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The Jamaican Art Distinctions

As an artist born in Jamaica, but now living and working in the United States, I have had the fortunate experience of a somewhat birds-eye view of the U.S. and its cultural constructs such as art. This has created an uncomfortable feeling for me within the art world, especially when looking at the value placed on particular pieces, and the ways this practice instead of trying to reach an audience, ostracizes them. This excluded audience tends to be those of the lower classes or those that are not necessarily schooled in the symbolism and particular nuances of how to read certain pieces of work. Thus, it is not surprising that a National Endowment for the Arts report in 1997 suggested that art institutions in the States had become elitist, class-based and ethnocentric (Larson 1997).

In my experience viewing the art world in Jamaica, I could not help but wonder if it was following the same direction for which I fault the art world in the U. S. and if the very categorization of Jamaican art could signal this direction. Could there be a move towards binary modes of thinking with the dualistic intuitive/mainstream distinction with no room for tourist art. Also what can be said of the art/craft distinction with little talk of the dialogue between the two? How does this binary way of thinking create and enforce hierarchies and mirror the very strong class divisions, clearly evident within the country? Seeking answers to these questions, I decided to do further research into the distinctions made in Jamaican art between mainstream, intuitive and tourist art as well as the general distinction between art and craft.

In order to look at these terms it is important to see how they are defined within the Jamaican art World. Tourist art, is easy enough to define. These are pieces usually created in the Craft Markets of Jamaica, catering to a tourist audience. Or, in the

case of the Craft Market in Kingston as based on information gleaned from interviews, tourist art also caters to an audience of returning Jamaicans.¹ In general, tourist art is disregarded in the art world and is seen more as craft than as art, a distinction that was never as sharp within the narrative of Jamaican art and which I look at further below. Also, art critics and curators use the accepted separation between "Art" and "Craft" to distinguish tourist art from intuitive art.

Intuitive art has been defined very much in opposition to mainstream art and vice versa. In fact, there have been discussions, especially by Annie Paul, about the lack of a critical view of the dialogue between the two. Mainstream art is defined as created mostly by artists who are trained either at the Edna Manley School of Art or at various institutions abroad. Consequently, it tends to have more Western influences than intuitive art.

I would like to spend a little time looking at the definition of intuitive art. Its importance is somewhat unique in the Jamaican art world because the term was coined by Dr. David Boxer to elevate the status of this kind of art. I would like to turn to Norma O. Hines-Brissett's thesis "The Intuitive Label" from April 23, 1999, to look further at this term.

In her thesis Hines-Brissett, whose style is similar to the intuitive artists, explores the label further. In the first few pages she lays out why she feels her research is necessary, describing the comments she would get about her work. She quotes from instructors/tutors as follows: "your compositional skills

¹ Starting in the Summer of 2005, I have been conducting interviews with various craft market workers. The interviews referred to in the text were done in the Summer of 2006. Kingston Craft Market wood-carvers, Frances and Douglas (last names withheld) provided information about the craft market and also escorted me to the "Intuitives III" exhibition held from July 23 - November 4, 2006 at the National Gallery in Jamaica.

are highly developed, the content factor is good... but if I had seen the work without knowing who the artist was, I would have concluded that they were excellent intuitives. You need to be able to do better than that." (Hines-Brissett 1999, 2)

Within the next few pages she gives us a clear definition of the term.

Intuitive art is the art of those not trained in the formal elements and principles of art as a discipline... forms including cave art, folk art, child art, art of the insane, and art of the untutored. (Hines-Brissett 1999, 10)

Bissett also looks at the label's association with Dr. David Boxer, curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica, and the exhibition he curated on August 20-Oct 5, 1979, "The Intuitive Eye". She sees Boxer's move towards elevating this type of art as opposed to the belief amongst the general public that the art of the self-taught artist, "Intuitive or not was essentially an aberration of mainstream art." (Hines-Brissett 1999, 5) This exhibition was known not only for elevating this kind of art nationally but also internationally, with paintings and sculptural works of intuitives going for much higher prices than they did in the past.

Although many see the value of the use of these terms at the time, presently there are various critics coming forward within the Jamaican art world who would like to have a more critical view of the terms, either by deconstructing them or showing the dialogue between them (Paul, Douglas). There are many reasons critics give for the need to look more closely at the terms including the fact that even with the initial elevation of intuitive art, the division creates hierarchies that are still present, whether it be in favor of the intuitives or the

mainstream artists. Thus, there are those in the art world that think of intuitive artists as more authentically Jamaican and others who believe that mainstream artists are more dynamic and forward looking. Also there are critics that have drawn attention to the fact that although certain intuitive art pieces sell for a lot more, as a whole, intuitive art is valued less than the art of mainstream artists. Lastly, critics see a divide between the visual arts in Jamaica and the general public, believing that the field caters to a few in the upper classes and that the hierarchies created by these terms may contribute to that divide (Paul).

Annie Paul is one of the main critics of these hierarchical categories. She faults David Boxer and Veerle Poupeye for setting up a grand narrative of Jamaican art that she feels is used to discredit certain pieces and artists that do not fall within this narrative. She also criticizes Poupeye for using Western ways of evaluating Jamaican art. These methods have promoted art that, in Paul's opinion, does not necessarily speak to the general public in its valuing of symbolism, non-utilitarianism, formalism, and individualism. She believes they take art away from the lower classes who may value other features such as figuration and representation (Legislating Taste 80).

In "The Expatriate Gaze" Paul locates herself as an art critic who is from India but now lives and focuses on art in the Caribbean. She questions her own view and the way she reads and speaks of Jamaican art realizing that cultural translation is a big part of the process. She also calls attention to the fact that a disproportionate amount of Caribbean art critics are from countries outside of the Caribbean. Because of this she finds it necessary to look at the gaze that expatriates are bringing to Caribbean art, as this gaze becomes very important in how art is talked about in the Caribbean. She explores the problems involved in cultural translation and points to Sarat Maharaj's

thoughts on the matter, saying,

Maharaj is adamant that beyond a point, the "other" almost always remains inherently untranslatable, irreducible to transparency by neat exchanges of meaning. Too often, rather than acknowledging and allowing for the fluidity and "rawness" of cultural translation, Maharaj warns, we establish "a spectrum of convenient, fixed categories of essential identities. The 'culturally different' have to be pinpointed, labeled, rendered visible, given representation--perhaps, up to a point, a crucial, quite inescapable task. But its troubling spin-off is that it tightens into a pigeonholing logic.(50)

Annie Paul believes this "pigeonholing logic" is evident in Caribbean narratives about art especially the narrative created by Boxer and reinforced by Poupeye:

Traditionally historians and critics of Caribbean art have been preoccupied with identifying and categorizing Caribbean artists according to received canonical ideas of art and art history. Thus artists might be described as neo-Expressionist, Minimalist, or "intuitive," a euphemism for "primitive" and so on.
(50)

She takes issue with what she sees as Boxer's "infatuation" with modern art's persistence in the maintenance of boundaries between high and low, art and craft. (Legislating Taste 80) She critiques the need to use European art history to define Jamaican art. She further criticizes contemporary Jamaican art for pandering to the cultural values of the middle class and not including a subaltern consciousness.

Andrea Douglas commends Paul for her criticism but believes she should go beyond the binary modes of thought within the Jamaican art world. Douglas believes that locating artists into these neat categories leads to a narrow way of thinking. She also faults Paul for falling into this either/or mode with her advocacy for the subaltern. "Her infusion of left identity politics is merely a reevaluation of one aspect of the binary rather than a deconstruction of the polarities." (56)

Douglas presents the most pointed critique of the mainstream/intuitive division. She believes that Boxer and Poupeye use these categories to highlight homegrown and expatriate artists they consider important (53). She points to the fact that Boxer has been either director or curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica, Jamaica's premiere arts institution and thus his terms become that more important because of his position (54). When speaking about the intuitive label she calls Poupeye on the fact that she "continues to give currency to a term that almost twenty years of debate has proven, as she indicates to be meaningless as a discreet category." (56) She believes that an artist's work should be evaluated based on their biography. This would give a more complex reading of what an artist is trying to do and expand views on contemporary Jamaican art (60).

Although Paul and Douglas give interesting critiques of Jamaican contemporary art none of them address the category of tourist art. It is an even more significant absence in Paul's critique, given her advocacy for the subaltern. Tourist art may cater to an outside audience but the producers and distributors of the work belong to the Jamaican lower classes. In interviews with Craft Market workers, many of them describe owning their stalls or managing them and getting a percentage of the sales. Consequently, they choose which work they decide to sell, whether it be from painters, wood carvers, ceramists or bead makers.

Interestingly enough many pieces that fall into the intuitive art category bear a striking resemblance to certain tourist art pieces. Francis, a wood carver who works in the Kingston Craft Market, and who I asked to give me his impression of the pieces in the National Gallery's "Intuitive Eye III" exhibition, felt for sure he had seen some of the pieces in the Craft Market months before. Other comments he made were that he could do a much better job than some of the artists and that many of the pieces he saw would not be good enough to be sold in the Craft Market (see footnote 1).

I believe then that the non-mention of tourist art is due mainly to the accepted distinction between art and craft. This distinction is used to separate tourist art from intuitive art and is also used to devalue tourist art. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to look further at the basic art/craft distinction and the hierarchy created in the separation of these two areas. To do this we would have to explore three very basic tenets related to art that are used to separate it from craft; the valuing of the non-utilitarian functions of art, its non-commercialization and its rarity. Therefore, I would like to take a more general look at the construction of the term "Art" as it relates to these three tenets.

In Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds, Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner give an analysis of the Western system of art classification. They start by showing how early art scholars grounded their work in the Kantian opposition between human freedom and the restraints placed on them by the material world. Looking at the work of German scholar Michael Podro, they summarize his thoughts about the early art historian's view that, "the role of art ... was seen as overcoming our ordinary relations to the world." (7) They further state, "Within the realm of the aesthetic, therefore, the highest forms are those that are most free—"art for art's sake"—

and the lowest are those that are the most utilitarian.”(7) This belief clearly lays the foundation for the Art/Craft distinction within Western art that we now also experience as a given in the art world of Jamaica.

Phillips and Steiner also look at the incorporation of non-western objects into Western art with the use of terms such as primitive art. They attribute this labeling process to the development of liberalism around the middle of the twentieth century and make an analogy between this incorporation and the political sovereignty granted to newly independent colonies. With this analogy they imply that imperialist nations still kept a grasp on their former colonies. Of the incorporation of non-western objects they state,

Formal recognition was extended... but the infrastructure of Western knowledge formations remained firmly in place. To be represented as “art,” in other words, the aesthetic objects of non-Western peoples had to be transposed into the Western system of classification of fine and applied art.(8)

In their analysis they show how this system of incorporation was especially detrimental in distorting the value attributed to Native American arts. They see the visual aesthetic tradition of Native American arts as quite different than the Western hierarchies connected to the valuing of the non-utilitarian functions of art. For example they look at the fact that the sculpture and paintings done by Native Americans were valued by Western scholars more highly than the utilitarian arts including beadwork, basketry and quilting, when in Native American culture itself the opposite was the case(8). They also bring attention to arguments that have been made to show how the distinctions between art and craft have historically devalued women’s art that fell in many instances into the craft category(6).

This system of de-valuing utilitarian art also leads to the second tenet within the Western construction of art that moves away from thinking of art as a commodity. In an essay from the Economist, the following is said about the difference between Western and African ways of thinking about art, "Whereas in the Western ideal the artist is a fiercely independent, even rebellious, creator of art for art's sake, the African artist aims to please his public".(114) However this is by no means a value judgment, for aiming to please ones public is not looked down upon within African arts. Also commoditization is seen as a natural part of the exchange of goods, including art. "Art has always been sold," argued Werewere Liking from the video In and Out of Africa. "Traditional (African) artists were paid with oil, sheep, cloth and so on. Insofar as art is useful, it should be sold. Making art for sale does not make it inauthentic." There are also arguments within the Western art world that show that this anti-commoditization is the most tenuous of the tenets since even avant-garde art capitalized financially on the anti-commodity feeling of its time.

The last tenet to consider is rarity. Except for the intervention of the Pop Art movement of the sixties, for the most part this tenet has been highly valued within Western art. The rarer an object the higher the price within the art world. This remains the case even with less traditional media such as video art, where, even though it can be easily reproduced, limited edition DVDs are circulated to increase the value of the work. In contrast, Christopher B. Steiner looks at the aesthetic of seriality within African art stating:

An object's economic worth in the African art market depends not on its originality or uniqueness but on its conformity to "traditional" style, displays of nearly identical objects side by side underscore to

prospective tourist buyers that these artworks indeed
"fit the mold."(96)

In it he states that within this market it is the *unique* object that is undesirable. He further argues that those works fitting a certain type signify the accepted canon and that which is most desirable to collect(97). This contradicts the Western way of valuing the "genius" artist that produces the original masterpiece.

Above I explore three basic tenets of a Western view of art that favors the non-utilitarian over the utilitarian, art for art's sake vs. commoditization, and rarity vs. seriality. However if you look at other systems of thought such as those of Africa or Native America it is not necessarily the case that one would be valued over the other and in many cases the second is more valuable. One can find evidence of similarly different values in Rastafarian forms of Jamaican culture. For example, in, "Rastafarian Art," Wolfgang Bender brings attention to the very different ways Rastafarians view art, that contrast with Western thought. These Rastafarian views show a clear distinction to the Western narrative of art where one school of thought is seen in opposition to another. This Western narrative has been written such that the trajectory is impressionism vs. expressionism vs. realism vs. abstraction vs. conceptualism vs. minimalism, etc.; furthermore, a clear distinction between art and craft has been established. In contrast Wolfgang sees Rastafarians as having an "all embracing motif... To overcome breaches, to reestablish unity".(6) Wolfgang states that Rastafarians would refute any difference between art and craft and in general disregard hierarchies and labels.

While Rastafarian beliefs demonstrate one can find different ways of thinking about art in Jamaican popular culture, how does this relate to the Jamaican art world as defined by art critics and

institutions? With the Jamaican art world's disregard of tourist art, which also goes against the basic tenets of Western Art by favoring utilitarianism, commoditization and seriality, it indicates that the institution of art in Jamaica has in place a Western way of valuing artwork. This is further suggested by many art critics' acceptance of the art vs. craft distinction. One also sees this in Poupeye's criticism of Roberta Staddart's work as confirming to the public's expectation of the "carefully crafted and, therefore, saleable art object." (Redefining Jamaican Art 42) Other indications are Boxer and Poupeye's championing of individualism. In "Redefining Jamaican Art," Poupeye states that the "open-ended, individualistic perspective" of artists defines contemporary Jamaican art (43).

The fact that curators and critics play such an important role in the arts in Jamaica leads to its similarities with a Western outlook on art. As stated before many art critics are expatriates that have been influenced strongly by Western modes of thought. This in and of itself is not a bad thing for given Jamaica's status as an ex-colony of the West it is only natural that Western thought would influence the island. More problematic issues come into play when those standards/values are used to denigrate other ways of thinking about art or are used to keep class hierarchies in place, especially when those hierarchies are quite unbalanced. Of further concern is the divide such values and distinctions create between visual arts and the general public (as many critics including Paul, Douglas and Poupeye make reference to). It may suggest that many in the public have a different value system than critics and curators when looking at art.

Then, how does the incorporation of "primitive" now called "intuitive" art fit within this Western-influenced Jamaican art institution. Is the term intuitive created from a "pigeonholing" Western way of looking at the other or is it including a greater

population and variety of artists to represent Jamaican visual culture? Is it making art more inclusive and expansive, or just restricting it in a different way? I do believe deconstructing the term and showing connections between intuitive, mainstream as well as tourist art will help move the answer to these questions to a more positive, inclusive direction. Furthermore, revealing the connections between the different kinds of intuitive, mainstream and tourist art and artists will break down the hierarchies between the terms.

Currently, the intuitive category of Jamaican art is so fixed that it already runs the risk of dying out. There are criticisms made of it being stagnant. The typical intuitive artist is an older male of the lower classes. There is hardly any female representation. Also, in our global world how long will it be the case that there will be artists that are working in isolation and basing their work solely on intuition, with little outside influences? If we hold on to this definition of "intuitive," the ranks of these kinds of artists will get smaller and smaller. Also where will the new, younger "intuitive" artists come from? If not from formal training, since that automatically tends to move them into the mainstream category then the other option currently is that the "supercurator" would be the one to go into the hills, the farms and other remote locations to find the next great "intuitive".

A more involved look at the term would move away from this fixed definition of the intuitive artist. It would begin to consider the connections with tourist art. Currently you have a large population of talented workers within the system of tourist art. Of course, they have their own value systems. They tend to want as they put it, "to finish their pieces" when compared to work they saw in the "Intuitive Eye III" exhibition. They also value representation over abstraction. These value systems will have to be looked at and not automatically disregarded.

This shift to the unconsidered category of tourist art will complicate further the 'accepted wisdom' of the paradigms for Jamaican art being used. It will allow us to consider that the distinctions in Jamaican art are themselves constructed and not aesthetic truths. For rather than just seeing 'intuitives' as individual geniuses that are just borrowing from certain styles of 'craft' art, instead, along with including the styles would come the "artists," Jamaican craft workers themselves, who as a group with their own opinions about their work would in and of themselves change the terms of the conversation and the idea of who an artist is in the Jamaican art world.

Tourist Art has some interesting aspects to add to this discussion on Jamaican art. It is a reflection of a phenomenon in our globalized, post-colonial world. A commercialized relationship between more well-off tourist clientele of developed countries and less well-off craft workers and their cultures. Works created for tourists/outsideers have the other implicated within the self and vice versa. The work created is not only a reflection of what the local producers believe the tourist want but also a reflection of the actual desires of the tourist. Because of this there is an interesting intercultural dynamic at play. Unlike "primitive"/"intuitive" art, the outsider looking at the work cannot so easily separate themselves from the work. Tourist art is harder to tokenize in a symbolic sense as it also becomes a mirror of the desires of the consumers. It reveals the intercultural exchanges of thoughts and ideas of what is aesthetically pleasing.

The argument about the difference between the intuitive and the mainstream, which form is better than the other, is actually a false dichotomy or argument, not as important for the future of Jamaican art as a discussion of the deeper distinction between Art and Craft, between mainstream and intuitive art on one side

and tourist art on the other. The discussion of this second and deeper distinction would take art critics to a broader conversation about the meaning of art in Jamaica, and the benefits and costs of using various types of standards to judge and define what Jamaican art is, based on the very different cultural systems (Western European, African, Native American] that all have an influence on the island's culture. Perhaps by deconstructing the terms, the elevation of intuitive art would also translate to an elevation in tourist art that will be more connected to a larger market and a greater distribution of the economy generated from art within Jamaica.

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