth to the charge that on-island [avant garde] artists remain locked into a private patois, albeit a modernist one, which has little application or relevance outside the island. While the metaphor of language offers a convenient mode of comparison, it must be said that there is nothing at all wrong in speaking patois or in speaking an international language with a patois accent. The important thing surely is to use these languages to participate in regional and international conversations about art. Arguably Jamaican artists abroad are doing this but not artists in Jamaica.

The problem, however, is greater than learning new languages or placing art from the island of Jamaica on the international map. In a lecture given to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Jamaica’s independence, sociologist Orlando Patterson put his finger on what will be needed to refashion a viable future for the country. Although he wasn’t

\textsuperscript{13} Interestingly in the 8th Havana Biennale Ward is listed as representing the United States.
\textsuperscript{14} Earlier this year the IADB Cultural Centre sponsored the First Latin American and Caribbean Video Art Contest and Exhibition. Its curator, Felix Angel, expressed consternation that there was no response at all from Jamaica to the invitation to participate. Jamaica was one of only two other countries, including Guyana, which didn’t participate in the contest.
speaking of art, Patterson’s plea is particularly relevant to the discussion of how local and global should intersect in the local art scene:

First of all, we need a new mind-set. We have to get away from thinking in old-fashioned national terms and take transnationality seriously. We should stop planning with the nation state as our unit and plan instead with this transnational community, as well as the broader North American economy and society in mind. Jamaica is no longer confined to the island of Jamaica. Every leader in the island should repeat this a hundred times each morning till the idea sinks in. Jamaica, as Miss Lou once wisely versified, has colonized America in reverse. Jamaica is in Brooklyn, Queens, Boston, Miami, Toronto and Atlanta. The nation state, with its patriarchal bond of patriotism focused on the land and turf protection, is passing and nearly dead. Thank god. It is being replaced in the transnational space with an allegiance we may call matriotism, modeled on the landless mother who moves across boundaries, weaving a bond of comity and culture, a vibrant community of memory and hope, between the many sites of her kinsmen and her children.\textsuperscript{15}

**Performing ‘Art’ in Trinidad**

Meanwhile in Trinidad and Tobago artists have been experimenting with new media at least for the last 10 years or more. In 1992 artist Christopher Cozier mounted two performances at an alternative art space run by fellow artist Eddie Bowen: *Speaking to a Shirt Jac* and *Tamarind Switch*. While Cozier claims that performance has always been taking place in Trinidad carnival these were the first performances offered as formal art interventions in the Trinidad space. With these works that involved items from local culture such as a shirt jac (a garment worn by nationalists) and the tamarind switch with which local schoolchildren are disciplined Cozier was trying to open up the claustrophobic and limiting formal art space in Trinidad and Tobago to the live and living world around it. He describes it as “the intervention of the everyday” into Trinadian art space.

Years later artist Johnny Stollmeyer would do his King Corbeau performances in which he dressed up as a life-sized vulture or ‘Cobo’. Interestingly Stollmeyer used the same costume during carnival further blurring the boundaries between the art space and the carnival space. The latter had been transformed in the late 70s by the interventions of Peter Minshall, a formally trained costume designer who immediately recognized that the local carnival tradition was an endless source of inspiration for an artist like himself, a veritable cornucopia of ideas waiting to be exploited. His experiments with carnival costume were so successful, winning both popular and critical acclaim that they catapulted him to international fame when he was invited to participate in the opening ceremonies of the Barcelona Olympics in 1986. Minshall’s work not only circulated at the global level it also played a transformative role at the local level. Like anyone else he has his critics; still you could say with honesty that carnival was never the same after Minshall.

In more recent times there have been the performances of Susie Dayal and Dave Williams. In *She Web* Dayal wrestled with wire body masks representing the cage of female stereotypes. The wire structures were inspired by similar objects used in carnival costume design. Williams, a dancer who has worked with Minshall, uses his body and its movements in space to articulate common concerns and questions. With the exception of Minshall none of these artists is responding to a local demand for

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performance. They are responding to each other and to the actions of artists elsewhere. As Cozier puts it:

Williams has been searching his way through a range of experiments with multimedia works that neutralize the traditional boundaries between medium and context. Is it dance, drama, the performance thing or videography, the public often asks. For the artist it is about how the individual articulates and commands space. His investigations have led him into subjects as everyday as the visa line-up outside the US embassy to reinterpretations of our folk mythology. It is interesting that much of this work has been discussed as alien to an alleged and never accounted for “us”, yet it remains squarely related to our current location, straddling the worlds we now occupy from street to gallery space from local to international, individual to community, in terms of its sensibility.16

In the early 90s in Trinidad a kind of alternate art scene began to coalesce around the work of a group of artists who had all studied abroad and decided to return home. Aside from Cozier and Bowen there were Steve Ouditt and Irenee Shaw, all of whom returned to the island in the late 80s. None of these artists were interested in being inserted into the prevailing paradigm of aesthetic nationalism the islands of the Anglophone Caribbean were steeped in. Spiritually they were more affined to the work of a Francisco Cabral, that phenomenon of the 80s in Trinidad, whose extraordinary chair constructions catapulted him to world attention. Conversant with the international idiom of contemporary art they would explore instead ways of using new media and new ideas to articulate a meaningful relationship with the environment around them. Not surprisingly their experiments ‘spoke’ for themselves and a catalogue documenting their work was produced by Ulrich Fiedler, using funds from the German government through whom he had organized an exhibition of their work. Fiedler, a German surgeon and collector of contemporary art who was resident in Trinidad for a few years, immediately realized the scope of their ambition and became a major source of support for the young returnees. In the catalogue essay Fiedler described the arid conditions in which these artists functioned:

This unproductive situation has eventually turned out to be an advantage for the works the four artists produce. They are not driven by market forces. They do not have to follow the influential critic’s demands. They do not have to please the important collectors. They do not have to decorate middle-class houses’ walls. There is hardly any demand for their work. So they are allowed to follow their thoughts, their imaginations, their own reflected values, their very own criteria. And these are deadly serious.17

CCA7

Between 1994 when Fiedler’s text was published and 1997 when CCA7 (Caribbean Contemporary Arts) was created the situation in Trinidad had clearly changed considerably. Conversations between these four and a few other art enthusiasts and patrons had created the conditions for the conception and actualization of an ambitious regional center for experimental art. Steve Ouditt was particularly instrumental in the creation of the Centre. Charlotte Elias, the founding director, had worked closely with Ouditt in developing the initial funding proposals and the first programme held at CCA7 consisted of back-to-back shows by Che Lovelace, Chris Cozier and Irenee Shaw followed by two talks. The talks “Leaning on the Posts…” and “Rethinking the support in Art Support” dealt with issues of both local and international currency such as what

16 Chris Cozier, “Between Narratives and Other Spaces,” Small Axe 6, September 1999, p. 36
17 Ulrich Fiedler, “Comments on Contemporary Art in Trinidad”, Four Contemporary Artists from Trinidad edited by Ulrich Fiedler, Port of Spain, 1996. unpaginated.
postmodernism, postcolonialism and post-structuralism might mean in the context of ‘developing’ economies.

CCA7, touted as “the first ‘studio building’ in the English-speaking Caribbean to provide artists with a facility in which to work without the interruptions of daily life”, houses “two substantial exhibition spaces, seven artists' studios, an information centre and offices, lecture and meeting facilities, a library and climate controlled archive and a giftshop”.

Funded by the American Ford Foundation, the British Triangle Trust and the Dutch Prince Claus Fund among other agencies, in the six years of its existence CCA has mounted almost a dozen exhibitions every year; in addition talks are frequently held and artists’ workshops and retreats, and the CCA also sponsors local artists’ participation in events such as biennials. Artists from Cuba, Venezuela and other neighbouring countries as well as local artists have made and shown work there. A range of media (traditional media, traditionally executed, excluded) is encouraged covering everything from conceptual art, performance, body art, site-specific work, installation, videography and multimedia. These constitute the syntactical elements of “a highly dispersed international language” which contemporary artists across the world are exploring today.\(^{18}\) International art stars such as Chris Ofili, Peter Doig and Dino Chapman have visited the centre (Peter Doig is now on the board) and CCA is fast becoming a locus especially for artists from the region who come and do residencies there. Finally this year Jamaican artists took advantage of this space as Petrona Morrison and Natalie Butler participated in CCA’s residency programme. On Nov. 13, 2003, a show called *Resident: Works on Paper* opened at CCA7 featuring the work of 44 artists from Barbados, Brasil, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, England, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, Trinidad, USA and Venezuela who had participated in CCA7’s Artist-in-Residency Programme between 2000 and 2003.

As promising a development as the establishment of CCA7 would seem to be it has come in for its share of criticism. In his eloquent and smartly theorized article “The Caribbean’s New Colonialism: The Art of Power”, Raymond Ramcharitar, a critic based in Trinidad and Tobago, raises some penetratingly pertinent questions about the role played by state-sponsored or authorized cultural apparatuses and international cultural organizations in the Caribbean.\(^{19}\) Ramcharitar argues that the former systematically promote Afro-centred notions of culture while the latter continue to embrace romanticized notions of the primitive.

Critiquing the nature of some of the Triangle Trust-sponsored international workshops held by CCA from the point of view of “a person trapped in the conceptual political space of primitivism” Ramcharitar rightly questions Robert Loder’s (of the Triangle Trust) celebration of the involvement of an unsuspecting “village community” in the making and exhibiting of such work. “These are poor, underprivileged people who are relegated — yet again — to being props in the project of the first world. Many of them

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would never leave the village, never be educated, and never escape the cycle of poverty and deprivation they were born into.”

**Race and Representation**

Ramcharitar also problematizes the fact that the principal as he calls it of CCA7 is “a wealthy white Trinidian” who he claims is without the requisite education or knowledge of art needed to make a real success of the enterprise she has embarked on. While acknowledging Ramcharitar’s point that “White West Indians enjoy more status, wealth and access to institutions and opportunity than non-White West Indians” it must be pointed out that it is unfair in the same breath to castigate a member of this privileged tribe for putting all the resources at her disposal to raise funds internationally for the creation of a regional art initiative of the caliber of CCA7.

In a sense the question of race could only have been brought up in the Trinidadian context where the signifier of skin colour is further complicated by the different and competing ethnicities of the Afro-Caribbean and the Indo-Caribbean. In contrast to Jamaica which maintains a stiff postcolonial silence on such matters, race and ethnicity are frequently invoked in discussions of art in Trinidad21. Guggenheim’s thesis on Trinidadian art for instance constantly refers to artists as ‘creole or black’, ‘white’, ‘East Indian’ and ‘Chinese’.

Ramcharitar’s worry about the construction of the Caribbean as “a primitivist African space” is a genuine one arising from the fact of his own ethno-racial background which generates a certain post-indenture angst which is not without basis. As David Scott puts it:

> I suspect, for example, that the emergence of an increasingly vocal Indo-Caribbean critique of Afro-Caribbean hegemony has very much to do with the presumed privilege of Afro-Caribbean identity that Independence installed. The story of the postcolonial state in the Caribbean, in other words, is normalized as the story of the empowerment of peoples of African descent, as peoples whose “authentic suffering” has guaranteed them a special and permanent dispensation.22

Steve Ouditt too, eloquently captures the predicament of the Indo-Caribbean:

> “In London it seems like I am an enigma of survival because I came here as ‘not an Afro-Caribbean’; from Trinidad, the most multi-coloured bead in that chain of variegated islands. The wider geography is known to us who live there as the Caribbean, or the West Indies for the English-speaking islands. But for people who live here, or those who don’t but read British cultural texts, the place is prefixed as the turf of ‘Afro-Caribbeans’.”23

Perhaps no one has articulated as brilliantly the predicament of the dis-located Caribbean artist than Ouditt who describes himself as ‘a post-independence American/English-educated Christian Indian Trinidadian West Indian Creole male artist’. In a sparkling set of short essays titled "Creole In-Site" Ouditt expands on the theme of the artist as a NO LAND'S MAN in NO MAN'S LAND. "Every step I take it's

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20 Ramcharitar, ibid, p. 14.
21 The silence referred to doesn’t include popular or subaltern culture in Jamaica which is volubly and ebulliently black; the reference is to the formal, official culture of the country which the visual art scene is almost exclusively a part of.
on someone else's land, but to me it's on no man's land. I am a no lands man, without compass, fences and instrument of measure." An Indo-Trinidadian, Ouditt asks sarcastically if it's possible to reincarnate while still alive to a place where "smallness" is not a life sentence. The reference to Jamaica Kincaid's A Small Place is not accidental. He talks of "being indentured to the figure of labourer regardless of the new revelations of historiography because post-independence political culture inhabits a neocolonial infrastructure that neglects his skin." In an early work, exhibited in Brixton in London, Ouditt used wire strung across the room to signal his predicament. In Creole in-Site he referred to the project thus:

... in wire pulled tightly from wall to wall in the shape of (what else?) an extra long house of asylum. This very tensioned wire is my smoothed sentence (court judgment?), my composed, linear, visible meaning, which when pulled in rows make a fence. A foreboding one electrified with intention that delineates my absurd private space in the mother (or mother's) land.

Ouditt speaks eloquently of the strangulation and paralysis felt by someone like himself who is wedded to a practice of poetics in a place where such a thing is seen as a supreme irrelevance:

"Why is my space so dark in these antilles which the laureate loves for its light? And why does the darkness stick around my wasting body and fall hard in stinging stabs that pin my hands to body-oil stained cream sheets? I am sure that in more time some decipherer will launch his graphological career as a sheet reader of Tropical men to tell the world long and complicated tales about entrapment, strangulation, paralysis and ambitions (ambitions?) By "reading" my body-in-pain stains and crackled markings like on neglected skin or a glass that wants to break.'

Gilane Tawadros, director of the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), insightfully sums up what is so unique about Ouditt. According to her:

"Steve Ouditt’s art and writings navigate the difficult terrain between the visual and the verbal, between the poetic and the prosaic. In his texts, he moves elegantly between insightful wordplay and devastating insights into the ‘poetic, plots and phobias’ of what he describes as ‘sucrotopia’—a neologism coined by Ouditt to describe the space of the subaltern, a space of ‘sweet pain’. This is the pain which ‘the subaltern feels emotionally or physically when subjected to many structures of institutionally administered legal and illegal injustices’.

Increasingly Ouditt is moving towards a practice that combines art with architectural concepts. Creole Processing Zone, exhibited in London in September 2000, plots a series of 'creole credit cards' in the shape of 'an old barracoon or a new factory/warehouse'. In this shrewdly conceived site specific work Ouditt proffers the idea of 'creole capital'. The red credit cards allow the user to benefit from 'spatial and travel directions and translations and exchanges in most places worldwide displaying the sign 'Creole Processing Zone'." How does one negotiate global circuits with creole capital? What is the exchange value of creole capital? Ouditt, an Indo-Caribbean, lays claim to the term 'creole', adeptly prising it out of the firm grasp of the Afro-Trinidadian with a conceptual chisel of no mean order. He is nimby tip-toeing a path between "parochial narrow-mindedness on the one hand and simplistic internationalism on the other.”

Ramcharitar’s foregrounding of Elias’s race as an issue highlights one of the central problems of art production in the region. The field of visual art in the Caribbean, like visual art anywhere, is almost exclusively the preserve of its elites. As discussed elsewhere, in places like South Africa and the Caribbean where this group, particularly the social and economic elites, are distinguished from the rest of the population not

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24 Gilane Tawadros, Foreword, Creole-in Site, Ibid.
merely by their superior wealth and power but also by the colour of their skin, this means that the artworld is mediated to a large extent by white and light elites often in collaboration with white expats.25

The Expat Gaze

To those of us supposedly creolizing (lounging about) on the margins of modernity it is obvious that art in the postcolonial Caribbean is dominated by questions of race, class, identity, gender, sexuality and the nation. It seems odd therefore that a very large number of those involved with talking and writing about art in the region happen to be foreigners and white foreigners at that. Even more strangely this curating class never locates its own alien status in the nation spaces in which it operates, even while blithely discussing such indices of identity as nation, race, gender and class in relation to the artists whose work they promote. There is something slightly sinister about this expat gaze which refuses to identify itself as such, which coolly assumes its normativity. It is as if the expat has limitless credit in the region, access to immense quantities of capital, cultural and otherwise, in contrast to the limitations of creole capital. Ouditt’s creole credit cards cost only a pound each in keeping with the cheapness of labour in the third world.

The role of the foreigner in legislating Caribbean art has been well documented by Guggenheim. In 1950 according to Guggenheim, fearing that ‘a jury of local artists would not be impartial enough to judge entries for the annual November exhibition’ the Management Committee of the Trinidad Art Society decided to invite foreigners who they thought would be more impartial, to sit on the jury. “The foreigner’s role was to be that of juror with the latent function of reducing the possibility of conflict among local artists. The jury, thus constituted, was comprised of the French Consul, an English correspondent, and two local white individuals of high social status”.26

The jury alas, failed to deliver, instead exercising its own bias (‘…only primitives were favoured’). “The rejected artists included the best known painters of Trinidad whose work had previously been considered by the public as the most technically and artistically competent.” The excluded artists then exhibited their work on a railing outside the exhibition hall. These were also the artists who had the most professional training in art but:

“…the judges…had a model in their minds of what ‘natives’ in a colonial situation should paint like. The model was derived from the colonial experience and was inclined to see Haiti, rather than Paris, as the center for the appropriate style Trinidadian artists should imitate. If Trindiadians did not paint like the Haitians, then at least it was thought desirable that they should be emotional and expressionistic, and stick to local subject matter. Hence, the most highly praised picture of the exhibition was one called ‘Indian Beggarman’. The artists hanging up their paintings on the railings in the street were, therefore, not only protesting the indignity of having been left out and rejected but, also, the insult to themselves as Trindidadian artists and to their collective vision of a national image.”

In an article called “Art in the Caribbean” John Harrison makes a similar point. Talking of the difference of opinion between those who favoured development “along the lines of the Haitian primitives and others who felt that “the salvation of art in the West Indies lies in the assimilation of the culture of Western civilization” Harrison observed that:

26 Guggenheim, Ibid, p. 50.
“People’s origin or nationality does not seem to have much to do with which way they think. There are West Indians who, while nationalistic, believe in assimilation, and there are Englishmen in official posts who are horrified at the idea of introducing Picasso or Henry Moore to what they presumably think of as ‘the noble savage’.

Obviously it is a very difficult point. No one wants to turn West Indians into imitation Europeans, but at the same time it is stupid to delude them, or oneself, into thinking that there is any background specifically West Indian on which they can draw comparable in strength of interest to Indian, Moorish, West African, or similar cultures where a native civilization clashes with a colonial government.

I do not want to underestimate the importance and influence of what we might call “Shango and all that”: it is from a much stronger version of this, the cult of Voodoo, that the Haitian artists draw their principal inspiration: but is it enough for us to build on? And is it even desirable as a long term policy? And can it even be preserved in islands where the standard of living and the standard of education will presumably continue to rise? That West Indian and visiting European intellectuals should have a certain compassion, a tender concern, for the survival and well-being of this interesting folk-lore is natural: but based, as these cults and their manifestations are, on ignorance, poverty, and superstition, how can they be reconciled for long with up-to-date hospitals and schools, the University College of the West Indies, and the poetry of Derek Walcott?”

Unfortunately Harrison’s optimism regarding the inevitable rise in the standard of living and education in the region proved to be unfounded. In an article titled “Abstract Art, the Avant Garde and Jamaica” English art educator Edwin Todd then teaching at the Jamaica School of Art agonized over whether Jamaican artists should keep abreast of the latest trends in art such as arte povera, at the time according to him “the most avant of the avant garde”. Bemoaning the practitioners of Arte povera who included “the earth movers who hire a bull-dozer and dig a ditch through a wheat-field, or lay a square sheet of lead in the snow” he concluded that:

“...it is just as well Jamaica is rather isolated, so that our artists can develop at a slower, saner rate, and not be too much influenced by the ‘latest’ thing that is happening in the art world of the US and elsewhere. I would hate to see, for example, Rodney abandon his slow but certain progress in painting, hire a back hoe, dig a ditch across the beach, and call the public to see.”

Guggenheim too, described the tensions existing between rival ‘lines of interpretation’ of the role and nature of art and artists in Trinidadian society. There were those who favoured a Trinidadian identity reflecting “artistic change and independence from European ways of seeing and painting” and there were others such as the novelist Edgar Mittelhozer who favoured a so-called cosmopolitan view which claimed that “…brilliant sunshine or not, the problems posed by art are sui generis, and identical everywhere. There is, therefore, no reason why artists should be restricted by national or regional boundaries in their efforts to find solutions to these problems. The world of art is their oyster, and the pearls they find have international currency.”

The Repeating AlterNATIVE

The tension between so-called indigenous or local artists, what Guggenheim called the ‘localist-radicals’ and the more ‘cosmopolitan’ ones continues to this day and remains an ongoing struggle. In places like Trinidad and Barbados the present-day equivalent of the so-called cosmopolitans maintains a precarious existence—Ouditt, Eddie Bowen, Chris Cozier, Johnny Stollmeyer, Annalee Davis and others are examples of this. The lack of

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support for their work has been a blessing in disguise, as Fiedler pointed out, for it has forced them to seek out links with external artworlds and kept them in touch with new developments in the international art world. In Jamaica on the other hand the National Gallery has been fiercely established and maintained as a ‘cosmopolitan’ enclave for some time now. While this might appear on first glance to be a great advantage, in actuality the institution has generated a self-contained insular art world whose parochial concerns have little resonance outside its narrow sphere of influence. At the same time its ‘cosmopolitan’ mindset has allowed a number of foreigners/expatriates to play important roles in the local art scene. The Trinidad Art Society experiment with a ‘foreign’ jury established a tradition that would continue to manifest itself in places like Jamaica and Barbados well into the twenty first century. In 1998 at the inaugural meeting of the Southern Caribbean chapter of AICA (Association of International Art Critics) the high proportion of foreigners/expatriates involved in Caribbean art discourse was as visibly evident as the ‘white countenances’ one might have encountered in Jamaica’s Portrait and Painting Gallery in 1891. Yet there was no recognition of this phenomenon, let alone discussion of it. Fiedler has been the exception to this rule proving that not all expat art promoters in the region operate with the same kind of blind spot when it comes to acknowledging their own race and identity, or locating themselves in the far from idyllic Caribbean landscape.

Fiedler also eloquently described the predicament of the artists he was supporting. Having studied abroad at some of the best art schools available in the ’80s, at a time when the canons of modernism were being successfully challenged in the metropolitan centres where they were acquiring their art educations it seemed to this new young generation that this was an exciting time to come home to Trinidad and Tobago, with its art world where artists seemed to be making a living. Why not them? The post-colonial reality that faced them at home was one they were not quite prepared for however. In places like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, the canons and legends of modernism are still cherished ideals and post-modernism is a dirty word behind which lurks a threat to the insecure status quo.

The returning residents were viewed as interlopers, invading foreigners in their own country by the art establishment. With their critiques of the nation and independence the young artists found themselves practically persona non grata, the borders of nationhood even policed against them by resident foreigners. Guggenheim had documented a similar reaction in the 1950s to painters who returned to Trinidad and Tobago after studying abroad. Forming “the nucleus of a new, professional class” now in possession of “a new sense of identity as members of an international community of artists and with newly acquired standards of professional competence” the returning painters found that, “Upon their return, their new work and ideas were resisted as un-Trinidadian, first by their former sponsors, and later by the more chauvinistic Creole revitalizers of Trinidadian 19th century folk culture.”

It seems ironic in the light of all this that while white foreigners are easily coopted into the story of Caribbean art, it is the fate of the alterNATIVES to be treated as foreign and alien in territory they are in fact native to. In 1967 Ralph Medina, Trinidad’s National Art Officer, commenting on another foreign-returned artist said, “He is no longer Trinidadian since he

28 Fiedler, ibid.
came back from England. He will have to learn for another five or six years to become a Trinidadian again.”

It is convenient to think of such ‘foreignreturned’ artists as alterNATIVES or natives who have been altered by their contact with the wider world or by their education abroad and are therefore considered ‘alien’, ‘superfluous’ or ‘irrelevant’ to the nation space they were born in. Such artists are usually not interested in fostering a Caribbean aesthetic or promoting and supporting national agendas. They refuse, in effect, to focus on subjects the nation considers suitable for artists to focus on and they themselves, because of their ‘refuse-nik’ posture, are not considered suitable subjects of the nation.

The alterNATIVES are the illegitimate children of the nation who by virtue of differing race, class, gender or sexual variables find themselves on the wrong side of nation stories in opposition to the majority groups which assert ownership of the national or Caribbean space. AlterNATIVES are a kind of internal refugee and suffer a double illegitimacy when they go abroad because their artistic practice is seen as too elevated above or irrelevant to the realities of third world countries by metropolitan critics. What, conceptual art in the periphery? Perish the thought. And thought does perish, under the circumstances.

Thus alterNATIVES are often invisible at home and invisible also in the metropole. London critic Sue Hubbard wrote of an exhibition by Steve Ouditt in Brixton, London, that "Many interesting ideas are explored ... though the intellectual content remains undigested and sits uncomfortably with notions of interaction and community arts. After all how many Brixton kids have got to grips with Heidegger?" While Ouditt was being denied Heidegger in London, Chris Cozier was being denied Foucault in Bridgetown by a foreign, white critic, Therese Hadchity on the grounds that Foucauldian ideas were somehow inappropriate for a ‘third world artist’.

The questions of citizenship, nationality, race continue to rear their heads in interesting ways. Regard the irony in the following scenario:

It is the summer of 1997. At the Sherbourne Centre in Barbados the region's art critics are meeting at the first ever conference of the southern Caribbean chapter of AICA. A young nonresident Caribbean scholar has just finished an impassioned plea for a more 'indigenous' art criticism. His ideas are somewhat fuzzy and the paper invites criticism though not of the kind that follows. No sooner has the young man finished speaking when someone in the audience strides up to the microphone and starts berating the young scholar for trafficking in imported ideas which are alien to the region. The man at the microphone is middle-aged, white, has his hair in a pony-tail. He is one of the many resident foreigners who consider it their prerogative to legislate art in the Caribbean. He ends his defence of the region against ‘foreign’ ideas by shaking his fist and saying "Massa day done!" He is quoting a famous line attributed to Eric Williams, the charismatic prime minister who led Trinidad and Tobago into independence.

As Guggenheim put it in his thesis “The idea that the ‘master’s day is done’ is a reference to the title of a speech...delivered by Eric Williams prior to Independence. It

29 Guggenheim, Ibid. p. 112.
30 See my “Uninstalling the Nation” (Small Axe 6, September 1999) for a fuller account of this.
caused great excitement and was interpreted as an anti-white polemic.” Yet in the
Caribbean in 1998 a white expat was using this line against a member of the Caribbean
diaspora, an interesting inversion.

Race is and remains a thorny issue in Caribbean artworlds. In Jamaica a large proportion
of practising artists happen to be white. And a large proportion of these happen to be
expats as well. Yet rarely, if ever, are these facts referred to or discussed. Implicit in
this is the suggestion that it is completely natural for foreigners to participate in the
local art scene and that such participation only enriches the country and its art. In
Jamaican art history all are included as Jamaican artists with no indication whatsoever
that a particular individual may not actually have been born here and indeed may
pick up and leave at any time. A British born-artist such as Rex Dixon, for
instance, who once represented Jamaica abroad is now doing the same for
Trinidad and Tobago where he has taken up residence in recent years. Other
amusing contradictions prevail where the work of black Jamaican artists is often
discussed in terms of identity, roots, culture and race but of course the work of white
expats is never, can never, be discussed in such terms. They are simply,
transparently, making art.

Judging by something Village Voice art critic Jerry Saltz said in a recent review the situation
is no different in the US:

“…the standard used to discuss ”black art” is as double as it is damaging. No one analyzes my
work as that made by a white, middle-aged, middle-class, balding, Jewish man with glasses.
Needless to say, I know that everything I do is shaped by these things. But they’re not brought
up around my work. Perhaps they should be.”

Whereas the anticolonial project of changing the subject of aesthetic representation has
largely been accomplished in Caribbean art, the question of who controls the image-
making apparatus and who actually executes these representations remains a problem.
The long-standing quarrels over the kind of representation considered suitable in the
English-speaking Caribbean—’cosmopolitan’ or ‘internationally’-influenced subject matter
versus ‘local’ or native—has been resolved quite differently in the two locales we examined
in this chapter, though in both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago those who pursued the
first option were themselves seen and constructed as cosmopolitan outsiders no longer
‘native’ to the islands.

In Trinidad these alterNATIVES were marginalized until eventually an art centre
specializing in experimental art inspired by international/global trends came into being in
1997—CCA7. Avant garde Trinidadian artists are now almost directly connected to new
international artworlds through the exhibitions and exchanges organized by the Centre. In
Jamaica, on the other hand, a similar group gained legitimacy through their control of the
National Gallery and the School of Art. Their privileging of cosmopolitanized subject
matter and a so-called avant garde agenda over the years has led to an unsustainable
situation insofar as cultivating an audience is concerned and is incompatible with the
mandate of a national gallery. Writing in the year 2000 the curators of the National
Gallery admitted that though its:

31 In Black and White by Jerry Saltz, Village Voice, October 15th, 2004
32 See “The Curator’s Palette” (Paul, Small Axe 4, September 1998) for a more thorough examination of the
National Gallery of Jamaica.
...educational services are wide-ranging...many people are still unaware of the Gallery and its programmes. Undeniably, the Gallery has yet to reach out effectively to significant parts of the socially, culturally, and economically diverse Jamaican public. Many schools, even those in Kingston, have never visited or even sent their students to do research. Although the Gallery is well supported by the local artistic community, it has been particularly difficult to bring the “average” Jamaican adult into the Gallery. Thousands of persons live and work in the downtown Kingston area, where the Gallery is located, but only a few make regular visits...

As I write, a well-executed regime change is going on at the National Gallery of Jamaica as the equivalent of Guggenheim’s ‘localist-radicals’ appear to be gaining the upper hand over the ‘Cosmopolitans’. The problem seems to be that institutional power made Jamaica’s cosmopolitan avant garde complacent. As the years passed they became a highly insular group, gradually losing touch with what was going on internationally and almost willfully cut off from it, as Amidon has shown in her article on Jamaica’s participation in the Venice Biennale. Lip service was paid to the forms of international trends albeit long after these innovations first appeared in the metropole (Todd would be horrified to know that Jamaica has its very own arte povera practitioner now). Whereas it was possible for Krista Thompson to mount a defense of Huie against those who criticized his mimesis of ‘outdated trends in European art’ by pointing out that the very act of painting was revolutionary for a black subject in those days today it cannot be claimed that merely reproducing international trends in Caribbean locales in a disengaged way is achieving anything significant or useful. Disconnected both from the local and the global Jamaica’s avant garde is now in danger of extinction.

Thus it is to Trinidad and Tobago that the region must turn for contemporary art in conversation with the global. In the long run it is hoped that CCA7 will develop into the kind of regional resource which will enable artists making conceptual and experimental kinds of art to remain in the Caribbean and engage in productive conversations with the rest of the world from their homebase rather than dispersed locations in the diaspora. CCA7 also has the potential to serve as a conduit for continuing the conversations which first emerged in the alternate international art circuit which developed “outside the Euro-American orbit” at sites such as the Havana Biennale, the Sao Paolo Bienale and the Johannesburg Biennial and which go uneasily under the name of ‘new internationalism’. The oppositional, contestatory art movements that came into being in places like Britain were directly linked to “the work of artists, writers and critics from the colonial diaspora” trying to create room for themselves in the lily-white artworld of the metropole. It is only by making links with these far-flung movements in the diaspora and elsewhere and by entering into global conversations with the rest of the world that the Caribbean can emerge from the blinding sunlight of the margins.

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34 Geeta Kapur, “A New Internationalism”, ibid, p. 44.