

DRAPETOMANÍA:

Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro-Cuba

The 8th Floor

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In an article published in the mid-19th century, Samuel Cartwright, a medical doctor in a Louisiana plantation, described a new disease among slaves. The most visible symptom of this disease, which Cartwright called *drapetomania*, was an irrepressible and pathological urge to flee and to be free. A form of resistance practiced by African slaves since the beginnings of European colonization in the Americas was transformed into a psychiatric disease. As any other pathology, *drapetomania* could be treated medically. The suggested remedies, however, were not particularly innovative. According to Cartwright, there were only two effective remedies to treat *drapetomania*: flogging and amputation, especially of toes.

Neither *drapetomania* nor the barbaric remedies prescribed by the famous doctor were new, of course. Along with other forms of resistance, the existence of runaways among African slaves in the Americas is reported since the early sixteenth century. Resistance and what the Iberians called *cimarronaje* were inherent to slavery and inseparable from it, to the point that sale contracts often included the propensity to flee as one of the "flaws" or defects of the slave. As early as 1535, chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, writing about Hispaniola, the first European colony in the New World, asserted that "Cimarrones... means in the language of this island, fugitives."

The term *cimarrón* was initially applied to "wild" cattle and was used to describe barbarism, savagery and wilderness, attributes that, according to the slave owners, characterized all Africans. But the slaves invested the term with new meanings and *cimarronaje* came to represent not only the obstinate resistance of Africans and their descendants to slavery, but also to the processes of *decolonization* to which they were subject. What was initially an attribute of wild animals became a symbol of rebellion and resistance against European colonial oppression. In the twentieth century, Caribbean thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, René Dépestre, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant conceptualized *cimarronaje* as an expression of cultural resistance and as a central feature of Caribbean identity.

It is in this tradition of identity-building and Caribbean assertion that the work of the Cuban visual arts collective Grupo Antillano (Antillean Group) (1978-1983) needs to be analyzed. Founded by sculptor and engraver Rafael Queneditt Morales, Grupo Antillano's foundational manifesto stated clearly that they wanted to recreate the Caribbean and African foundations of an authentic Cuban culture. They also made clear that, to them, Africa was a lively and vital cultural reference, not a dead historical heritage. As poet Pablo Armando Fernández stated, Grupo Antillano was asking a fundamental question: "What and who are we as inhabitants of the Caribbean?"



Ever Fonseca, *Familia en el charco* ("Family on the Pond"), 2000

During its five years of existence, Grupo Antillano articulated a new vision of Cuban culture through the visual arts. This vision was popular, radical, Caribbean, Maroon, African, revolutionary. As the founding manifesto of the Group claims, they did not want to promote a new artistic concept, but rather sought to highlight the centrality of Africa in Cuban culture and to debunk dominant narratives that equated Cuban progress and modernity with European influences. They valiantly opposed the persistent belief, supported by vast sectors of the Cuban bureaucracy in the 1970s, that Afro-Cuban religious practices were backward, primitive and grotesque - a "remnant of the past," as they were frequently described at the time. Cuba, Grupo Antillano proclaimed, was quintessentially an Afro-Caribbean nation. Cuban modernity was anchored in the knowledge, the aesthetics, the cultures and the sweat and blood of the African peoples. "We are not interested in other worlds," their foundational manifesto asserted.

Grupo Antillano engaged the support of a large group of collaborators and created what can only be described as a vibrant Afro-Cuban cultural movement. Among their collaborators were key figures in Cuban art, including Wifredo Lam, who became an active member of the Group and its Honorary President until his death in 1982. But their exhibits were not just visual art events. They were multidisciplinary events that included theoretical workshops, theater plays, concerts and recitals where Cuba's best and most notable intellectuals participated.

"The voice of a new art is being heard," ethnomusicologist Rogelio Martínez Furé wrote about Grupo Antillano in 1980. Yet neither this voice, nor this "new art" or even the very existence of Grupo Antillano are remembered today. In fact, Grupo Antillano has been erased from all accounts of the so-called "new Cuban art," a movement in Cuba's artistic production which took shape precisely during those years and that is frequently associated with the legendary exhibit *Volumen Uno* (1981).¹ *Volumen Uno* is remembered today as the initial salvo of a new generation of artists who tried to break away from socialist realism and to experiment with new techniques and artistic expressions. Some of the artists of *Volumen Uno*, notably Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, José Bedia, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla and Leandro Soto, developed lines of work which included some of the concerns of Grupo Antillano. But *Volumen Uno* did not look towards Africa or the Caribbean for inspiration. Those artists searched for new formal and artistic horizons in Western art. The "new art" of Martínez Furé did not become the "new Cuban art" of the 1980s, that is, the art that was embraced by international collectors, critics, and curators. Grupo Antillano was relegated to oblivion, their contributions silenced for decades.

The exhibit *Drapetomanía: Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro-Cuba* (The 8th Floor, March-July 2014), seeks to recover the memory of this group and their important contributions to the art of Cuba, the Caribbean and the African Diaspora. Several members of Grupo Antillano had attended the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Nigeria in 1977 and saw their work as part of a diasporic conversation on art, race and colonialism. At FESTAC they met other artists and intellectuals interested in race-justice

¹ Grupo Antillano is not even mentioned in the best books on Cuban contemporary art, such as Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba* (University of Texas Press, 2003), Rachel Weiss, *To and From Utopia in Cuban Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), or in Natalie Bondil, *Cuba: Art and History from 1868 to Today* (Prestel USA, 2009). To my knowledge, the existence of Grupo Antillano is registered only in two art books: José Veigas Zamora et al., *Memoria: Cuban Art of the 20th Century* (Los Angeles, 2002) and Judith Bettleheim, ed. *Afrocuba: Works on Paper, 1968-2003* (San Francisco State University Press, 2005).



José Bedia, *El Rompimiento, El Amarre, El Pataki* ("The Break," "The Tether," "The Fable"), 2013

issues, such as activist sculptor Mel Edwards, who became a lifelong friend of several members of Grupo Antillano.

The exhibit showcases works by the artists of Grupo Antillano (Esteban Ayala, Rogelio Rodríguez Cobas, Manuel Couceiro, Herminio Escalona, Ever Fonseca, Ramón Haití, Adelaida Herrera, Arnaldo Rodríguez Larrinaga, Oscar Rodríguez Lassería, Alberto Lescaj, Manuel Mendive, Leonel Morales, Clara Morera, Miguel Ocejo, Rafael Queneditt and Julia Valdés). *Drapetomanía* also includes works by a group of contemporary artists (Belkis Ayón, Bedia, Choco, Diago, Esquivel, Marta María Pérez Bravo, Montalván, Olazábal, Douglas Pérez, Peña, Elio Rodríguez and Leandro Soto) who share some of the concerns articulated by Grupo Antillano in the late 1970s.

I hear, or more precisely, "see" echoes of Grupo Antillano in the work of these contemporary artists. This does not necessarily mean that they acknowledge, either explicitly or implicitly, a debt to Grupo Antillano. As an intellectual and curatorial project, the exhibit suggests continuities and proposes a genealogy that does not depend on the introspection of each individual artist. The exhibit offers a fresh and alternative look at the "new art of Cuba" through the work of artists who have been concerned with issues of race, history, and identity. It reassesses the importance of Grupo Antillano by linking their work with that of a new generation of Cuban artists, particularly those associated since the 1990s with the *Queleoides* curatorial project. *Drapetomanía* argues, without hesitation, that the "new art" that Grupo Antillano produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s is part of what we have come to know as new Cuban art. Thirty-five years after its creation, Grupo Antillano continues to assert, as the late Fernando Ortiz used to say that "without the black, Cuba would not be Cuba."

Alejandro de la Fuente, March 8, 2014
Harvard University

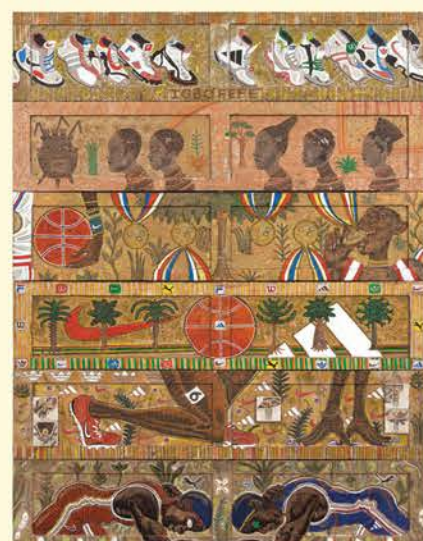
Originally presented at the Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño in Santiago de Cuba, where it was described as "one of the best visual arts exhibits of the last few years," *Drapetomanía* travels to The 8th Floor from the Centro Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales in Havana. The exhibition will go on to the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco and Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African and African American Research.

Curated by Alejandro de la Fuente, Robert Woods Bliss Professor of Latin American History and Economics and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, *Drapetomanía* is sponsored by the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at the Hutchins center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, with support from the Ford Foundation and the Christopher Reynolds Foundation. The exhibit is complemented by the book *Grupo Antillano: The Art of Afro-Cuba*, edited by Alejandro de la Fuente, with essays by art critics and historians Guillermina Ramos Cruz, José Veigas and Judith Bettleheim.

The 8th Floor is a private exhibition space established to promote cultural and philanthropic initiatives. Opened in 2010, recent shows have primarily focused on the presentation of contemporary Cuban art under the direction of curator Rachel Perera Weingeist, and with partners in Cuba. The 8th Floor is free and open to the public, and school groups are encouraged. Viewing hours are Tuesday through Thursday 11-6pm, and Friday 10-5pm.

The 8th Floor wishes to acknowledge the participating artists and estates for their rich and provocative contributions to this powerful exhibition - it has been a pleasure to share in the process. A particular form of magic occurs on The 8th Floor, which can only be attributed to the tireless dedication and creativity of the staff at the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection - Aaron Gurley, Michelle Hailey, Matthew Johnson, Anjali Nanda, and Sandi Roegman, not to mention Anna Gonick and Sarah Van Anden and new members George Bolster and Yandro Miralles - whose efforts are very much appreciated. It goes without saying that our ongoing collaboration with Alejandro de la Fuente and Elio Rodríguez continues to be a rewarding adventure in partnership. We are grateful for the generous support and thoughtful contributions of Shelley and Donald Rubin, without which this opportunity to share a range of Cuban voices would not be possible.

Reverse: Manuel Couceiro, *Sin título* ("Untitled"), 1977



Douglas Pérez Castro, *El jardín del alardoso (igbofefe)* ("The Bragger's Garden"), 2012