

Alternate Currents

Despite its vibrancy, Antillean (from Guadeloupe and Martinique) visual art has not integrated the mainstream American art discourse due in part to unawareness and the language barrier (these are Francophone islands). Since 2002, the year the Art Basel fair was launched in Florida, Miami has been recognized by art critics and other professionals as a leading art city, that according to its director Samuel Keller “brings (to South Florida) the art scenes of Europe and the Americas”¹. However, despite its phenomenal success situated at the intersection of “art, intellect, glamour, and money”² and its claim to showcase the arts of the Americas, more effort is still required to educate the public on the Antillean art scene. In 13 years of existence only one full exhibit, *The Caribbean Crossroad IV*, held in 2013 at the Little Haiti Cultural Center, has focused on artists (14) from the French West Indies and French Guyana. But more recently, in 2015, Guadeloupean Kelly Sinnapah Mary was included in the *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* show at the Perez Art Museum Miami.

How does one combat the isolation Francophone Caribbean artists seem to suffer from in the US? How does one bring awareness in this country on the incredible work done by artists from Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guyana? How do you, as the Executive Director of an art incubator based in Miami and specialized in Caribbean and Diasporic art, acquaint yourself and your creators with their Guadeloupean and Martinican counterparts? You do what Rosie Gordon-Wallace, Fonder Director of Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator, did in March 2015: you select a pool of your plasticians and fly to Guadeloupe to engage in an artistic and cultural exchange with member artists of l’ARTOCARPE, a sister Guadeloupean art collective with similar aspirations. To that end, you enlist a videographer/photographer Roy Gordon-Wallace, a

social impact strategist and graphic designer Vincent Scatliffe, and a project manager/scholar-in-residence/interpreter/translator fluent in English, French, Creole, conversant in Guadeloupean arts, and part of a large network of movers and shakers on the island Alix Pierre, Ph.D., Spelman College.

A very resourceful manager, Gordon-Wallace made the best of the financial and human capitals as well as the expertise available to her in the US and Guadeloupe. She went and met the French and Creole-speaking artists in situ, in their local milieu. She offered her protégés what is today an integral part of the mission of American institutions of higher learning: engagement in a global experience and citizenship. What is truly amazing is that for an institution of its size and the financial means with which it operates, DVCAI has been a trailblazer in international exposure. In the past 18 years, in addition to Anglophone regions, they have engaged in similar ventures with colleagues in the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic, and Dutch-speaking Aruba and Surinam.

During nine days, the Americans and Guadeloupeans explored the notion of Diasporic culture. At the heart of the exchange is the Creole *lyan'naj bokantaj* model. The phrase describes the local modus operandi in terms of social relations. The first vocable refers to the joining of forces of the members of the community toward a common goal. It recognizes: 1) that at times there is a need to have a corporate conversation over important issues; 2) that there is strength in unity; 3) and that individualism should never overshadow communalism. A strong group is one where the members are interdependent.

The second terminology brings balance to the socializing traditions. Equity and equilibrium are critical here. In such a context, one contributes as much help as they receive. We

see this principle and practice as retention of the African pre-colonial trading system of bartering where cattle and shells were used as currency. James Odunbaku explains in an article that before the introduction of metal currencies, trade was done by barter in Yoruba land and other areas in West Africa (3). He states, “Trade by barter means the exchange of goods without the use of money when articles of trade were purchased. It was practiced for a very long time and it continued till the end of the 19th century.”³

Borrowing from the context of the slave trade and the resistance put up by the enslaved, I would like to use another metaphor here, that of the quilombos or Maroon communities created by the runaways who practiced *grand marronnage*. They traded with the surrounding free villagers as well as the captives from the plantations who came to the markets to sell the products of their gardening. This catalogue attempts at capturing the essence of the artistic reciprocation that took place in Guadeloupe. One of the most forceful paradigms of the interchange relates to food. In *Reversing Sail* Michael Gomez states,

African cuisine accompanied Africans throughout the Diaspora, constituting its own widespread dispersal. Examples of food ways transferred to the Americas from Africa include rice, black-eyed peas, okra, and palm oil ... Transferred African cooking techniques included deep oil frying, fire roasting, steaming in leaves, and boiling in water to produce soups and stews. Spicy seasoning, such as hot sauces and pepper sauces, was used everywhere ... Local and regional preferences have followed the African-descended in their various migrations since slavery’s end, from Caribbean cuisine in North America to soul food prepared by North American musicians working in Paris (213)

On March 21, 2015, the Guadeloupean artists greeted their American counterparts at the Pôle Caraïbe airport gift bags in hand. Each one contained among other things a ½ liter bottle of Damoiseau rum, one of the locally manufactured brands. Upon their arrival at the villa they had rented out in St-François, on the eastern part of the island, the visitors were met by the concierge with a gift basket containing several bottles of *punch au coco*, a coconut and rum based liqueur. While sipping the *punch* once they settled, the participants were reminded of the importance of the sugarcane industry in Guadeloupe by the scholar-in-residence. From an economic standpoint, up until the turn of the 19th, cane was the only source of sugar in France before sugar beet became more cost effective. So from the 17th through the 19th centuries, sugarcane cultivation was intense on the island. Currently, 18 of the 34 districts grow sugar cane. Consequently, sugar and rum are the base of the agricultural sector on the island.

The artists realized how much the rum based beverages represented a core cultural sense of home. We understood how applicable Gomez's statement was, as we reflected on the names given to *punch au coco* in neighboring islands that some of the DVCAI members are descended from. Francesca Lalanne indicated that in native Haiti it is called *kréma*; Rosa Naday Garmendia and Juana Valdes who have Cuban ancestry, said that it is named *crema de vie* in Cuba. Additionally, Naday Garmendia pointed out that in Puerto Rico it is known as *coquito*. I have since found out that Venezuelans and Dominicans refer to it as *punche crema*, while Guatemalans label it *rompopo*, and Trinidadians and Tobagonians dub it *punch de crème*.

The welcoming reception that took place in the evening of the first day was the perfect occasion to carry on the culinary conversation. The extended Pierre family lead by Simone, a consultant and partner on the project, treated the two groups of artists and guests to a

gastronomic feast that laid emphasis on the hyphenated identity of Guadeloupeans. The dishes served paid homage to their African, Amerindian, East Indian, and European heritages.

Most of the meals served are common staples in the Caribbean diet: salted cod fish, cured herring, pumpkin, rice, greens, chicken, tomatoes, cucumbers, coconut water, pineapples, cantaloupes, and fruit cakes. What made the difference were the preparation, combination, and presentation. Cured cod fish filets and herring are customarily prepared shredded in a stew (*chiktaye* in Creole) with diced onions, tomatoes, herbs, and spices to taste. The fish comes with rice, breadfruits or other roots. A variation on the cod fish is to serve it not stewed but grilled with French style diced cucumber. The pumpkin (*giromon* in Creole) was prepared *velouté* style. The spinach and rice were cooked together along the same principal as the rice and peas menu. The French influence was most visible in the arrangement of the food. Everything was stylishly laid out in verrines, and in an instant the *manjé péyi* (soul food) took the look of a gastronomic spread as appealing to the eyes as the palate. The assortment of freshly collected coconut water and local iced herbal tea (*té péyi* in Creole) highlighted the healthy and organic dimension of the Caribbean diet.

In one other instance, Roy and Rosie treated the group to a meal of *johnny cakes*, fried breadfruit, and stewed fish reminiscent of their Jamaican heritage. Alix Pierre explained that *johnny cakes* are found in St. Martin but instead of being round as in Jamaica, they are flat. He went on to explain that in Guadeloupe they are also flat but much larger than in St. Martin and called *bokit*. As a consequence of the French imprimatur, once fried, they are cut horizontally and stuffed with ham and cheese, chicken meat, cod fish, mackerel, or any number of fillings. Groana Menedez had a revelation. She was finally able to understand why in the Dominican Republic the fritter is called *jhonny kéké*.

In addition to exchanging around food ways, many other conversations were had. The artistic dialogue took many forms. The artists met in several *gran kozé* (important and long communal talks) sessions. In the course of those gatherings that carried a workshop format, art practices were discussed. The attendants reflected on the impact of creating “from the margin.” Was does it mean to be a Haitian, Cuban, Jamaican, Dominican, Mexicana or African American visual artist operating in a field dominated by Caucasians? How does it feel to be a Cubana, Mexicana, Afro Cubana, and Afro Jamaican American female or Haitian American female artist working in a country that is said to be post racial despite the recent homicides perpetrated by white police officers or citizens on blacks? What does it mean to experience otherness with regards to gender and sexual orientation in the male and heterosexual dominated American landscape? Those issues shared by the Americans were quite relevant given the makeup of the ARTOCARPE group. Three of the seven members were males, whereas the DVCAI artists were all females. Of the seven Guadeloupean plasticians, two are Caucasians who have lived on the island for quite a while. One of the females is of East Indian descent.

What is it like to be Guadeloupean, Martinican, French, and European at the same time? What if you are from one of the “dependencies” (smaller islands that are part of) of Guadeloupe like St Martin; do you feel Guadeloupean, St Martinian, French, and/or European? What if you were not born in Guadeloupe nor St. Martin but in France proper? Does it make a difference? Does it impact your art? Does it matter that your East Indianess comes across or not in your art?

The ARTOCARPE members explained that the question of hyphenated identity in the center-periphery paradigm is raised every time they are invited to international events such as the recent Havana Art Biennale where Henri Tauliaut represented ARTOCARPE. There usually is the French delegation of artists and officials, and then there are the Antillean artists who are on

their own. It always begs the question of identity, belonging, and borders. When they travel abroad, in the eyes of the observers and the Antilleans themselves who do these artists that carry French passports represent their island, the French Republic, the European Community or themselves? If they represent France why aren't they with the French delegation? Why are they standing aside? Former writer and elected official Aimé Césaire raised a question decades ago that still seems relevant here. Speaking of the Guadeloupean, Martinican, and French Guyanese constituents at the National Assembly, he asked: “Sommes-nous des citoyens à part entière ou entièrement à part? (Are we full fledged citizens or totally cut off?)”

After dialoguing on the question of identity and ethnicity, the artists ventured outside of ARTOCARPE's headquarters. It was an opportunity to reflect on the geography, the way it impacts the Guadeloupean creators' working conditions and serves as a source of inspiration. Through those onsite visits and field trips the Americans could visualize their colleagues' frame of reference and gauge the possible benefits to be gained with regards to the impact on the work. They could also gain knowledge of the local artists' technique and the relationship to their environment. Consequently, the ARTOCARPE artists opened the door to their studios to the DVCAI group, physically or virtually via Internet. The conversation at Kelly Sinnapah Mary and François Piquet's spaces challenged the designation “atelier.” What does it mean on an island for a visual artist to have a studio when the majority of art practitioners don't make a living out of their craft? Is the space located in the house, outside the house? Is it an extension of the house? Are the levels of comfort the same as in America where heat, air-conditioning, and indoor plumbing are the norm? Because he carves out wood and welds also, $\frac{3}{4}$ of Piquet's space is open to the elements and only partially protected from the sun. Sinnapah Mary shares a studio with her photographer husband with all the constraints one can imagine.

One of the mandates of the International Cultural Exchange is for the DVCAI crew to meet with the art community at large in the host country. Painter Joël Nankin, one of the leading figures, hosted a community reception in his studio/gallery in Lassere, Moule, in honor of the Americans. The breadth of his knowledge of the art scene in the Americas and elsewhere as well as his craft left a lasting impression on the attendees. As a plastician, activist, carnival band member and musician, and citizen who got arrested and served a six-year jail sentence because of his pro independent political views, he unapologetically placed art (at least his) at the intersection of critical consciousness and political engagement. This is a pertinent subject that Diasporan creators have had to grapple with all over the world and throughout time. Can the black/brown artist afford to subscribe to the “art for art sake” school of thought? Do they have a commitment to the masses instead? Can they afford not to be civically engaged? In the 1920s, Langston Hughes raised the question with his fellow Harlem Renaissance artists and thinkers in his famous essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau echoes Hughes’ sentiment by expanding on the challenges the Antillean artist is faced with in a neo colonial context, in a masterful opus published in 1997.

In an effort to strengthen the dialogue, lay emphasis on the importance of alternative artists in contemporary art, and show her impact on the art scene, land art designer Guy Gabon organized a special after-hour evening for the US DVCAI delegation at the Musée Victor Schoelcher, in Pointe-à-Pitre where her exhibit *Carte Blanche* was on view. Gabon, who also attended the *gran kozé* at ARTOCARPE’s headquarters, brought her art to bear on the ongoing diasporic conversation that started on the first day. She creatively invited the audience to meditate on the “devoir de mémoire” or duty of remembrance. She explored the persistence of slavery in the 21th century by putting in conversation the resistance of the Maroons, the

transgressive writings of Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and enslaved Bermudan Mary Prince, child labor, and women trafficking. Gabon managed to intertwine short documentaries, reversed graffiti, and vegetal prints with the museum's permanent collection dedicated to Victor Schoelcher, the senator who introduced in the French Assembly the bill pressing for the emancipation of the enslaved Africans that was made into law in 1848.

To solidify further the exchange and highlight the ability of the artists to work together and dialogue across medium, regardless of their countries of origin and the language spoken, a collective exhibit concluded the artistic and cultural collaboration. It was critical to offer the viewers converging, intersecting, and transversal views as a new art current born of the *lyan'naj* experience. Free and open to the public, the event drew a cross section of the population including officials from the Regional Council (the commission of art and culture), the Moulé mayor's office, art critics, artists, the media, and art lovers, across gender, age, race, and class. Titled *Alternate Currents*, the show laid emphasis on the plurality of the Diasporic voice and ways in which it is enriched by forward thinking endeavors such as the DVCAI-ARTOCARPE collaboration.

In his book entitled *Poétique de la relation*, Martinican essayist Édouard Glissant states, « Ce qui nous porte ce n'est pas la seule définition de nos identités, mais aussi leur relation à tout le possible : les mutations mutuelles que ce jeu de relation génère. ("We are not prompted solely by defining our identities but by their relation to everything possible as well-the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations") (Glissant 104). » This relational epistemology resonates well with the exhibition and the overall experience in Guadeloupe. The program showcased the writing of the Diasporan self in a non-black/non-brown majority discourse by African descended subjects. Even though African descended Guadeloupeans are the

majority on the island, what we mean is that put into the context of the French Republic Antilleans are less numerous. *Alternate Currents* elevated story telling by artists of the Americas, across gender, faith, sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity.

Whether the medium was photography, video, installation, sculpturing, painting, or dancing, the carefully curated works made for a richer narrative. The representation of the Diasporic self was central. “Who am I in my true self? Who are we?” seemed to be the underlying question addressed. The portraiture drew inspiration from ancestral belief systems and practices as evidenced by the work of Jaquenette Arnette (voodoo), Aisha Tandiwe (ancestor spirits), François Piquet (Amerindian petroglyphs and tagging), Nadia Rea Morales (cosmogonic myths) and David Gumbs (cosmological legends).

But gender concerns surfaced too, such as the necessity for women to have a voice as Merle Collins reminds us so aptly in “Crick Crack”, “Tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter, until lioness has their own hiss-torians.” Florence Poirier-Nkpa, Annabel Guérédrat, and Kelly Synnapah Mary addressed the erasure of the female subject, her body being mutilated in all sorts of manners, sexually, and otherwise. Aisha Tandiwe and Groana Menedez spoke to the feminine strategies put in place to resist disappearance. Consideration was also given to the evil visited upon the black/brown body or the environment in which Afro-descendants and other minorities live. Rosa Naday Garmendia verbalized the arbitrary murder of black subjects by police officers in the US through shots of her brick memorial project. Joëlle Ferly, Henri Tauliaut, and François Piquet tackled the topic of human-caused environmental degradation.

Tandiwe’s three-dimensional pieces were quite arresting. Some were part paintings and part ceramic sculptures. The spectators were presented with personas whose heads juttred out of the frame while the painted rest of their bodies dripped on the canvas. One in particular, a

“wearable piece” invited a particular form of interaction on the part of the audience. Placed at the entrance way of the gallery, the suspended ceramic tiara was an invitation for the visitors to crown themselves, literally try on multiple identities. It invited role playing; a topic of research Tandiwe is interested in. Was it a way of reminding attendees of the glorious past Africans once enjoyed when Egypt ruled the world through pharaonic dynasties where men as well as women reigned?

The polyphonic rhythm of the exhibit reached its peak with choreographer and dance company director Annabel Guérédrat’s tableau titled “Freak Show for S.” Homage to Sara Baartman and the atrocities inflicted upon her by the perversely racist and voyeuristic European colonizer, the dance took on a Pan African and Pan Caribbean tone that evening when Guérédrat invited Tandiwe, a performance and spoken word artist herself, to collaborate. We read the ballet as a figure of the traditional music of Guadeloupe (*gwoka*), inherited from the West African griot tradition.

Like the musical genre, Guérédrat’s work was participative. The assistance played as much a role in the performance as the two artists. There were no spectators per se but participants arranged in a circle in the midst of which the dancers moved. The dance followed the African call-and-response pattern. Emulating the *gwoka boulagèl* style where all the sounds of the instruments are made by the human voice, Guérédrat and Tandiwe exchanged vocalese lyrics while snaking around amid the spectators. They swapped guttural onomatopoeias along with French and English phonemes. Feeding off of the audience’s response they improvised along.

What a perfect metaphor for the International Artistic and Cultural Exchange. For an American and Martinican artists to perform together in Guadeloupe across languages a choreographic tribute to an enslaved African female subjected to the grossest form of discrimination and victimization by the European colonizers! What a *lyan'naj*! This is the kind of interdisciplinary Diasporic conversation that needs to be had more and that Rosie Gordon-Wallace has been working at for the past 18 years and Joëlle Ferly for 6 years to make available to their pool of artists. It is transformative and promotes cultural Diaspora. It is all the more beneficial and successful when one of the guests-Aisha Tandiwe-goes as far as to investigate the literature of the host country and incorporate it in their work. She drew inspiration from novelist Simone Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond* for one of the paintings she had on display. She titled the piece *Télumée* after Schwarz-Bart's *shero*.

The DVCAI-ARTOCARPE International Cultural and Artistic Exchange is a three-phase project. The first stage took place in Guadeloupe in March 2015, when the Guadeloupeans hosted the US artists in Moule, Guadeloupe. Since then, over the past few months, the second chapter has started and is well underway, as the Guadeloupeans benefit from the assistance and expertise of DVCAI's artists and executive director. Three of the artists from the island have been invited to the United States. Kelly Sinnapah Mary participated in the *Field Notes: Extract* show at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art, in June 2015, in Brooklyn, New York with 6 other artists from the Caribbean and its Diasporas. Dancer/choreographer Annabel Guérédrat gave a talk at a community engagement breakfast at the Betsy Hotel, Miami Beach, FL and performed the American premiere of "A Freak Show for S." at MADE at the Citadel in Little Haiti, Miami, FL, in June 2015. Joëlle Ferly, Executive Director of ARTOCARPE and visual artist, had a two-day workshop at DVCAI's headquarters in Miami. She also met with the

movers and shakers of the art scene as well as toured museums and galleries. David Gumbs has been invited to participate in the 2016 Red Davidoff Residency in Beijing, which is part of the Davidoff Art Residency Program.

For the concluding phase of the collaboration, DVCAI will be hosting the Guadeloupeans in Miami. A few weeks ago, when I went down for Annabel Guérédrat's performance, I visited the *Poetics of Relation* exhibit at the Perez Art Museum Miami. The introductory panel to the show, which acknowledges Glissant's concept as a source of inspiration, reads:

... Miami is defined by the varied diasporic communities that continuously shape its population. It is a city made of individuals whose understandings of place and home are relational, existing between here and elsewhere. This exhibition takes its inspiration from these defining characteristics, as well as from the city's tropical landscape, which affects the city economically, through tourism, and psychologically, as a source of pleasure and imagination. The works in these galleries place this local context and its specific cultural questions in dialogue with similar queries articulated by artists working in such diverse settings as the Dominican Republic, Great Britain, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Morocco, New York, and South Africa

All of the above augurs well for the visit of the Guadeloupeans. In the meantime, may the present catalog inspire you to research the artists and organizations they are affiliated with, acquire some of the art, travel to Guadeloupe and Miami, support DVCAI and ARTOCARPE, and finally use your network to recommend the catalogue. As the Creole saying goes, "Pwen

final baton maréchal ka maré chuval ay dè mòn lopital.” This formula is one of the ways of concluding a folktale. The French equivalent would be *FIN* or the end.

End Notes

¹ See Hoban Web.

² See Hoban Web.

³ See Odunbaku.

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