

Rethinking the “Transnational” Caribbean Curatorial: Politics of Space in “Caribe insular: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso”

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The main interest of this essay is the representational politics of Caribbean art exhibitions developed within European cultural and curatorial scenarios. In particular, I will analyze the 1998 “Caribe insular: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso” at the Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo, Badajoz, Spain, one of the major and most innovative curatorial initiatives in the 1990s to deal with the Caribbean region. “Caribe insular” was a collaboration of the recently founded museum and Casa de América in Madrid and was curated by Antonio Zaya and María Lluïsa Borràs along with a group of Spanish Caribbeanists. Focusing on “Caribe insular,” I will examine how the use of certain conceptions associated with the Caribbean and constructed and sketched in European countries through art exhibitions and cultural practices complicate understandings of Europe’s own postcolonial present. More specifically, I will try to understand how “Caribe insular” echoed the regionalized panorama of postdictatorship Spain and coped with the “postcolonial” anxieties and expectations of Spanish artistic institutions. In so doing, I intend to assess the role that Caribbean visual culture has played in the configuration of an image of postcolonial Spain, that is, the ways these curatorial practices configured and defined not so much an image of a postcolonial

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Caribbean but one of Spain in relation to its colonial past, and how the contradictions and conflicts of the Spanish cultural reality were captured in this productive curatorial process.

If we were to consider “Caribe insular” only for its discursive statement, it would still remain an exercise in defining and constructing a determined representation of Caribbean reality. What renders “Caribe insular” interesting as an object of analysis, nevertheless, is that the exhibition attempted to break with pre-established and exotic conceptualizations of Caribbean artistic practice, something that burdened the major previous curatorial initiatives on Caribbean art conceived from outside the region. “Caribe insular” articulated a nuanced approach to Caribbean reality and presented a daring use of the exhibition space and a more active notion of spectatorship. Prior to 1998, the major large-scale shows of Caribbean art produced outside of the Caribbean—“1492/1992: Un nouveau regard sur les Caraïbes” (Paris, 1992); “Karibische Kunst Heute” (Kassel, Germany, 1994); and “Caribbean Visions: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture” (Miami, 1995)—focused mostly on painting and sculpture in their attempt to represent an “authentic” image of the Caribbean. By foregrounding a specific part of the region, for example, “Caribbean Visions” and “Karibische Kunst Heute” somehow compromised the curatorial endeavor of dealing with the totality of the Caribbean region. In “Caribbean Visions,” fourteen Jamaican artists were included, a number that far exceeds the representation of other countries and that contrasts with the total absence of artists from territories such as Martinique or Guadeloupe.

The approach to the Caribbean elaborated by “Caribe Insular,” on the other hand, included many curatorial advances, thus attempting to move away from the contradictions of “identity-exhibitions” in order to complicate the *locus* of curatorship and to focus attention on the complexity of Caribbean reality and visual production.¹ The exhibition was complemented by a theoretical event and a catalogue that includes texts of key Caribbean thinkers.² At a time when the representation of the Caribbean in Spain was solely exemplified by the presence of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, “Caribe insular” gave attention to manifold contexts within the region, troubling the identification of the area present up to then in Spain and acknowledging the complex postcolonial and geopolitical predicament of the Caribbean.³

“Caribe insular” intended to foster an original, aesthetic-oriented approach to Caribbean creativity. It tried to give certain autonomy to artworks to free them from a single curatorial logic, encouraging experimental and nonlinear approaches to the exhibition display. Although this objective, as we will see, was not fully achieved, the project presented substantial differences with respect to previous large-scale regional shows curated both inside and outside

1 See Reesa Greenberg, “Identity Exhibitions: From Magiciens de la terre to Documenta 11,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (2005): 90–94.

2 Aside from the contributions of the two curators, the book contains texts by Antonio Gatzambide-Géigel, Yolanda Wood, Adi Martis, Allison Thompson, Gerald Alexis, Veerle Poupeye, Irina Leyva-Pérez, Dominique Brébion, Haydee Venegas, Antonio Martorell, Marianne de Tolentino, Christopher Cozier, the Callaloo Company, and Delia Blanco.

3 The artist selection is quite eloquent in that respect. The show paid attention to normally infra-represented contexts (even more so in Spain) such as Aruba, Saint Lucia, and Martinique.

the region.⁴ In this sense, “Caribe insular” stands as one of the most pivotal events in the search for a more aesthetically oriented embodiment of curatorial practices dealing with the Caribbean.

I will suggest, therefore, that the exhibition can only be approached from an ambivalent point of view. By this, I mean that any criticism of the show—and, by extension, of other similar experiences—can be realized only by integrating the heterogeneous, even contradictory, agencies of the institution, the curators, the spectators, and the exhibition itself. Whereas Caribbean art exhibitions have been read in a conceptual vein, attentive above all to the purpose that the curatorial discourse and each artwork portray, a different history emerges when we pay attention to the visual archive and the oral testimonies of the show. In our case, “Caribe insular” aimed to ensure a space for aesthetics, putting into place a set of strategies of display and artistic appreciation that generated a negotiation with the Caribbean’s politics of space and perception. However, it remained trapped within the contradictions derived from Spanish postcolonial anxieties of representation, categorization, and identification of Spain’s own past and present. Therefore, only by considering how those dimensions were driven to coexist will it be possible to measure the reach of the exhibition’s curatorial aspirations. Far from being a unique case, I will argue, the contradictions arising from those aspirations have shaped curatorial practices produced about the Caribbean region in heterogeneous ways.

Confronting Caribbean Curatorship

Understanding curatorship as a complex, ambivalent terrain, where multiple and divergent agencies come into play opens up, I suggest, a particularly suitable position from which to analyze the complex spatial politics developed within postcolonial art exhibitions about and from the Caribbean. In many cases, regional art exhibitions have been criticized only by looking at their curatorial statements, as if they were little more than a direct extension of the curator’s will. Curatorial practices are, however, not only ideas and theoretical images but also practical materializations of those ideas and images, for they elicit multiple responses from their audiences, giving shape to heterogeneous and contradictory experiences and interpretations. Although exhibitions are configured by curators and specific art centers, expressing the interests of both and somehow “limiting” the terrain where the art project can express itself, their lives go far beyond the intention of the curators or the art centers. In this sense, if we aim to understand the spatial politics taking place within art exhibitions about the Caribbean, it will be necessary to conceptualize each project as more than a direct materialization of a single curator or art center. We will need to consider the curatorial as a terrain where multiple and

4 I appreciate here the insights of Allison Thompson, Yolanda Wood, and Dominique Brébion concerning Zaya and Borràs’s engagement with the cases of Barbados, Cuba, and Martinique, respectively. Their comments point out the existence of significant divergences in the awareness and position of both curators concerning their negotiation with different Caribbean countries.

occasionally contradictory forms of agency come into play in heterogeneous ways. To ensure a critical posture toward Caribbean curatorial discourses will require, borrowing from Krista Thompson, that we transcend “a longer tendency in curatorial approaches to Caribbean art to view it as illustrative of ideals, facts even, of Caribbeanness or of historical processes in the region, instead of engaging what the work does visually and aims to affect and letting these visual and aesthetics matters inform the interpretation, narration, and display of the work.”⁵

Thompson’s suggestions will be particularly salient for my purposes here. Throughout this essay I will pay attention to how “postcolonial” art exhibitions have played a central role in the configuration of a postcolonial Spain; that is, the ways “Caribe insular” engages with and reflects the contradictions of not only an image of the Caribbean, but also of one of the “local context” in which it arises. The focus on Caribbean regional shows taking place in Spain helps us provide a useful framework with which to deconstruct the presence of colonial legacies in present day Spanish and European visual and cultural politics. It should be noted that Caribbean reality is not perceived in the same terms in Spain as in other European metropolitan centers, such as in the United Kingdom or France. During the 1990s, Spain became a privileged destination for a “cultural migration” of artists from the Caribbean, constituting, in the case of Cuba, an alternative to the Miami-Havana binary.⁶ The expansion of Caribbean visual culture coincides with a moment marked in Europe by a tense redefinition of its regional present and its colonial past.⁷ In the case of Spain, exhibitions such as “Caribe insular” came at a time of historical and social adjustment, when the development and expansion of the European Union was forcing many countries to rethink their role as peripheries, and pushing many local identity practices, not exempt from a colonial background, to assert themselves within a new “expanded” terrain.

In recent years, we have witnessed a considerable development in critical thinking about Caribbean curatorial practices. Many voices have attempted to define the conditions under which Caribbean art is presented and exhibited, as well as the institutional and curatorial gaps that exist in the artistic panorama and to what extent curatorial practices are still attached to colonial and postcolonial notions of regional and national identity and identification.⁸ The turn toward “regional” art survey shows (that are quite heterogeneous in content and discourse)

5 Krista Thompson, “How to Install Art as a Caribbeanist,” in David Bailey, Alissandra Cummins, Axel Lapp, and Allison Thompson, eds., *Curating in the Caribbean* (Berlin: Green Box, 2012), 99.

6 Many renowned Caribbean artists, including Carlos Garaicoa, Los Carpinteros, Jorge Pineda, and others, settled in various locations in Spain over this period, and a similar process has taken place with intellectuals (Rafael Rojas, Jesús Díaz), writers (Abilio Estévez, Antonio José Ponte), and art critics and curators (Iván de la Nuez, Gerardo Mosquera.)

7 See Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds., *The Manifesta Decade* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

8 Especially relevant in the context of the Caribbean are Bailey, Cummins, Lapp, and Thompson, *Curating in the Caribbean*; Wendy Asquith, “Expectations of Catastrophe: Mario Benjamin, Commissions, and Countercontext,” *Small Axe*, no. 42 (November 2013): 227–42; and Claire Tancons, “Carnival and the Artistic Contract: Spring in Gwangju,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 25 (Winter 2009): 106–19.

within the last years of the 2010s, and the increase in transnational creative projects within the region, make these reflections decisive for the Caribbean context.⁹

Although those forums began to address key issues related to the display and modes of spectatorship of artistic practices, thus generating a more sharply focused view of the predicament of Caribbean curatorial practice, some pitfalls are still present in regional curatorial criticism. For example, the effects of the representation-based condition of the critique of exhibitions—and the *presentism* that blurs the fact that Caribbean cultures of display have a long, and contradictory, genealogy—are often forgotten.¹⁰ Similarly, the preeminence of the “curator as star” in group exhibitions and the subordination of the aesthetic dimension of the artworks in favor of a direct and immediate identification of their content through their provenance are also not fully addressed.¹¹ Finally, other similarities can be drawn to the process of overlooking the complex relationship between curatorial practice and spectatorship.¹²

A further reading of the role of the Caribbean curatorial is compulsory. I will attempt to tackle that issue, complicating, through the analysis of “Caribe insular,” some of the most recent approaches to Caribbean art’s transnational condition. Traditionally, there has been a prevalent tendency to dismiss regional shows curated outside the region, along with their related “insider-outsider” binaries.¹³ In examining the special contextual predicament serving as a base of “Caribe insular,” I will attempt to move away from such binary dichotomies as “us” and “them” in order to understand the curatorial terrain as a space in which processes of cultural domination, spatial configuration, and negotiation occur not only at a discursive but also at a practical level. I will then consider what happens when we acknowledge the problematic existence of art exhibitions, one that is partially independent of the will of curators and art institutions. That is, what happens when we no longer consider exhibitions as direct

- 9 These include “Caribbean: Crossroads of the World” (New York, 2012), “Rockstone and Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art” (Hartford, Conn., 2010), and “Infinite Islands: Contemporary Caribbean Art” (New York, 2007) in the United States, and “Who More Sci-Fi Than Us” (Amersfoort, Netherlands, 2012), “Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic” (Liverpool, 2010), and “Kréyol Factory” (Paris, 2009) in Europe, to name just a few. Not all of these exhibitions were restricted to the Caribbean, although they all intended to place the region within spatial configurations, complicating the identification between territory and context. Since the analysis of those shows is not the objective of this article, it can, however, be noted that they were centered on the reformulation of the relationship between national identity and diaspora, the articulation of a broader mapping of Caribbean culture, and the strategies used by artists and curators to eschew the “burden of representation” imposed by external interests. For a critical examination of each show, see Carlos Garrido Castellano and Dominique Brébion, eds., *De los últimos creadores de mapas: Pensamiento crítico y exposiciones colectivas de arte caribeño* (Madrid: La Discreta, 2012).
- 10 Much has been written on this subject. What remains, however, is to conceive of Caribbean creative activities and artistic spaces within a more comprehensive logic of power and labor relations, and not as an exclusive, isolated area, a need that is even more pressing when we consider how artistic practice “colonizes” extra-artistic spheres.
- 11 This becomes even more pressing in regional, “postcolonial” exhibitions, where the major intent is to condense the elements by featuring a specific “peripheral” region. For a critical review of that process, see Emma Barker, *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 1999); Paul O’Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects* (London: Open Editions, 2007); and Francesco Bonami, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition,” *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (2003): 152–63.
- 12 Very few references can be found concerning the decisive transformations on contemporary art spectatorship in the Caribbean. As exceptions, we can mention Leah Gordon, “Kanaval: Vodou, Politics, and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti,” *Radical History Review*, no. 115 (Winter 2013): 169–83; and Claire Tancons, “Curating Carnival? Performance in Contemporary Caribbean Art,” in Bailey, Cummins, Lapp, and Thompson, *Curating in the Caribbean*, 37–63.
- 13 See, for example, Yolanda Wood, “Arte del Caribe: El decenio que terminó el siglo XX,” *Arte por Excelencias*, no. 1 (2009): 13–20.

products or derivations of personal or institutional will, and we attempt, instead, to approach their in(ter)dependent located existence? In engaging these issues, Christopher Cozier has pointed out that “we remain nameless but labeled images.”¹⁴ Taking up Cozier’s observation, through the case of “Caribe insular,” I will explain how this proposition can be developed.

“Caribe insular: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso”

“Caribe insular” emerged as a collaboration between the then recently created Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo (MEIAC), located in Badajoz, and Casa de América in Madrid.¹⁵ It was curated by Antonio Zaya and María Lluïsa Borràs, and it brought to Spain the works of forty-six artists from twelve Caribbean countries. Moreover, it gathered together fourteen academics, Caribbeanists, art critics, and curators both from inside and outside the region. The exhibition reflected the interest in art from the Americas that MEIAC had shown since its inception.¹⁶ The exhibition expanded its scope to many artistic practices that had previously remained secondary. The configuration of immersive installations, performative actions, and the screening of video artworks took a leading role within the exhibition framework. Spectators could experience, through multiple sensorial approaches, a series of artworks that demanded different reactions. To that interest in the participatory and the immersive—which distanced the exhibition from the anxiety of defining what could stand for the Caribbean and how to deal with the representation of Caribbean identity—we should add the interest in presenting the ongoing advances of a young generation of creators who



Figure 1. Annalee Davis, *Barbados in a Nutshell*, 1996. Installation. Courtesy of the artist

- 14 Christopher Cozier, “Notes on Wrestling with the Image,” in Christopher Cozier and Tatiana Flores, *Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011), 9. One of the most interesting points made by Cozier relates to the consideration that “local” Caribbean contexts have already been engaging in international debates before, and besides, the presence of foreign curators and actors.
- 15 The museum was created in 1994 as part of the cultural initiatives following the commemoration of the quincentennial of the “discovery” of the Americas held in 1992. That year marked a developmental explosion in Spain. Perhaps most emblematic of this phenomenon was the 1992 Universal Exposition in Seville (Expo '92).
- 16 Prior to 1998, MEIAC had presented the work of Carlos Capelán and a group exhibition on Arte Madi, thus initiating a tendency that would continue throughout the following years. “Caribe insular” was, in any event, the most ambitious exhibition developed by the museum in the 1990s.



Figure 2. Albert Chong, *The Sisters*, 1986. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3. Albert Chong, *Seated Presence*, 1992. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist

began to gain international relevance in the early 1990s. The show was a pioneer in exhibiting the work of artists and collectives such as Los Carpinteros, Carlos Garaicoa, Albert Chong, Belkis Ramírez, Jorge Pineda, Pascal Meccariello, Christopher Cozier, Marc Latamie, Annalee Davis, and Tania Bruguera, who had emerged between the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

The curatorial discourse of “Caribe insular,” expressed through a voluminous catalogue, aimed to elaborate a critical view of Caribbean art understood as oppositional to the forces of Westernization in the art world. Pointing out the exclusion that Caribbean creators have experienced when trying to engage within international arenas, it outlined the cosmopolitanism of the region, presenting an art “that despite being interiorized does not become provincial, but that on the contrary inscribes itself within cosmopolitan postmodernity.”¹⁷ Through the artistic selection, curators Zaya and Borràs intended to explore the most recent creative developments of the region, aiming to capture the “diversity” of “an artistic phenomenon matching deconstruction, globalization, postcolonial discourse and the end of history.”¹⁸ Moreover, they sought to privilege processes that were producing a critical understanding of Caribbean reality: “We have tried to select that contemporary art that takes part in the permanent conflict between a dominant, unifying and subjugating culture, and another dominated culture, one of resistance, since this conflict is a salient feature of Caribbean art of nowadays.”¹⁹

Assertions like these jeopardized some curatorial choices, such as the inclusion of intuitive artists alongside contemporary discourses, supposedly integrating and representing a common ethos, and somehow biased the perception of some of the artworks as “resistance art.” By drawing a story of Caribbean art understood as a peripheral reality, the display of “Caribbean art” remained trapped in the orientation toward the very content it sought to escape. Sharing to a great extent the “new curatorial rhetoric of flexibility, connectivity, transformativity, intersubjectivity, contextuality, collaboration, and hybridity” that Paul O’Neill recognizes in many curatorial practices from the 1990s, “Caribe insular” aimed to project a nuanced view of the predicament of cultural production within the region without acknowledging that the exhibition itself was compromised by the contradictions implicit in that predicament.²⁰ It also obviated the fact of curatorial practice being a decisive factor of artistic mediation, responsible for transplanting a whole thought on Caribbean politics of representation to a place as remote from the Caribbean as Badajoz. That said, my intention is not to criticize the pitfalls of MEIAC’s “postcolonial” approach to the Caribbean. Instead, I will assert here

17 “Que a pesar de interiorizarse no deriva en provincianismo, sino que por el contrario se inscribe de pleno derecho en la postmodernidad cosmopolita”; Antonio Zaya and María Lluïsa Borràs, “Introducción: Ultramarina,” in Antonio Zaya and María Lluïsa Borràs, eds., *Caribe insular: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso* (Badajoz and Madrid: MEIAC and Casa de América, 1998), 13. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

18 “Un fenómeno artístico coincidente con la deconstrucción, la globalización, el discurso postcolonial y el final de la historia”; *ibid.*, 11.

19 “Hemos tratado de seleccionar aquel arte actual que toma partido en el conflicto permanente entre una cultura dominante, integradora y de sometimiento y otra cultura dominada, de Resistencia, viendo en ella una constante del arte del Caribe de hoy”; *ibid.*, 13.

20 Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 110.

that these constraints and limitations can be directly linked to the museum’s own peripheral position and its postcolonial aspirations. It is time, then, to outline this connection.

(Not so) Paradisiacal Stories of Exclusion and Fragmentation

“Caribe insular” forms part of a complex network of cultural politics in which different interests and different regional, national, and transnational processes of identification and marginalization are taking place at the same time. Although constructed from Europe, its point of view cannot be summarized as and equated to dominant European representations of the Caribbean. Rather, the exhibition attempted to contest previous stereotyped visions of the region, linking that process to the complex process of construction of a subaltern regional identity within the subaltern role Spain plays within the European Union.²¹ The exhibition’s pitfalls were, in other words, subjected to a complex set of cultural politics that cannot be easily applied to other large-scale Caribbean art exhibitions organized in Europe.

The exhibition was one of the major curatorial projects undertaken by MEIAC.²² It reflected the interest the museum has in presenting itself as the articulator of a three-way relationship, having Portugal, the region of Extremadura, and Latin America and the Caribbean as its members. MEIAC sought to create its own distinctive space within the already crowded panorama of museums and contemporary art centers in Spain. In order to do so, it aimed to benefit from the singularities of the border condition of Badajoz with respect to Portugal, and the (at least) polemical historical links between Extremadura and the Americas, with Extremadura being the region that gave birth to most of the *conquistadores*, including Hernán Cortés, Francisco Pizarro, Francisco de Orellana, and Vasco Núñez de Balboa.²³ MEIAC’s *raison d’être* is thus connected with a “territorial principle that situates the act of selection in a defined yet necessarily complex field of proximities, and aesthetic and political contiguities and repudiations.”²⁴

Concurrently, the museum attempted to counter the isolation of Extremadura within the regionalized panorama of democratic Spain, offering paths that might lead to the modernization

21 Spain is part of the less economically developed nations of the European Union, a set of countries referred to by the pejorative term of “PIIGS” (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain). When Spain and Portugal joined the EU in 1986, critical and popular debates in both countries revolved around the fear of losing sovereignty, the potential benefits of membership, and the need to balance European influence with other historical, political, and economic links. The regional politics described in this section illustrate those debates.

22 Between 1995 and 1998, when “Caribe insular” was being produced, MEIAC focused mostly on building bridges with Portuguese art. This interest materialized in the form of frequent group and individual exhibitions of Portuguese art within the annual program. The museum also developed a series in which the work of a Portuguese artist was contrasted with the work of a Spanish artist.

23 All these elements are present in the statements produced at the time of the museum’s founding. See Antonio Franco Domínguez, “Presentación: Museo extremeño e iberoamericano de arte contemporáneo,” in *Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo* (Mérida: Junta de Extremadura, 1995) 17–39. See also Miguel Rojas Mix, “¿Por qué una colección de arte iberoamericano en Extremadura?,” in *Museo Extremeño*, 203–15.

24 “Un principio territorial que hace de la selección un ámbito definido, pero algo necesariamente complejo, de proximidades, pliegues y rechazos estéticos y políticos”; Francisco Godoy, “El panóptico extremeño: Voluntades explícitas y problemas implícitos en el proyecto MEIAC,” *SalonKritik*, 18 October 2011, www.salonkritik.net/10-11/2011/10/el_panoptico_extremeno_volunta.php.

of that Comunidad Autónoma and seeking to enliven Badajoz's cultural life.²⁵ It thus sought to partake in the diversity of the entire Spanish territory: on the one hand, contemporary Spanish art was becoming capitalized and transformed into a spectacle, as evidenced by the creation of ARCO Madrid art fair, the foundation of a vast number of biennials, and the creation of museums such as the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (1992), the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (1995), and the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum (1997), to name just a few.²⁶ Spain, then, was becoming institutionalized in the 1990s, and was doing so in a very specific way, one focused on large-scale institutions and celebratory and spectacular exhibitions. On the other hand, Spanish artists were becoming provincialized, condemned to oblivion and exiled to a periphery within the overall framework of the European Union. In this sense, Spanish art of the last two decades of the twentieth century was subjected to the contradictions of the art market and the fragility of the institutional art system, which coexisted with a ferocious commoditization of culture within official policies:

Since the beginning of the eighties some institutional structures for the dissemination of contemporary art based on criteria linked to the global *boom* of market, and specifically of the art market, started to be developed in Spain. . . . These structures were legitimized by a discourse of modernization that was established at the service of the art industry, at the expense of other possible models of cultural politics for which the market did not necessarily serve as the privileged or legitimate framework. We should consider, in any case, that such politics were methodically initiated within a context that lacked museums and institutions capable of ensuring the public function of art. . . . It is also necessary to point out that this entire process introduced a period in which cultural politics reached a centrality without precedents in our context, acting as flagship of national politics.²⁷

25 The Comunidades Autónomas are territorial entities that enjoy partial political and juridical autonomy within the Spanish nation-State. The actual structure of Spain was configured in 1978 as part of the first democratic constitution promulgated after the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. With regard to MEIAC, it used a seventeenth-century panoptical structure that was part of a prison. The inherent discourse of this architectural project was also related to the idea of breaking the region's isolation and acting as a catalyst for elements that were shared by both Badajoz and Extremadura: the Americas, Portugal, and "Spanish modernism" represented by Madrid. A fourth element, embodied by the local art scene and common genealogies, was to be added to this programmatic discourse.

26 The terms *cultural management*, *urban development*, and *modernization process* became common within the Spanish lexicon of the 1990s. Many of the museums that arose during the decade were conceived as agents of modernization and urban transformation; they became a trademark that was particularly efficient in transforming the image of some cities and promoting them in the cultural tourism sector. See Juan Antonio Ramírez and Jesús Carrillo, *Arte de tendencias, tendencias del arte a principios del siglo XXI* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2004); Selma Reuben Holo, *Beyond the Prado: Museums and Identity in Democratic Spain* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1999); and Iñaki Esteban, *El efecto Guggenheim: Del espacio basura al ornamento* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2007).

27 "A principios de los años ochenta comenzaron a desarrollarse en España unas estructuras institucionales para la difusión del arte contemporáneo basadas en criterios ligados al *boom* global del mercado, y específicamente del mercado del arte. . . . Estas estructuras fueron legitimadas por un discurso de modernización que se planteó esencialmente al servicio de la promoción de la industria artística, en detrimento de otros posibles modelos de política cultural para los cuales el mercado no era necesariamente el entorno privilegiado o legítimo. Hay que tener en cuenta, en cualquier caso, que dichas políticas se iniciaron programáticamente en un contexto originalmente carente de museos e instituciones capaces de garantizar una función pública del arte. . . . También es necesario resaltar que todo ello abrió un periodo en el que las políticas culturales adquirieron una significación sin apenas precedente en nuestro contexto, alcanzando ocasionalmente el grado de verdadero buque insignia de las políticas de Estado más generales"; "Desacuerdos: Sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado español," *Desacuerdos*, no. 1 (2004): 11, www.museoreinasofia.es/publicaciones/desacuerdos#numero-1.

To this panorama we should add the intrinsic cultural and political impact of 1992—the year of the Columbus Quincentennial—a mythical event that was appropriated politically in different ways and that fueled a range of official and insurgent imaginaries, permeating the debates on art and the public sphere over the course of the entire decade.²⁸ This process opened, in any event, the cultural panorama of Spain to the representation and display of difference.²⁹ However, this did not translate, in most cases, to a critical conceptualization of the predicament of postcolonial Spain. The “curatorial turn” in Spain was introduced through the institutionalization of the art system and through an interest in exploring (gender and post-colonial) difference as a “differential” recourse with respect to Europe. In the latter case, this exploration was more emphatically developed by art centers such as the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno in the Canary Islands or MEIAC.³⁰ Throughout the 1990s, we find a succession of

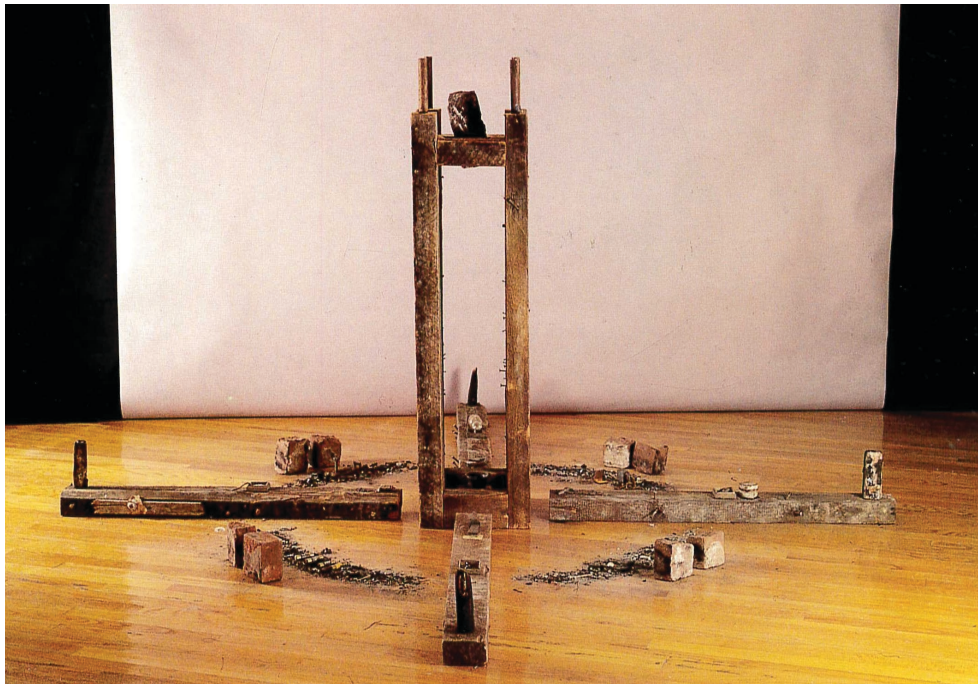


Figure 4. Osaira Muyale, *Silence*, 1997. Installation. Courtesy of the artist

- 28 The nineties saw the emergence of a critique of cultural institutions that can be more easily tracked through the work of some artists than by following curators and exhibitions, even when some projects, such as *Desacuerdos*, intended to use art criticism and curatorship as a vehicle for critically examining Spanish cultural and artistic policies. See Juan Vicente Aliaga, “El fondo de la cuestión: Sobre las características del comisariado en el Estado español en las décadas de los 80 y los 90,” in *Impasse 5: La década equívoca; El trasfondo del arte contemporáneo español en los 90* (Lleida: Ajuntament de Lleida i Centre d’art la Panera, 2005), 233–51.
- 29 See Ileana Rodríguez, “‘El sentido de la diferencia’: Racialización y multiculturalismo—mundos hispánicos ‘post,’” in Ileana Rodríguez and Josebe Martínez, eds., *Postcolonialidades históricas: (In)Visibilidades hispanoamericanas/colonialismos ibéricos* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2008), 21–43.
- 30 Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (CAAM) was created in 1989, under the idea of the Canary Islands as an Atlantic location belonging to “three continents.” Antonio Zaya (one of the curators of “Caribe insular”) was responsible, along with his twin brother Octavio Zaya, director of *Atlántica*, one of the most important Spanish art journals dealing with postcolonial art.

exhibitions that attempted to approach “the art of the peripheries” from widely heterogeneous positions, ranging from more celebratory and illustrative visions or politically correct itineraries, to more critical positions, often taking shape in the form of exhibitions.³¹ The latter addressed the predicament of art from the Americas, taking into account the presence of Latin American



Figure 5. Petrona Morrison, *Survivors*, 1995. Sculpture. Courtesy of the artist

Both Zayas played a central role within the “postcolonial” debates of the 1990s, as exemplified by the fact that Octavio joined Okwui Enwezor’s curatorial team for Documenta 11 (2012).

- 31 Martí Perán alludes to “the evident reduction to what all those problems are subjected to from the very moment of their artistic thematization” (“la evidente reducción a la que son sometidos todos estos problemas desde el momento mismo de su tematización artística”). Martí Perán, “Diez apuntes para una década (arte español de los 90),” [www.martiperan.net /print.php?id=18](http://www.martiperan.net/print.php?id=18) (accessed 10 December 2014). A (not exhaustive) record of those exhibitions would include Dan Cameron’s “Cocido y crudo” (MNCARS, Madrid, 1994); “Comer o no comer” (Salamanca, 2003); and the series of exhibitions that the Museo Reina Sofía commissioned in 2000 under the title “Versiones del Sur: Cinco propuestas en torno al arte en América.” The series included “Más allá del documento” (2000–2001, curated by Monica Amor and Octavio Zaya); “Heterotopías: Medio siglo sin lugar (1918–1968)” (2000–2001, curated by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea); “No es sólo lo que ves: Pervirtiendo el minimalismo” (2000–2001, curated by Gerardo Mosquera); “F[r]icciones” (2000–2001, curated by Ivo Mesquita and Adriano Pedrosa); and “Eztetyka del sueño” (2001, curated by Carlos Basualdo and Octavio Zaya).



Figure 6. Belkis Ramírez, *De la misma madera*, 1994. Installation. Courtesy of the artist

and Caribbean communities in Spain and the attempt to redefine Spanish identity from the vantage point of difference, leading, ultimately, to contradictory results.³²

“Caribe insular” materialized within, and in some ways exemplified, that context. The image of a fragmented, excluded, and not-so-idyllic Caribbean overlaps with, and in some respects comes to be explained by, the contradictions of its own image as a postcolonial, peripheral Spain. Nevertheless, to identify “Caribe insular” with a colorful exercise of multicultural display risks missing a great portion of what the show meant in the context of Caribbean visual culture of the 1990s. As we will see, a more nuanced interpretation of the exhibition is possible.

Artistic Discourses within/versus the Curatorial

Although being burdened by its status as a manifestation of Spanish regional, “postcolonial” anxieties, and by its condition as a so-called peripheral regional group show exhibited in Europe, “Caribe insular” played a decisive role in configuring a curatorial practice based on the expression of the multiple agencies involved in cultural production. It aimed to reinvigorate Caribbean regimes of visibility and display, eliciting new possibilities for dealing with Caribbean reality from a regional curatorial standpoint. In terms of display, curators Zaya and Borràs granted an important space for the artworks to “speak for themselves” within the curatorial staging. Many of the works were unfolded as “invading” the space of the spectator, aiming to trouble the “primacy of the gaze” predominating in traditional—and not-so-traditional—exhibition displays.³³ By so doing, “Caribe insular” opposed its presentation to that of the major former regional exhibitions mentioned earlier in this essay.

This is best demonstrated by the visual and oral testimonies of the show that, in absence of wider documentation, are of inestimable value in reconstructing the curatorial initiative from the point of view of spectatorship. The curatorial discourse favored many itineraries, including such large spaces as the not frequently used museum basement. The rooms were dominated by immersive installations and videos that demanded different reactions from the visitor. In many cases, the inclusion of details within large-scale compositions forced the public to approach each artwork with attention and to spend time examining each project. If the layout encouraged freedom of movement, in many cases the spectator had to face physical obstacles (this was the case, for example, with the installations by Annalee Davis, Los Carpinteros, Armando Mariño, among others). This strategy—the inclusion of not readily identifiable or symbolically complex artworks, the use of diverse artistic mediums, and the inclusion of a wide range of Caribbean countries—visually echoed the idea of fragmentation

32 In Badajoz, MEIAC commissioned Gerardo Mosquera to organize a series of seminars on identity and cultural politics, critically examining the relationship between the Caribbean, Latin America, and Spain. These events took place in 1998, 1999, and 2000 and resulted in the publication of a book. See Gerardo Mosquera, *Adiós Identidad: Arte y cultura desde América Latina* (Badajoz: MEIAC, 2004).

33 On the implications of the primacy of the gaze in the museum, see David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

that the curatorial discourse aimed for. The statements made by the artists participating in the show were particularly insistent on this dimension.³⁴

Although acknowledging the heterogeneity of approaches offered by the exhibition, Spanish critics placed greater emphasis on the thematic aspects of the show. There were, however, exceptions. Rosa Olivares dedicated a six-page review to the exhibition in the popular journal *Lápiz*. Elaborating further on the idea of a nonexotic conceptualization of the Caribbean that was at the base of the curatorial discourse, Olivares recognized that the interest in categorizing and exhibiting the Caribbean was directly related to an attempt to redefine Spain’s colonial past and postcolonial present. The text—which uses the inclusive *nosotros* (we), thus referring to the Spanish community as a whole—centered the analysis on issues of spectatorship in Spain, which served as a springboard for contextualizing the exhibition display.³⁵

Countering the preeminence of the visual and the contemplative, the artworks exhibited in “Caribe insular” demanded different approaches from the public, involving a multisensorial engagement and a special prominence of process-oriented, open-meaning artworks: Marcos Lora’s installation, for example, included reworked objects, a message transmitted through a phone, and graphic design; Elvis López presented a video within a space filled with neon sculptures; Marc Latamie’s installation, configured in situ, gathered prefabricated object altered by the artist; Allora and Calzadilla designed a dance floor specifically for the exhibition, which required audience participation in order to function; something similar occurred with Antonio Martorell’s installation; Freddie Mercado performed at the show’s opening; Carlos Garaicoa created a jukebox as part of an in-situ bar scene; and Tania Bruguera configured a labyrinth and performed inside it. All these projects produced a singular image never seen in other Caribbean group exhibitions showcased outside the region. The preponderance of immersive and participatory artworks somehow added greater complexity to the interpretation of each project, thereby challenging the expectations that many Spanish spectators had about the region.

Similarly, many artworks were representative of ongoing processes taking place within the Caribbean region that were aimed at transforming the impact of art on local public spheres. The artists represented in the show were in many cases developing or initiating artist-run spaces throughout the region, an element that was palpable within the exhibition display. The exhibition also produced a turn toward more collaborative, immersive, and participatory practices, joining art collectives and voicing a critical concern about the role that artists should play within the art system. In addition, the exhibition focused on questioning not only

34 In preparing this essay, I interviewed the following artists: Alexandre Arrechea, Winston Branch, Ernest Bréleur, Albert Chong, Christopher Cozier, Annalee Davis, Pascal Meccariello, Osaira Muyale, Jorge Pineda, Belkis Ramírez, and Marcos Lora Read. Though not all of them were able to attend the show, many of them had a studio visit with the curators and remember having had conversations on the mounting of each artwork in the museum. In the case of already produced artworks, there were different processes of selection: in some cases (as for Meccariello), the artwork was chosen from the last solo exhibition; in others (as for Muyale), through a studio visit and a conversation; finally, in some cases, the national museum was used as a conduit for contacting the artist (as for Chong).

35 Rosa Olivares, “El paraíso no existe,” *Lápiz: Revista Internacional de Arte*, no. 147 (November 1998): 68–74.

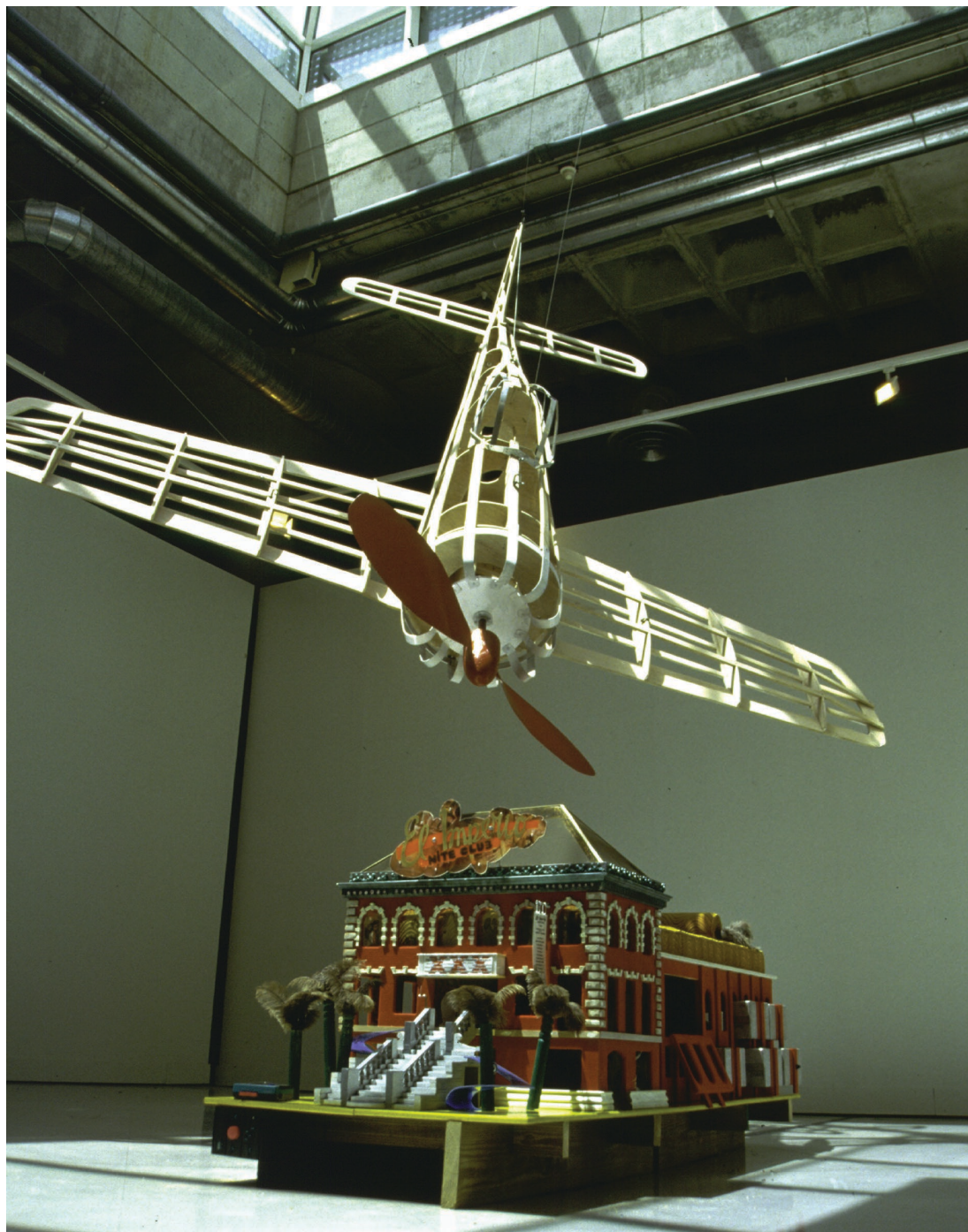


Figure 7. Charles Juhász-Alvarado, *Transvestoys*, 1998. Installation. Courtesy of Charles Juhász-Alvarado and Ana Rosa Rivera

representational and identity issues but also wider notions of visual appropriation and commoditization envisaged through a strong presence of vernacular elements within the selected artworks. Many of the exhibited projects dealt directly with everyday Caribbean vernacular issues. In these cases, instead of providing the elements for identification and categorization of an artwork’s meaning, a more open and less explanatory engagement—an “untranslatable” presentation of the artwork—was favored.³⁶

Exhibition Making and Spatial Politics

In this essay, I have argued that any reading of curatorial practices of Caribbean art developed abroad cannot be based solely on a rigid divide between “authentic” approaches and “misleading” images. Rather, it is necessary to understand the spatial politics taking place within each show, in each institutional context. In many ways, “Caribe insular” signified a major step in inserting a critical consciousness into international curatorial approaches to Caribbean art. It was conceived as part of a broad investigation into the genealogies of Caribbean art.³⁷ Despite its pitfalls and the anxieties of the postcolonial background in which it arose, the 1998 show aimed (again, without fully achieving this goal) to acknowledge the autonomy, the creative potential, the experimental character, and the heterogeneity of Caribbean artistic practice. It attempted to function as a laboratory of (then) new ways of conceiving Caribbean artistic practice as well as a platform in Europe for many young Caribbean artists.

However, as already noted, the exhibition, at the same time, remained largely trapped in authorial conceptions of curatorship and colonial expectations. Although paying attention to aesthetic criteria, the curators brought together a group of artworks acting as a “survey” of the artistic production and even the culture of a region; many of the artistic processes included in the show could not be transplanted into Badajoz, being present only through documentation and consequently losing much of their meaning.³⁸ The orientation of the show toward a Spanish spectatorship also acted in this sense. The image of the Caribbean as a peripheral space of resistance and creativity was intended to mirror the dislocated image of MEIAC and Extremadura within the context of the European Union. The vision drawn by “Caribe insular,” then, responded both to the unease of Spanish art institutions as well as to the ongoing changes that were taking place within Caribbean artistic practice.

36 Sarat Maharaj, “Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other,” in Sarah Campbell and Gilane Tawadros, eds., *Annotations 6: Modernity and Difference* (London: Inlva, 2001), 26–36.

37 Both curators, especially Zaya, had vast experience in the field of Caribbean art by the time “Caribe insular” was presented. Three years earlier, they had curated the ambitious “Cuba siglo XX: Modernidad y sincretismo” (1995, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain), which is today still one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of Cuban art produced in Europe. See Antonio Zaya and María Lluïsa Borràs, eds., *Cuba siglo XX: Modernidad y sincretismo* (Las Palmas: CAAM, 1995).

38 According to the conversations I had with MEIAC personnel responsible for staging the exhibition, many artists were present at the show, and some of them mounted their work in situ; others were unable to travel to the venue.

Acknowledgments

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