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Frédéric Lefrançois

Weaving Artistic Archipelagos in Afro Diasporic Networks

Résumé

A travers le prisme de l'archipélité, la production artistique de la Diaspora afro-américaine révèle son potentiel diffractif : à la fois proche et lointaine de ses origines premières, elle se déploie dans l'entre-deux d'une double conscience. Dans son essai majeur, Paul Gilroy appelle au dépassement des oppositions binaires pour mieux appréhender la complexité de la culture intellectuelle afro-diasporique qu'il considère comme spécifiquement transnationale (Gilroy, 1993). Pour aussi inclusif qu'il puisse paraître, ce cadre théorique se heurte à la transcolonialité foncière des dynamiques artistiques animant la région des Amériques insulaires noires. À ce jour, les avatars du modèle colonial subsistent aux Petites et Grandes Antilles ainsi que dans la majorité des nations côtières du bassin caribéen. Ces schèmes continuent, dans une certaine mesure, d'influencer les choix esthético-politiques des plasticiens et performeurs de la région, tout en leur fournissant des codes symboliques interprétables comme autant de signes d'appartenance à la diaspora afro-transaméricaine. C'est donc une gageure que de prétendre à quelque forme de citoyenneté diasporique dans une configuration aussi mouvante et incertaine. Ce que l'on croit être pertinent du point de vue individuel ou communautaire peut s'avérer subversif sur le plan institutionnel. Comme le veut la tradition syncrétique prévalant à Cuba et au Brésil, un même code peut se voir attribuer diverses acceptions sémiotiques en fonction du contexte politique et pragmatique. Le présent article s'attèle donc à poser un regard ethno-critique sur l'apport de telles pratiques au cadre plus global des réseaux archipéliques en contexte transaméricain, et entend esquisser une cartographie des zones de connectivité artistique autour du concept d'afro-diasporicité.

Abstract

Through the prism of archipelicity, the artistic production of the Afro-American Diaspora reveals its diffractive potential: at once close to and far from its original origins, it unfolds in the in-between of a double consciousness. In his seminal essay, Paul Gilroy calls for the overcoming of binary oppositions in order to better apprehend the complexity of Afro-diasporic intellectual culture, which he sees as specifically transnational (Gilroy, 1993). As inclusive as this theoretical framework may seem, it is challenged by the inherent transcoloniality of the artistic dynamics animating the region of the Black Island Americas. To this day, avatars of the colonial model persist in the Lesser and Greater Antilles and in the majority of the coastal nations of the Caribbean basin. To a certain extent, these schemes continue to influence the aesthetic-political choices of the region's visual artists and performers, while providing them with symbolic codes that can be interpreted as signs of belonging to the Afro-Trans American diaspora. It is therefore a challenge to claim any form of diasporic citizenship in such a shifting and uncertain configuration. What is thought to be relevant from an individual or community perspective may prove to be institutionally subversive. In the syncretic tradition of Cuba and Brazil, the same code can be given different semiotic meanings depending on the political and pragmatic context. This article therefore takes an ethno-critical look at the contribution of such practices to the broader framework of archipelagic networks and map zones of Afro-diasporic connectivity in a trans-American context.

Resumen

A través del prisma de la archipelicidad, la producción artística de la diáspora afroamericana revela su potencial difractivo: a la vez cerca y lejos de sus orígenes, se despliega en el intermedio de una doble conciencia. En su ensayo seminal, Paul Gilroy reclama la superación de las oposiciones binarias para comprender mejor la complejidad de la cultura intelectual afrodiaspórica, que considera específicamente transnacional (Gilroy, 1993). Por muy inclusivo que parezca este marco teórico, se ve desafiado por la inherente transcolonialidad de las dinámicas artísticas que animan la región de las Américas de las islas negras. Hasta la fecha, persisten avatares del modelo colonial en las Antillas Menores y Mayores y en la mayoría de las naciones costeras de la cuenca del Caribe. Hasta cierto punto, estos esquemas siguen influyendo en las opciones estético-políticas de los artistas plásticos y los intérpretes de la región, al tiempo que les proporcionan códigos simbólicos que pueden interpretarse como signos de pertenencia a la diáspora afrotransamericana. Por lo tanto, es un reto reivindicar cualquier forma de ciudadanía diaspórica en una configuración tan cambiante e incierta. Lo que se considera relevante desde una perspectiva individual o comunitaria puede resultar institucionalmente subversivo. En la tradición sincrética de Cuba y Brasil, un mismo código puede recibir diferentes significados semióticos en función del contexto político y pragmático. Este artículo, por tanto, echa un vistazo etnocrítico a la contribución de tales prácticas al marco más amplio de las redes archipelágicas y mapea las zonas de conectividad afrodiaspórica en un contexto transamericano.

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Texte intégral

Introduction

1To conceive of Afro-diasporicity as the result of antagonistic processes that question the relationship of the subject to the diasporic in-between is a challenge when approaching the field of the arts. In the perspective of the present dossier, this article engages in a dynamic cartography between the Africa of origins – real or imagined – and that of a topology of the Here conceived as an Elsewhere, a place and moment of paradoxical projection, in a trans-American artistic context. For when we speak of diasporas, and those of Afrodescendants at that, the only geography is that of passage. And of time, we can say - especially of the present - that it is a past that is ignored, as we say of the diasporic link, stretched or underpinned by a cyclical temporality, as the “diasporisation” of identities increases. Impossible or dual inscription, this now calls for the dispersion of consciousness in a *Tout-Monde* of practices of erasure or reactivation of culturally or pragmatically oriented links.

2What about this dispersion that fertilises the migrant’s Elsewhere resulting from slavery and/or colonisation? Is it the result of a reparative logic or of erratic amnesia? In view of the politicisation of works of art and their reception, it is becoming urgent to refine the concepts with which they are analysed. Such a programme is all the more critical as it brings us back to the eternal question of unity in diversity, and more precisely, of the place of Africity in globality, according to the modalities of its experience: biopolitical heritage, bliss, fantasy of belonging. So many options that contemporary American and Euro-Caribbean artists can seize in order to accentuate ethno-cultural aspects of their praxis. It is a contention of this paper to show that the aesthetic and political stakes at play in the strengthening of this orientation shape a sociocultural and context-based consciousness.

Afro-Diasporic Networks: Roots and Routes of Connectedness

3“Weave an artistic web in *your* Diaspora”: an imperative of this kind may well have made its way in the minds of the visitors who questioned the presence, and significance, of Pascale Marthine Tayou’s latest exhibition – “Black Forest” – at the Fondation Clément, in Martinique (FWI) in 2019. Like British-Nigerian Yinka Shonibare and his famous counterpart, El Anatsui, Tayou creates artworks that connect all the descendants of the transatlantic trade scattered around the globe. By winning many international prizes, he has succeeded in translating the contemporary issues of his native Cameroon into the larger context of a modern, globalised artistic world, in collaboration with diasporic networks. Likewise, other artists based in North America or the Caribbean, like Simone Leigh, Manuel Mendive and Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, have bridged paths over the oceans in an endeavour to create a hub of artistic interactions.

4But the event is not the first one in the history of Afro-descendant art. Over the last 20 years, many exhibitions have showcased the distinctive talent of Afro-Caribbean artists, including “Infinite Islands” at the Brooklyn Museum in New York (2007–08); “Caribbean: Crossroads of the World” at the Museo del Barrio in New York (2012); and “Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art from the Caribbean Archipelago” at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, California (2018). The accumulation of such international events focusing on art from the diaspora of Black America suggests the emergence of an Afro-diasporic consciousness in the region, and calls for socio-critical appraisal. These are positive manifestations, but challenging modes of representation occur as well.

5In the wake of growing concerns over the visibility and representativeness of Afro-descendants in Western visual public spaces, it has become an urging question to pinpoint the role played by ethnicity in the representation of art dealing with postcolonial/transcolonial issues. The toppling of monuments dedicated to the memorialization of colonial power testifies to this fact.

6Over time, discussions have progressively focused on Caribbean artists and their relationship to their roots, especially as the persistence of colonial violence calls for the recovery and support of ancestral knowledge and spirituality, and consequently the connection to their Afro-diasporic environment.

Afro-Diasporic Aesthetics: an Artistic and Spiritual Ideal

7Diaspora can be theorized as “a syncretized configuration of cultural identity: shifting, flexible, and invariably anti-essentialist” (Goyal, 2003, p. 5). In this perspective the diasporic artist tends to reconfigure cultural identity with a view to avoiding binary oppositions, in accordance with Glissant’s rhizomic conception of culture and Gilroy’s double consciousness. But as Kandinsky would have it, art practitioners also need ideals to mobilize their psychic energy and build an inner cathedral. African heritage can thus provide them with a reservoir of beliefs, symbols, myths and kinships that constitute an ancestral foundation.

8That such connections point to shared ancestral roots/routes leading to the formation of transnational and “co-ethnic networks” (Tsuda, 2018, p. 191) is evidenced in the hub of artworks produced by Cuban diasporic plasticians who embed webs of African-originated symbols in their pieces. Manuel Mendive, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Ana Mendieta and Daniel Lind-Ramos all refer to Yoruba cosmogony as the foundation of their aesthetic discourse. Not only does borrowing motifs and faith principles add to the symbolic power of the artwork but it includes their artworks in a spiritual network that is easily and readily recognizable by Afro-Caribbean archipelagos.

9In the same way as Mendieta, Mendive supports the ideal of resilient politics that can suffuse Afro-diasporic aesthetics:

My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy, which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world (Blocker, 1999, p. 34).

10 Interestingly, such a commitment to diasporic citizenship and ancestry is not limited to celebrating origins, fostering encounters in national institutions, or structuring hybrid spaces, like “Afropea”, where black diasporic subjects might share an ideal “union” (Miano, 2020). These stimulating prospects are soon followed by pragmatic interrogations: how can West-Indian spectators relate to, and appreciate the African-ness of diasporic artwork, knowing that most of them have never seen the African continent? Can a remote member of a 200-million-person group achieve a sense of belonging when he or she ignores the exact location of his origins? Can art facilitate this kind of cultural and genealogical quest?

11 Answering such concerns points not only to the recurring issue of post-colonial Caribbean identity, but also to the propensity of the Afro-diasporic subject to find a cohesive force in the maze of scattered, fragmented black selves that call for reunification. Only commitment to Afro-diasporic citizenship within transnational artistic networks can motivate practitioners to indulge in so many efforts and sacrifices.

Conclusion

12 Between artists and artworks gradients of Afro-diasporicity operate a slow but constant transformation of aesthetic and political choices. The existence of sustained Afro-diasporic networks in the art scene shows that a transnational community bridging millions of people throughout the world can be empowered with the help of artistic archipelagos. Art is, in this perspective both a cure and a blessing.

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