

CLAIRE TANCONS

# CURATING CARNIVAL? PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN ART

Every first Monday of September since 1969, Caribbean Carnival celebrations have turned Labor Day observances into leisurely pageantry on Brooklyn's Eastern Parkway, its main parading venue. Having first moved from the ballrooms of the Harlem Renaissance to the streets of the old New Negro neighborhood, before migrating to Crown Heights post-Civil Rights Movement, the history of Carnival was never any less complicated in the United States than it was in the Caribbean. Nor is its place within the arts, complex at home and abroad, as exemplified by the relationship between the West Indian American Day Parade, as it is now known, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, to which it was only ever granted limited access in four decades spent at its doorsteps.

Carnival made a prominent debut at the Brooklyn Museum in 1990 with the exhibition 'Caribbean Festival Arts,' organized

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by John Nunley and Judith Bettelheim. That exhibition's discourse and display, however, were largely anthropological, presenting Carnival, along with Hosay and Junkanoo, as folkloric emanations of historical diasporic cultures more so than vibrant artistic manifestations of contemporary global networks.<sup>1</sup> Carnival made a promising re-entry at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, in the form of a lecture, "Minshall and the Mas," and a performance "The Dance of the Cloth," presented by legendary Trinidadian artist Peter Minshall, a formidable proponent of the recognition of the artistic status of Carnival.

Nearly ten years later, the exhibition 'Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art' organized by Tumelo Mosaka for the Brooklyn Museum though dedicated to "Carlos Lezama (1923–2007), founder of the Brooklyn's West-Indian American Day Carnival and Parade, a champion of Caribbean Culture," left Carnival at the door once again. The warning Annie Paul issued in her essay for the exhibition catalogue was not followed: "Caribbean visual art cannot model itself on narrow modernist concepts and tropes without risking extinction"<sup>2</sup> she wrote, lamenting the reductive Western modernist framework within which Caribbean art is confined. Drawing from notions of the modern, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, articulated by Homi K. Bhabha as "vernacular cosmopolitanism"<sup>3</sup> and by Kobena Mercer as "cosmopolitan modernism,"<sup>4</sup> the Kingston-based cultural critic envisions Jamaican Dancehall as "represent[ing] a *vernacular modern* or *vernacular cosmopolitanism* in fundamental opposition to the delicately constructed high modernism of its art world"<sup>5</sup> (my emphasis). She could have just as well spoken of the Trinidad Carnival, another vernacular modern, in these terms.

That Carnival, let alone Dancehall, should enter the museum is debatable. The question was posed regularly, if ambiguously in most major contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions organized in the United States over the last two decades. The main

challenge this question sought to meet was the artistic validation of Carnival, a task traditionally assigned to that great artistic standard-bearer, the museum. The other more fundamental questions about whether or not Carnival should be curated at all, and if so whether or not it should or could be curated outside of the museum context and the exhibitionary complex, remained largely unanswered.

Taking inspiration from the notion of vernacular modernism as a possible way out of accepted ideas of artistic value and of curatorial principles, artists and curators have yet to articulate questions and make propositions that break away from the dichotomic view of that which can be curated and that which can not, of that which belongs in or out of the museum. "Curating Carnival" presents past and present efforts to address Carnival as an artistic and curatorial object, discusses attending discourses that supported these efforts and offers this author's own contribution to the debate and practice of Carnival.

## I

By and large, Carnival has been marginalized at best, left out at worst in contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions in the United States and the United Kingdom, where most such exhibitions are organized. It is virtually absent from all non-Caribbean contemporary art exhibitions as it is from contemporary art exhibitions in the Caribbean. Following is a sample of two decades of contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions in the US and the UK and of Carnival therein. A similar exercise could be done about Carnival in Brazil but I will restrict my argument to Carnival in the Caribbean within the frame of this essay. As we will see, the Trinidad Carnival, the Caribbean's most famous carnival is also the most represented.

'Caribbean Visions: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture' (1995) organized by Art Services International for a number of

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American museums including the Center for Fine Arts in Miami and the New Orleans Museum of Art, clearly indicated its focus on the traditional media of painting and sculpture in its title, and did not feature Carnival. However, and somewhat paradoxically, the catalogue included two essays celebrating the importance of Carnival in Caribbean art and culture: “Trinidad Carnival. History and Meaning”<sup>6</sup> by Errol Hill, the great professor of Drama and Oratory at Dartmouth College and author of *The Trinidad Carnival. Mandate for a National Theatre* (1972), and “Carnival and Its Place in Caribbean Culture and Art”<sup>7</sup> by Peter Minshall, Trinidad’s acclaimed contemporary carnival designer and self-styled masman.

In contrast, in ‘Caribe Insular. Exclusión, Fragmentación y Paraíso’ (1998) organized by Antonio Zaya and Maria Lluïsa Borràs for the Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo in Badajoz and Casa de América in Madrid in 1998, Peter Minshall’s carnival band of the same year, RED, not only figured on the catalogue cover but was also included in the exhibition. The catalogue also featured several written pieces about Carnival in Trinidad: an artist statement by Peter Minshall and a text about RED from the Callaloo Company, Minshall’s Carnival production company, as well as an essay by Trinidadian artist, art critic and curator Christopher Cozier,<sup>8</sup> a section of which, “‘Roadworks’ Searching for a Starting Point?” is devoted to the importance and relevance of Carnival to contemporary Caribbean culture.

Significantly, ‘Rockstone and Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art’ (2010), an exhibition focusing on works from the English-speaking Caribbean countries of The Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, curated by Kristina Newman-Scott and Yona Backer for Real Art Ways, in Hartford, Connecticut, was accompanied by two exhibitions exposing Caribbean performance traditions, one, the ‘Trinidad Carnival,’ with Zak

Ové's *Blue Devils* and the other, 'Jamaican Dancehall,' with a presentation of posters by Maxine Walters. Indeed, the very title of the exhibition, 'Rockstone and Bootheel,' was borrowed from a Jamaican dub-metal song by Gibby. However, both exhibitions, the former of Carnival photographs and the latter of Dancehall posters, kept the performative within the traditional realm of representation rather than enactment. "That is Mas" an incisive essay by literary critic Nicholas Laughlin is that exhibition's greatest contribution to the understanding of the importance of Carnival "as a resource for our artists as they play themselves on the world stage." Cozier's own exhibition, 'Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions' which he co-curated for the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington (2011), dealt with performance in much the same way as 'Rockstone and Bootheel' did with performative representations in the works of artists such as Ebony Patterson and Marlon Griffith. Time will tell how the planned Carnival section in the upcoming pan-Caribbean exhibition 'Caribbean: Crossroads of the World' (2012) organized jointly by The Queens Museum of Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and El Museo del Barrio will be handled.

In the United Kingdom, even the current re-examination of modern art practices within the expanded context of the Black Atlantic failed to re-center Carnival away from the margins to which it is being relegated. In 'Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic' (Tate Liverpool, 2010), Carnival only appeared as a footnote to the exhibition's grand narrative through the screening of the seminal *Orfeu Negro* (1959), set during the Rio Carnival. In 2000, the Hayward Gallery mounted the exhibition 'Carnavalesque,' largely based on Mikhail Bakhtin's eponymous theory, to celebrate an important movement within the cultural life of Great Britain and Europe. Looking beyond Bakhtin and European carnival traditions and at its own postcolonial diasporic carnival, two exhibitions were organized about the

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Notting Hill Carnival, no doubt a result of its hard-won recognition following the infamous riots: one, 'Masquerading: The Art of the Notting Hill Carnival' by the Arts Council of England in 1986 at the height of the multicultural discourse, and, more recently, 'Midnight Robbers. The Artists of Notting Hill Carnival,' in 2007 at London City Hall and later in American university art galleries (Ohio State University and University of Memphis).

That Carnival is centrally marginal is no less oxymoronic a semantic proposition than is the idea of an exhibition on painting and sculpture devoting two essays to Carnival, and that of another one dedicated to the memory of Carnival's founder, yet blatantly excluding it from its content. Perhaps, wisely, these exhibitions' curators sensed the inadequacy of the exhibition format and the museum framework for Carnival. The scarcity of critical writing on Carnival suggests instead that Carnival was not within their purview of the artistic and the curatorial. When it was, it could only be within the anthropological or representational traditions, by way of displays of props or photographs rather than of the actual performative action itself. Yet, what more propitious a time could there be for the advancement of the debate on the place of, not just Carnival, but of performance in general within contemporary Caribbean art practice when so-called performance art dominates the mainstream contemporary art discourse?

In the United States, the discourse about performance art is largely dominated by the terms set by curator and art historian RoseLee Goldberg. As a theoretical construct that emerged in the late 1970s, it follows closely her art historical account enshrined in *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present* (1979) seen by some as "the Bible" and in *Performance: Live Art since the 60s* (1998).<sup>10</sup> As a field of curatorial practice performance art finds its largest incarnation in the Performa biennial, since 2005 New York's biennial of "new visual art performance" organized by Performa, Goldberg's non-profit organization "committed

to the research, development and presentation of performance by visual artists from around the world.”<sup>11</sup> While the performance art narrative is set mainly in North America, Europe and Japan, its canonical representations are staged within the white cube gallery and the black box theater, both of which are inappropriate to the display of street-based urban artistic practices such as Carnival. A notable exception was Arto Lindsay’s *Something I Heard* for Performa 09, a single-file procession inspired by his experience of the Bahia Carnival, held at night in Times Square.<sup>12</sup>

Performance art’s positioning within the mainstream Euro-American canon behooves me to ask the following questions: Is performance the last bastion of Eurocentrism in contemporary art discourse and practice? Or, in other words, is performance art a Eurocentric concept? Could Carnival only find its way in the sanctum of performance art by way of Lindsay’s deft deconstruction of the form? And, specifically as regards contemporary Caribbean art: How relevant are terminologies such as “visual art performance” or even simply “performance art” to contemporary Caribbean art anyway? Can Caribbean art offer a platform from which to investigate anew the supposed epistemological difference between the performing arts and performance art?

## II

The quasi-total absence of Carnival within contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions is matched by its near-oblivion from contemporary Caribbean art history manuals. As an example, *Caribbean Art*<sup>13</sup> by Veerle Poupeye does devote a chapter to Carnival; however, it is the thinnest. There are scores of books about various Caribbean carnivals, chief amongst which in terms of numbers of publications, the Trinidad Carnival, followed by the Carnival of French Guyane. For the most part however, the region’s carnivals still need proper historical accounts of their own. More

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often than not, when considered in scholarly publications, it is within the disciplines of history or anthropology, seldom art history or even visual studies. An exception is *Carnival: Culture in Action – The Trinidad Experience*<sup>14</sup> edited by Milla Riggio with a foreword by Richard Schechner, founder and head of the Performance Studies department at New York University, who ushered Carnival into the academic field he created, which might combine approaches from the above-mentioned disciplines, and more.

In the decades following Independence in the British Caribbean colonies, Caribbean artistic performance practices were discussed by academics such as Trinidadian Errol Hill (1921–2003), and Jamaican Rex Nettleford (1933–2010), Vice-Chancellor Emeritus at the University of the West Indies (UWI), choreographer and founder of the National Dance Theater Company of Jamaica, within the context of the Performing Arts, mainly Theatre for the former and Dance for the latter, against the backdrop of their countries' blossoming national discourse. Carnival, according to Hill, was to be Trinidad's National Theatre and, for Nettleford, Jamaica had to have a National Dance Theatre Company. The path to recognition for vernacular forms of expression, artistic or otherwise, was through academic legitimization within known Western disciplines. The exercise often entailed including vernacular content into standard Western form, or using a vernacular form to interpret classical European or American pop music as continues to be the case in steel pan, Trinidad's vernacular musical instrument. Surely, this was considered an improvement from not simply integrating the vernacular into the theatre, dance or music repertoire at all, as would have been the case during the colonial era.

Fast-forward to the 1990s and back to Carnival. From the mid-1990s onwards, Peter Minshall along with Todd Gulick, Callaloo Company's production manager, began shifting the discourse on Carnival from the Performing Arts and into the field

of the Visual Arts, though Minshall came from the theatre, having studied Theatre Design at Central St Martins School of Art and Design in London in the mid-1960s.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, Minshall and Gulick steered Carnival towards performance art, aided by the concept of mas' which they helped shape. Mas', short for masquerade, is the vernacular for Carnival in Trinidad and other English-speaking Caribbean countries where taking part in Carnival is to "play mas'" as it is to "rush" in Junkanoo in the Bahamas or to "courir le vidé" in Guadeloupe and Martinique. The word mas' was certainly not invented by Minshall but he appropriated it to refer to "the most visual" Carnival form and, by extension, to his own work, having defined or helped refine mas' as an artistic genre. Minshall's 1999 lecture at the Brooklyn Museum was indeed called "Minshall and the Mas" and he is fond of calling himself and being called a 'masman,' the title of a recent documentary on his work (*Masman Peter Minshall* by Dalton Narine, 2010). In "Carnival and its Place in Caribbean Culture and Art," his essay for *Caribbean Visions*, he writes:

"To evaluate the place of the Carnival in Caribbean culture and art, it is helpful to realize that Carnival incorporates a broad range of forms and activities. Carnival in Trinidad includes: lyrical songs (calypso and soca), instrumental music (steel bands and brass orchestras), and costumed masquerade along with the dance and movement by which it is presented (mas'). [...] *The most visual of these forms is what we call mas'*: the tradition of costumed masquerade in the Trinidad Carnival."<sup>16</sup> (my emphasis)

Minshall goes on, specifically referring to mas' as "a performance art," then as "performance" or "performance art":

"Mas is a *performance art*. It is not merely visual; a mas costume displayed on a mannequin is not mas. [...] *Though it is performance, mas does not easily fit into the mold of any one of the more conventional performing arts*. It is theatrical, but it is necessarily broader of stroke, more symbolic, simpler than conventional

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narrative theater. It involves dance, but this dance is often more spontaneous than choreographed; or, it is dance that is aimed at articulating the mas that is worn, more than the body that is wearing it. *It is most akin to what has become known as simply 'performance' or 'performance art,' yet the mas had these characteristics, naively and unselfconsciously, long before the term 'performance art' was coined.*"<sup>17</sup> (my emphasis)

In a footnote, he goes on to quote directly the following passage from RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance: Live Art to the Present*:

"Many of the things that have been said about 'performance' as an avant-garde discipline apply in equal terms to mas [Minshall wrote:]

[Goldberg quote starts] 'Performance has been a way of appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relationship to culture ...

[B]y its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists ... For performance draws freely on a number of references—literature, theatre, drama, music, architecture, poetry, film and fantasy, deploying them in any combination.

No other artistic form of expression can be said to have such a boundless manifesto ... The manifestos accompanying much of this work establish a framework and a utopian vision for an all-inclusive art that no painting, sculpture, or architectural monument can hope to achieve in itself."<sup>18</sup>

Minshall does however recognize that performance art and mas' are not entirely identical and that there are many ways in which mas' is not performance art. In the same essay he writes:

"The field of art 'performance' has been described as a natural searching in response to the growing irrelevance of conventional object-oriented art to the dynamic modern world. Mas can offer the same opportunity to transcend the object in favor of

the experience, yet in a manner that is not elite and inaccessible, but by its nature popular and participatory.”<sup>19</sup>

I would add that another main difference between mas’ and performance art, in addition to the fact that it is “popular and participatory” is that mas’ is also collective on a massive scale in a way that little performance art is.

Ten years later, artist and art critic Luis Camnitzer reprised the argument about mas’ as performance art in “The Keeper of the Lens,” his essay for ‘Looking at the Spirits: Peter Minshall’s Carnival drawings’ (2005), an exhibition he co-curated with Gulick at the Drawing Center:

“Carnival in Trinidad, or more precisely mas—a derivation from masquerade and used as in ‘playing mas’—*features practically all the dynamics of cutting-edge performance art and installation while predating those forms by over a century.*”<sup>20</sup>

The argument was also used by random art commentators such as one William Dunlap, “Special to the Washington Post,” who wrote of *The Dance of the Cloth*, Minshall’s adaptation of Mancrab—the King of one of the bands in his trilogy of bands River—for the 7th Havana Biennial (2000):

“Any piece of performance art would be hard-pressed to compete with Havana’s lively street musicians, costumed señoritas, jugglers, fire-eaters, Obispo barrel rollers, Cohiba-smoking tarot card readers and vintage Detroit rolling stock. One work, however, was triumphant and made the whole trip worthwhile.”<sup>21</sup>

*The Dance of the Cloth*, however, might have rightfully belonged as performance art, or indeed, as the closest version of mas’ to performance art, as presented through Mancrab, a reprise from the main costume of the masband River, Mancrab, in a performance in the courtyard of the Palacio Municipal. It was characterized as such by Gulick: “Outside of the context of Carnival, this type of performance could be referred to as mas-theatre, a type of performance art.”<sup>22</sup>

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Peter Minshall, *The Dance of the Cloth*, Havana, Palacio Municipal, 7th Biennial of Havana, 2000. *The Dance of the Cloth* was performed by members of the Callaloo Company.

Like Minshall and Gulick before him, Camnitzer also utilized some of the arguments about Carnival's lack of recognition in the mainstream art world and wrote:

"Because it belongs to a different history, it is considered a local, vernacular, and popular expression, lacking significance for any speculation about 'high art.'"<sup>23</sup>

Both Minshall and Camnitzer along with Cozier and Dunlap also conveyed the opinion that if mas' was to be produced outside of Trinidad, in the by now shifting centers of the mainstream contemporary art world, it would create an unprecedented stir. Cozier writes:

"If something like it were to happen in one of the alleged power locations for art theory there would be miles of text. So far it is perceived to be a mere folk or street festival, the subject for

more renderings of culture by local artists and foreign anthropological case studies.”<sup>24</sup>

However, Cozier’s greatest contribution to the debate about the place of Carnival in contemporary art discourse, indeed about Carnival as an art form, was to define Minshall’s mas’ as “contemporary theatrical and visual art strategies to give new shape and meaning to traditional carnival and folk characterizations” and use the notions of moments and monuments, echoing Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieu de mémoire* or site of memory, to define mas. In a text entitled “Mancrab,” Cozier wrote:

“Through his work, Minshall often proposes an *alternative critical understanding of the ‘monumental’* in opposition to what is asserted in conventional art history books. He prods us to *rethink the vernacular and the ephemeral; to consider the way actions or ‘a moment’ can also live through memory and discourse.*”<sup>25</sup> (my emphasis), and in his essay for the ‘Caribe Insular’ catalogue:

“Outside of geological phenomena, there are no monuments in the Caribbean islands such as pyramids, domes or towers but we have our people; their particular stories as defined by their language, gestures and vision.”<sup>26</sup>

One may argue that there are monuments in the Caribbean, if in the Greater Antilles more so than in the Lesser Antilles, and that Carnival is no less vibrant throughout Brazil whose architecture from the Baroque to the Modern eras gives meaning to the very notion of the monumental (not least among which is Oscar Niemeyer’s Sambódromo or Carnival stadium in Rio de Janeiro). However, Cozier’s intention with this statement is less to imply that there is a direct relationship between the absence of monuments and the existence of Carnival, than it is to create a critical vocabulary within the specifics of the vernacular while remaining fully aware of the larger global art context. In an earlier version of the same essay, Cozier proposes the term roadwork to refer to Peter Minshall’s work: “Since many of the activities

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surrounding our lives are street activities I thought it interesting to replace the word art with road.”<sup>27</sup> In the published version in *Caribe Insular* he writes: “His [Peter Minshall’s] artworks or rather roadworks as I’d like to call them, as they are used in street performance [...]”<sup>28</sup>

How might the epistemological shift articulated by Cozier from artwork to roadwork affect the way in which Carnival is conceived of and, by extension, curated?

### III

It should be noted that three of the most influential critics and theoreticians of Carnival, Camnitzer and above all Minshall and Cozier, are artists. So have two practicing Carnival artists, Minshall and Marlon Griffith, most advanced the curation of Carnival. It might also be worth mentioning that both Minshall (born 1941) and Griffith (born 1976) received a Guggenheim fellowship, the former in 1982 in Carnival Design and Kinetics and the latter in 2010 in Fine Arts, facts which, in addition to the specificity of the artists’ practice, might indicate the growing appreciation—or co-optation—of Carnival within the realm of the visual arts.

From the mid 1980s through to 2000, Minshall’s work was repeatedly featured in British art institutions and twice in international art biennials.<sup>29</sup> In each instance, Minshall’s role was paramount in the choice and display of the work. According to Gulick who often wrote the catalogues’ texts, Minshall “confronted the difficulty of trying to convey a dynamic performative work of art in a static gallery space, and in answer to this selected a work whose mas costume forms are especially sculptural even when static [...]; and to include a video and sound.”<sup>30</sup> This statement, which applied to Minshall’s choice of the masband Callaloo (1984) for his first invitation to present an exhibition of his work called ‘Callaloo by Minshall’ in an art gallery, the Arnolfini

in Bristol and the Riverside Studios in London (1986), an exhibition later reprised for the 19th São Paulo Biennale (1987), could have applied to the masband RED which he chose to exhibit in the 7th Havana Biennial (2000) and later at the Drawing Center exhibition mentioned previously (2005). In both cases, the choice of a single masband for exhibition reflected Minshall's desire to "convey the integrity and coherence of a single (albeit multi-faceted) work of art."<sup>31</sup> And while Callaloo was indeed "especially sculptural," RED was particularly visual and both masbands illustrate Minshall's ongoing dialogue with the visual arts. But Minshall's exhibition displays in gallery spaces seemed rather traditional, if masterful: drawings of costumes were hung on the wall and costumes displayed on mannequins; even in these perhaps novel features for the times: ambient sound and videos; and details, in which Minshall's part could be found: mannequins painted black and a sophisticated multi-channel video display.

His curatorial experiments within his own medium, mas' proved more innovative. If with 'Carnival is Color' (1987), Minshall killed two birds with one stone, poking fun at the narrow-mindedness of small-island people who, by saying that "carnival is color" meant that carnival should be fun rather than serious, while also castigating the highbrow pretentiousness of the art-world with section titles such as "Horizontal Primaries," "Tangerine Expanding" and "Uncomposed Red Lines in Space," with 'Tantana' (1990), he devised an entire section as "a group exhibition as a public art event, conceived, commissioned and curated by [himself.]"<sup>32</sup> Taking the seven foot square of appliquéd cloth, an important design medium, as a premise, Minshall invited about fifteen fine artists, among whom at least one also doubled as a masman, Carlisle Chang, along with Lisa Henry Chu Foon, LeRoy Clarke and others, to contribute designs sewn up by Callaloo company craftsmen which taken together, formed the section called "Artists Squares." As Chris Cozier, who

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Peter Minshall, *Peter Minshall: Callaloo*,  
*an Exhibition of Works from the Carnival of Trinidad*,  
19th International Biennial of São Paulo, 1987

declined the invitation to participate in the “Artists Squares” anticipated, this “exhibition of ‘dancing paintings’” in Minshall’s words, squares of appliquéd clothes toted on the back of the masqueraders as if kites (whose rods they used for reinforcement) lacking wind or speed to take to the sky and fly, was somewhat awkward.<sup>33</sup> More promising perhaps, and less tied to the sacrosanct medium of painting which Minshall for all his irreverence against it, deeply respected, was yet another section of that decidedly unbridled Tantan band, a section for children, Bacchacs (the vernacular for a local leaf-carrying ant) designed by fine artist and maswoman Kathryn Chan who, rather than trying to replicate her own paintings onto an appliquéd canvas, used mas’ as an artistic medium.

In keeping with his preoccupation to legitimize Carnival by way of a comparison with performance art, Minshall sought ways

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to translate masbands into performance art pieces within the context of the art gallery or biennial. If for the installation of 'Callaloo by Minshall' at the Arnolfini in Bristol Minshall created an original masband, *Drums and Colours*, to accompany the exhibition, a year later, for the São Paulo Biennial, in the days preceding the opening, he gave an improvised performance of *The Dance of the Cloth* to a percussive soundtrack, before an audience of a hundred or so spectators. *The Dance of the Cloth* was later reprised in 1999 at the Brooklyn Museum to accompany his lecture and in 2000 at the 7th Havana Biennial. In this last instance, over a decade apart from the first, Minshall was no longer the sole improvising performer, or a performer at all, but rather several members of the Callaloo Company presented a rehearsed performance in the courtyard of the Palacio Municipal. But, as



Peter Minshall, *Artists Squares in Tantana*, Port of Spain, Trinidad Carnival 1999.

Featured in the photograph are Artists Squares by,  
on the right Carlisle Chang, played by him;  
on the left Lisa Henry Chu Foon, played by Carol Aqui.

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was the case with painting within the context of mas', wasn't Minshall too tied to the concept of performance art in these contemporary art displays to which, for better or worse, he tried to adapt? Cozier, who saw the performance twice, said that "it had something to it ..."<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, a planned retrospective exhibition designed by Chan, and a publication edited by Cozier and other faithful followers such as editor and writer Patricia Ganase, both of which could have granted Minshall the recognition from the mainstream art world he so desired, were aborted in 2006.

Marlon Griffith, a disciple of Cozier, with whom he perfected his drawing and graphic skills, even more so than of Minshall, in whose mascamp he apprenticed, seems to be headed in a different direction. When featuring his work in an art gallery context, Griffith has, for the most part, resisted trying to recreate a mas-band physically in the gallery space by way of mannequins but rather has attempted to recreate phenomenologically the feeling of being immersed in a masband. In 'Lighting the Shadow: Trinidad in and out of Light' (CCA7, Port of Spain, 2004, curated by this author), Griffith appropriated the technique used to cast molds for carnival costumes to create clear-plastic prints of carnival characters reflected as shadows onto the gallery wall through light projection. With these he said that he was attempting to evoke the emotions of Jouvé, the nocturnal Carnival Sunday purifying ritual, as did Kathryn Chan who also contributed a mas'-inspired installation to the exhibition. In various other instances, with 'Symbiosis' (CAGE Gallery, Edna Manley College, Kingston, Jamaica, 2007, curated by Veerle Poupeye) and *Trapped in a Memory* (in 'Mas': From Process to Procession,' BRIC's Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, 2007, curated by this author) Griffith created organic environments in the cut-out technique that has become his hallmark, using light to reflect shifting motives and, in so doing allowed shadows to fragment the image



Marlon Griffith, *Symbiosis*, CAGE Gallery, Edna Manley College, Kingston, Jamaica, 2007, curated by Veerle Poupeye

even as they also became an embodiment of the work and a reminder of the transient and ephemeral quality of mas'. When incorporating mannequins, at the Mino Paper Art Village (2005) and in 'South-South: Interruptions and Encounter' (Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto, 2009, curated by Tejpal Ajjji and Jon Sonske), Griffith designed his work specifically for the gallery space rather than using past design as props. When using past designs, he resorted to suspending the work, rather than displaying it on mannequins, in another attempt to respect the irrevocability of the spatio-temporal dimension.

Space, it has been suggested, not the artwork, is the material of curators, and their instrument the exhibition.<sup>35</sup> When space is the street, the artwork becomes roadwork, the exhibition a procession, a parade, a march. It is with this understanding of space that with 'Spring' (5 September 2008), the group procession I organized for the 7th Gwangju Biennale, as a project curator

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under Okwui Enwezor's artistic directorship, I offered Griffith the opportunity for his first "full-scale street production."<sup>36</sup> Having written and spoken extensively about 'Spring,' I will turn to Cozier, that expert mas' commentator.<sup>37</sup> According to Cozier, "*Spring* proposed and implemented a trans-cultural, collaborative street procession involving artists from Trinidad, Haiti, Brazil, France and Germany. Through the process of this collaboration, various moments—historical and cultural—were interwoven [...]. Tancons has tried to shift the dialogue from anthropological culturalism to comparative discussions with other places (and moments), where similar street actions take place. As a curator of the project, she also entered into the process as imaginer/instigator of the 'band' in Gwangju. The line between curator and creative producer became blurred in a transient exhibition space, one without walls and in the public domain. Utilizing



Marlon Griffith, Artist in Residence exhibition,  
Mino Paper Art Village, Mino, Japan, 2005

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**'SPRING,' 90-minute procession with 200 participants  
curated by Claire Tancons, 7th Gwangju Biennale,  
5 September 2008, May 18 Democratic Plaza.**

**Clockwise from left:**

**Jarbas Lopes, *Demolition Now* (after the second float has been  
destroyed in front of the Former Provincial Office);  
Karyn Oliver, *Grey Hope*; Mario Benjamin, *The Banquet*;  
Marlon Griffith, *RUNAWAY/REACTION*; MAP OFFICE, *The Final Battle*  
(before the wagons are set on fire).**

the impulse of Carnival, Tancons is advocating another way or mode of curatorship.<sup>38</sup>

I initially apprehended my role as the organizer of 'Spring' and of 'A Walk Into the Night' (2 May 2009) for CAPE 09, the second Cape Town biennial, no differently than I did other curatorial projects, having started to mull over the idea of the procession as a curatorial format at least since 'Mas': From Process to Procession,' which was to be accompanied by a procession, if not since 'Lighting The Shadow: Trinidad in and out of Light,' both exhibitions mentioned earlier which I organized and in which Griffith's work was featured. Griffith, the main artist in

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'A Walk Into the Night' went on to organize a procession of his own, *Stuffed Swan* (2010), as part of Junkanoo in Nassau. Growing up in Guadeloupe, I had run the *vidé* in Pointe-à-Pitre through childhood and adolescence. During research trips, I participated in Jouvé in Port-of-Spain a couple of times since 2005, rushed in Junkanoo in Nassau in 2008 with fellow art historian and curator Krista Thompson, had gone up and down Arto Lindsay's *trio eléctrico* in Bahia and paraded with artist Jarbas Lopes and the Mangueira Samba School in Rio de Janeiro's Sambódromo in 2009. I researched artistic practices and observed the cultural milieu out of which they developed, and set out to design a methodology best suited to produce works outside of their original context of creation. I was aided in this pursuit by ongoing conversations with Gulick and it was made possible to a great extent by Anthony 'Sam' Mollineau, one of the last recruits of the Callaloo Company who was workshop and parade manager of 'Spring.' For both my procession projects, I started by organizing what could be seen as a mascamp, barracón or shack, that is workshops during which artists would create works with assistants.<sup>39</sup> I then proceeded to curate a procession, a parade, a march, taking a measure of space unbounded by walls, reaching back in times immemorial of popular festivals and tuning into a future of globalized mass movements.

Enwezor, who back in 2008 told me that as a Nigerian he knew what a masquerade was, where I was coming from and where I was going, was first to refer to me as a producer in my role as organizer of a procession. At a recent conference, Brazilian art historian Roberto Conduru responded to my presentation of 'Spring' by saying that Carnival already had its curators, the *carnavalescos*. In turn, Brazilian curator and architecture historian Paola Berenstein Jacques ventured to say that I was a *carnavalesca*.<sup>40</sup> In Trinidad they would have said *maswoman*. While the Trinidad Carnival can be seen as having generated not just a

new artistic lingua franca, under the form of mas', but also reinvented an old performative exhibitionary model specially suited for the public ceremonial culture of the Caribbean streets, the procession or parade, the Rio Carnival created its own museum-stadium to Carnival, the Sambódromo.

The truth is, I never set out to be a producer, a carnavalesca or a maswoman and the proposition of "Curating Carnival" remains a risky one. Yet to the extent that carnavalescos in Brazil, masmen in Trinidad, Junkanoo-makers in the Bahamas and Crop-Over designers in Barbados continue to make daring contemporary artistic interventions, and artists and audiences throughout the Americas create and participate in Carnival, it remains a necessary one. As contemporary Caribbean art integrates more fully the global contemporary art world and its performance tradition is recognized as being central to it, it becomes an urgent one.

1

See: John Nunley and Judith Bettelheim (eds.), *Caribbean Festival Arts*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, and St Louis: St Louis Art Museum, 1988.

The exhibition opened at the St Louis Art Museum in 1988. Though the organizers of the exhibition and authors of the catalogue might disagree with the characterization of their approach to Carnival as folkloric, such statements as "The ingredients [of the festivals], like the people, are distinctive yet together they create a sweet, pungent pan-Caribbean aesthetic" on the flap cover makes it also exotic and suspect of the kind of essentialism that Eurocentric views of non-European cultures promulgate.

2

Annie Paul, "Visualizing Art in the Caribbean," in: Tumelo Mosaka (ed.),

*Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art*, Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, and London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2007, p. 32.

3

Homi K. Bhabha, "Unsatisfied: notes on vernacular cosmopolitanism," in: Laura Garcia-Moreno and Peter C. Pfeiffer (eds.), *Text and Nation: Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities*, Columbia: Camden House, 1996, pp. 191-207.

4

Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernism*, Boston: MIT Press, and London: inIVA, 2008.

5

Paul, op. cit., p. 30.

6

Errol Hill, "Trinidad Carnival. History and Meaning," in: *Caribbean Visions*:

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*Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1995, pp. 43-7.

7

Peter Minshall, "Carnival and Its Place in Caribbean Culture and Art," in: *Caribbean Visions: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1995, pp. 49-57.

8

Christopher Cozier, "Trinidad: Questions about Contemporary Histories," in: *Caribe insular: exclusion, fragmentación, y paraíso*, Badajoz: Mejac, and Madrid: Casa de América, 1998, pp. 348-9.

9

Nicholas Laughlin, "That is mas," in: Yona Backer and Kristina Newman-Scott (eds.), *Rockstone and Bootheel, Contemporary West Indian Art*, Hartford, CT: Real Art Ways, 2010, pp. 22-7. By "our artists" Laughlin refers to Trinidadian and possibly Caribbean artists at large. Laughlin also quotes this author in a passage from the essay "The Greatest Free Show on Earth. Carnival from Trinidad to Brazil, Cape Town to New Orleans," in: Dan Cameron (ed.), *Prospect. 1 New Orleans*, Brooklyn, PICTUREBOX, 2008, p. 52.

10

RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present* was first edited by Abrams in 1979, re-edited by Thames and Hudson in 1988, revised, expanded upon and re-edited in 2001 as *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* by the same publisher. Her second book on performance art, *Performance: Live Art since the 60s* was published, also by Thames and Hudson, in 1998 and 2004.

11

<http://www.performa-arts.org> (10 July 2011).

12

Inspired by his experience of the Bahia Carnival, for which he usually performs on a *trio elétrico*, Lindsay, a musician of the Tropicália generation and participant in the noise avant-garde in New York, has been organizing parades in collaboration with artists such as Matthew Barney and Rirkrit Tiravanija in Brazil, Europe and the United States since 2004.

13

Veerle Poupeye, *Caribbean Art*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998.

14

Milla Riggio (ed.), *Carnival: Culture in Action - The Trinidad Experience*, New York and London: Routledge, 2004.

15

Among many other theatre projects, Minshall created set designs for Hill's *Man Better Man* at Dartmouth College in 1975.

16

Minshall, *Caribbean Visions*, op. cit., p. 50.

17

Minshall, *Caribbean Visions*, op. cit., p. 51.

18

Minshall, *Caribbean Visions*, op. cit., pp. 56-7.

19

Minshall, *Caribbean Visions*, op. cit., p. 50.

20

Luis Camnitzer, "The Keeper of the Lens," in: *Looking at the Spirits: Peter Minshall's Carnival Drawings*, New York: The Drawing Center, 2005, p. 5.

21

William Dunlap, "The Island of Reflected Images. Two-month festival brought out the best of Havana's

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contemporary art scene," *The Washington Post*, 18 February 2001, p. G4.

22

Todd Gulick, explanatory notes to the typescript of William Dunlap, The Peter Minshall Archives, Callaloo Company, Chaguaramas, Trinidad and Tobago, W. I.

23

Camnitzer, op. cit., p. 5.

24

Cozier, *Caribe Insular*, op. cit., p. 349.

25

Christopher Cozier, "Mancrab," typescript, p. 2.

26

Cozier, *Caribe Insular*, op. cit., p. 348.

27

Christopher Cozier, typescript of talk given in 1998, p. 2. A revised version of this essay was published in *Caribe Insular*. The sentence, in italics in the typescript, as if to suggest a mental note, does not feature in the final published version.

28

Cozier, *Caribe Insular*, op. cit., p. 348.

29

Other art exhibitions of Minshall's work in Great Britain, in addition to those mentioned in the text, include: 'The Dancing Mobile,' an exhibition of work from the mas' by Minshall (Leicestershire Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester, England, 1990) and an important section of Minshall's work in the Trinidad Carnival and the Barcelona Olympic Opening Ceremony in 'The Power of the Mask' (National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1993).

30

Todd Gulick, 24 February 2011, 2:15pm, email correspondence with the author.

31

Gulick, 24 February 2011, 2:15pm, email correspondence with the author.

32

Gulick, 24 February 2011, 2:17pm, email correspondence with the author.

33

Christopher Cozier, 07 April 2011, 2:44am, email correspondence with the author. "For *Tantana*, I opted to be a regular foot soldier. I bought a costume and played with the band, which I have done for years when I could. [...] I wanted to just play mas—anonymously—and had a better time out in the regular band with a flowing parangole like cloth with my posse getting on—not walking around on display with a static image stuck to my back."

34

Cozier, 07 April 2011, 4:39am, email correspondence with the author.

35

See Carson Chan, "Measures of an Exhibition," in: *Fillip*, Issue no. 3, Spring 2011, pp. 28-37.

36

Christopher Cozier, "Shifting Signs and Transitional Moments," in: *South-South: Interruptions and Encounters*, Toronto: The Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 2009, p. 49.

37

For my writings about 'Spring' see: Claire Tancons, "Spring," in: *The 7th Gwangju Biennale. Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions*, Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2008, pp. 334-63; Claire Tancons and Jesse McKee, "On Carnival and Contractual Curating," in: *Fillip*, Issue no. 13, Spring 2011, pp. 74-79; Claire Tancons, "Carnival as Counter-Curatorial Intervention," in *Viz. Inter-Arts* (UC Santa Cruz),

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- upcoming in 2011. For writings about ‘Spring’ by others see: Anna Schneider, “Architectures of Spectacle. Facets of the exhibition boom in South Korea and China in the context of the strategy of globalism” in: *Springerin*, Issue 1/09, January 2009 (<http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft.php?id=58&pos=1&textid=2167&lang=en>); Anna Daneri, “The Carnival of Art” in: *Mousse*, December-January 2009, pp. 81-83; Jesse McKee, “Mythographies, Archeologies, Circuitries. Other Ways of Curating” in: *BorderCrossings*, vol. 29, no. 2 (#114), February 2010, pp. 66-67.
- 38**  
Cozier, *South-South*, op. cit., p. 50.
- 39**  
The ‘mascamp,’ ‘barracón’ and ‘shack’ are the names of the workshop-like, basic production units of the Trinidad and Rio carnivals and Bahamian Junkanoo respectively.
- 40**  
On the occasion of the reading of my paper “Carnaval do Sublime” at the ‘Contemporary Art in the South Atlantic? Images and Strategies’ panel in the ‘Terceira Metade/Third Half’ conference, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, 29-31 March 2011.