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New Directions in Caribbean Art
En Mas': Carnival and Art Performance of the Caribbean

Curated by Claire Tancons and Krista Thompson, *EN MAS': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* has generated much expectation and positive critical reception in recent years. This is partly due to its innovative vision. The foundation for this exhibition is performance art; specifically, nine commissioned performances that took place in different locations during the 2014 Carnival season. After their enactment in the streets of cities like Santiago de los Treinta Caballeros; Nassau; Kingston; Fort-de-France; Port of Spain; London; New York and New Orleans, these performances were then exhibited through digital media at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) of New Orleans. A setup like this—a varied group of transnational performances that can afterwards be viewed and experienced in the space of the museum—is not only ambitious in scope, but also seems fitting to both the transient elements and defining bearing of Carnival.

The exhibition reflects the innovative vision of independent scholar and curator Claire Tancons, originally from Guadeloupe. Tancons conceived of the idea of an exhibition on Carnival and performance art during her tenure as associate curator at CAC. Tancons subsequently invited Bahamian art historian and university professor Krista Thompson, to collaborate on the curation of what became *EN MAS': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean*. Tancons also invited her longstanding collaborator architect Gia Wolff, a longstanding collaborator to assist with the exhibition design. The original undertaking that EN MAS' embodies is further shaped by its projection, since the exhibition travelled in a tour organized by Independent Curators International. *EN MAS'* ran from March 7-15 2015 at CAC; before moving to the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands (January 14-March 18, 2016) and later to the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas (April 28-July 17, 2016), DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago (2017), the Museum of African Diaspora, San Francsico (2017-2018) and the Ulrich Museum of Art in Wichita (2018)[1].

Through photography and video installation, the exhibition shows performances by Ebony G. Patterson, Hew Locke, John Beadle, Christophe Chassol, Charles Campbell, Nicolás Dumit Estévez, Marlon Griffith, Lorraine O'Grady, and Cauleen Smith. Although image is one of the central vehicles to transport these performances into the museum, there is also an important attention to materiality through the inclusion of objects – part of the original performances — displayed in the museum's space. This highlights the significance of mas as a practice of unique craft, design and transformation embodied in the masquerade.

EN MAS' depicts the rich diversity in the celebration of carnival, palpable through the connections and dichotomies between these performances, across the eight cities and six different countries where they took place. In contrast with previous exhibitions where Carnival has nevertheless had an important (yet more peripheral) role, *EN MAS'* seems to place the emphasis on the very spatial origins of this cultural expression: the actual streets, itineraries, routes and performative practices that characterize Carnival in the Caribbean. In the article "Curating Carnival: Performance in Contemporary Caribbean Art" Tancons discusses previous attempts to curate carnival within the museum context.She suggests potential avenues for an alternative engagement: "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." (39). This challenge was successfully taken up by Tancons and Thompson.

Invisible Presence, Bling Memories, by Jamaican artist Ebony Patterson, re-centers the street as a space of critique, social reflection and ritual following the spirit of Ole Mas, an approach shared by other artists in the exhibition. Patterson's performance consisted of a procession through the streets of Kingston on Carnival Sunday, April 27, 2014. Fifty people each carried replica caskets upholstered in bright multi-colored fabrics to represent the seventy-three Jamaican civilians who were killed during the 2010 police and military incursion at the Tivoli Gardens district in Kingston. By engaging in a ritual of mourning and commemoration, following the styles of bling funerals in Jamaica, their lives and loss were made visible. There was a mixture of revelry and solemn remembrance. One of the photographic images of Patterson's performance shows a carnival band with dancers leading the procession of caskets. The musicians and dancers are dressed in the colors of the Jamaican flag, which signals their location, but the image can be reminiscent of the brass band parades in New Orleans.

The exhibition at CAC also conferred a special recognition to New Orleans as a 'satellite city' of the Caribbean. Cauleen Smith, a New Orleans-based artist, brings the focus on film. Smith's series of music performances *H-E-L-L-O*, like Patterson's, reflect an engagement with individual and collective acts of mourning in public spaces. *H-E-L-L-O* is a video recording of nine musicians who perform different solo interpretations of the same theme in several spots across New Orleans. This audio-visual document marks the loss, impact and legacy of hurricane Katrina. Also through video format, Christophe Chasol's Big Sun offers a novel perspective on the experiences that surround Carnival, focusing on the everyday.

The performances in *EN MAS'* reflect a personal take on Carnival's plasticity in creating opportunities of social critique, offering an alternative response to more commercial celebrations of Carnival at times promoted through government sponsorship and tourism marketing.

The role-reversal, and suspension, of identities during carnival reverberates through Charles Campbell's *Actor*

Boy: Fractal Engagement; Campbell's performance encouraged the participatory reversal of two distinct areas of Kingston during carnival: Upside and Downtown Kingston. Performances represent the creation of a liminal space where both areas coexist. In *C-Room*, Nicolás Dumit Estévez presents a carnivalesque space, demarcated by bright golden-plastic curtains, that displays photographs and an interactive video still documenting his performance. He offered viewers of the Dominican Museo Folklórico Don Tomás the possibility to dress with props and design their own performance. The sense of 'play' as creation and participation in cultural production is also televised and therefore 'contained' despite its creative license.

John Beadle's *Inside-out, Outside-in* and Lorraine O'Grady's Searching for a Headdress question notions of authenticity in regards to cultural and individual identity, respectively. Issues of authenticity and belonging equally run through Hew Locke's performance *Give and Take,* at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Locke's performance was part of *Up Hill Down Hall: An indoor carnival*, curated by Claire Tancons, that invites reflections on who is included and excluded throughout the history of the Notting Hill neighborhood and its carnival, contextualizing and demystifying the multicultural quality of one of London's cultural landmarks. With an architectural design also by Gia Wolff, Locke's Give and Take transformed the space of the Turbine Hall into the more conflicting issues that surround carnival, and that often remain invisible through the colorful display of the celebrations: these include gentrification, police surveillance and brutality. The performances, which also included a new performance by Marlon Griffith, *No Black in the Union Jack,* were accompanied by Sonar, a live musical remix by London-based sound artists Dubmorphology (Gary Stewart and Trevor Mathison). Collaborative and interactive artistic practice defines *Up Hill Down Hall: An indoor carnival* and guides the playful participatory nature that it offers viewers. In the Turbine Hall, viewers hold robes and move across the space interacting with the performers, whilst listening to the beats that shape the rhythm of their movement. In the museum space at CAC, audiences could view the powerful performance through a TV screen and headphones whilst standing next to a wall decorated with gigantic photographic cardboard images of the participants. Pinned on the wall were the carnival masks and shields displaying large photographs of wealthy Victorian terraces that were used in the performance. The distance of the subtle room lighting and the grey museum walls at CAC could further envelop spectators in an opportunity to reflect on the transcendence of the moment captured on camera.

Additionally, artistic collaboration in *EN MAS'* aids the transition of the performative into the viewing space of the gallery and the museum. Through the mediums of photography, video and architectural design, a series of collaborating artists document the performances for their display and reproduction at the museum. The following artists authored the documentation of performances: Marvin Bartley, Arnaldo James, Marlon James, Raymond Marrero, Oneika Russell, Nile Saulter, Storm Saulter, and Michelle Serieux to name a few.

One of the most enticing aspects about Tancons and Thompson's exhibition is the sheer variety of styles and sensibilities that also act as a powerful underlying thread connecting them. As stated in the official website



Figure 1: General View – Carnival image on screen and Campbell installation at the far end En Mas', CAC New Orleans general view, 2015. Exhibition design Gia Wolff. Photo: Sarrah Danziger