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# Conceptual Materialism

## Installation Art and the Dismantling of Caribbean Historicism

Carlos Garrido Castellano

*Everything's black, as if the space inside had swallowed the light and with it all that you know, all that's recognizable. You step uneasily into the blackness. The floor is spongelike. Walking is tentative. You must do so slowly. Your feet are like a blind man's fingers. Your senses sharpen.*

*You are alone here, or not.  
You are implicated.*

Tania Bruguera, 2002<sup>1</sup>

'Implication' is an apt word for the experience of Cuban artist Tania Bruguera's untitled installation for the 7th Havana Biennial in 2000.<sup>2</sup> Visitors were invited to enter a room in La Fortaleza de la Cabaña, a former fortification used as a prison in the mid-twentieth century by both Fulgencio Batista and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. La Cabaña is a prominent and well-known landmark of Cuban heritage, so nobody could have anticipated the sense of disorientation and loss felt by visitors as they entered the space of the installation. In total darkness, they had to walk over a smelly, unstable surface that, only after their eyes had adapted to the lack of light, revealed itself to be mouldering sugar cane. Losing their sense of time and space, visitors came to realize that they were not alone: naked actors inhabited the room, and from time to time a projection showed footage of Fidel Castro declaiming on productivity, modernization and progress. The clarity of the screen light and of Fidel's resolute message were, however, challenged by the oppressive, anguished atmosphere, and the feeling that visitors were, somehow, implicated.

It is interesting that we can read Bruguera's installation more intensely as a sensory experience than as an epistemological tool. While it intersects with colonial history, the plantation economy and the political present of Cuba, it teaches us nothing about those issues. There was no message

1. Tania Bruguera, *Untitled (Havana 2000)*, *boundary* 2, vol 29, no 3, autumn 2002

2. See <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/habana/bien7/cabana1/e-bruguera.htm>.

hidden in the repulsive tunnel of La Cabaña. Although complex layers of meaning are embedded within it, sugar cane was not a symbol of anything; it was a real, unpleasant presence. Visitors were more likely to leave quickly than to find enjoyment or aesthetic appreciation. It was not in spite of, but through the touch and smell of sugar cane that visitors engaged with the artwork. They experienced it through sensory, ephemeral means – the smell produced by the decay of the material medium of the installation. Meaning arose as a partial, incomplete approach to the artwork, driven by sensory stimulus. Only by entering the fort, by being there, could one fully apprehend the experience designed by the artist. In Bruguera's installation, engagement, experience and material culture were indissolubly entangled.

As a way of investigating this entanglement further, this article considers the uses of material culture by Caribbean installation artists Nikolai Noel (born Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, 1976), Marcos Lora Read (born Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 1965) and Blue Curry (born Nassau, Bahamas, 1974). In so doing, I search for a way of articulating the relations between the materiality of things included in installations,<sup>3</sup> the historical and economic referents they enact, and the artistic device that connects them. All three artists pay special attention to the sensory, material aspects of their work. They share similar concerns with the use of different media, the search for international audiences and with setting in train ambivalent discourses. Finally, in all three cases we find a similar interest in separating artistic practice from direct interpretations or explanations of external issues, conferring on each project an aesthetic dimension that does not preclude parallel political or social aspirations. I argue that, although charged with historical referents, the artworks analysed here do not represent history, nor do they address historical symbolisms. Rather, they appear to be sites of sensory and material negotiation not attached to a single, specific temporality, but to a holistic, multi-sensory approach to colonial and postcolonial processes. In that sense, the recovery of the Atlantic material culture they intend is not a way of fashioning historical narrations of the past; rather, it is a tool used to open new interpretations and possibilities within Caribbean present and future lives.

The main idea I wish to express here is that installation art troubles notions of the referential and of visual recognition, establishing a 'history of illegitimacy' and enabling a threefold approach to material culture.<sup>4</sup> This has to do in the first place with the nature and meaning of artefacts and materials: Where do they come from? Who owned them? What did, and do, they mean for past and present societies? It relates secondly to their historicity: what is their 'curriculum vitae'?<sup>5</sup> In other words, how did this situation evolve and broaden through history in terms of production, circulation and consumption? The third idea is linked to the display and perception of artefacts and materials, and implies not only a concern with their location in the past, but also about the mediation that determines their presentation in the present of the installation. In this, moreover, we can trace a meta-artistic thought related to the way those things serve as a space of negotiation of the position of Caribbean artists within an international, postcolonial art scene.

3. For a discussion of the difference between 'things' and 'objects' see Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relations between Humans and Things*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, New Jersey, 2012. Since I try to highlight the sensory and social mediations implied not only in human-made objects but also in raw materials, I will opt for the first term throughout this article.
4. Rebecca Schneider, 'Solo Solo Solo', in Gavin Butt, ed, *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, p 37. Schneider uses the model of the jazz solo to conceptualize a model where the quality of actions 'become profoundly riddled with the echoes of precedence and the forecast echoes of future response', p 37. My approach to the materiality of installation art is close to the challenge to canons posed by Schneider.
5. See Arjun Appadurai, ed, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986; Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 'The Cultural Biography of Objects', *World Archaeology*, vol 31, no 2, 1999, pp 169–178.



Nikolai Noel, *Untitled*, 2012, earth/soil, water, cast brown sugar, dimensions variable, photo courtesy the artist

### *SUGAR, SUN CREAM, KAPOK WOOD*

Three installations and three materials can be found at the beginning of this analysis. The first arises from a set of artworks made by Trinidadian artist Nikolai Noel between 2009 and 2012 as an experiment with the sensitive qualities of sugar and its historical implications. In one of his earliest and most powerful compositions, entitled *Night and Sugar* and shown for the first time in 2011, a light bulb was covered in brown sugar, which coloured and modified the light but also made the bulb blow after a while. Two main elements conditioned the sensory perception of the visitors here: the absence of illumination, the light bulb being the only source of light, and the particular odour of the sugar heating up and then destroying the bulb. In other untitled installations displayed the same year, Noel drew various silhouettes on the wall using sugar.<sup>6</sup> The surface was intended to blur with the warming of the exhibition space caused by the arrival and the breath of spectators, leaving an imprint in the wall and, again, an olfactory trace. Sensory perception was both essential to the installation and impossible to ignore. More recently, the artist used sugar to fashion sugar machetes that deteriorated during the installations.<sup>7</sup> Through the metonymic action of constructing the blade from the material it was designed to cut, the productive object became raw material and vice versa, conveying the interconnected and attainable character of Caribbean histories. In more recent installations created in 2012 (*Some Kind of Vessel*, *The Sweet of My Brown* and untitled compositions), Noel placed fingers and human jaws made of sugar on earth pedestals. Raised to the status of relics, they were ‘condemned’ to a finite existence, which the public could contemplate.<sup>8</sup>

A cloying atmosphere akin to that created by Noel is employed by Bahamian artist Blue Curry. For the Sixth Liverpool Biennial in 2010,

6. See <http://nikolainoelprojects.blogspot.co.uk/>.

7. Ibid

8. Ibid



Nikolai Noel, *Member*, 2012, cast brown sugar, salt, water, dimensions variable, photo courtesy the artist

Curry exhibited a customized shimmering blue cement mixer filled with gallons of sun cream that was in continual operation during the exhibition. As the cement mixer spun, the sweet smell of the sun cream invaded the entire room at Greenland Street, Liverpool. As a contribution to another project, the artist silk-screened a sun-cream pattern cover design onto the exhibition catalogue, giving it a sticky texture and the same olfactory sensation. He has also used sun cream painted directly onto the walls of the exhibition space to act as an element in his recent installations. Particularly sparing, this and other works of Curry offer a sensory appeal that makes it difficult to elicit a direct meaning. None of his works is titled; instead he lists the materials of which they are composed, and this is what reveals possible interpretations. That lack of descriptive meaning, consciously adopted by the artist, opens his works to a sensory approach. To this consideration we must add the noise produced by the industrial cement mixer, something that made the installation resemble a construction site. As its smell permeated the space, sun cream was thus inserted into a transformative context.

The work of the Dominican artist Marcos Lora Read also shows a concern for the contradictions between the temporal condition of material life and the permanence attached to heritage items. Since 1990, Lora has used parchment and paper to reflect on materiality, technology and the archive. That combination is behind projects like *Cinco car-rosas para la historia* (1991),<sup>9</sup> presented in 2009 in Paris as part of the 'Kréyol Factory' exhibition.<sup>10</sup> The installation consisted of five wooden canoes, which Lora furnished with wheels before hanging them on the wall. The structure of the canoes was covered with words taken from documents he found in the Archivo de Indias in Seville, relating to the first slaves brought to La Española, the island that now contains both Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Each boat contained either a sword or a rose made

9. The title contains word play that does not translate easily into English. On one level it reads as *Five Carriages for History*, but the Spanish 'carrozas' or 'carriages' is altered to 'car-rosas' so that it incorporates the 'rosas' or 'roses' of the installation. In Latin-American Spanish the pronunciation of the two spellings is identical.

10. See <http://www.kyas.com/P/Marcos/02.html>.



Blue Curry, *Untitled*, 2010, customized cement mixer, sun cream, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial, photo courtesy the artist

of metal and cardboard. To make the canoes Lora used kapok trees from Sabana de la Mar, a coastal town located in the northern part of the Dominican Republic that faces the peninsula of Samaná across a bay. The zone has historically been the point of departure for illegal migration towards Puerto Rico and is the location for the building of *yolas*, the small boats used to cross the Mona Passage, the strait that separates the countries. The use of local wood recalls not only present-day illegal migration by Dominicans but also the displacement of Taino communities across the Caribbean. Those communities also used the bark of the kapok, and would extract and discard the tree's heart; a difficult process as the surface of the kapok tree is covered by thorns. There is a symbolism in the fact that the transformation of a tree by hollowing out its core enabled the mobility and the miscegenation of indigenous communities. The materialism of this process is hidden by several conscious measures that are also open to interpretation: the canoes are covered with text, hung from the museum wall, and displayed as museum objects. In abruptly incorporating them into museum discourse, Lora produces an estrangement of their material biography that is nevertheless a conscious part of the installation display.





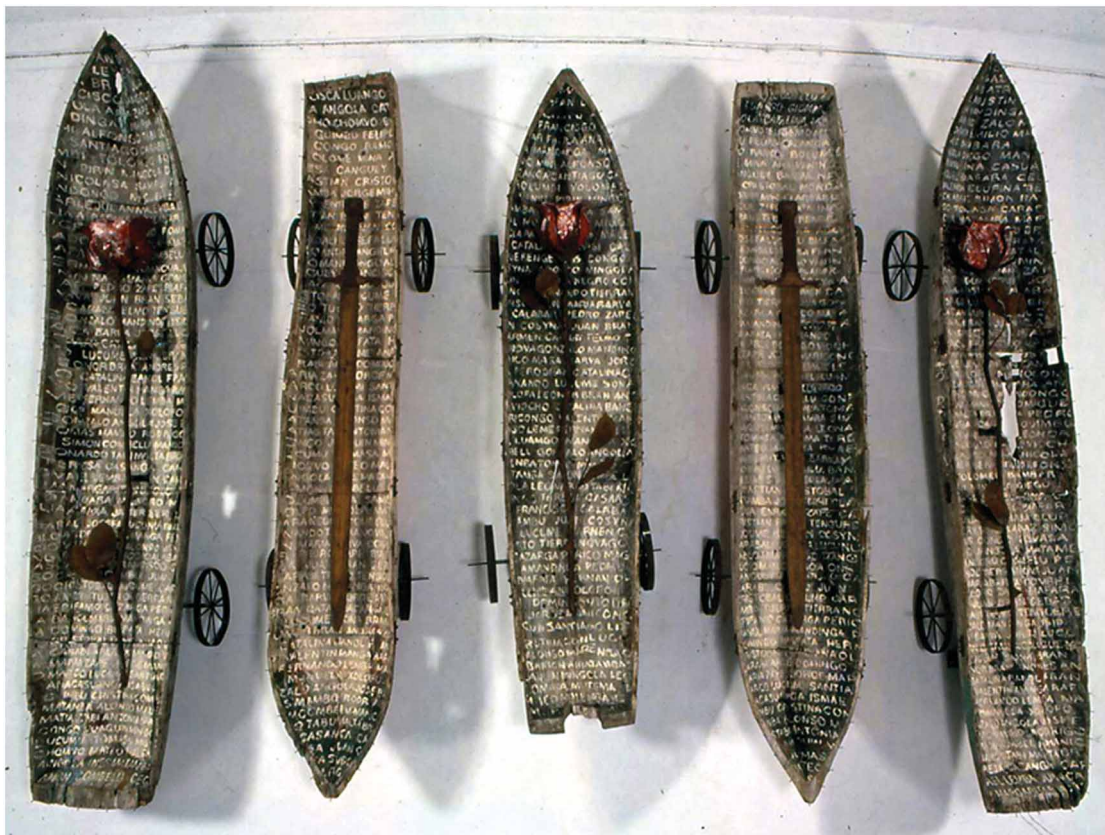
Nikolai Noel, *Some Kind of Vessel*, 2012, showing detail of sugar machete, cast brown sugar, dimensions variable, photo courtesy the artist

What do the artists examined here have in common? First, they share an interest in exploring the everyday materiality of the Atlantic landscape. Through the use of ordinary materials and objects, they track the politics of consumption and accessibility to those products from both a historical and a present-day perspective. Sugar, sun cream and wood offer a sensory experience that can tell us multiple things not only about how the Caribbean landscape looks, but also about the unconscious that pervaded the relations between things and human beings within the Atlantic space. Second, in none of the analysed cases is the sense given; rather, installations confront the public with a myriad of stimuli that appeal to all the senses, not only to sight. Third, things become ‘epidermalized’ when inserted in the installations, since they acquire a material dimension that speaks eloquently about the shared lives of human beings and material culture.<sup>11</sup> In that sense, artists make things to be ascribed and related to a human scale, materializing historic processes.

11. Jennifer A González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2008, p 5

### *ATLANTIC MATERIAL CULTURE*

What does ‘materialized’ mean in this context? How can we define those material objects? In other words, what do sugar, sun cream and wood mean for our purposes here? How can we approach them? A simple, general, answer could be: they are things. In recent years we



Marcos Lora Read, *Cinco Car-rosas para la historia*, 2008, Parc de la Villette, Paris, dimensions variable, photo courtesy the artist

12. See Hodder, *Entangled*, op cit; Christopher Tilley, ed, *Handbook of Material Culture*, Sage, London, 2006.

13. See Ann Brower Stahl, 'Colonial Entanglements and the Practice of Taste: An Alternative to Logocentric Approaches', *American Anthropologist*, vol 104, no 3, 2002, pp 827–845; David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2003.

14. See Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, Routledge, London, 2004; Helen Pheby, 'Contemporary Art: an Immaterial Practice?', in

have witnessed the emergence of the study of material culture associated with a greater acceptance of the senses as sources of knowledge, a development that can be observed in several disciplines, among them archaeology,<sup>12</sup> anthropology and sociology,<sup>13</sup> art<sup>14</sup> and collections and museum studies.<sup>15</sup> In this section I will outline some aspects of this debate and subject the work I have introduced to further analysis.

As several authors have pointed out, objects are not isolated. They shape our lives and our world, as we shape their form. They are 'the very substance of our societies'.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as Hodder has pointed out, we tend to extract from them what we need, a particular aspect of them, instead of considering that things have their own life and set of values and relations.<sup>17</sup> According to him, both artefacts and natural things – and the border between them tends to blur – present themselves in eco-systems.<sup>18</sup> Despite that, we are so used to some objects that we consider them part of the landscape, which enables us to relate to them in a non-discursive way.

This perspective confers an active voice to things. Each thing has, in that sense, a biography. This biography, however, is an ever-changing, troubled one.<sup>19</sup> If we agree to confer on things a life of their own, then, how can we approach them? In this case, we have to consider several implications of ownership, accessibility, consumption and exchange.



- Sandra H Dudley, ed, *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, Routledge, London, 2010, pp 71–89.
15. See Susan Pearce, ed, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Routledge, London, 1994; Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C Mancall, eds, *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2011.
  16. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p 4
  17. Hodder, *Entangled*, op cit, p 3
  18. *Ibid*, p 4
  19. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips, eds, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, Berg, Oxford, 2006, p 13
  20. Chris Gosden, 'What Do Objects Want?', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, vol 12, no 3, 2005, pp 193–211
  21. W J T Mitchell, 'What Do Pictures "Really" Want?', *October* 77, 1996, pp 71–82
  22. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1998
  23. See, for example, the classic work of Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, Viking, New York, 1985.
  24. See Ann Laura Stoler, 'Racial Histories and their Regimes of Truth', *Political Power and Social Theory* 11, 1997, pp 183–255.
  25. See Constance Classen and David Howes, 'The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts', in Edwards, Gosden and

With regard to possession, collecting appears to be an act indissolubly linked to our approach to things. Chris Gosden has questioned,<sup>20</sup> after W J T Mitchell,<sup>21</sup> what objects want, pointing out the existence of an inter-artefactual domain that interacts with human communities. Moreover, though simple, everyday gestures such as eating and drinking imply a complex setting of power relations that regulate our position in relation to other human beings. Agency, then, comes into discussion,<sup>22</sup> allowing us to consider contact between cultures as subtle, long-term manoeuvres implying interdependence. In that sense, although constructed across situations of accessibility, inequality and privilege, objects and raw materials can also be approached as sites of divergence, difference and contest.

In our case, the installations we have examined refer to the material culture of the Atlantic. The social life of Atlantic artefacts and materials is not isolated in a colonial past; rather, it is lived, transformed and challenged in postcolonial negotiations of place, history and dominance. We can easily assert, for example, that for many Caribbean communities sugar cane – not only its image, but also its odour, its taste, the sound produced when the canes are rustled by the wind – is more than a simple reference to the past. All those sensory experiences belong to the realm of the everyday. Things and raw materials have played a decisive role in configuring our understanding of colonialism and colonial territories as a central part of the modernity process.<sup>23</sup> The history of colonialism and slavery and the exchanges that shaped the colonial past and present can also be read in material terms.<sup>24</sup> Atlantic history is not only marked by transnational fluxes of persons, but also by the displacements, dislocations and relocations of things. We can read colonial and postcolonial processes that shaped this history by looking at the material culture that emerged from them.<sup>25</sup>

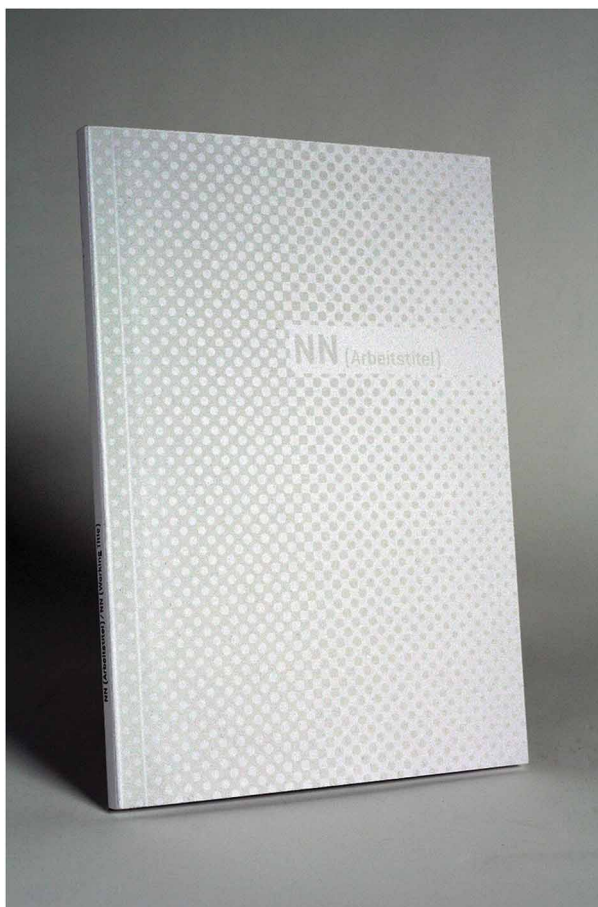
## DEFYING MEANING

What happens if we translate this approach to Atlantic material culture to the three installation art practices we are examining? What kind of knowledge can we infer from the use of sugar, sun cream and wood in the installations of Noel, Curry and Lora respectively? I believe that any approach to those questions has to begin with a recognition: in these installations, meaning is defied. In other words, answering these questions has more to do with revealing the implications recorded in the work than with discovering a hidden message, a unifying reading. Installation art is an immersive practice that deals with multiple layers of knowledge and sensibility. Just as there cannot be a single way of engaging with installation art, so it is impossible to derive a single meaning from it. When looking at an installation, we are not static. Experience, temporality and movement are inseparable from our aesthetic engagement with it. This forces us to adopt a versatile approach with the capacity to challenge the predominance of visuality in our engagement with art and to transform artworks into 'active sites of cultural production'.<sup>26</sup>

When considering the installations under examination here, we can say that there is a significant difference between arriving at the exhibition

Phillips, *Sensible Objects*,  
op cit, pp 199–223.

26. Brower Stahl, 'Colonial Entanglements and the Practice of Taste', op cit, p 832



Blue Curry, *NN [Arbeitstitel]*, 2011, exhibition catalogue cover, silk-screened sun cream cover design, published by Forum Stadtpark, photo courtesy the artist

space at the moment when the display has been set up, and doing so a short time later, or when the installation has come to an end. In the first case our visual perception predominates; then, after a while, the odour of the materials and the noise invades us, modifying our first impression. If we simply pass through the room housing Curry's cement mixer without pausing to perceive the smell of the heated sun cream, even if we identify the spinning substance, we will miss a substantial part of the work. It is clear that only through experience can we fully access meaning. It could be argued that the case of Lora is different and that in his work experiencing and sensing are not so important. To some extent this is true. Both the 'cultural' coating that the archival names express and the hanging of the canoes postpone temporality and sensibility. Yet a harsh tactile experience lies beneath this coating. The use of kapok is not an arbitrary gesture. It reveals significant information about technique and technology; it also evinces the environmental sacrifice of extracting the 'heart of nature', and we can connect this to a historical awareness of the importance of the natural medium in La Española. Devastating processes of deforestation have shaped the

evolution of the island's two nations differently so that the border between denuded Haiti and the relatively intact forest of the Dominican Republic is clearly visible. Kapok links, finally, several fluxes of migration, intersecting with histories of mobility and creolization.

Temporality lies at the centre of installation practice, as do the spatial and the site-specific.<sup>27</sup> Installations provide a new home for things and materials. This does not mean an interruption of their meaning outside the gallery space. Despite the translation to a new context, objects bring their belongings with them; they bring, that is, a particular memory of social practices established within and around them. We are not dealing only with sugar, sun cream and wood in themselves; rather, we have to consider at least two further elements that are strongly inter-related: the cultural and material network recorded in their 'curriculum vitae', and the cultural and material network they create within the installation space. The first is easy to describe, since we can easily acknowledge a vast historical and cultural significance for sugar, sun cream and kapok wood. The implications of the second element, however, are not so clear, and warrant further examination.

In the case of Noel's light bulb installation *Night and Sugar*, the latter covers the only light in the room. Apart from the direct implication of a relation between plantation agriculture and the Enlightenment, the contiguity of both elements is essential to the installation: sugar enhances and colours the light, but also suffocates it. It is this proximity, the cause and the consequence of the tragedy, that transforms the apparatus of the installation into debris. In Noel's installations of fingers and jaws, the position of these sugar artefacts is also important. They are deposited over a soil mound, the olfactory qualities of which emerge when the room warms and the sugar melts. Acting as a sacrificial altar, earth also offers a promise of regeneration, condensing the fluid remains of the embodied relics. If we consider Curry's sun-cream installation, the spatial context is made eloquent; tropical longing is 'fabricated' by the introduction of sun cream into the cement mixer and the activation of the latter. In the installation, sun cream is not only a product; it is a product *being fabricated* within the time and space of the exhibition.

Apart from the temporal and the spatial, a third level we need to consider at this point is intention. Artists intervene not only by choosing the things included in the installation, by positioning them and by establishing a temporal context; they also condition the ways we approach each artwork, setting up certain conditions that shape the implications of the work. Coming back to Noel's installations, we can see how the human presence is objectified, since it is the multitude of spectators who heat the room and hasten the chemical reactions of the sugar melting. Regardless of whether they wish to do so, visitors will 'destroy' the artwork, revealing its true meaning. This gesture can be read, as we can see, as a concern with artistic practice itself. Something similar occurs with Curry's sun-cream installation, where only the decision to activate the cement mixer reveals the nature of the project, and in Lora's, which reveals the contradictions between the material nature of each piece and its 'cultural' layers.

It is important to consider that all these levels do not work separately; they are closely entangled. In the next section we will see how history is the missing piece of our puzzle.

27. See Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Routledge, London, 2005; Erika Suderburg, ed, *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2000.

## DISMANTLING THE MONUMENT CALLED HISTORY

Apart from having a set of material values, things have a complex history. This history is the result of the interactions with other things and with human beings. That implies intricate connections, among which we can find

where the objects come from, who created them, who owned them, who bought or sold them, how they were stored, how they were collected, how they were marketed, how they were (or are) used in different cultural traditions, and how they were (or are) part of a given cultural hegemony.<sup>28</sup>

In this section I will argue that, by inserting indexical referents into the non-indexical context of the installation, the artists in question are challenging the nature of those connections, bringing them to the present and questioning the meanings and uses of things.

We have already recognized that the selection of kapok wood by Marcos Lora Read restaged technological memories associated with its Caribbean past. We have also mentioned that kapok works as a sort of material counterpart to the archival documentary recorded on the wood, one that challenges its meaning. But what meaning? When visiting the Archivo de Indias in Seville, Lora was fascinated by the names of slaves brought to and from the New World to the Spanish territories. The combination of a Catholic, Spanish name and an African surname suggested a continuous process of creolization, a narrative of the past made from a particular point of view, from a particular position. From the insertion of those names in the display of the exhibition, we can also deduce a strong concern with making the silences they imply speak for themselves. Those silences, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, can be located along the whole process of historical production, having been present since the moment the fact took place.<sup>29</sup>

Is, then, the artist taking the role of an archivist or a historian, whose task is to reveal the failure of this historical tool? No. The archive indexes the material it contains according to a cultural logic that changes with the needs of the moment and the society. Within it, each element is contextualized within a category, the act of categorization being an act of empowerment. We can interpret the lists recorded on the boats, then, as evidence of the counter-narratives existing in the archive, but also as a framework that collects the possibilities of new processes of miscegenation, both continuity and separation from the burden of the contextual logic fixed by the archive. For it points not so much to a past of forced migration and slavery as to a present marked by the separation of their presence from a fixed context, in other words, to the ongoing character of creolization.<sup>30</sup> Materialism, the choice of historically, socially and culturally charged goods and raw materials, becomes, then, a conceptual gesture. If we accept that archives are not only a physical place, but also a social apparatus intertwined with colonial powers, Lora's *Cinco Car-rosas* seems to separate itself from, and to react critically against, that apparatus.<sup>31</sup>

If we now look at Noel's sugar installations, we witness a similar critical distancing from any pretension to veracity of the 'biography' of sugar as a product and of the melting 'relics'. In this case, the destruction of the evidence as it melts distances the work from the logic of the archive, and yet an archival gesture is present in the selection, exhibition and

28. González, *Subject to Display*, op cit, p 10

29. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon, Boston, Massachusetts, 1995, p 26

30. See Michaeline Crichlow and Patricia Northover, *Creolization and the Post-Creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2009.

31. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2009



categorization of the body fragments, and in their aspiration to represent the human body in its totality. We can accept, then, that both works make an attempt to dismantle the historical genealogies of things and humans in the Caribbean context. They achieve this by subverting the epistemological technology developed by the archive. However, can we read them only as a counter-narrative of historical discourses? I believe that the installation strategies we are examining imply a broader critique, challenging not only the mechanisms of the production of history and material genealogies, but also the boundaries between the archive as the sanctified terrain of historical preservation and real life. They do so by complicating notions of authenticity and authority, generating 'A response to a call and a call to response ... beyond the confines of singular intention or policed legitimacies'.<sup>32</sup>

Historical documents and archives by their very nature collect and preserve an account of the past, which always means a selection of events and facts. It is in that sense that we understand them as sources for the study of the past. We confer authenticity on the information recorded in those documents, as we similarly confer it on artworks. The practice of installation art, however, involves a challenge to the artificiality and the originality of things. For Boris Groys, installation art operates as an antithesis of the techniques of reproduction outlined by Benjamin in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*).<sup>33</sup> Benjamin's aura implies a belonging to a temporal and spatial uniqueness.<sup>34</sup> Installation art integrates objects and materials and re-contextualizes them. That makes the artworks of Noel, Curry and Lora active actions and configurations of reality, rather than simple re-enactments of historical processes.

Thus, those selections and relocations of the materiality of the everyday are just an observation of the process of circulation of goods and materials that shapes the politics of consumerism. According to Groys:

The installation reveals precisely the materiality of the civilization in which we live, because it *installs* everything that our civilization simply *circulates*. The installation thus demonstrates the material hardware of civilization that would otherwise go unnoticed behind the surface of image circulation in the mass media. At the same time an installation is not a manifestation of already existing relationships among things; on the contrary, an installation offers an opportunity to use the things and images of our civilization in a very subjective, individual way.<sup>35</sup>

That subjectivity confers on the installations we are analysing a subversive, transformative capacity. For they arise from an act of taking decisions. The three installations examined here create scenarios that merge into real life, since each of the elements included in the displays has an open and ongoing biography outside the gallery space.

## QUESTIONING OWNERSHIP AND DISPLAY

We have seen so far how the way we show or hide things and the way we reclaim a privileged access to things defines to a great extent our relationship with them. If we exhibit a thing by positioning it in a particular context, both the thing and its owner are imbued with meaning. Things

32. Schneider, 'Solo Solo Solo', op cit, p 32

33. Boris Groys, 'The Topology of Contemporary Art', in Okwui Enwezor, Terry Smith and Nancy Condee, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2008, pp 71–83

34. Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 2012

35. Groys, 'The Topology of Contemporary Art', op cit, pp 76–77, emphasis in the original

can be sold and bought, can be collected. What we find in Noel, Lora and Curry's installations is not symbols or images of sugar, sun cream and wood, but 'the real thing', although they become symbolized during this process. We can see and experience those things because they have been purposefully inserted in the device of the installation. We can approach them, thus, not only by the evidence of their sensory properties, but also by the way different people react differently to those properties. If we have accepted that this strategy entails a direct relation with how we consume products, this means that an examination of the links established by objects and persons within the installation space can also transform our knowledge about the circulation of the products included in them.

However, we have said before that, even when it implies indexicality, an installation is not an archive and nor is it a museum. We have recognized that we deal with the message of those artworks through a sensory approach, one that transcends a uniquely epistemological value and generates a movement that is destabilizing for the visual archive of colonialism and slavery.<sup>36</sup> This movement works both as a representational practice and as a critique of the conditions of representation of collections and museums.<sup>37</sup> Lora's boats could be hanging on the wall of any anthropological or historical museum; Noel's objects remind us of the last remains of a lost culture; Curry's sun cream exemplifies the contradictions and the anxiety of representation caught up in tropical landscapes and culture. In recent years we have seen how collections have become a space for critical debate. Echoing this debate, through their focus on materiality and sensitivity the examined installations defy institutionalized forms of display and the power the museum holds over visitors. But they also defy the power that visitors hold over objects, perceived as caged, displaced remainders of disappeared, fossilized cultures.

A second element that catches our attention is temporality. In each of the cases we have considered, things and materials are not stable, but transient, negating the task museums and collections need to fulfil. They are subjected to drastic modifications, the clearest example being Noel's sugar installations, and the most subtle Lora's *Cinco Car-rosas*. The sugar objects of the Trinidadian artist disappear during the installation; sun cream creates a flow inside the cement mixer in Curry's installation. In this context, installation art not only displays objects; it re-contextualizes them, conferring a specific temporality, a difference between (different) pasts and presents. Things become not finished products or objects, but ambivalent processes. The nature of their functioning in the spheres of history and the everyday is, by that means, challenged from the very beginning of its permanent nature, for, as Ian Hodder has explained, even when we do not perceive it, things are not stable.<sup>38</sup> Neither is their meaning. As Copeland and Thompson have asserted, there is an intrinsic difficulty in reading the history of slavery from objects and materials located in archives and collections of the governing classes.<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have tried to explore how contemporary Caribbean artistic practice deals with issues of materiality, history, consumerism, display

36. See Stephen Best, 'Neither Lost nor Found: Slavery and the Visual Archive', *Representations*, vol 113, no 1, 2011, pp 150–163.

37. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988

38. Hodder, *Entangled*, op cit

39. Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson, 'Perpetual Returns: New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual', *Representations*, vol 113, no 1, 2011, pp 1–15

and social inequalities. This is particularly, although not uniquely, visible in installation art, since this medium has an intrinsic preoccupation with spatiality, originality and material culture. I have outlined how any analysis of artistic discourses has to outline at least three interconnected levels: the epistemological, the historical and finally the curatorial. In examining those three levels we have also seen how the installations of Noel, Curry and Lora pose a challenge to all the categories implied in each of them: a direct interpretation of meaning is questioned, as are the genealogies of memory in the past and their continuity in the present and the politics of display of institutional practices. The creation of a 'transient materiality' helps in that regard.<sup>40</sup> In some cases, installations are finite. They have a birth and a death, and only documentation remains. However, in the three analysed examples there is a sensation of loss when we look at visual documents, since the three installations considered here have a strong multi-sensory vocation.

The second aim of this text is to outline the enriching effect of material culture when it is brought into contemporary art practices. Traditionally, Caribbean art has been analysed in terms of issues. That implies the acceptance of categorizations and the pre-eminence of interests that are sometimes beyond those of the artists. A shift towards materiality can help to focus more on the relations implicit in the artistic device and on the decisions the artist takes. It also allows artists to avoid the pigeonholing of their works on the basis of a direct reading of their 'exotic' provenance.<sup>41</sup> A conceptual approach to things is present in the three cases analysed. But if we look no further than this we will be missing something, since the conceptualism implied in the choice made by the artists is only completed through the openness of material culture. In other words, the decision to include a specific material is a disorienting act, since it carries, we may say without the consent of the artist, different implications for the relations between human beings and other things. We have tried to reach and think through those implications as a way of explaining not only the profundity and the acuity of Caribbean art critique toward situations of domination and exchange both within and outside the artistic sphere, but also as an appealing and widely applicable methodological approach.

40. Linda Sandino, 'Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Transient Materiality in Contemporary Cultural Artifacts', *Journal of Design History*, vol 17, no 3, 2004, pp 283–293

41. Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p 6

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