

Past, Present and Future: Mapping Vodun and the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié

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Introduction

Beneath their bright surfaces, Duval's paintings are X-rays of a pornographic society. They are positioned like mirrors on the ceiling of a bordello whose whores mimic the manners of genteel society.

Cosentino 2004: 14

A mirror image not only reflects historic, present and future events, it offers, depending on the mirror's surface, a glance at the various possibilities of reality. It can add layers of distortion to the world as it is perceived and is therefore able to trigger memory like images of history; as a Déjà-vu, it can provide a gaze into possible futures, based on interpretations of the past and present.

When it comes to the religion of Vodun — a term originated in West Africa, describing Spirits, a belief and knowledge system and its material culture at the same time — its mirroring imagery offers visual and often quite personal interpretations of a complex religion, its human and non-human actors as well as glimpses into material and immaterial archives. Vodun, “a knowledge system that transgresses the boundaries of a dualistic worldview” (Sharpe 2020: 61), connects practitioners with their ancestors, their past and future as well as their homeland through practices of remembrance. Specific memories can be activated through sacred and secular archival sites like museums or shrines, where memory is triggered by performative ways of interacting with things, pictures or architectures. While travelling through Black Atlantic spaces — a hidden archive of the Middle Passage and route for the “flow of knowledge” (Sharpe 2020: 61) between West Africa and its diasporas — Vodun changed constantly. Showcasing the characteristics of a fluid archive, Vodun transforms when it encounters new environments by incorporating and adapting to local religious and pictorial practices”.

This text will follow some of those global connections, looking at the work of Edouard Duval-Carrié and the exhibition *Voodoo* held at the Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim (19.10.2019 - 27.09.2020), Germany.¹ The exhibition's aim was to tell a global story of Vodun, mostly based on the objects of one single German private collection, using the umbrella term “Voodoo”² to frame the religion, its actors and imagery. The Haiti-born artist Duval-Carrié is one of the most prominent visual narrators of Hai-

1 This essay is derived from an ongoing PhD project on “Voodoo and the State of Inter. Picture Production and Media of West African Vodun between Identity and Alterity” which focusses on a critical analysis of the display of Vodun in European collections and publications, artistic representations and (re)appropriations as well as decidedly contemporary approaches of West African shrines to publicly displaying Vodun.

2 The term Vodun also highlights the connection of the religion to West Africa; its adaptations in Haiti are known as *Vodou*, whereas the commonly used term *Voodoo*, often an umbrella term for content wise and geographically quite different belief systems and practices, is located in the south of the US and determined by the many influences the religion encountered there.

tian history and the strong connections between the country, its Vodou Spirits and its diasporas. One of Duval-Carrié's bigger installations, *the Apotheosis Altar*, was shown most prominently on the exhibition poster. Vodoo presented more than 1200 objects from West and Central Africa as well as from diasporas like Haiti, Brazil, Cuba or the US, most of them from the Henning Christoph collection, which usually is partly on display at the private Soul of Africa Museum in Essen, Germany. The exhibition display combined the material culture of Vodun with contemporary artistic interpretations.

According to Jacques Derrida a material archive would be organized, institutionalized, and contained within walls of all kinds of shape or form. In the context of the African diasporas those material connections have been immaterialized and dispersed by the experience of the Black Atlantic. Water is the path through which human and spiritual actors traveled to new destinations during the Middle Passage.³ Yet, especially in recent times, the sea signifies also one of many conceptual connections between West Africa and its diasporas.⁴ Following Kobena Mercer it could be argued that "accepting that the diasporas are the product of forced migrations which separate populations from their natal origins, we find that, instead of time's arrow moving in a straight line, the traumatic ruptures and breaks that characterize the Black Atlantic as a chronotopia of multiple stops and starts are offset by unexpected patterns of repetition, detour and return" (Mercer 2010: 41). Therefore, the ocean is not only the material and immaterial connection between continents and route to the realm of Spirits, but also an important metaphor to understand contemporary Vodun and its artistic representations. Water was and still is a (if not the main) medium of Vodun, "replete with diasporic memory" (Sharpe 2020: 15) and part of the geography of Vodun.

In 1992 the then president of Benin Nicéphore Dieudonné Soglo started to plan the *Ouidah '92* festival which took place one year later. As part of the bigger UNESCO funded project *La Route de l'esclave* it was intended to memorialize the transatlantic slave trade (while in parts neglecting the lucrative involvement of Africans in the deportation)⁵ and to address worldwide diasporas in a way that could be termed as roots tourism. Vodun and its imagery was staged as cultural heritage of West Africa and a crucial connecting factor between the diasporas and their home countries. Many architectural and other visual and commemorative markers were erected along the coastline of Benin before the festival, to make the starting point of the Middle Passage more tangible and to create sites of remembrance between West Africa and its diasporas.

Eduard Duval-Carrié was one of the diasporic artists who traveled to Benin in 1993. He contributed a work focusing on the connecting character of the event, an installation resembling an antenna so "that spirits of Haiti, when they would go back

3 In many Haitian Vodou shrines one would encounter tubs of water, a material connection to the many marine spirits in Vodou. One of the most prominent water deities in Vodou is Lasirèn, based on West Africa's Vodun Mami Wata, an intercultural and international goddess of Vodun (in Vodou often associated with Damballah, the rainbow snake), "part-European, part-African; part-Rada, part-Petwo; and, of course, part-human, part-fish" (Houlberg 2008: 144) and therefore especially important for watery journeys such as the Middle Passage.

4 Kamau Braithwaite coined the term *tidialectics* to describe the back and forth, the cyclical flow of water and its meaning for transatlantic movements (which are thought as not being linear as would the tide be). (Pressley-Sanon 2013: 40).

5 Tony Pressley-Sanon also highlights the differences in remembrance between different diasporas and African countries. She argues that some actors in Benin would suppress certain memories — such as their contribution to the inner African and transatlantic slave trade — through "historical amnesia", to address contemporary diasporas through the connecting aspects of Vodun and forget the "sad past". (Pressley-Sanon 2013: 43). Eduard Duval-Carrié made the same point as Pressley-Sanon. (Duval-Carrié, Interview Niklas Wolf). Thanks to Eduard Duval-Carrié for the kind help and inspiration and all those exciting stories along the way.

to Africa would know where to go".⁶ Duval-Carrié decidedly thought this installation as an art piece to be displayed at an international art festival and later on in a local (art) museum after the ending of the festival. Nevertheless, Daagbo Hounon, the spiritual leader of Vodun in Benin, who traces his ancestry back to the powers of Mami Wata and the ocean itself, received the artist as a well-known *feticheur* from Haiti.⁷ Daagbo Hounon had no intention to display international art, yet later he re-integrated those powerful antennas into local practices of Vodun, blurring the terminological and material borders between sacred and sacral matter, between works of art and works of religion and their corresponding modes of display. As evidence of his artistry, Duval-Carrié showed a catalogue from an earlier exhibition to Daagbo Hounon, "and the next day he had selected walls in his compound where I was to paint. He was like 'that painting goes there, this one there' and so on and so forth; he thought it was a sales catalogue".⁸ Duval-Carrié then created several murals in Benin, one depicting the Daagbo lineage, another one showing the Vodun Avleke-te, among others. Those murals — done by an internationally well-known artist or a likewise successful *feticheur*, depending on how one would understand the role of Duval-Carrié — were all repainted and partly transformed by a local artist several years later, as it is common for the treatment of Vodun imagery.

Even though Duval-Carrié's antennas were more informed by international art discourses and the artist's ideas of materiality, form and display than by religious ideas, their seamless re-integration into religious spaces and the repainting of his murals show that both curatorial and religious approaches are indissociable to displaying Vodun, since its imagery is often an expression of the dialectics between ephemerality, unfinishedness, openness and continuous actualization (Rush 2010).

The Hildesheim exhibition used various modes of display to frame the origin of Vodun material culture and to map and tell the story of Vodun. The first floor presented West African Vodun. The second-floor showcased African diasporas and their forms and adjustments of Vodun. Visitors were supposed to symbolically experience the Middle Passage. In the last room of the first floor the curators used a huge backlit photograph of Benin's *Door of no Return*, one of the newly built commemorative monuments for the 1993 festival, inspired by the one on the island of Gorée, Senegal (Law 2008). In that part of the exhibition the vitrina backgrounds were painted in a darker shade of blue, and slave irons ornamentally structured the walls. Several artefacts like whips, shackles and photographs related to the transatlantic slave trade were presented. Some of them were arranged on pedestals like works of art, seemingly a spooky or haunting atmosphere was suggested, reminiscent of the exhibition poster's design.⁹ The highly stylized photograph presented the *Door of no Return* at the center of the image: Two straight lines of small pylons lead to stairs, forming the first of the three superposed platforms. The door itself is formed by four pillars supporting the decorated architrave, showing two rows of people being deported to a ship at the center of the relief. The surrounding of the door in this picture is deserted, blending out its history and present: traces in the sand are the only visible signifiers of human activity. The ocean is barely visible as a faint blue line in the middle ground behind the pillars. In

6 Duval-Carrié, Interview Niklas Wolf.

7 "(...) I was there to present my pieces, which were supposed to be shown in a museum, but there was no museum and I had to install them at his (the Daagbo Hounons) compound, you know. And then they kept them there because they were from this great *feticheur* from Haiti" (Duval-Carrié, Interview Wolf).

8 Duval-Carrié, Interview Niklas Wolf.

9 For a more elaborate discussion of the exhibition poster see below.

combination with the walls painted in blue and the objects shown, the photographic representation of the monument could be read as an otherworldly end time portal.

Across the *Door of no Return* visitors left the first part of the exhibition through a staircase leading to the Vodun in the African diasporas, one of them being Haiti.

Vodou in Haiti: Making History

The new is about multiplicity. It is the way in which the past is not self-referral but becomes disrupted (...) history is replaced with the contemporary and with it a new aesthetic emerges.

Bogues 2018: 29

The Caribbean has been thought of as being a "liquid continent" (Gutiérrez 2017: 20), referring to its global connections and the many transfers of knowledge and imagery occurring in this region. Edouard Duval-Carrié's art is strongly connected to his experience of being Haitian. In his work, he is dealing with the politics, history and collective memory of the country,¹⁰ rooted in the experience of migration and the pictorial and ritual practice of Haitian Vodou, which was introduced to Haiti via the Black Atlantic routes.

The religion of Vodou — the Haitian term for Vodun based religious practices — is part of a "profoundly creolized culture" (Cosentino 2009: 250). Tony Pressley-Sanon introduces the Haitian Kreyòl term *istwa* to highlight the strong connections between history, its framing and formation through storytelling and memory (Pressley-Sanon 2022: 19).¹¹ Over centuries Vodou in Haiti has been maligned, even "fetishized" (Cosentino 2009: 250) and associated with sorcery and magic. As a form of *sortilège* (spell) Vodou has been forbidden by the Haitian penal codes in 1835 and 1864 (Ramsey 2011: 14). During the American occupation of Haiti (1915 - 1934) these laws were used to suppress Vodou and to establish a paternalistic understanding of "moral decency" (Ramsey 2011: 15). Only in 1934 the right to practice Vodou "in accordance with popular custom" (Ramsey 2011: 15) was established before finally being recognized as an official religion in 2003 (Sharpe 2020: 60).

One could argue that making history in this case is based on the experience of displacement (Bogues 2018: 27). Most of the contemporary Haitian population has ancestry in sub-Saharan Africa. By the end of the 15th century the indigenous population of the island was eradicated, and the island was repopulated in the following two centuries mainly by deported Africans working in the sugar industries of Saint-Dominique.¹² At the end of the 18th century Toussaint Louverture (whose father was deported from Benin), and others led the Haitian Revolution, declaring Haitian independence from France in 1804. Haiti became the first independent nation in Latin America, fighting for the abolition of slavery ever since. The following decades were characterized by the political dominance of several autocratic regimes and violent conflicts, some of them leading to the formation of the Dominican Republic. In the beginning of the 20th century, the United States of America occupied Haiti, leaving it in 1934 to Haitian presidential de-

¹⁰ Which can't be disentangled from Vodou. (Pressley-Sanon 2022: 5)

¹¹ The author also draws a connection between the dis-membering experience of the Middle Passage and the potential of re-membering (in the sense of bell hooks' definition) of Vodou (Pressley-Sanon 2022: 8/20).

¹² On the strong connections between Vodou and Haiti's social and political history see Mintz/Trouillot 1995.

mocracies after another revolution. In 1957 the former medical doctor François Duvalier (Papa Doc) became president. He introduced a decidedly anti-American policy and established a gruesome regime between 1957 and 1971. Under his dictatorship, Duval-Carié, born in 1954, fled with his family to Puerto Rico.

Since the 1930s Duvalier was interested in Haitian ethnography and became one of the main figures of the Noirist movement.¹³ Not only did he reclaim his Haitian African heritage, he also reintroduced Vodou iconography and practices to the Haitian society thereby instrumentalizing Vodou for political purposes. Duvalier later proceeded to model his public appearances after a powerful Spirit (*Iwa*) of Haitian Vodou: Baron Samedi, also known as Baron-Cimetière, member of the *Guédé* family generally associated with death (Métraux 2017: 123-129).¹⁴ Like Legba (the Spirit of the crossroads) who establishes the connections between the world of humans and the one of the Spirits, Baron Samedi connects the living with the dead. He is dressed in black, mostly wearing dark sunglasses and a black hat - as did François Duvalier, appropriating iconography of (spiritual) power: "Power sui generis is transgressive and transformative, exceeding boundaries, subverting structures, even turning hierarchies upside down; it must be harnessed and domesticated, contained by authority structures and channeled for the collective good" (Apter 2002: 236). By modeling his appearance after one of the most feared Vodou Spirits, Duvalier made use of the religious beliefs and knowledge system by melting political and religious power into one, "cooling it down" to speak with Andrew Apter: "If in formal terms such a concept of power is transgressive, transformative, and pitted against the rule-governed hierarchies of administrative authority, then in Yoruba terms it is hot, polluted, and dangerous, a pure potency that must be purified, cooled, and contained" (Apter 2002: 236).

Taking the form of a seemingly classical but decadent family portrait, the painting *Mardigras au Fort Dimanche* (1992/93) by Duval-Carié is an artistic expression of Duvalier's iconographic strategy. The painting shows eight people in a small, dark room; the only window is close to the ceiling, the view outside is partly blocked by bars, connecting the picture to the Fort Dimanche prison, mentioned in the title. It was the most feared prison during Duvalier's regime. At the center of this otherworldly prison cell stands Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc), François Duvalier's son. He is dressed in a bridal wedding gown, pointing a pistol at his lap. He appears to be "an absurd parody of a strongman dictator" (Munro 2015: 14). On his right shoulder rests the hand of his father, who is standing behind him. The father, dressed in a black suit, tie and hat, appeared like Baron Samedi. The left half of his face is exposing his skull thereby creating a per-

13 Especially parts of Duvalier's early writings could be compared to other political movements of that time with similar agendas, like the Négritude in Senegal or the Harlem Renaissance in the USA. Andrew Apter juxtaposes the concept of Négritude (which he translates to black cultural nationalism) with ideologies like *mestizaje* (mestizo identity), *creolite* (Creole identity) and *noirisme* (blackness) (Apter 2002: 233). Those movements (all manifesting in writings, art and exhibitions like the FESMAN in Dakar 1966 or the FESTAC in Lagos 1977) had a recollection of African heritage, the formation of a diasporic consciousness and the idea of being African while not being there in common. Actors like Langston Hughes, L. S. Senghor, Aimé Césaire, L. G. Damas, WEB du Bois (who produced the first programmatic studies of African cultural contributions to the Americas, enlisting the recovery of this history against Jim Crow and the color bar (Apter 2002: 233), and many more focused on the visual and material cultures of African countries, their philosophies and religious systems, to proclaim self-conscious identities. Duvalier co-founded *Les Griots* as a printed manifesto, reminding of similar publications like *Présence Africain*, and was involved in the foundation of the Bureau National d'Ethnologie, a National Institute for Culture and Arts.

14 In addition, Duvalier made use of traditional Vodou imagery. For example his violent secret police the *tonton-makout* was literally named after "a bogeyman in a folktale." Their uniforms were partly made in the image of the Vodou spirit *Zaka* (Apter 2002: 245). Though Duvalier heavily relied on the common understanding and social connections to Vodou in Haiti, he officially tried to "solidify the ties between the Roman Catholic church and the Haitian state". After the Duvaliers regime the process of *dechoukaj* (uprooting) started, which led to a "vendetta against Vodou leaders" (Mintz/Trouillot 1995: 144; 146/147).

ception that he has returned from his grave to visit his grown-up son.¹⁵ The former president is depicted as being in a state between the living and the dead, between politics and Spirits, between the real and the imaginary, between memory and present.

Duvalier's wife Simona (dressed like Gran Brijit, Baron Samedi's wife (Cosentino 2004: 15), his daughters, the archbishop Ligondé and a general, Max Dominique are the other persons who are present in the painting. Duvalier seems to be supported (and literally framed) by the military and the church. Showing Duvalier and his family between the realms of politics and religion, Duval-Carié has created a history painting, "a *memento mori* of Haitian history" (Middelanis 2005: 116). The painting not only showcases formal aspects of the genre but also reveals the uncertainties and transformative powers of history and its archival construction by man, which is like West African Vodun unfinished: "[...] it seems to matter little if one is dead or alive. [...] the severed hands on the walls and in Simone's basket are still fresh with blood" (Munro 2015: 14).

Here and there. *Vodou* and West Africa

Transformative powers were already inscribed into most of the Haitian Vodou Spirits even before they left the African continent.¹⁶ The *Iwa* are generally divided into two categories, the *Rada* and the *Petwo*. The latter can be traced back to the Kongo kingdom (de Heusch 1989: 290)¹⁷ and are associated with "hot" emotions and transgression, carrying "revolutionary power" (Apter 2002: 240); *Rada*, of Dahomean ancestry, are cool, righteous, but "lacking in power."¹⁸ *Petwo* and *Rada* represent thus the hot and cool valences of Yorùbá pantheons and the difference between power and authority. While "*Rada* carry the authority of Africa [...] enshrining the reproduction of the status quo, [...] the *Petwo* manifest pure power and efficacy, uncontrolled, dangerous, devious, and above all, transformative" (Apter 2002: 240/241).

The Spirits of Haitian Vodou themselves are actors of international networks between West African countries and Haiti. Enslaved people mainly from Benin, Ghana, Togo and Nigeria, brought the Vodun Spirits to the Caribbean and other Black Atlantic spaces. Especially Yorùbá belief systems (as well as the ones from the Kongo or other religious ideas from West African origin) have been transferred, translated and adapted to new geographies like Cuba (Santería), Brazil (Candomblé), USA (Voodoo) or Haiti (Vodou). In Haiti several Òrìsà (Yorùbá gods) were fused with or were "camouflaged as" (Fandrich 2007: 776) representations of Catholic saints, to enter religious systems of the colonial rulers, forming new Spirits specifically addressing diasporic contexts and issues. The *Iwa* Papa Legba, *Maître Carrefour* (Métraux 2017: 111), derived from the Òrìsà Èsú, is a "divine trickster" (Chemeche 2013) who often takes the shape of the Catholic saint St. Anthony of Padua. The Yorùbá Spirit Sàngó is the origin for Ogou Chango, the *Iwa* that took the form of St. Michael. The Òrìsà for War and Iron, Ògún, was transformed into the Haitian Papa Ogou (Fandrich 2007: 783).

¹⁵ Soon after Duvalier's death his son became the president of Haiti.

¹⁶ Robert Farris Thompson highlights the transformative aspects of Vodun showing how the Dahomean kingdom integrated ("assimilated") foreign spirits of other inner African cultures long before their encounters with Europe (Farris Thompson 1983: 166).

¹⁷ *Petwo* or *Petro* refers to a messianic figure named Don Pedro (Farris Thompson 1983: 164).

¹⁸ The term *Rada* refers to "the slaving destination for persons abducted from Arada, on the coast of Dahomey, itself derived from the name of the holy city of the Dahomeans, Allada" (Farris Thompson 1983: 164).

Besides the above mentioned terminological and content related connections to the belief systems of Yorùbá religion, Haitian *Vodou* seems to be strongly based on juridical systems and therefore is very much connected to everyday reality. The term *lwa* is probably based on the French (*loi*) and Kreyòl word for law (*lwa*). However, new etymological connections have been made to Yorùbá too wherein the term *lwa* and its spiritual meaning have been traced back to *oluwa* (god) and *babalawo* (diviner or priest) in Yorùbá language (Ramsey 2011: 18/19). Andrew Apter uses the Yorùbá terminology *imo jinlé* to frame the transfer of knowledge in confrontation with established discourses and especially its strong connection to memory that could be stored in material culture. This kind of “deep knowledge [...] has no content at all but derives its power from context-specific opposition to the authoritative discourses that it implicitly challenges.”¹⁹ In *Vodun* this is achieved by “reblending” (Farris-Thompson 1983: 164) iconographies, imagery and knowledge in different settings. I contend that deep knowledge also made the integration of Christian iconography into Haitian *Vodou* possible. Woodcuts and lithographs of Christian saints were integrated in *Vodou* because their potency was linked to their imagery.²⁰ By incorporating such pictures, diviners used “context specific opposition” to successfully challenge the “authoritative discourses”.

Visual Jazz? Voodoo in Hildesheim

*I'm an artist, don't ever forget it.*²¹

In the introduction to “The Rara of the Universe: Vodun Religion and Art in Haiti”, a chapter of his groundbreaking study *Flash of the Spirit. African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (1983), Robert Farris Thompson quotes the Oxford Dictionary's definition of Voodoo at the time. No wonder the definition, based on racist and primitivist Western categories, refers to “superstitious beliefs”, which Farris Thompson very eloquently deconstructs and disproves of in the following pages.

In Western contexts the reception of Vodun-based religion is often determined by a one-sided gaze at *the other*, imagined as being exotic and in clear opposition to the construction of the Western self. Ever since Vodun became a part of traveling imagery, it was adopted in popular culture of the Global North, often taking an alienating perspective, summarized under the term Voodoo. Its sometimes eclectic, mostly open and unfinished or ephemeral material manifestations have been described as “dances for the eyes [...], visual jazz, constantly reworked and reactivated”.²² *Vodou* was displayed in several big exhibitions all over Europe, followed by extensive publications. Most of those exhibitions relied on one European collector and their networks and provided exciting insights into Western modes of appreciation and appropriation of *Vodou*. The resulting strategies of

19 “[...] it was precisely the hermeneutical mapping of deep-knowledge claims within these oppressive contexts that provided possibilities of collective empowerment” (Apter 2002: 237/238).

20 “[...] potent images indeed for minds informed by the visual cultures of Dahomean vodun, West Yoruba orisha, and Kongo minkisi.” (Farris Thompson 1983: 169).

21 Duval-Carrié, Interview Wolf, 13.04.2022.

22 David Byrne, cited by Donald J. Cosentino 2004: 20. Donald Cosentino also writes on the ongoing processes of actualization of *Vodun* (looking at the reception of chromolithographs and their imagery into Haitian *Vodou*): “Each new interpretation is contingent only upon the attributes of the last, no authoritative voice is powerful enough to check theological innovation. The process is centripetal, pushing out into new forms like a jazz riff.” (Cosentino 2005: 242).

display in those exhibitions and their accompanying publications presented Vodou in terms of both art and ethnography.²³

It should be obvious by now that there is no one Vodun religion. The term Voodoo might be the one best known and the basis of many stereotypes, a term that is often “fraught with racist categories about black religious practice” (Desmangles 2012: 26). And still, this is the title chosen for the exhibition at the Roemer- und Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim. For almost one year a plethora of pictures and objects of Vodun was shown,²⁴ most of which came from the Henning Christoph collection. The poster featuring Duval-Carrié's *Apotheosis Altar* was held in black and grey: The altar was floating in a space of otherworldly drifting smoke. Above Duval-Carrié's altar, the title of the exhibition was written in bluish cold flames. Though the altar was recognizable as being religiously powerful, the poster design was more reminiscent of horrific movies and othering phantasies of the West. Using the imagery of Holly- and Nollywood movie productions featuring Zombies and wax dolls pierced by needles, the poster “rescripted” (Cosentino 2015: 40) Vodun to ‘Voodoo’, despite its declared aim to trace Vodun back to the routes of the Black Atlantic and thus to present it beyond all stereotypes as a global religious phenomenon.

Since the geography of Vodun was immensely important to the curators and designers of the exhibition, the visitors were greeted by an enormous world map showing the spreading and globalization of Vodun. The map was illuminated from behind and colored in brown, its design referred to depictions (imagination) of the world in early atlases from the 16th or 17th century. West African Vodun was shown in display cases with muddy brown walls, covered with straw roofs. Maybe for conservational reasons there was almost no light, the rooms were filled by the sound of a Vodun ceremony, emerging from a film by Henning Christoph, shown in a *séparé*. Among the many Vodun objects only a few works of art were shown in that part of the exhibition. When leaving the African continent via the room described above, visitors were led to *The World of the Underwater Beings* (2007-08, fig. 1) by Edouard Duval-Carrié. The huge installation was the visual introduction to the second part of the show, which could be headlined Vodun and its Diasporas; a wall text introduced Haiti as “the undisputed center of modern art in the Caribbean.” Unlike the first part of the exhibition, the second presented several contemporary artworks. The display echoing Caribbean architecture was bright and colorful, for instance in *The World of the Underwater Beings*. Made from polyester and textile the installation features three big boats, floating above the visitor's head. In these boats three *Iwa* - Mambo Inan (the wife of the *Iwa* Bazou, also known as Kongo Chief or King Wangol, coming from Angola (de Heusch 1989: 299)), Agwé (the ruler over the sea, dressed in blue) and Erzulie (an incorporation of love and female beauty, marked by jewelry, beautiful dresses and perfume (Métraux 2017: 121) - are crossing an imaginary ocean. Agwé's long arms are recalling seaweed. Like tentacles they reach for the ground and connect the Spirit to the realm of the ancestors that died during the Middle Passage. Cowry shells cover their bodies, sea plants are emerging from the Spirit's arms. Erzulie is adorned

23 There will be an extensive catalogue of the Hildesheim exhibition, which was not available while writing this text. Other comprehensive exhibitions in Europe dealing with the topic of Vodun which are well documented and published in accompanying catalogues are for example: *VODOU. A Way of Life*, Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève, Geneva 2008, *Vodou. Kunst und Kult aus Haiti*, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin 2010 (both exhibitions displayed objects from the Marianne Lehmann collection) and *VAUDOU/VODUN*, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris 2011 (Jacques Kerchache collection).

24 According to the curator, more than 1200 artefacts related to the topic of Vodun were on display (Oliver Gauert, Interview Wolf, 24.09.2020).

with several picture frames tangling from her neck. They are not only jewelry but material manifestations of their origin in West Africa. They represent the archive of Vodun, its deep knowledge, which such imagery globalizes.



Fig. 1 Edouard Duval-Carrié, *The World of Underwater Beings*, 2007 - 2008, mixed media (polyester, textile et al.)

In his *Série migration* (Migration Trilogy) from 1997 Duval-Carrié visualizes the idea of Haitian Spirits traveling to new shores. The first painting, *Embarquement pour la Floride*

(Embarcation for Florida, fig. 2), shows seven *Iwa*, cramped into a small wooden boat, leaving Haiti in the night.²⁵ The water seems to be calm, the black sky is structured by yellow dotted lines, as is the watery ground. Those dotted lines are *pwen*,²⁶ like *vèvè* ephemeral drawings leading the way to *Ginen*.²⁷ In West African imagery it is often the “use of dots to specify a surface that is permeable and transparent, thus signifying the immaterial presence of the spirit. More than signifying, it is visible information that serves as a geometric metaphor specifying a presence without surface” (Benson 2008: 156). Sela Kodjo Adeji highlights the importance of dots, spheres and circles as a crucial part of West African Vodun aesthetics; dots are “among the most popular shapes, forms and symbols that permeate Vodun iconography” and are reflected in the architecture of shrines and spiritual regalia (Adeji 2019: 275). In Duval-Carrié’s paintings *pwen*, the “distilled points of power”,²⁸ seem to be part of a permeable and transparent spiritual cartography, structuring the surface of the painting and mapping the way of Vodun more precisely than the geographical map shown in Hildesheim ever could.



Fig. 2 Edouard Duval-Carrié, Embarquement pour la Floride (Embarcation for Florida). 1997, from Série Migration (1), oil on canvas in artist's frame, 150 x 150 cm. Courtesy Edouard Duval-Carrié

25 According to Duval-Carrié, in his artworks the migrating *Iwa* are doppelgangers for the Haitian people (Cosentino 2013: 385).

26 Mystic power points of “energy or spiritual heat, (...) as dots painted or sewn onto sacred objects, usually in conjunction with the *Petwo* (or *Kongo*) spirits” (Cosentino 2004: 50).

27 The term *Ginen* is used in Haitian *Vodou* to refer to a land under the water (that) shares the same name with *Ginen* signifying “Africa” as a land across the water (Sharpe 2020: 4).

28 “usually [they] evoke or assuage *Kongo* spirits” (Cosentino 2013: 87).

The second painting of the series, *La calabasse magique* (The Magic Calabash, fig. 3), shows the boat in heavy waters, threatened by an armed coast guard ship; the seven Spirits seem to use all their power to fight the hostile Atlantic and no less dangerous humans at the same time. In the last painting, *Le débarquement à Miami Beach* (The Landing, fig. 4), all of them arrive safely at the coast of the American continent, as suggested by lines of *pwen* spanning Miami's skyline. Duval-Carrié's series connects Haiti and its diaspora relying on the metaphor of spiritual travel over the sea and the boat, creating a representation of the global dimensions of conscious and decidedly contemporary Vodun. Contrary to the curators of Voodoo, Duval-Carrié does not rely on Western cartographic modes but shows an artistic representation of spiritual travels, giving the journey of ideas the shape and form of travelling *Iwa*. He presents an alternative knowledge system actualizing Vodou deep knowledge in the form of painting and thereby challenging the iconographies of knowledge production prevailing in the Global North.



Fig. 3 Edouard Duval-Carrié, *La calabasse magique* (The Magic Calabash), 1997, from *Série migration* (2), oil on canvas in artist's frame, 150 x 150 cm. Courtesy Edouard Duval-Carrié



Fig. 4 Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Le débarquement à Miami Beach (The Landing)*, 1997, from *Série migration (3)*, oil on canvas in artist's frame, 150 x 150 cm. Courtesy Edouard Duval-Carrié

Leaving The World of Underwater Beings behind, visitors of the Hildesheim exhibition finally encountered Duval-Carrié's *Apotheosis Altar* (2004, fig. 5) which they already knew from the poster.

The Vodou altar is a very special form of displaying aspects of history, present and future in religious contexts, encompassing all the objects that constitute the spatial experience. The materiality and modes of display of its knowledge producing imagery - and therefore its site-specific strategies - may vary. Such an altar is also an architectural anchor of the ritual. Vodou altars can be found everywhere, taking any imaginable shape, form, size and material. They are "located in temples, bedrooms, and on the dashboard of taxis, such altars consist of found objects, images, and offerings known to please divine tastes" (Cosentino 2004: 20). They are the "face of the gods [...] a school of being, designed to attract and deepen the powers of inspiration" (Farris-Thompson 1993: 147).

Duval-Carrié's room-filling installation consisted of an altar in the shape of a huge white, luminous cross.²⁹ The installation was dominated by a big, bust-like sculpture

²⁹ The Portuguese brought the iconography of the Christian cross to the Kongo, where it was adapted into tradition-based art. In Dahomean cosmology it represents the four cardinal points and is a visual metaphor for crossroads "joining the worlds of the living and the dead" (Sharpe 2020: 72). Mostly it is part of Papa Legba's vèvè, "the Kongo and Angola cruciforms invoked God and the collective dead" (Farris Thompson 1983: 191).

in the middle, which was accompanied by five smaller busts. Symmetrically arranged, several snakes,³⁰ made of the same colorful material as the busts, were crawling towards the center from all sides. The wall behind the installation was painted black. Most of the light came from the cross, illuminating the figures from below and giving them an eerie glow. The installation was most obviously informed by the modes of display to be encountered in international art shows. It was an aestheticized and decidedly contemporary and globalized interpretation of a Vodou altar making use of the structuring habit of Vodou shrines,³¹ but never meant to be anything else than an art piece (Duval-Carrié interview Wolf). Similar to the Underwater Beings, the *Iwa* on the *Apotheosis Altar* are made of colorful plastic, creating a contemporary and globally accessible materiality. Following Edouard Duval-Carrié, the altar was erected to celebrate the marriage of the *Iwa* Erzulie Dantor (the more aggressive *Petwo* form of the peaceful *Rada* spirit Erzulie Fréda)³² and Damballah,³³ a “mariage mystique” (Welling 2012: 36). Both forms of Erzulie are depicted, the central one being Erzulie Dantor. Damballah-wèdo is one of the main Spirits of Haitian Vodou. Being the *Iwa* of creation and fertility, he takes the shape of a crawling snake (Métraux 2017: 115). Also shown are the *Iwa* Agwé, Aizan and General Sobo.



Fig. 5 Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Apotheosis-Altar*, 2004, mixed media (polyester, plexiglass, et al.), variable dimensions. Courtesy Edouard Duval-Carrié

30 The iconography of the snake is very important for Vodun in general. Snakes are globally and in different religious and profane contexts often associated with special knowledge, the duality of things and the natural cycle as well as with access to otherworldly realms; it can often be read as “the embodiment of a reverse side” (Welling 2012: 15). On the strong connections between Vodun visual and material culture based on the snake imagery in Ewe pottery (Ghana) see Aronson 2007.

31 There is “a strong organizing principle in the world of Vodun altars, while *Petwo* altars for example would look very much different to the ones of *Rada* spirits” (Farris Thompson 1983: 182).

32 The *Iwa* Erzulie can take two different forms: Erzulie Fréda being the *Rada* form of the spirit and Erzulie Dantor being the more aggressive *Petwo* form. Erzulie Fréda is the goddess of love and beauty, while Erzulie Danto as a mother figure would fiercely protect her children (Pressley-Sanon 2013: 51).

33 The creole name for the Fon spirit Dā, “a metaphor for [...] primary, combinatory sign of order”, combining male and female aspects. The many colours of Damballah-wèdo’s (the rainbow snake) body, represent aggression (red) and compassion (blue) (Farris Thompson 1983: 176).

The surface of the altar is decorated with blue shapes and forms that could be interpreted as contemporary forms of vèvè, which are "considered some of the earliest nonindigenous art forms and, as such, contain sacred memories passed from one generation of oungans and manbos (Vodou priests and priestesses) to the next" (Sharpe 2020: 60). Vèvè are part of the knowledge system of Vodou, taking the shape of geometrical line drawings; they are the symbols of the *Iwa* and the writing of the Spirits, functioning as doorways to Ginen (Sharpe 2020: 74). They "are traced by priests or priestesses in powdered substances [...]. Symmetrically disposed and symmetrically rendered, they praise, summon, and incarnate all at once the vodou deities of Haiti."³⁴ As for the *Iwa*, there is no existing canon (Cosentino 2004: 17) though some are based on the recollection by Milo Rigaud.³⁵ Cosentino says: "The *Iwa* are like the Greek god Proteus. Grab them and they metamorphose, [...] iconic consistency is irrelevant. Divine inspiration is the artist's privilege" (Cosentino 2004: 17/18). Vèvè are also taking part in the continuous adaptation of Vodun to the present; according to Farris Thompson vèvè have influenced Haitian "museum art since its first renaissance", around 1947 to '49" (Farris-Thompson 1993: 294).³⁶ Duval-Carrié often uses vèvè-like shapes to literally frame his paintings, probably to further blur the borderlines between the many heres and theres of Vodun.

Conclusion

John Dewey coined the idea of *Art as Experience*. He broke down the differences made by Western theory between (fine) art and *popular art* (his reference being Jazz) in order to reestablish the continuity between life and art. Dewey argues that works of art are able to trigger sensations comparable to aesthetic experiences made in everyday life. Edouard Duval-Carrié would have liked to see his art as part of Haitian or West African shrines³⁷ where they could be "an actual object of veneration" (Sullivan 2007: 170). They would then create a sensory experience even closer to Vodun terms, re-connecting their different localities like he intended with the antennas for the Benin festival. Popular and fine art, profane and religious art and practice would finally be reunited. LeGrace Benson suggests that large installations like Duval-Carrié's *Apotheosis Altar* or *Underwater Beings* dominate a room, even forcing the viewer to become part of the artwork: "This is the kind of sacred space in which the theatre of re-enactment takes place, and anyone who enters must become an actor in the drama [...] Duval-Carrié urges us to be more than voyeurs" for a drama only visible on some shiny surface; "to use

34 Farris Thompson traces the term vèvè back to archaic Fon terminology and the idea of cosmograms to Kongo and neighbouring territories (Farris Thompson 1983: 188 and 1993:49, 293). Some of them provide geometric design for a constellation of Dahomean, Kongo, and Roman Catholic forces constituting the very fabric of Haitian cultural history (Farris Thompson 1983: 191).

35 Milo Rigaud (1974: 67), describes vèvè as having magical power, them being ritual attractors and condensers of astral forces to which they are mysteriously bound by a geometric occult chain, from which Writing and Language, Architecture and Cybernetics were born. Besides making esoteric references and connecting vèvè to mythical teachings like the kabbalah (tradition of Jewish mysticism) or the New Age mystics, virulent at the time of its publication, the book is a compendium of vèvè and a work of visual reference, being closest to a canonical work on the stylistic aspects of vèvè, still used by religious specialists today (Duval-Carrié, interview Wolf).

36 It also might be noted that in *Face of the Gods* Farris Thompson seems to terminologically differentiate between museum art and non-museum art.

37 "Yes, my initial aim with all the big installations, was to build a cathedral of Vodou in Haiti. But that's like really going to lalaland, that kind of concept. I've mentioned it. I talked about it and everybody looked like what does he think he is? A crazy Vodou priest or what? But you know — where do I exist otherwise?" (Duval-Carrié, interview Wolf).

the language of Vodou, the works to some degree possess the visitor" (Benson 2008: 155). While the Hildesheim exhibition showed the curators' idea of Vodun display, Duval-Carrié's installations and paintings challenge the concept of a museum space by integrating Vodun *deep knowledge* into decidedly contemporary works of art. Thus, the space of a museum or a shrine is to be understood as a powerful archive. Their pictorial programs are part of the (re)writing of histories which inform contemporary identities in the Black Atlantic and beyond by visually analyzing Vodun knowledge production and its power strategies.

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