Deborah Cullen & Elvis Fuentes (eds.)

Caribbean: Art at the Crossroads of the World. New York: Museo del Barrio & New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 495 pp. (Cloth US\$65.00)

Caribbean: Art at the Crossroads of the World, more of a book than a catalog, was published on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition at the Museo del Barrio, the Queens Museum of Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York. It consists of twenty essays, a selection of excerpts of major historical texts, hundreds of full-color illustrations, and a comprehensive bibliography. The aim is to map the large spectrum of questions related to the diversity of populations, vernacular traditions, emigrated cultures, and contemporary artistic production in order to foster research in the rather neglected field of Caribbean art.

The book recounts the many geographical and historical events and circumstances that account for the difficulty, experienced and commented on by many Caribbean actors of the cultural scene, of reconstructing a history that goes back to colonial domination and the violence of slavery. Thus, it offers a significant effort to build, as Derek Walcott writes in “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” a “memory that yearns to join the center, a limb remembering the body from which it has been severed, like those bamboo thighs of the god. ... No people. Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken” (p. 21).

Many of the texts deal with the artistic production of specific countries—Haiti (Gérald Alexis), Curaçao (Jennifer Smit), Jamaica (Veerle Poupeye)—while others are dedicated to themes such as the body in Caribbean art (Rocío Aranda-Alvarado), the founders of art in the Caribbean (Álvaro Medina), Surrealism in the Caribbean (Lowery Stokes Sims), the Harlem Renaissance and New York’s Afro-Caribbean diaspora (Deborah Cullen), and Maroons in Suriname and French Guiana (Richard Price & Sally Price). Edward J. Sullivan offers an overview of the past three decades of exhibitions and collecting in the United States.

The very large and appropriate iconography reflects this diversity with a strong emphasis on the contemporary visual arts. This is perhaps the most innovative aspect of the book. The images provide convincing evidence for the central topic of a fragile cultural memory, which is elaborated in many of the essays. But readers (who are also viewers) receive the strong impression that many of these artworks are not “illustrating” some intellectual idea, but rather thinking by themselves, exploring the depth and breadth of the mnemonic fracture of the Caribbean identity by mixing and matching cultural references.

The cultural history of the Caribbean is sailing between the historical time that enacts an *a posteriori* reconstruction of the chronological sequences and the time of the memory for which every remembrance is simultaneously present. They are different in their form and in their content. Indeed, the first tends to erase the richness of the remembrances in order to construct a true coherence. Yet in the Caribbean, because of the cultural uprooting from Africa but also from India or China, it is necessary for the history to be reconstructed to be itself a recollection of dispersed fragments of a memory. And this possible memory, not yet actual and self-conscious, only exists in the cultural and artistic testimonies, in the oral tradition and in all the places and objects in which something of the lost past has found a precarious shelter.

As he was developing these ideas in *Le discours antillais*, Édouard Glissant was at the same time evaluating the place and function of the aesthetic form of his own book. He wrote: "Our intention in this work was *to pull together all levels of experience*. This piling-up is the most suitable technique for exposing a reality that is itself being scattered. Its evolution is like a repetition of a few observations that *take root*, tied to realities that *keep slipping away*" (Glissant 1981:13; the English translation is by J. Michael Dash in Glissant 1989:4).

I think that we may also consider *Caribbean: Art at the Crossroads of the World* from the point of view of the meaningfulness of such an accumulation. We would then stress accumulation as a strategy related to the need to reconstruct the historical and cultural existence of Caribbean populations. The appearance of such a book in the very poor context of publications on Caribbean art constitutes a memorable event in this process of reconstruction. As an object, it materializes a moment of cultural crystallization, which is part of the more global process of historical recovery. This book and exhibition will significantly contribute to the international move for recognition of a specific Caribbean transcultural identity.

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References

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