It may be useful to briefly examine the conceptual framework around Documenta 11 of 2002—arguably the most elaborate and concerted attempt ever to renegotiate the terms of exchange between the global peripheries and the metropolitan centres of the contemporary art world. As Anette van Niekerk observes, Okwui Enwezor’s curatorial approach was rooted in “a politics of difference, rather than a politics of identity”, and the exhibition was “set up as a space for engagement with hybridity” explicitly aligned with Bhabha’s vision of “translating and trans-valuing cultural differences”. Under reference not only to Bhabha, but also Hall, Mouffe, Agamben, Hardt and Negri (and many others), Documenta 11 thus sought to describe a plurality of agonistic relationships, and to “counteract global forces of homogenization and fragmentation affecting art production everywhere”. With four geographically dispersed platforms leading up to the final event in Kassel, and with a variety of exhibits outside the main gallery, the event was demonstratively ‘extra-territorial’ and rhizomatic (as emphasized by the many extra-mural exhibits and by the labyrinthine exhibition layout in the main gallery).

Held on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia, platform 3 focused on ‘Créolité and Creolization’, and the compendium of texts collated after the event is an unmistakable testimony to the post-nationalist turn in Caribbean criticism. Gerardo Mosquera thus observes that new Caribbean art usually is “not bonded to nationalistic modernism or to traditional languages”.5 In the face of residual nationalisms, Stuart Hall argues for Glissant’s more flexible concept of ‘Créolité’ as “a kind of difference that refuses to fall back into its binary elements, which cannot be fixed in terms of this or that pole, but remains unsettled along a spectrum”. In a second essay, he moreover envisages a globalization from below, which in the cultural domain identifies itself through expressions of rupture, dissemination, tensions between exile and return, traveling without determination, contradictory juxtapositions, troubled interstices, etc. As it came to inform the curatorial
vision, this politics of difference implied a migration from aesthetic towards ethical criteria, therefore precluding works purely preoccupied with form, imagination, etc. Armed with postcolonialism’s arsenal of ambiguity, hybridity, paradox and irony, the exhibition thus precisely embodied a cosmopolitanism centered on ‘difference’ (elevated to a universal principle)—to the effect that its perception of what could be regarded as “international advanced art” was oddly homogenous after all. Though Documenta 11 featured a wide range of works, which in both satirical and militant ways expressed postcolonial or ‘third world’ concerns, the exhibition therefore suggested that cultural resistance now presented—ostensibly could only present—as a heterogeneous and revolving display of ‘difference’ and concerns. If the exhibition was controversial, it was, however, not because of its demonstratively political themes, but because there was a feeling that, as Sylvester Ogbechie puts it, the “focus on non-Western art merely answers to global capitalism’s persistent need for new commodities”. Objections were also leveled at the literal or activist character of many works, since “mere subject matter”, according to Rasheed Araeen “does not provide any significant opposition to the hegemony of Western power”. There was, in other words, a perception that the exhibition’s panoply of protestations at some level also represented a concession. Perhaps the most troubling question brought out by Documenta 11 was, therefore, what form significant opposition to a Western hegemony could now take? It seems relevant to interject, here, Wainwright’s suggestion that artists of the ‘Small Axe Collective’ (i.e., the 1990s avant-garde) “present the grounds for a refusal to be conscripted as much by local and national terms of historical explanation found within the Caribbean region, as the imposition of paradigms of modernity that would be imposed from without”. While the passage undoubtedly reflects the group’s self-perception as neither nationalist, nor metropolitan, it is unclear how the refusal of “imposed paradigms” is expressed. While I concede that its cosmopolitanism may not always represent a conscious appeal to the metropolitan curatoriat, the 1990s avant-garde has incontrovertibly embraced a set of aesthetic values and strategies, which are, if not directly imposed, every bit as imported as those adopted by the Creole modernists. Yet, in the final analysis, the central question ought not be whether ideas are indigenous or imported, but what possibilities they open and close. On that note, Cozier’s one-time suggestion that the “enemy of the nationalist has shifted from the colonizer to the perpetual ‘next generation’” invites some consideration of how successfully the latter has charted a path beyond both nationalist and colonizer.

Despite the criticisms, Documenta 11 was generally considered a success, and to a large extent set the agenda for the next decade’s exhibitions of postcolonial art.
In the discussions that follow below, I intend to show the journey towards (and past) the quintessentially cosmopolitan Documenta matrix in North American exhibitions of the Caribbean contemporary. To this end, I undertake a discussion of five exhibitions that have been held in the United States between 1995 and 2019 (with a detour towards one held in Europe). Due to its temporally and spatially disseminated character, *The Global Caribbean* (2009–2013) is not included, nor is *Caribbean Crossroads* (2012), which had a historical, rather than a contemporary focus.

**We Know We Won’t Get It Right**

The first obstacle for international curators preparing a Caribbean survey-exhibition is the scarcity of institutional support, national art-histories, documentation and critical writing in the region. Such curators have always had to patch together a conceptual framework of their own and subsequently find suitable works to fit the script. In so doing, they have typically turned to creolization-theory, to Caribbean literature, ethnography, cultural heritage and black history. In the process, they are frequently guided by local critics, curators and artists, who may themselves have vested interests in such events: as Poupeye points out, there is a high degree of desirability attached to inclusion in overseas survey-exhibitions, not least because the accompanying catalogues have a long shelf life as a ‘who’s who’ in Caribbean art. Such a curatorial assignment can easily become a journey between Scylla and Charybdis, and, for a long time, a remark made by the then director of the Museo el Barrio during the *Caribbean Crossroads* consultation (see p. 102) echoed in my ears: “No museum wants to ‘do’ the Caribbean anymore. For a U.S. curator, a Caribbean show is considered a rite of passage: we know we won’t get it right.” On that note, its feels appropriate to recognize that curatorial efforts usually are made in good faith and with tremendous effort. As has been the case with Carifesta, ‘getting it right’ by all parties concerned is never a realistic prospect. It is likewise necessary (if prosaic) to acknowledge that the shape of such events above all reflects institutional mandates, resources, facilities and timing. Because of such variables, it is an admittedly precarious undertaking to use exhibition-catalogues (and reviews) as indicators of shifts in intellectual hegemonies in the Caribbean and the United States. Meanwhile, even though their evidence is both tenuous and indirect, the empirical data they contain (who curated the exhibition, what was shown and how it was conceptualized) are the only available ‘cold facts’ pertaining to this trajectory. The purpose of the following discussion is to show correspondences between the critical re-directions
described in section 1, and the trajectory of the curatorial conceptualization of the Caribbean contemporary in an international context (I acknowledge that exhibitionary dynamics at the national level tend to be more random). It must also be stressed that not every individual work can be taken in evidence of an exhibition’s overall inflection: large survey shows often co-opt the particular art work into a conceptual framework, which did not inform its making.

**Caribbean Visions, 1995**

The traveling exhibition *Caribbean Visions* toured the United States in 1995. It was curated by Samella Lewis and Mary Jane Hewitt of Art Services International, whose mission was “to bring the fine arts of the world to American audiences”. The intention with *Caribbean Visions* was to present “a comprehensive view of contemporary painting and sculpture in the region by featuring works created by artists who well reflect, and are inspired by, a Caribbean consciousness”. Readers of the catalogue are informed that, despite the region’s geographical and cultural spread, “Caribbean artists have found unity in diversity”, and that “the uniqueness of contemporary Caribbean art lies within the artists’ sense of space, their perceptions of light and color and the geographic identification with the Caribbean, despite the location of their ancestral homeland or their current residence”.

The front-cover of the exhibition catalogue, which is graced by a segment of a semi-abstract painting by Dudley Charles, contains a somewhat disjointed collection of texts by prominent writers and artists of the region (Derek Walcott, Rex Nettleford and Peter Minshall) and by various North America-based scholars specializing in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Haiti, or in ‘festival arts’. When I describe the collection as disjointed, it is because the majority of essays seem quite disconnected from the exhibition itself (despite two out of eight essays focusing on carnival, the selected works did not contain many references to festival arts). There was, in other words, no attempt to explain, through the texts, what “unity in diversity” might mean, or how this is expressed in the exhibited works. Meanwhile, if the theoretical frame was less than coherent, it can be taken as an indication of the near absence, at the time, of dedicated literature on visual art from most Caribbean territories.

The catalogue grouped the fifty-six participating artists into national sections. At least three-quarters of these had trained in the United States, and almost half were listed as residing outside the region, mainly in North America. Some nations (for example Grenada) were not included at all, while others (i.e., Guyana, Cuba, Saint Thomas and Saint Vincent) were represented by non-resident artists only
Section 3. Encounters

(in the case of Cuba, according to Poupeye, “an obvious concession to Cuban-American politics”). The stated aim of reflecting the “essence of the Caribbean people” was obviously problematic, and so was the complete lack of artists from French and Dutch territories, as well as the omission of intuitive works from an exhibition seeking to expose works inspired by a “Caribbean consciousness”. In my opinion, Caribbean Visions did, nevertheless, present a sufficient range of stylistic positions and thematic preoccupations to indicate the presence of generational, political and aesthetic contestations in the region. Consistent with the nationalist ethos, which certainly would have influenced many older artists, numerous works were in the celebratory, affirmative and sometimes essentialist vein: portrayals of Caribbean people, folklore, spirituality and celebrations of ‘blackness’ (Moody, Watson, Bedia, Gonzalez). Other works implicitly or explicitly arrested such postulations of national unity, but maintained the use of traditional media (Davis, Butcher, Esson). Several artists could be described as Creole modernists, who combined form-experiment with the narration of Caribbean stories (Clarke, Charles, Greaves), others as abstract modernists (Bowling, Cadien), and others yet (though new media was scarce, given the curatorial focus on painting and sculpture) as fledgling Caribbean postmodernists—i.e., ‘conceptualists’ veering away from traditional media, critical of the postcolonial nation and unwilling to posit an essential Caribbean identity (Cozier, Campos-Pons). In different ways, many also spoke to the concepts of diaspora (Clarke, Chen) and hybridity (Nanan, Chong). To anyone looking for it, there was evidence of a continued subscription to, as well as departures from the nationalist paradigm and the Creole modernism, which accompanied the early phase of the nation-building project.

Poupeye critiques Caribbean Visions for its conservative reproduction of the region’s internal hierarchies (through the inclusion of “local and international ‘heavy-weights’ such as Wifredo Lam, Edna Manley, Ronald Moody, Karl Broodhagen and Leroy Clarke, along with younger and emerging artists”). I am, however, of the converse opinion, that it is only through such juxtapositions, that generational ruptures become visible and meaningful (especially in a traveling exhibition). I likewise disagree with Poupeye’s suggestion that the identification of artists by nation should necessarily have “reinforced the notion that Caribbean art consists of a cluster of cohesive national schools”. The national identification merely (but importantly) connects the works with particular historical, political and institutional structures (consistent with Jameson’s ‘national situation’) and precisely helps illuminate which trends transcend national borders and therefore may be considered significant for the region at large. If Caribbean Visions could be faulted for preserving existing hegemonies, those to worry about do not, in my
view, pertain to the region’s aesthetic hierarchies, but to the relationship between the United States and the Caribbean: it is in this context, that the exhibition’s oversights and omissions become significant. For by invoking, but never really using national frames to draw out potentially controversial political issues (for instance regarding Cuba, Grenada, Puerto Rico or Guyana), the exhibition arguably denied the national perspectives on which it seemed to insist. Similarly, by showing works, which generally employed a language that to a metropolitan eye in 1995 may have registered as ‘belated’, but neglecting to theorize this oddity as a possibly deliberate measure of resistance, the exhibition ultimately preserved the notion of a region still catching up with modernity. It did not, in other words, expose Caribbean artists’ particular challenge to reflect the complicated relationship between modernity, modernism and postcoloniality. The closest the curators came to a discussion of what Wainwright calls a ‘politics of time’ is the passing suggestion (albeit in the literary context of Wilson Harris and Kamau Brathwaite) that “Caribbean uniqueness” lies in its liberation “from the constrictions of historical convention”.20

Towards the end of their introduction, the curators offer the following summary of the exhibition’s thematic diversity: “nationalism/indigenism, romantic love, mysticism, religious practices, respect for nature in all its forms, the excitement brought by Carnival throughout the Caribbean, the folk roots of culture and visual narrative language”.21 Meanwhile, one highly significant feature that could have been drawn out, but that passes without mention, is the collective scope (visualizations of ancestral roots, cultural practices, spirituality, political challenges, migration), which suffuses many of the works. Despite Walcott’s and Nettleford’s fervent regionalism, the resistive and political gestures embedded (both aesthetically and thematically) in the works are therefore neutralized under general reference to diversity, creolization processes and the carnivalesque. There is no contextualizing effort to infer an aesthetic principle from Walcott’s idea of creolization, and no attempt to integrate different characteristics into collective (and potentially politicized) regional claims. Ironically, and almost in conflict with his earlier and prescient statement that “Despite persistent colonial attachments to a Eurocentric ideal among many, there are enough Caribbean artists and others of vision who are seized by the fact that universality, as Herman Melville once said, is a ‘culturally specific concept, used to maintain a hierarchy and a dominance over other cultures’”,22 Nettleford’s final paragraph thus attains an inadvertently conservative inflection, which, to a North American audience, should put to rest any concerns about the region’s stability: “Herein lies a celebration of heterogeneity, of unity in diversity, and of the method that underlies
all that appears to be madness! Against the background of such differences, such contradictions, such contrariness, even such chaos, is a unifying space in which an identity that defies stasis, while it promotes order and stability is now being forged” (my emphasis).

In conclusion, it can therefore be argued that Caribbean Visions’ portrayal of the region indeed was one of cultural and aesthetic diversity. The exhibition moreover provided a lot of raw material for an apprehension of Caribbean resistance and critique, but either failed to bring these characteristics into focus, or actively diffused them. All the same: even if the curatorial team left viewers to detect a political, aesthetic and generational dynamic for themselves, there was no direct effort to conceal the thematic and political diversity of the region’s art by projecting aesthetic conformity (within the limited field of painting and sculpture). To my mind, the exhibition therefore exemplified how a portrayal of the Caribbean as carnivalesque, given to a high degree of cultural narcissism, and alternating between self-affirmation and self-critique, served a broader multiculturalist agenda intent on paying homage to the diversity of the world, while taking the edge out of its more radical and collective potential.

A Cursory Look at Caribe Insular, 1998

Though it says nothing about the Caribbean-American trajectory, which is the focus of my discussion, the catalogue for the large-scale Spanish exhibition of Caribbean art, Caribe Insular (1998) (jointly commissioned by Casa de America and the Museo Extremeno y Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporaneo in Madrid) curated by Antonio Zaya and Maria Lluisa Borras, testifies to the gradual transition from the curatorial suggestion of Caribbean multicultural diversity to the cosmopolitan projection of relative thematic and aesthetic conformity.

The catalogue, which features a Peter Minshall ‘mas’-production on its cover, tones down the ‘national claim’ on the forty-three participating artists (from all four language-areas of the Caribbean), by listing them in alphabetical order with country of birth, residence or practice indicated in small font underneath the name. Apart from the two curators’ own contributions, the accompanying texts (this time no less than sixteen) are, however, decidedly national in origin and approach, and also specifically focused on the visual arts. They offer an unprecedented and valuable compendium of writing and perspectives on the region’s art histories and dynamics, which the exhibition thus attempted to fuse into a directed, if not univocal portrayal of contemporary Caribbean art. On this occasion, the curators are also more forthright about their overarching agenda.
The Caribbean, they suggest, offers helpful insights into processes, to which the West is currently trying to adapt: hybridization, racial intermixing, transculturation, syncretism, multiculturalism, large-scale immigration, dissemination etc.\textsuperscript{23} Though the exhibition necessarily seeks to exempt a number of Caribbean artists and works from art historical “exclusion and fragmentation”, it is thus primarily occasioned by the need for Europe to come to terms with its growing cultural and ethnic diversity. It is, moreover, explicitly conceded that globalization is driven by Western interests: “globalization must be understood as homogenization and occidentalization, and hence the equivalent of monopolization, occidental imperialism of the media, and re-colonization”.\textsuperscript{24} The exhibition therefore at once reflected Western self-interest and self-scrutiny, and the curators openly acknowledge, that matters between the Caribbean and the West remain unsettled. They are moreover refreshingly specific about their findings and the features of Caribbean art are listed as follows (irrelevant details omitted). It is:

— free from prejudice
— in search of its own roots
— not provincial (but) fully belongs to cosmopolitan postmodernism
— integrates popular, Creole and traditional elements with ancestral, African and native Indian cults, tending towards demystification
— does not reject any form of artistic expression
— returns to the subjects of islands, migrations and crossings
— (infused with) resistance, defiance and knows how to use kitsch as an implacable critical weapon.

Rather than common characteristics of an ideal category of ‘Caribbean art’, this list should perhaps have been described as a multiplicity of aspirations, which often come into conflict with one another (certain forms of Creole resistance and traditional elements may, for example, breed a bias against cosmopolitan postmodernism).

However, even though the exhibition’s objectives were portrayed as mutually beneficial to Spain and the Caribbean, I contend that the need to make it fit a domestic agenda (which may be as narrow as the reputation and future career of its curators) manifested itself in the selection of the works. The curators’ claim to have included all media “as long as none exercises a hegemonic dominance over the others” is thus tempered by the allusion to a certain preference for installations, which “continue opening new paths of exploration and synthesis, of intimacy and expression, of investigation and celebration”, and by the remarkably provocative declaration, that most of the “excellent painters from the islands who
are often chosen to represent their homelands in international exhibitions” were omitted as a matter of policy, because “we felt that their work was intended to fit into art world trends and occidental interests.” Notwithstanding the promise of a balanced selection, the vast majority of works were thus ‘conceptual’ and more than half of those shown in the catalogue were installations. The remainder was made up of painting, performance, photography, mixed media and sculptural objects. Whereas *Caribbean Visions* excluded intuitive artists but had a strong representation of what I have termed ‘Creole modernists’, *Caribe Insular* included a couple of intuitives (Moore, Daley, Jolimeau), but few artists working in the narrative or celebratory vein of Creole modernism, or otherwise opposing art world fashions. The emphasis was on works that exuded a general air of ambiguity and were relatively indirect in their representation of the Caribbean, though several referenced its spiritual and popular traditions (the inclusion of a few intuitive artists may indeed have been an attempt to contextualize an emergent cosmopolitanism). The claim that the omission of many painters rested on concerns about ‘Western’ or commercial interests, however, raises the converse question, whether the extreme overrepresentation of installation did not itself reflect a concern with art world trends and *more current* occidental interests. Indeed, those who aligned themselves with a cosmopolitan postmodernism were held up as full members of an (inherently progressive) international avant-garde. Like *Caribbean Visions*, *Caribe Insular* failed to pick up on the concerted efforts on the part of many artists in the region to resist, at their peril, the contemporary ‘culture game’.

*Caribe Insular* therefore anticipated Poupeye’s (chronologically speaking, later) contention that visiting curators should avoid reproducing local canons. This time, they clearly sought to show the region where its priorities ought to be, for it to be taken seriously in an international context. While *Caribe Insular* warmly acknowledges ‘Caribbean resistance’, such resistance (i.e., gestures towards neo-imperialism, contested identities, migration, diaspora, the loss of cultural traditions etc.) was therefore primarily expressed through thematic rather than formal dispositions. The maneuvers of Creole modernism, which to foreign eyes might register as anachronistic (works by the likes of Greaves, Clarke, Charles and other artists foregrounded in *Caribbean Visions*), were discarded under reference to an alleged compliance with a foreign gaze. That the cosmopolitan expression may be similarly charged is never acknowledged. Meanwhile, *Caribe Insular* was also indicative of another trend: the average age of the artists in *Caribbean Visions* was fifty; in *Caribe Insular*, it was forty-three; and in the next big Caribbean exhibition, *Infinite Island*, it had dropped to forty.
Infinite Island, 2007

_Infinite Island_ was organized by the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 2007 and put together by the museum’s in-house assistant curator for contemporary art and exhibitions, Tumelo Mosaka. It was, according to the foreword by the museum’s director, especially intended for the large Caribbean constituency served by the museum. _Infinite Island_ featured forty-five artists from the Caribbean and its diaspora with approximately 35 percent residing outside the region, which may be one reason why Mosaka opens his introductory essay by valorizing the idea of the region as a ‘space’ rather than a ‘place’. The front-cover of the catalogue shows Hew Locke’s sensational piece ‘El Dorado’, and the artists are introduced in alphabetical order with no reference to their nationality (which is only revealed in the accompanying blurbs). Apart from the opening citation of Derek Walcott’s Nobel lecture, which also was reprinted in the _Caribbean Visions_ catalogue, the difference in curatorial approach to the two exhibitions could hardly have been greater. Mosaka is, for example, far more overt than Lewis and Hewitt about the region’s political and economic challenges and the shadow of colonization. The marketing of the Caribbean as a ‘Paradise’, he notes, “conceals social conditions burdened by poverty, crime and the lack of education and health care. These conditions engender fragile governments that are vulnerable to outside manipulation”. He proceeds to observe the problematic use of the term ‘hybridity’ (meaning creolization) as a nationalist ideal, which leads to a false notion of homogeneity, rather than genuine pluralism: “Approaching nationalism through the lens of hybridity, however, can also reduce the cultural complexity of the Caribbean to a homogeneous entity in the service of political interests. Such nationalisms presuppose that cultural hybridity produces equality among its component parts, when in fact the historical particularities of the region have resulted in the privileging of certain groups within the various groups that make up the Caribbean (...). It is the cultural mixture and tension of differences that give the Caribbean its dynamism”.

The curator’s attention to the region’s internal challenges is, however, not matched by equal attention to its external challenges and continued dependency, which perhaps follows naturally from the definition of the Caribbean as a ‘space’ (a de-territorialized approach in fact necessitates the treatment of the region as a cultural, rather than a political entity), but rather with an emphasis on Caribbean artists’ longing to escape their insular tedium: Defying the strictures of limiting categories associated with physical boundaries, national desires, and market-driven images, the contemporary artists in _Infinite Island: Contemporary Carib-
bean Art reimagine the Caribbean as a place where both infinite and delimited conditions apply.29

On this background, one would surely expect Mosaka’s selection to reflect a great deal of diversity, ‘composite hybridity’ and a pronounced awareness of the politics of aesthetics—indeed, a US-based curator, who dedicates a long paragraph to the power of ‘naming’ and gestures towards previous tendencies to “reduce the cultural complexity of the Caribbean to a homogenous entity in the service of political interests” might have exerted a high degree of self-scrutiny before defining the Caribbean contemporary. Infinite Island was, nonetheless, by a long shot the least aesthetically diverse Caribbean exhibition to date. Practically all works were thus in new or experimental media (installation, mixed media, performance and photography). There were no intuitive or naturalistic works and few that registered as modernist in either the Creole or the Western tradition. Echoing Documenta 11 practically all the submissions now reflected postcolonial concerns and preoccupations: migration (Allora and Calzadilla), global and social inequality (Arrechea), the failures of de-colonization (Cozier, Denis), body and gender (Paiewonsky, Patterson, Atkinson), black history (Gardner, Campbell) and popular culture (Dzine, Diaz). The works come across as both issue-oriented, pointed and humorous, but also as ideologically ambivalent and politically disillusioned: Allora and Calzadilla’s beach-footprints (with an image of the Statue of Liberty) may offer a simultaneous critique of Cuban socialism and US immigration-laws, but also suggest the failure of either system to bring about ‘freedom’ in any real sense. Hew Locke’s ‘El Dorado’ may be a gigantic vodou-doll, and an apparent monument to anti-imperialism, but most of all comes across as a resigned postmodern joke: poking fun at the ultimate symbol of empire, but without projecting, in its aesthetic spectrum, any hint of postcolonial vision or agency beyond its momentary subversiveness. Infinite Island consisted entirely of sophisticated works, which exuded a worldly contemporaneity and resonated with cosmopolitanism’s indication of ‘locality’ in a universal language. Conceptualized as a cultural space marked by infinite complexity and diversity, however, the region’s cumulative political critiques could not be attached to a coherent position or agenda and therefore simply vaporized. The lasting impression was therefore not of political concerns, but of aesthetic sophistication and creative cleverness and of an exhibition eager to prove the postmodern prowess of its artists.

Infinite Island’s demonstrative cosmopolitanism nevertheless had limited returns. Krista Thompson objected to its thematic sections, which “speak(s) less to the aesthetics of the work and more to their status as documents and reflections of ‘Caribbeanness’” and therefore is deemed “anthropologizing”.30 Meanwhile, the
most memorable review was, as mentioned, by Holland Cotter, who lamented the exhibition’s insipid provinciality. In a particularly stinging turn of events, it was indeed the curatorial effort to satisfy cosmopolitan expectations that got in the way of its claim to true contemporaneity: “Multiculturalist terms like identity, hybridity and diversity may sound like words from a dead language in Chelsea, but they are the lingua franca of the Brooklyn show. Once-hyped forms like installation art and the neo-conceptual object may be disdained by Manhattan tastemakers, but they are embraced here.” On the whole, Cotter asserts, the show “does not have the sense of risk and discovery that a re-arguing of identity as a subject now needs, at least in a New York context”.31 Were the subtext of miscalculated efforts not so pitiful, it would have been tempting to commend Cotter for being so candid about the lack of horizontality in the global art world.

Before moving on, it is worth pausing for a moment over the catalogue’s second (and last) essay by Annie Paul. Under reference to Thompson’s An Eye for the Tropics, Paul opens by stating the importance, in a region dependent on tourism, of shaking off stereotypical images imposed from abroad (as will be discussed momentarily, this notion provided the conceptual framework for the 2011-exhibition Wrestling with the Image). Reflecting further on aesthetic dynamics between the Caribbean and the metropole, she observes:

Throughout the Caribbean, there has been a sustained tension between traditionalist artists, who felt that their mandate was to give visual form to the local, the indigenous, and the native, and modernists, who considered themselves internationalist in orientation and favored a more cosmopolitan, less parochial outlook. The former tended toward national themes, and toward realism and illusionism as preferred techniques of image making; the latter preferred international styles such as Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, and in more recent times have been experimenting with the new media of installation, site-specific work, performance and video.32

Notwithstanding the inconsistent use of terms in relation to Paul’s earlier writing (the once reviled modernists are now described as ‘cosmopolitanists’ and held up as forerunners for the present-day avant-garde), the implicit suggestion is that there is a relationship between Caribbean artists’ choice of language and their (perceived) prospects in the international art-world. It is surprising, therefore, that she does not attempt to draw out the differences between previous and current efforts at gaining international visibility or to show how this is reflected in the present exhibition. Such an inquiry might suggest that artists’ choice of medium and critical tenor now tend to be more decisive factors than style and
subject-matter. Paul, however, ends her essay by switching from an analytical to a prescriptive mode and reiterates the hope, that the region’s visual arts may soon be cross-fertilized with popular culture. Almost as if by cue, the next exhibition of contemporary Caribbean art in the United States was indeed centered on ‘the popular’.

As may have been noticed, the curators of the three exhibitions discussed so far have been emissaries of the host-institution or organizing body. The evolution from a projection of multicultural diversity (but also of ‘belatedness’) in Caribbean Visions, to one of postcolonial cosmopolitanism in Infinite Island, may thus be indicative of changes in the way the cultural metropole approaches the cultural Caribbean. These exhibitions have in recent years been followed by another three curated by individuals with close personal ties to the Caribbean (whether in an effort to award the region more agency in its own representation, or to lessen the pressure on the host-institution to ‘get it right’). As will become apparent, the conceptual frameworks for two of these exhibitions correspond exactly with the ‘culturalist’ and the ‘conceptual’ factions of the Caribbean postmodern described in section 1.

Rockstone and Bootheel, 2009

Rockstone and Bootheel was hosted by Real Art Ways in Connecticut and curated by Kristina Newman-Scott and Yona Backer (both of the Jamaican diaspora) in 2009. According to the accompanying catalogue (with a graphic pun on the exhibition-title on its cover), Real Art Ways is one of the earliest surviving alternative spaces in the United States. It was established in 1975 “in a rambling upstairs space on Asylum Street in downtown Hartford. The founding members created a bare bones salon in which they lived, worked and presented the work of others. The idea of alternativity to the mainstream is central to Real Art Ways—the organization arose at a moment when alternative ideas were being explored ( . . .) and alternative institutions were being established”.33

Rockstone and Bootheel differed from Infinite Island and Caribbean Visions in the reduction of scope from the entire region to contemporary West Indian Art (so often marginalized by the more populous and institutionally stronger Spanish-speaking areas). The exhibition thus displayed works by thirty-nine artists from the Anglophone Caribbean and its diaspora. Incidentally, the artists’ average age was also thirty-nine, thus slightly lower than in Infinite Island, but with a drop of eleven years from Caribbean Visions. Artists are listed in alphabetical order with their country and year of birth indicated in small letters below. It
Caribbean Contemporary in the US

is, however, unclear whether it was the Caribbean (as a marginal region), or the ‘popular’ (as a supposedly marginal aesthetic category), or the combined notion of ‘the marginal in the marginal,’ which was seen to connect with the ‘alternative’ scope of the space. Given the counter hegemonic claims of the host-venue, the overlaps between the artists in Rockstone and Bootheel and those featured in Infinite Island (in a decidedly mainstream institution like the Brooklyn Museum) was indeed surprising. Predictably, the majority of works were thus executed in new or mixed media and more than a third of the Anglophone Caribbean artists shown in Infinite Island, reappeared here (Christopher Cozier has in fact been included in every exhibition discussed here, except Wrestling with the Image, which he co-curated).\(^{34}\)

What clearly was meant to set the show apart was its explicit emphasis on the ‘popular’, starting with the dub-reference in the title of the show. This was stated as a conscious effort to renegotiate the (not further qualified) “basic structures and assumptions”, which usually inform the selection of Caribbean art for metropolitan survey shows.\(^{35}\) Popular culture was therefore a common theme for a majority of the catalogue-essays (especially those by Nicholas Laughlin, Donna Hope and Annie Paul), which offered a purposeful critical frame for the exhibition. Though it did not extend to intuitive, performative or participatory works,\(^{36}\) the popular was widely defined, and its references included street-life (Rose and Todd), carnival (Ové, Griffith), gang-violence (Johnson, Morrison), dancehall culture (Patterson, Cozier), mass-media (Russell) and spirituality (Akuzuru, Dada). While the show thus argued for a high degree of cultural autonomy, there appeared to be some internal disparity on the question of critical autonomy. Some works sought to engage ‘directly’ with political issues (migration, labor-exploitation) in the form of video-documentaries (Davis, Fabri). Others tackled aspects of popular life by addressing reductive perceptions of the Caribbean (Loy, Russell, Curry) or the constructed nature of identity (Cox, Lawrence). In the overall argument for a Caribbean cultural subject, the deconstructive inflection and the tendency towards ironic distance was arguably less pronounced than in Infinite Island. A press-release suggested that the exhibition “evokes the feeling of a high-energy ‘mash up.’ The works are juxtaposed in conversation with one another to reveal complex, fragmented stories about contemporary Anglophone Caribbean culture, challenging common assumptions about West Indian artistic expression”.\(^{37}\) Meanwhile, even though the emphasis on ‘the popular’ may have been intended as a counter-point to Infinite Island’s sleek conceptualism, and was deployed to suggest an intentional and structurally ‘deeper’ expression of cultural identity and resistance, it’s organizing principle of ‘the mashup’ would, had it been
employed by non-Caribbean curators, have been furiously rejected as pejorative and essentialist. If *Caribbean Visions*’ portrayal of the region as ‘carnivalesque’ revealed an underlying prejudice, *Rockstone and Bootheel* thus made that prejudice its own. It is therefore questionable to what extent Backer and Newman-Scott challenged “common assumptions about West Indian expression”. The engagement with the popular moreover prompts the ‘Spivakian’ question, whether the vernacular cosmopolitanism of an exhibition like *Rockstone and Bootheel* manages to engage the people for whom it supposedly speaks.

Whereas *Infinite Island* largely failed to excite the art-establishment, *Rockstone and Bootheel* was generally well received. Whether because of the show’s relatively focused agenda, its humour or its self-imposed essentialism, critics were enthusiastic about the exhibition’s diversity and ‘contemporariness’. Hank Hoffmann, a Connecticut-based visual arts blogger, wrote “There is no overarching theme but there is an organizing principle: the mashup. Newman-Scott says the use of the mashup aesthetic for the exhibit appropriately reflects life on the islands. Culture in its various manifestations—visual arts, music—is woven into the fabric of daily existence.” Despite the charming chaos, the show thus passed muster with this viewer and registered as “fully within the mainstream of contemporary art”. Even more significant, Benjamin Genocchio, writing for the *New York Times*, opens his review “Colorful, Witty, Noisy: A West Indian Mélange”, with a declaration: “Every now and then a show comes along that takes you out of your comfort zone and into a strange new world. The ideas and imagery in that world can be difficult to appreciate at first, but the more you look, the more you begin to understand the local references and cultural concepts involved. Slowly and surely the beauty and sophistication of the art come into focus.” What Genocchio’s statement accurately describes is the pleasurable rendezvous between the metropolitan critic and an exhibition, which exactly manages to project an aura of cultural ‘otherness’, and yet allows the determined and open-minded viewer to crack the codes. The ‘comfort-zone’ is, in other words, momentarily jeopardized, but quickly restored when the viewer locks eyes with the exotic artist in a moment of mutual—and cosmopolitan—recognition.

*Wrestling with the Image, 2011*

Cultural stereotypes and preconceptions, and ways of redressing them, were to become the theme of *Wrestling with the Image. Caribbean Interventions*. The exhibition was arranged for the World Bank in Washington, DC (partnering with the Inter-American Development Bank and the Organization of American States)
and curated by the US-based art historian Tatiana Flores and Christopher Cozier, thus marking the zenith of his ascent from newcomer in Caribbean Visions. Suggesting some common ground between the two, Flores's professional profile at Rutgers University indicates that her work is "deeply informed by theoretical approaches, such as feminism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism".

Wrestling with the Image presented works by thirty-six artists from the Caribbean and its diaspora as part of the World Bank’s About Change series. A statement on the jacket of the exhibition-catalogue states that “Works chosen during the open Call for Entries are by contemporary visual artists from all member states in the region. The exhibitions provide a comprehensive overview of current artistic spheres and specialties”. The catalogue, once again, lists artists in alphabetical order with nationality indicated below. Given both curators’ discussion, in their respective catalogue-essays, of the Caribbean as an ever-expanding space, less and less tied to national boundaries or geographical locations, it is at first surprising that even diasporic artists are identified with a particular Caribbean nation. Roshini Kempadoo and Hew Locke, both long-standing residents of the United Kingdom, are thus listed under Guyana/UK. While this of course reflects the exhibition’s focus on the movements and ‘routes’ undertaken by Caribbean artists, it does, however, also protect the curators from having to include less cosmopolitan works created by artists actually living in a place like Guyana, notwithstanding the host institution’s promise of a “comprehensive overview of current artistic spheres and specialties”.

Whereas Rockstone and Bootheel could be linked to the ‘culturalist’ strand of the Caribbean postmodern, Wrestling with the Image corresponded with the ‘deconstructive and conceptualist’ direction. Though neither curator dwells at length on the concept and current shape of ‘contemporary art’, the exhibition oriented itself towards questions of visual representation by featuring works that ‘wrestle with’—i.e., challenges or subverts—imposed identities (metaphorically captured in the front-cover’s reproduction of John Cox’s ‘I Am Not Afraid to Fight a Perfect Stranger’, which was discussed on p. 154). One of the exhibition’s objectives was therefore to redress assumptions about Caribbeanness, tropicality and postcolonial identity, whether reflected in tourist-brochures or nationalist cultural programming, and another was to dismantle notions of the Caribbean as tied to a particular location by demonstrating its dispersed and migratory character. The latter was argued through a curatorial emphasis on works made by Caribbean people born in one country, living in another and exhibiting in a third. In his catalogue-essay (presaging Laughlin as cited on p. 47), Cozier writes: “These artists display a defiance against being pinned down to a single location, and the
expectations ascribed to being here or there. Defying these territorial boundaries brings up questions of license and approval, and indeed images of passports, certificates, and associated coats of arms and official insignias move through many of the works, underscoring the way that bodies and land are constantly commodified and licensed.”

The region is thus (as in Infinite Island) re-conceptualized as a coherent, if infinitely differentiated, critical space in which “the dizzyingly dynamic visual production of contemporary Caribbean artists” nevertheless “is bound by ‘common threads’.” Though Flores finds it encouraging that artists “choose to engage local subject matter—broadly understood—instead of retreating into a hermetic visual language that would have them deny their surroundings and backgrounds altogether”,43 the exhibition primarily portrays the common threads as a widespread objection to cultural stereotypes (be they “hammocks, palm-trees and blue skies with smiling faces and available bodies” or “abject silhouettes cramped in sloops on a CNN report”). What is evoked, therefore, is often a Caribbean identity ‘under erasure’, which entails a deferment of any positive claims about Caribbeanness, while nonetheless positing a generalized notion of external prejudice. On this premise, however, the contemporary Caribbean artist is placed in the role as perpetual defendant—at the same time against stereotypical assumptions on the part of naïve visitors from the north (from journalists and tourists to curators in search of ‘Caribbeanness’) and against essentialist identity-claims made by past generations—both ‘running and dodging’, to paraphrase Brennan once more. The underlying perception of this bundle of ‘offenses’ (so differently motivated) as being of a kind is nonetheless problematic. It is, moreover, hard not to feel a sense of consternation that this sort of artistic endeavor is argued as a novelty—it was, after all, not least to contest the projection of a picturesque or exotic Caribbean (in both colonial and early ‘tourist’ art), that many Caribbean modernists engaged in whole or partial abstraction: indeed, the effort to make us ‘see things anew’ through the wholesale turn to new media today, in some ways replicates the rejection of naturalism more than half a century ago.45

A themed exhibition with a deconstructive scope may, however, ultimately be an impossible brief. In the present case, this is reflected in the surprising inclusion of works which, given their unequivocal celebration of maroon culture seem to contradict the exhibition’s fundamental premise of unsettling fixed notions of cultural identities. One artist is introduced in the catalogue as follows: “With his art Marcel Pinas aims to create a lasting record of the lifestyle and traditions of his maroon heritage and hopes to create a worldwide awareness and appreciation for the unique traditional communities in Suriname.”46 Such authenticity claims are
indeed conspicuous and contradictory for an exhibition, which specifically sets out to challenge cultural commodification, and prompt the question, whether the inclusion of these artists may be explained by something other than the practical difficulty of staying true to a deconstructive vision. This is where section 2’s discussion of the region’s alternative spaces and creative network becomes doubly relevant. A scrutiny of the participating artists in *Wrestling with the Image*—artists who, according to the statement on the catalogue-jacket, were selected via “an open Call for Entries”—reveals that at least 55 percent were somehow associated (or soon to be associated) with Alice Yard (ranging from exhibiting artists to those discussed or merely mentioned on its website). Others were similarly associated with Alice Yard’s extended network: Popopstudios, Fresh Milk, *Small Axe, Arc Magazine*, Paramaribo Span, and others yet had previously exhibited in *Infinite Island* or *Rockstone and Bootheel*. In the end, only 5 percent of the artists shown in *Wrestling with the Image* were not demonstrably part of this amalgamated network. (By comparison, about 48 percent of *Rockstone and Bootheel*’s artists were verifiably part of the same network). It is not implied, that there is anything untoward about the curatorial dispositions made by Cozier and Flores (professional engagement today invariably implies that ever more names, solicited or not, become part of one’s network). What is troubling, however, is the obvious difficulty for ‘non-aligned’ artists to become visible. In this context, it is not insignificant that the average age of the artists in *Wrestling with the Image* had once again dropped (albeit incrementally) to 37.5 years, the youngest yet. This suggests a strong presence of artists still in the process of shaping their vision and language, artists, who may still be influenced by mentors or by the ‘incubating’ process of a particular creative environment. The alternative scene, it thus turns out, had—at least at the time of *Wrestling with the Image*—effectively become the filter through which talent from the Anglophone Caribbean (especially outside of Jamaica) rises to both regional and international visibility.

The trajectory from *Caribbean Visions* to *Wrestling with the Image* has pointed to a gradually evolving hegemony around the international representation of Caribbean contemporary art that corresponds with the Caribbean postmodernism I have described. The most recent survey exhibition, *Relational Undercurrents*, however, indicates that a conceptual recalibration is now underway.

*Relational Undercurrents, 2017–2019*

Curated by Tatiana Flores, *Relational Undercurrents* opened at the Museum of Latin American Art in Los Angeles in 2017 and was later shown at other US
locations. With eighty-five participating artists from the entire Caribbean and its diaspora, it was much larger than any previously discussed exhibition (and the age of the participants had increased to an average of forty-six). The catalogue, which is co-written and co-edited by Flores and Michelle Stephens (but contains essays by other contributors as well), carefully situates *Relational Undercurrents* in the contemporary philosophical landscape and presents the most coherently theorized survey-exhibition to date. What I want to draw out is not the selection of works or artists (nor the significance of older participants), but how the exhibition’s conceptual framework, which is tied to broader revisionist efforts in Caribbean studies, differs from, and yet in some ways still lines up with the conceptual trajectory I have outlined.

The catalogue for *Relational Undercurrents* indicates two departures from recent contemporary Caribbean survey-exhibitions: first, a (post-poststructuralist) shift from a predominant emphasis on ‘discourse’ towards an equal emphasis on ‘materiality’, and, second, a retreat from the familiar attention to ‘difference’ in favor of renewed attention to connections and continuities. After a period in which the Caribbean has been treated as a diasporic ‘space’ marked by diversity and difference, there is, in other words, a tentative recuperation of place, identity and collectivity. The curatorial approach rests on Latour and Deleuze—especially the latter’s assemblage-principle as it relates to the relatively new disciplines of islandology and archipelagic studies—and on a radical interpretation of Glissant’s relational poetics. While the ‘Caribbean assemblage’ mostly consists of actual islands, the concept is scalable and applicable to any country, region or continent (irrespective of size or geographical characteristics), and thereby becomes the common denominator necessary for enabling a global relationality. The ‘archipelagic assemblage’ is described in terms of assorted multiplicities, liquid narratives, entanglement, invagination, ebbs and flows, ongoing processes of de- and re-territorialization. In Stephens’s treatment, however, the more solid features of the archipelago recede in importance in favor of ‘watery links’ and gestures towards Brathwaite’s notion of a submarine unity. In the exhibition itself, this translates into a lot of attention to water, horizons, ecologies, temporalities, and alternating states of visibility and invisibility. The invitation to look away from the land towards the sea thus warns us not to get too caught up in matters of territory and boundaries in our pursuit of ‘place’, and in fact to let go of our ontological terra firma. One of the exhibition’s aims is indeed to challenge the assumptions and connotations afforded by the island-trope itself—less, perhaps, as a pre-modern paradise, tropical playground, or postcolonial nation-state (this was, after all, addressed in *Wrestling with the Image*), than as a metaphor for man,
or nation, as a self-sufficient, limited and limiting entity. Along these lines, Stephens suggests that the binary relationship between island and sea must itself be reimagined and replaced with the image of ‘interlapping’ rather than ‘overlapping’ zones. Rather than a natural border, the shoreline must be seen as the threshold of infinite openness, and the notion of the autonomous human subject ought to be replaced with an oceanic one, immersed in, rather than separate from the totality of the world. Deleuze is, interestingly, critiqued for not being relational enough in his use of the island as a metaphor for the sovereign subject. Stephens thus argues that he “draws the distinction between ocean and land too starkly, over-privileging metaphor above and against the material in his description of the island as a profound symbol of man’s relationship with the outside”. A more radically relational model would, she argues, maintain the “tensions between discourse and experience, between the ancient and the modern, between metaphor and materiality.”

While the conceptual basis for Relational Undercurrents thus anticipates a future in which every archipelago is both metaphorical and material, coeval and relatable and no principle or perspective privileged, the question is, to my mind, whether the hyper-relational assemblage model is any more helpful in bringing such a future about than those it seeks to replace—whether the oceanic consciousness, despite its immersion and panoramic vision, isn’t more powerless than empowered.

I have argued that contemporary Caribbean art and criticism for the last couple of decades has been characterized by a tendency to marry evocations of locality with gestures towards diasporic fluidity, to hint at collective ‘problems’, while refusing collective solutions, and by the celebration of difference and infinite interpretability. Despite its renewed and welcome attention to the local and material, to collectivities and continuities, Relational Undercurrents, it seems to me, does not aim at a revival of what Kamugisha describes as “a regionalism anchored to an anticolonial will”. On the contrary, it throws into question the very notion of human agency, which would give this revival material meaning.

Yet, if Stephens ultimately seems ambivalent about an all-out post-humanist stance it may not reflect the prevalent hesitation in Afro-American and Caribbean thought on this matter (as Lewis Gordon puts it, “there would be something strange about people whose oppression is marked by dehumanization to then reject being human beings”), so much as an attempt to hold Deleuze to his own ‘both-and’ principle of keeping opposing paradigms in tension. Under reference to Cozier’s ‘New Level Heads’ (a large-scale mobile in which a series of human
profiles are moving forwards and backwards just above the water’s edge\textsuperscript{55}, Stephens’s concluding remarks indeed leaves the door open in both directions:

As humans, we have a complex relation to these archipelagic tensions. On the one hand, we negotiate how to stay afloat, how not to get taken over by an oceanic feeling of oneness with the totality of the natural world, as captured often in metaphors of the sea. On the other hand, we strive not to resort simply to rising out of the water and settling on land, permanently resolving the tension in our idealizations of sovereignty. The image of the drowning human, whose head bobs precariously on the water is not just an image of the sea overtaking the lonely, isolated swimmer. The bobbing head also represents the liminal moment of humanity’s uncertain interaction with world, an interlapping rather than an overlapping that leaves us constantly swimming, standing, and walking on rocky, irregular, sinking and rising shores.\textsuperscript{56}

Summary of Chapter 8

Chapter 8 has indicated an evolution in the curatorial framing of Caribbean contemporary art for US audiences, which closely corresponds with the critical, aesthetic and organizational developments described in the first two sections of this book. It has been proposed that, notwithstanding other significant problems, only \textit{Caribbean Visions} (1995) indicated (albeit passively) an ideological and generational contestation over the contemporary. However, to counter the ‘anthropologizing’ approach of previous survey-shows like \textit{Caribbean Visions} and \textit{Infinite Island} with new suggestions of Caribbean agency, \textit{Rockstone and Bootheel} and \textit{Wrestling with the Image} intentionally set their own terms by limiting their focus to ‘the popular’ and ‘the image of the Caribbean’. Altogether, the exhibitions discussed have reflected an elimination of expressions, which could register as provincial, belated or unequivocally ideological, in favor of works that fall within the Caribbean postmodern spectrum.\textsuperscript{57} They have also reflected the promotion of younger artists who have internalized these codes, but who may still contribute a sense of renewal and openness. This trajectory quite accurately reflects the 1990s avant-garde’s displacement of its anti-colonial predecessor, its gradual movement from the margins to the centre of the contemporary scene, and its reach into the next generation—a transition that has assumed a certain character of cultural logic, precisely because it has been difficult.

It may be possible to argue that homogenizing the profile of the contemporary along these lines, is one way of countering metropolitan dominance with the im-
age of a united front: judging by these exhibitions, artists from the Anglophone Caribbean largely self-identify as conceptual or vernacular cosmopolitanists. On the other hand, by uniting only in a vigorous renunciation of universalism, ontological stability, binarism, oppositionality and traceable causalities, this contemporary also surrenders the collective vision or resistive thrust, which would give meaning to a united front. The relentless critique of cultural nationalism has thus displaced efforts at critiquing or countering a Western or neoliberal hegemony, which, at any rate, may now be seen as too diffuse or too entrenched to warrant resistance.

To conclude my argument, chapter 9 attempts to show, at the level of three individual œuvres—those of Barbadian artists, Ewan Atkinson, Sheena Rose and Alicia Alleyne—the loss (or inversion) of critical potency, which may result from the substitution of the ‘national situation’ with a more diffuse diasporic ‘space’ as critical and interpretive lens.