

small axe

a caribbean journal of criticism

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THE SMALL AXE PROJECT

The Small Axe Project consists of this: to participate both in the renewal of practices of intellectual criticism in the Caribbean and in the expansion/revision of the horizons of such criticism. We acknowledge of course a tradition of social, political, and cultural criticism in and about the regional/diasporic Caribbean. We want to honor that tradition but also to argue with it, because in our view it is in and through such argument that a tradition renews itself, that it carries on its quarrel with the generations of itself: retaining/ revising the boundaries of its identity, sustaining/ altering the shape of its self-image, defending/ resisting its conceptions of history and community. It seems to us that many of the conceptions that guided the formation of our Caribbean modernities—conceptions of class, gender, nation, culture, race, for example, as well as conceptions of sovereignty, development, democracy, and so on—are in need of substantial rethinking. What we aim to do in our journal is to provide a forum for such rethinking. We aim to enable an informed and sustained debate about the present we inhabit, its political and cultural contours, its historical conditions and global context, and the critical languages in which change can be thought and alternatives reimagined. Such a debate we would insist is not the prerogative of any single genre, and therefore we invite fiction as well as nonfiction, poetry, interviews, visual art, and reviews.

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Caribbean Locales and Global Artworlds
Guest edited by Annie Paul and Krista A. Thompson

CONTENTS

Introduction: Caribbean Locales/Global Artworlds <i>Annie Paul and Krista A. Thompson</i>	v
“Black Skin, Blue Eyes”: Visualizing Blackness in Jamaican Art, 1922–1944 <i>Krista A. Thompson</i>	1
Resonance: The Essence of the Playing Field <i>Rocío Aranda-Alvarado</i>	32
ART/WORK: <i>KHARY DARBY</i>	43
Facing the Nation: Art History and Art Criticism in the Jamaican Context <i>Andrea N. Douglas</i>	49
<i>Haciendo Patria</i> : The Puerto Rican Flag in the Art of Juan Sánchez <i>Michelle Joan Wilkinson</i>	61
Visual Narratives of Cultural Memory and Diasporic Identities: Two Contemporary Haitian American Artists <i>Jerry Philogene</i>	84
From Jamaica to the Diaspora <i>Catherine Amidon</i>	100

ART/WORK: <i>JOHN BEADLE</i>	119
DISCUSSION FORUM: <i>REDEMPTION SONG, LAURA FACEY COOPER'S EMANCIPATION MONUMENT</i>	
An Interview with Laura Facey Cooper <i>Petrina Dacres</i>	125
Monument and Meaning <i>Petrina Dacres</i>	137
Enslaved in Stereotype: Race and Representation in Post-Independence Jamaica <i>Carolyn Cooper</i>	154
Whose Monument? The Battle to Define, Interpret, and Claim Emancipation <i>Narda Graham</i>	170
Monumentally Caribbean: Borders, Bodies, and Redemptive City Spaces <i>Susan Mainis</i>	179
ART/WORK: <i>PETER DEAN RICKARDS</i>	199
REVIEWS	
The Ellisonian Injunction: Discourse on a Lower Frequency <i>Grant Farred</i>	205
Moving History in the Aftermath <i>Harvey Neptune</i>	214
Conversations on Creoleness <i>Nadī Edwards</i>	222
Contributors	228

Caribbean Locales/Global Artworlds

Annie Paul and Krista A. Thompson

From what is art autonomous?

—Okwui Enwezor, “The Black Box,” *Documenta XI*, exhibition catalogue, 2002

In our own reluctance to ask how work engages within the larger social context, we are attempting to protect art and the artist from censorship; however, in practice we are actually participating in the bourgeois notion of the isolation of the artist from society and of so-called high culture from the debates about representation and plurality current in popular culture.

—Carol Becker, *Social Responsibility and the Place of the Artist in Society*

Visual art in the twenty-first century is a field in transition. Perhaps no other activity has undergone as radical a redefinition over the course of the twentieth century as the practice of “art.” Indications of such change can be found at all the major curatorial extravaganzas that constitute the pantheon of contemporary art at the global level. Megashows such as Documenta 11, the Havana Biennale, and the Venice Biennale have reflected this shift in the new media they have increasingly created space for; media such as video, film, site-specific projects, and concept-based artwork that bear little or no explicit resemblance to the staples of modernist art agendas—painting, sculpture, photography, installation, assemblage—that still dominate art locales in some parts of the Caribbean. Artists from several Caribbean islands, especially Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Martinique, and to a lesser extent, Trinidad, Barbados, and Jamaica, have, however, become regular participants in these global exhibition arenas.

In an uncanny way Documenta 11, under the directorship of Okwui Enwezor, seemed to presage—indeed almost set the stage for—the kind of images and visual information that would challenge the very operating systems of global power brokers such as the United States and Britain. Enwezor’s focus on processes of transitional justice, truth and reconciliation commissions, state-sponsored torture, state impunity, systemic violence, repression, war crimes, and human rights violations presciently foregrounded the very issues raised today by the publication of photos of Iraqi prisoners suffering gross and inhuman abuse at the hands of American and British soldiers and by the very use of visual representation—photography—as an intrinsic form of torture. If there was a moment when the battle for the control of Iraq shifted gears and world opinion decisively turned against the Americans it was during the war of images that occurred soon after the anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2004. Today the photo of the hooded and garbed prisoner, arms outstretched, balancing for dear life on a shaky crate is likely to become as iconic a memento of this era as the image of Kim Phuc’s naked, napalm-covered child’s body, arms outstretched, desperately fleeing hostile skies, was to a previous one.

The parade of visual evidence amassed against the invaders framed the naked bodies of prisoners, stripped not only of their clothing but also of humanity, being violated—poked, probed, prodded, invaded, electrocuted. The dissemination of the images well beyond the closed circuits they were intended for revealed the poster boys of democracy to be no less barbaric and inhumane than the regimes of brutality they were supposed to be rescuing Iraqi citizens from. That these were Muslim/“heathen”/non-Western bodies unaccustomed to appearing unclothed in public made the pictures that much more horrific, their message now freighted by the additional burden of infinite otherness cloaking them. What are the “spectatorial regimes” governing the consumption of such images? How should we respond as members of a community that claims a special relationship to the visual in the Caribbean? In the midst of the series of unfolding global crises, how should art and representation be rethought? Where do art and visual representation in Caribbean locales fit in or relate to these newly defined “global” definitions of art and politicized representational landscapes?

Caribbean locales are riven by their own battles for meaningful visual representation. Recent debates generated by *Redemption Song*, the Jamaican monument to Emancipation unveiled in August 2003, constitute another kind of war over representation, more specifically, a struggle over the memorialization of the battle to end slavery in the island. The monument, by Jamaican artist Laura Facey Cooper, portrays two nude black figures with eyes upraised, in a pose that, according to the artist, signifies an inner spiritual



Redemption Song, Kingston, Jamaica (Photograph: Susan P. Mains).

journey to freedom and healing (*Sunday Observer*, 10 August 2003). Despite the artist's "healing" intentions, the sculpture has been the subject of contentious debate. Significantly, the controversy over the monument has made the subject of art and representation an active part of public discourse, perhaps more than any other single event or work of art in the recent history of the anglophone Caribbean. At stake in these debates over representations of the past are the political, social, and cultural wars of the present.

The public arguments around the casting in bronze of a founding moment in Jamaican history—the emancipation from slavery in 1838—have signaled unresolved schisms in the body politic of the nation and the limits or challenges of art in representing what postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee has termed the "fragments of nation" (the various constituents frequently left out of the national project).¹ At the heart of the controversy surrounding the monument, which was commissioned by the National Housing

1. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Trust, is the question of who gets to represent the nation. The trust's choice of an artist many Jamaicans perceive to be white to represent Emancipation, an event that granted freedom to the island's black population, has been viewed variously by some critics as indicative of the black working classes' lack of representation within the racial democracy of the island, a testimony to continued white privilege in an independent Jamaica, and illustrative of a small white and "brown" social elites' control and legislation of culture. Retrospective calls for a more democratic process in the selection of the monument devoted to the past are transparently cries for greater participation in the contemporary political and cultural life of the nation.

Local debates over the monument have also provided a platform through which local audiences have questioned the place of personal experience in public art. Can an artist's personal inner journey to freedom translate into the collective memorialization of Emancipation? Can a "universalized" spiritual work represent the specific political struggle and rebellion of the past (and present)? Who has the authority to represent this experience, to memorialize this event? To use an analogy from another multiethnic society, India, would a Brahmin, however sensitive and empathic, be the best person to represent the predicament of Dalits, or "Untouchables"?

The debates over *Redemption Song* echo struggles over art and representation throughout the Caribbean, most explicitly in regard to earlier memorializations of what Petrina Dacres in "Monument and Meaning" refers to as "the traumatic past." Public representations of slavery and emancipation have a long history in the Caribbean. In his essay "The Politics of Emancipation and Remembrance," Laurence Brown documents the debates and representational challenges of monuments to these events in other islands.² From the statue of the abolitionist Victor Schoelcher in Martinique (1904), the emancipation monument associated with slave revolt leader Bussa in Barbados (1985), or the memorial of the Coramantee slave, Prince Klaus, in St. John, Antigua (1993), artists and viewing publics have struggled over how to best reenvision history and visual representation on the islands. The challenges were particularly acute given the prevalence of colonial historical and aesthetic models of representing emancipation as something given. Catherine Hall documents, for example, how an earlier monument to Emancipation in Jamaica (from 1841) represented Africans as "emblematic figures" but named specific Englishmen as the "architects of freedom, the agents of history."³ In the case

2. Laurence Brown, "Monuments to Freedom, Monuments to Nation: The Politics of Emancipation and Remembrance in the Eastern Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 23, no. 3 (December 2002): 93–116.

3. Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 138.

of Martinique, monument commissioners looked to metropolises for artists, art models, and judges for their emancipation monuments. In fact, as Brown discusses, Negritude poet Aimé Césaire hoped Picasso would create a monument in commemoration of the centenary of emancipation in 1949. The past and recent history of public monuments highlights some of the larger predicaments and challenges about the production and discourse of art in the island and in many parts of the Caribbean generally: as a region seemingly long caught in between artworlds and empires, how do Caribbean artists use visual vocabularies from a wider artworld to create art representative of their subjectivities, localities, racial constituencies, and histories?

The very meaning and history of art has become a central tool in both the defense of *Redemption Song* and weapon against it. For example, the lightning rod for the debate has been the nakedness of the bodies and the opulence of what one local columnist referred to as the “emancipated penis.”⁴ Supporters have attempted to justify the work by locating it within a long tradition of public nudity in European art. Its detractors, however, disqualify the work on these very grounds, arguing that such traditions are alien to the Jamaican environment and inappropriate models for the representation of black bodies and histories in the island. Some posit another art historical genealogy from which local artists should draw—the history of art in Africa. Both camps, however, validate their positions by constructing interpretative frames for art in the island based on canons from elsewhere. These attempts to cast art in opposing art historical nets may stem in part from the absence of a well-preserved pre-Hispanic indigenous art on the island. In light of this historical erasure, “art” on the island came from other social contexts, other artworlds. How do such concepts of art translate in Caribbean locales? Can they represent Caribbean pasts and presents? How do art historians, critics, and other viewing publics construct interpretative frames and conduct a dialogue about art in the Caribbean outside of the confining walls of these other artworlds?

The essays in this special art issue tackle these questions both historically and in the contemporary context, and the artworks represent the work of a younger set of image-makers struggling for visibility in Caribbean and international art arenas. The essays examine how Caribbean artists in the region and its diaspora have drawn on a variety of artistic traditions from impressionism to minimalism, formal styles, and icons from different parts of the world to create work that speaks to their particular experiences, communities, and histories. Contributors explore how these artists have also capitalized

4. Mark Wignall, “Perkins and the Emancipated Penis,” *Daily Observer*, 7 August 2003. For further documentation of the public debate, see also Annie Paul, “Emancipating Ourselves in Post-Slave Societies of the New World”, *Axis: Journal of the Caribbean School of Architecture* 7, (June 2004): 122–35.

on global art markets or international art megashows. Essays also touch on how Caribbean artists have been represented, misrepresented, or marginalized in the global art market and in “grand” art historical narratives. They consider too whether, given the current “age of globalization” and the long history of the Caribbean artist’s engagement and participation in the global artworld, national (and regional) narratives of “Caribbean art” have reached their end.

Annie Paul and Krista A. Thompson