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The Parallax Effect

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The Parallax Effect

Leon Wainwright

Ingredients:

Collaboration

Strategic Phenomenology

Theory of Practice

Cultural Economy

Some scholars, among whom—to be placed with prominence—is Kitty Zijlmans, have been an abiding presence and guide for me during the last three decades. Even when scholars live in different countries or continents—we reside in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands, respectively—they can enjoy the impression of proximity regardless of that distance. This creates something like a parallax effect, which bridges a geographical divide and has lent character to our ever-evolving academic discipline. Thanks to an invitation from Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, back in 2006 we took part with others¹ in a conference panel in Leeds (UK) entitled ‘Taking Back Art History’. The organizers had in mind a panel that would reckon with the pressure to make the discipline of art history ‘useful’ to the wider society, such as in its adjacent organizations and structures like the museum and the heritage sector. Kitty and I would speak about feeling the first tremors caused by a shift to instrumentalize the teaching and research of the histories of art, to show what ‘impact’ we were having beyond the confines of intellectual space.

At that stage in my career, I had returned fairly recently from fifteen months in Trinidad and Guyana, where a fellowship funded by the Leverhulme Trust had supported me in looking at ‘art and agency in the Caribbean’. My use of that phrase was telling of someone reaching out to social anthropology as an art historian, restating the need for interdisciplinarity. The project had yielded some insights and a published work by which I tried to issue a sort of *j'accuse* to the academy at large (my first book *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean*)² and art history was put in the dock. The charge? I suppose, the ‘wilful forgetting’ of the Caribbean and its ‘subtraction’ from the canons of artistic modernism, followed closely perhaps by a concomitant way of commoditizing the very vocabulary of

globalizing change and ‘differencing’ that the Caribbean had bequeathed to scholars, such as in so much curatorial riffing about ‘global contemporary art’.

Timed Out suggests to its readers that the dominant centres for the production of knowledge have wanted to ignore the deep and continuing history of relationships between the Caribbean and the wider Atlantic world. While people have moved in flows and waves, travelled, sojourned, and migrated across this wide and transnational geography, so have artworks been on the move, as well as ideas about them and the artists who created and carried them. It is far too commonly assumed that art of the Caribbean lags behind the lead and the cutting edge of art, that the Caribbean field is backward or belated and anachronistic. It is positioned as thus marginal or provincial in histories of creativity chiefly by being denied its place in the ‘here and now’. So distinctively geographical and temporal are such outlooks—being implicitly about space and time—that the basis of such thinking has to be undermined from certain angles. That is what I set out to achieve in this line of work, quite trenchantly, without apology. But *Timed Out* pushes farther than that, I like to believe. It demonstrates why we deliver a form of social justice through working in art history once we refuse to accept any of the conventional ‘common sense’ about the art of ‘distant’ places being synonymous with a condition of backwardness. To put it in a way that is both more abstract and yet can be generalized outwards to the wider discipline of art history, this is all about refusing the equation of ‘over there’ with ‘back then’—an absolute spatial as well as temporal division between art’s putative centres and peripheries. The Caribbean region formed the very crucible for early modernity—the plantation system, capitalism at its first flush—and its diaspora has reached and transformed every shore of the Atlantic. But the art-historical record of the Caribbean has simply not responded accordingly. Instead, the Caribbean has suffered (with great dignity, I should emphasize) a *chronic disregard*, to use the phrase advisedly, a fate suffered by its art above all else.

What does this mean for the university curriculum as taught in the ‘metropolitan North’ in view of this deepening epistemic violence, these myths perpetuated about the Caribbean by art history with the effect of furnishing the latter’s vaunted self-image? It is a question that could be asked of attitudes to diaspora communities more broadly, for which the particular condensation of circumstances in Britain that brought together artists of African, Asian, and Caribbean backgrounds seems to provide a suitable answer. Indeed, this was the territory of my second book *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art*,³ a detailed

philosophical account of artworks by individuals of black and Asian backgrounds working in contemporary Britain (I cast these under the porous heading of ‘black British’ but they include an entire spectrum of ethnicities, the artists Hew Locke, Henna Nadeem, Juginder Lamba, Perminder Kaur, Manjeet Lamba, Mona Hatoum, Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper, Yeu-Lai Mo, Johannes Phokela, Zarina Bhimji, Chila Burman, and Sonia Khurana). In that book I have explored a vivid range of intimate, bodily relationships with works of art, in a manner that speaks to interest among scholars in the arts and humanities as they have come to focus, in particular, on the senses and perception, the emotions, affectivity, and what has come to be captured under the rubric of the ‘new materialism’. At the same time, the book problematizes the basis on which the significance of black British art has been staked in cultural criticism and curatorial practices, namely the weight of attention to identity politics and theories of representation and cultural diversity. Yet there is no intention here to set aesthetics on one side, politics on the other—far from it. Rather, the book represents a detailed case for recognizing the role of black British art and artists in shaping a more layered and philosophically open account. Focusing on the materiality and immediacy of artworks, *Phenomenal Difference* isolates and demonstrates how the ‘phenomenal’ qualities of artworks are what allow audiences to enjoy distinctive and complex perceptual encounters that are enriched by cultural differences.

In short, what this line of work does is to emphasize the fundamental aesthetic character and objecthood of artworks themselves. It seeks to heal this field after so much tokenism and what may be called the ‘semiotic reductionism’ of attitudes and public discourse on black and Asian British art and artists. Hardly surprising then that the book results from a long period of personal contact with artists, arts organizers, and curators of diverse backgrounds in Britain and here it brings a significant focus on the art of women and those of South Asian backgrounds. Drawing on picture research and supported by a sort of ‘strategic phenomenology’, I show why theoretical reflection may be used to try to counter the misunderstanding that these artists continue to face, which includes the overreliance on discussion of issues of cultural identity and ethnicity which have tended to preoccupy commentators of this art. Through a wide range of detailed aesthetic analyses of specific artworks, the book shows why it should now be necessary to see black British art for the ‘phenomenal difference’ it brings.

These are two strands of work, focused on the politics of art historiography in the first case, and on philosophy as a critical intervention in contemporary art discourse in the second. It was through a collaboration with Kitty Zijlmans (as Co-Investigator) that I was able to bring them together and push and develop them further, what became in that sense a third strand of research. The opportunity came with the project *Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean*, which took a direct look at the complex realities attendant upon the conditions of art production, circulation, and reception for artists of Dutch- and English-speaking Caribbean backgrounds. The project team held conferences in Amsterdam (at the Tropenmuseum) and London (at Iniva, the Institute of International Visual Arts), each of them filmed (this material is archived in an open access repository at the Open University), and consolidated our progress in a special issue of the *Open Arts Journal*, an open access peer-reviewed publication, which was subsequently developed into a major book anthology.⁴ Through the project, artists from Aruba, Curaçao, Germany, Japan, Canada, Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados, Surinam, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (around fifteen in all) shared a platform in order to speak for themselves. They did so with eloquence and patience, and often with force, directing their views to the funding agencies, arts bureaucracies, curators, art historians, and cultural policymakers that operate within as well as outside the Caribbean.

The project traced the similarities and distinctions between Dutch- and English-speaking contexts of the Caribbean and its global diaspora. It sought to find strategic ways to support this community's rich cultural heritage by assessing how the Caribbean region has stood as a locus for global cultural communities. In particular we wished to exchange perspectives on how activities of networking can help to transform both creativity and a sense of Caribbean location. The book that resulted bears witness to how the Caribbean sits in dialogue with current (neoliberal) arts discourse, comprising of various public programming and arts funding policy frameworks, as well as art-historical interests. Through this and the surrounding project, we uncovered the significant pressures and difficulties felt by Caribbean artists at the local, regional, and international scales.⁵ Among them is the frustration that artists have felt, especially towards the way that common buzzwords such as *sustainability*, *community*, or *transnationalism*, have come to be traduced, subverted, and misused. That was a surprising finding, given that the same terms are virtually everywhere in the funding policies and curatorial celebration of Caribbean artists, venues and mechanisms that are usually held to be a source of support and means of 'visibility' for Caribbean creativity.

Hearing about the experience of Caribbean artists and finding that there are cross purposes and conflicts here with their objectives, as an art community centred in the ‘global South’, is salutary. The artists that we worked with, helped to identify the need to foster a sustainable arts community that may nurture the broader Caribbean culture and society. We pinpointed a key aim, articulated in numerous ways by artists in the course of the project, which was about placing responsibility on the visual arts to serve as a site of living heritage that in turn could inform the academy.

I was fascinated to work together in tracing such diverse experiences in this shifting and contemporary cultural geography. Artists of the Caribbean, when they spoke of their various groupings, migratory lines, and archipelagic routes of travel and settlement, spoke also of a history of creativity that makes new demands on art history. Flipping the script on this, as we tried to do, was to suggest that art history can be a window onto these worlds; without it we would not be able to grasp, for example, how artists operate in national contexts where the sense of community is being drastically changed through those artists’ mobilities and networks. Thereby, the *Sustainable Art Communities* collaboration has been a recursive and iterative way of accounting for the original roles that the Caribbean can hold in theorizing and historicizing art in the present situation. It suggests at least one very effective means by which art-historical researchers can embrace the Caribbean’s visual, embodied, performative, and immaterial approaches to creativity.

The outcome of that analysis—crossing linguistic boundaries—brings our entire field onto fresh and original ground. As a project that has an impact upon current scholarly attitudes as well as on the social and political climate in which artists live and work, it also brings my short discussion here round full circle, back to our first meeting in Leeds (‘Taking Back Art History’). The parallax effect as I have felt it is ultimately the effect and the yield of a lasting dialogue. I have sketchily set out a recipe for its longevity and success here. What needs emphasizing a bit more though, in closing, is the lasting concern that can be identified with finding or positing a ‘theory of practice’, a way to ensure that artworks are to be analyzed always as a mode of agency and a materializing of ‘affect’. Where and when needed to be critical, scholars should embolden one another to raise and develop objections about the failure of endeavours (such as scholarship or exhibition curating) to recognize that art and artists have value beyond the lexicon that has come to be used on them. That means unfolding them from the cultural economy in which social identities are drawn within

globalized, metropolitan settings. Can our discipline transcend histories of marginalization and exclusion? It not only can, it must.

¹ Marquard Smith, Amelia Jones, Anna Bryzski, Matthew Rampley, Jae Emerling and Marius Kwint.

² Leon Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester, 2011).

³ Leon Wainwright, *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art* (Liverpool, 2017).

⁴ Funded jointly by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). See: www.open.ac.uk/Arts/sac/ (accessed 1 June 2021); and Issue 5 of the *Open Arts Journal*: www.openartsjournal.org.

⁵ See also: Leon Wainwright, 'Transatlantic Movement and the Taste for Ethnicity: Art and 'Exchange' between Suriname and the Netherlands', *Etnofoor* 24, no. 2 (2013): 13–40; 'Global Change and Contemporary Art of the Caribbean: Notes on the Futurology of a Sustainable Art Community', *Who More Sci-Fi than Us? Contemporary Art from the Caribbean*, ed. Nancy Hoffmann (Amsterdam, 2012), pp. 80–84; Kitty Zijlmans, 'Art and agency in contemporary Curaçao: Tirzo Martha's "Blijf maar plakken"', *Sustainable Art Communities: Contemporary Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean*, ed. Leon Wainwright and Kitty Zijlmans (Manchester, 2017), pp. 91-101; and Kitty Zijlmans, 'Globalisation and Localization: Two Sides of the Same Coin', *Changing Perspectives. Dealing with Globalisation in the Presentation and Collection of Contemporary*, ed. Mariska ter Horst (Amsterdam, 2012), pp. 214-228.