Art and Acceptability: Some Problems of Visualising Caribbean Slavery through Modernism

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Introduction

In 1763, two enslaved men, Cuffy[1] and Accara, led a revolt against the Dutch owners of the Magdalenberg plantation on the Conje River in Berbice, now a county of Guyana, then a separate Dutch colony. After killing the plantation manager and torching his house, almost a year of successful resistance followed. It was the fifth reported uprising to take place in the colony over the course of thirty years, and the largest slave rebellion in the Caribbean to date. A military unit headed by Cuffy took over a long list of further plantations as well as Fort Nassau, while he attempted by several written dispatches to strike a peace accord with General Van Hoogenheim. But intransigent planters, the arrival of European troops and divisions in the ranks of the rebels led the enterprise to failure, with Cuffy's death and the brutal punishment of those who stood behind him.[2]

In the years just before and after Guyana's independence from British rule in 1966, several of the country's artists would turn to the memory of that uprising, making it the basis for some distinctive and controversial artworks. In 1960, the Guyana-born painter Aubrey Williams (1926-1990) found in the story of the rebels an allegory for present day decolonisation in the Caribbean and produced the painting *Revolt* (1960) (fig. 1). His interest in the rebellion of 1763 helped to put in place concerns that continued and developed in Guyana into the decade of the 1970s. In 1976, the Guyanese painter and sculptor, Philip Moore (1921-2012) made his great public sculpture, the *1763 Monument*, popularly known as 'the Cuffy monument' (figs. 2 and 3). A signature work among the artist's wider body of painting and sculpture, here Moore handled that same historical topic of the Berbice rebellion, presenting a colossal figure with tubular limbs, a frenetically modelled surface, and somewhat obscure motifs.

Fig. 1: Aubrey Williams, *Revolt,* 1960. Oil on canvas, 134 x 165 cm. National Gallery of Guyana. © Estate of Aubrey Williams. All rights reserved, DACS 2014.

1 The spelling of this name has been anglicised since that period, as in this article. In the contextual record it is given as Coffij.
2 See Cornelis Christiaan Goslinga, in Maria J.L. van Yperen's 1985 edited book, and Klars 2020.

Figs. 2 and 3: Philip Moore, The *1763 Monument (or the Cuffy Monument)*, 1976. Georgetown, Guyana. © The Guyana National Trust.

In some ways, these artists' various attempts to represent and remember the events of 1763 were as failed as the rebellion itself. They were not well received nor have they held lasting appeal. Yet perhaps it is because rather than despite that outcome that these two works of art are so revealing of the circumstances of decolonising and post-independence Guyana. Their artists occupied an unstable mix of party--political, religious and nationalist interests, each focusing on the topic of the 1763 rebellion. Consequently, the matter of Williams's and Moore's respective 'success' with their two works is, at root, about how to see modern art in the Caribbean, and how such art has been seen by its audiences and its artists. Bringing these works of art together for discussion can show what may emerge when artists in the Caribbean turn to the theme of the region's past of plantation slavery and the theme of anti-colonial resistance.[3] The story of Williams's and Moore's attention to slavery, indeed, shows how Guyana has looked back onto its past from a range of viewpoints. Episodes of retrospection, enacted in the making and reception of art, serve to demonstrate that visualising such a past may at the same time raise questions about creativity and the imagination at large: the power and the purpose invested in art, and the reasons why the art of remembrance may disappoint its viewers.

When art is assumed to be a way of disturbing the present through attention to the historical past, it becomes entangled in an especially complex interplay of forces. Much more is going on than commemoration when artworks are charged with the responsibility of revisiting slavery. Yet there are limits to what may be achieved through using art for public memorialisation. The tensions that have arisen through such attempts to employ artworks seem to refer to the formal aspects of material creativity itself. While individual works of art are often positioned within surrounding expectations about their political usefulness, in Guyana during the 1960s and 70s, some artists set out to visualise the past while trying to loosen them from that purpose. As they did, they would point to a particular difficulty with modern art when

3 This article builds upon my previous attempts to examine this field, including my published attention to the same key works by Williams and Moore. See Wainwright 2006; 2009; 2011; 2016; and 2018.

it takes on the burden of commemoration. When the outcomes of visualising and materialising the past are thus so contextually inadequate (to the point of seeming wholly unacceptable), it seems fitting to evaluate the demands that are placed on modern artworks and how they fare in response.

Art historical and curatorial research on 'visualising slavery' has surveyed art-making in several contexts within the African diaspora, mainly in the United States, to show how modern and contemporary artists might turn towards such histories while being bound by present circumstances (Bernier and Durkin, 2016; Copeland, 2013; Barson and Gorschlüter 2010). Caribbean-focused research on this topic has benefitted from Marcus Wood's seminal analysis (1997) of the visual phenomena that framed the processes of the abolition of plantation slavery. Wood showed that the historiography of slavery and heroism in particular have suffered with 'blind memory' (in reference to how the mainstream of abolitionist thought relied on images of black passivity and of fetishization of the body). On reflection, it is worth wondering if there is not also a correspondingly 'blind faith' in art to do the work of memory. A great deal of faith has rested in the efficacy of modern artworks for remembering the past, even when in actual practice they may more often frustrate or even subvert such an instrumental aim to revisit history. While such attitudes to art are probably not unique to processes of visualising slavery, they do assume a certain character in this commemorative arena. The matter has yet to be raised for Caribbean-focused studies of modern art, tackled en route to a consideration of modernism in its global, comparative contexts.

Training a focus on the materiality of artworks (Wainwright 2017; Fuglerud and Wainwright 2015) can enable such an analysis. It can reveal how different artistic media compare in delivering upon the historically contextual expectations of artists and their audiences. Through the process of visual commemoration, each medium is found to be doing its own work each according to its means. Looking more closely at the Caribbean can assist in understanding those historical instances when the goal of fulfilling art's ostensibly commemorative potential becomes operative in the production and reception of public visual practices. The pictorial and sculptural imagination separate from one another, and they diverge from the historical imagination too, eluding the expectations that are implicit to memorialisation. These processes may prove to be salutary for scholars of the histories of slavery, whose interest in art forms has lately grown, and for research more generally on memorialising practices during the twentieth century.

Problematising Art's Commemorative Efficacy

These highlighted artworks by Williams and Moore, although ostensibly on the same theme –focusing on the year 1763 – were made to perform quite dissimilar memorialising functions. Contingent upon the changing significance of slave rebellion before and after Guyanese independence are equally changing circumstances of production and reception for the works. It is striking that in 1960, the visibility of Williams's painting was temporarily withheld, frustrating the artist's ambition to have it shown during the final years of colonisation, and that, by contrast, in 1976 Moore's

monument on the same theme was proudly unveiled. There are also particular political, social and religious expectations underscoring those differences, which may be shown by giving particular attention to the visual medium of each artwork, and asking what actual work they were expected to do.

Executed in Britain where Williams was then domiciled, and given by him as a gift to the Guyanese people, the painting *Revolt* is now in the Guyana National Gallery in Georgetown. *Revolt* is composed around a silhouette, outlining the figure of an enslaved rebel who brandishes a weapon as he stands as victor over a maimed white body, a stripped white woman, and a helpless white man. The provocative content of the work inaugurated a series of events: an ensuing protest in the local press that drew support from the literary personality, Jan Carew (1960); and a long delay before the painting was displayed – not until after Independence, in 1970, when it was selected by a sub-committee headed by Williams for a National Museum retrospective exhibition.

I will limit my reflections for a moment to the handling of its subject matter and reception during the decade of the 1960s and two interlinked aspects. First is the artist's self-identification with the enslaved man it pictures. Cuffy's physical profile is portrayed to resemble that of Williams's own, who poses as the artist may have done when painting himself by looking in a mirror. His raised hand during the self--portrait would have held a paintbrush, which is here substituted for weapon. The second is its composition, which exploits a choreographic arrangement that places the viewer behind the enslaved man's back, so that the 'revolt' in question becomes both 1763 and 1960. In each way, the work asserts both the righteousness of the eighteenth-century rebel and the present-day anti-colonial artist-activist, above all assuming, even demanding, that its audience supports the political principle of trans-historical struggle against European domination. *Revolt* framed the promise of political freedom in British Guiana as the resolution of a long programme of national struggle, dating back at least to the Berbice rebellion. Yet, as it became loosened significantly from the didactic purpose of remembering the year 1763, it also countered the various expectations for modern art that dominated in the Caribbean and Britain around 1960. This aspect of the work's efficacy rests on its chosen medium of painting and relies on the artist's main interest being figuration. For his 1960 intervention in Guyana, Williams chose painting because it harked back to the older colonial order and offered a form of address that depended on a context of display that was understood and accessed by an elite colonial audience. By the decade of the 1960s, the medium of painting and representations of the human figure could no longer be seen as the sine qua non of modern art. That superior status for painting in the Caribbean had been superseded by the turn toward sculpture and time-based, contingent forms of spectacle – dance, theatre, carnival, steel drumming and calypso (while such performances also intersected with literary production).[4]

Artists in Britain, meanwhile, who persisted with figuration, did so in the face of a New York-led assault on depiction itself, and in view of the dominance of abstract form and the arrival of the new three-dimensional work. For a clearer sense of the critical forces that ranged against painting in the 1960s in the metropolitan north, we may note that by 1958 Allan Kaprow referred to Jackson Pollock's 'legacy' as

4 For some Guyanese examples see: Creighton 1995 and Maes-Jelinek 1989.

an imperative to use all our senses, suggesting the extension of the artist's method beyond the borders of painting into a 'new concrete art'. As he wrote: 'Here the direct application of an automatic approach to the act [of painting] makes it clear that only is this not the old craft of painting, but it is perhaps bordering on ritual itself, which happens to use paint as one of its materials. […] Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odours, touch.' In Japan, another requiem for painting would be Jiro Yoshihara's The Gutai Manifesto (1956); while by 1963 a feminist such as Carolee Schneemann was using her painted body as a sculptural material; in parallel Gunter Brus had long given up painting in favour of performance. Comparisons may be drawn with Yves Klein's The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto of 1961 ('Would not the future artist be he who expressed through an eternal silence an immense painting possessing no dimension?'), Guy Debord and the Situationist International (1957), and Kaprow's (c.1965) 'Untitled Guidelines for Happening', while a different but consequential set of theoretical coordinates issued from Robert Morris' 1966 'Notes on Sculpture' (Parts I and II).

In the Caribbean after the Second World War, the pressure on painting, although just as sustained, was of quite a different order. Here a flattening out of the field of creativity made room for public spectacle – carnival masquerade (which became known in Trinidad simply as 'mas'), steelpan bands, and so on. Guyana produced variations on this in the 1970s, with its crowd-assembled paintings that were cut into square panels and paraded during the newly-inaugurated Culture Week.[5] In the present-day Caribbean, such divisions are being systematically troubled still further, in tune with the global growth of interest in 'participatory' art practices, creative projects that require the involvement of their audiences. Visual artists have worked with carnival costume designers, presenting their work at mainstream, international spaces for contemporary art practice, such as part-Guyanese artist Hew Locke and Trinidad's Marlon Griffith, in works such as *Up Hill Down Hall: An Indoor Carnival* (Tate Modern 2014). That work is a forerunner to the static forms made by Locke for his installation *The Procession* (Tate Britain 2022). To be noted too is the range of contributors to the exhibition and cultural programme *En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* (Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans 2015, and touring).

Since Williams practised as an artist on both continents during the 1960s, he should be considered as having strived to resist the concerted move away from painting in the decolonising Caribbean, while at the same time subverting the mid-century high modernism (centred on abstraction) that was established in metropolitan centres of the north Atlantic. The terms in which he did so are complex and specific to the cultural geography of the Caribbean and its intellectuals in the diaspora. Williams encapsulated these in his essay 'The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean' (1968), a meditation on the developments away from painting and the push toward abstraction. He led with the argument that 'Art is always in the foreground; it is the true *avant-garde*. The visual arts, being the simplest and most direct, should be a little ahead of literature, because with emerging peoples you have the problem of

5 It is also worth recalling, in contradistinction, that in the early years of political independence in the English-speaking Caribbean there was a persistent conservativism in this regard. In the area of arts education policy, the coming together of painting and carnival in any institutional context was resisted. For instance, M. P. Alladin's book Man is a Creator (1967), prescribed a firm division between these art forms, as its author in his capacity as Trinidad and Tobago's first Minister of Culture oversaw the directing of official funds to the standardisation of visual art through studio-based teaching.

illiteracy, and direct contact is the natural level of communication in this society'. For the Caribbean, art should be 'the technology, the philosophy, the politics and the very life of the people'. Writing as an advocate of painting who found the term 'abstract' itself somewhat unhelpful, Williams underlined at the same time that 'The arts of (our greatest) past civilisation were to a great extent non-figurative', confessing that '…I am worried about a prevalent conception that good art, working art, must speak, it must be narrative. I do not see the necessity for art to be narrative, in that in thinking about the past and man, art has never been 'narrative' to any great extent.' He summed up his position in this way:

> I am not trying to ask Caribbean intellectuals to consider abstraction as 'high art,' or the 'art of the future' or anything like that. As a matter of fact, I don't even think of my paintings as being abstract. I can't really see abstraction. Abstraction to me would be two colours on a surface, no shape, no form and no imprint of the hand of man. I do not think that painters paint abstraction, nor do I think that sculptors sculpt abstraction. I am not very sure that I understand the meaning of the word.[6]

The topic of the politicisation of Aubrey Williams's *Revolt* during the 1960s deserves the attention of a wider project of scholarship on artistic modernism that maps the movements of Caribbean art and artists, noting the choices they made in relation to artistic modernism, and taking into view their diverse locations around the Atlantic (Wainwright 2011; Hucke 2013). What may be observed here in a more focused account, is that Williams's painting practice was for the most part an interworking of naturalism and abstraction. At the time it would have seemed conservative for north Atlantic modernists and their proponents, but his approach makes much more sense now with knowledge of the way that art would develop in the later twentieth century, with painting remaining of interest. Indeed, Williams was implicated in a process of opening up the art community so that it would value works that were more contingent on local conditions of production. There was a sea-change in attitudes toward art, found outside the historical centres of modernism, which came to the fore and began to shape a more transnational cultural geography. In at least two senses then, with *Revolt*, he turned on its head the anachronism that had come to be associated with painting and figuration.

The context of production for Philip Moore's *1763 Monument* was shaped as much by Williams's influence as an artist, as by Moore's wider art practice, his deliberate search for new approaches, definitions and materials for what he felt to be an authentic expression in art, culturally and even spiritually appropriate to the wider Caribbean. As Moore told the writer Andrew Salkey in 1970 on the matter of his own development as an artist, 'I broke away from the rigid anatomy way of representing my figures, and began to express myself freely, with the encouragement of a Guyanese artist who had gone up to London, and come back. I mean Aubrey Williams.' (Salkey 1972: 87)[7] In fact, Aubrey Williams initiated and co-ordinated the

6 Williams, Aubrey (1968: 60-61). I am grateful to Claudia Hucke for sharing this insight with me in relation to her research on Williams's visits to Jamaica. In the United States, an important response to these issues during the earlier period of the 1930s shows a comparable complexity in the example of Jacob Lawrence's series, *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, consisting of forty-one individual tempera-on-paper compositions executed between 1936 and 1938. While the series is now widely celebrated, it tends to be overlooked that it was originally part of the attempt to make abstracted figurative forms against the backdrop of hostility to both social realism and modernism, a move that subjected Lawrence to strident criticism, see Ellen Harkins Wheat, 1986.

7 The interview is transcribed in Salkey 1972.

1763 Monument, following a competition for the commission that was won by Karl Broodhagen (b. 1909, Georgetown, Guyana, d. 2002).[8] When Broodhagen refused to make certain requested changes to his entry and then withdrew it, Philip Moore, who was not in the competition, was approached by Aubrey Williams to replace him. That agreed solution came at the behest of the artist, institution-builder and archaeologist Denis Williams (no relation) who oversaw the process of executing Guyana's first, and what has come to be its last, large-scale public monument. Eve Williams (daughter of Denis) records that,

> The artist Philip Moore was repatriated to Guyana from the United States to undertake this work. His fifteen-foot bronze statue, weighing two and a half tonnes, was cast for Guyana at Britain's famous Morris Singer foundry in Basingstoke where the work was overseen by Williams in his role as Director of Art for the History and Arts Council of Guyana. The original maquette Moore had sculpted in wood was also cast in bronze and later formed a central exhibit in Guyana's exhibition at the Jamaica Institute during Carifesta 1976 (Williams 2012: 118).

That appearance in Jamaica ten years after Independence identified the *1763 Monument* with a 'national school' of Guyanese art. The label rather oversimplifies the transnational geography associated with the movement of the monument, and the artists who collaborated on it, connecting the United States, Guyana, Jamaica and Britain. Nonetheless the monument was pressed above all into national service, during a decade of initial optimism about the Co-operative Republic of Guyana. Sited at the Square of the Revolution ('to the heroes of the 1763 revolution against forced labour and the plantation system', its plaque reads), it was unveiled three days before the tenth year of independence from Britain, and the anniversary of the 1763 uprising on February 23rd was chosen as Republic Day. Here was the commemoration of a story of continuous struggle, resistance and ensuing emancipation from slavery that spoke to anticolonial Guyana's ostensible beginnings.

My own encounter with the monument was in 2005. I viewed it at ground level and there saw that a temporary altar had been put up, hidden behind the structure, which was laden with blue eggs and candles, and tended ritually by a white-clad follower of 'Spiritists' (of the Caribbean's Afro-syncretic Spiritual Baptism). It was August, the most intense month for libation ceremonies and thought to mark the historical period of a visit to that area by Cuffy and his followers when they hoped to negotiate successfully with the colonisers.[9] Such offerings and libations at the foot of the *1763 Monument* are not uncommon and they signal its dual importance for national and religious community.[10] The focusing of Afro-syncretic religious beliefs on the monument is consonant with Philip Moore's personal philosophy of 'godmanliness'. This drew from his membership of the Jordanites, and the pan-African framework that he promoted through attempts to 'represent the African man in all his spheres; by that I mean Africans living in Africa, and those who are the descendants of slaves in the Caribbean, America, Latin America, Canada and Britain, anywhere they've travelled and settled down.' (Salkey 1972: 88-89).

8 Broodhagen would go on to attract the commission from the Government of Barbados for *The Emancipation Monument*, popularly known as "the Bussa statue", unveiled 28th March 1985. The sculptor called the statue "Slave in Revolt", in reference to the largest revolt against slavery on the island of Barbados in 1816.

9 This combination of elements has been explored for its iconography in paintings by Stanley Greaves, with his references to the veiled monuments to public figures and signs of obeah.

10 See also Williams 1990.

If Williams's *Revolt* was a work of self-identification, such a practice emerged again with Philip Moore's monument, yet in a way that spoke not to an image of the individual but more to what may be called an 'elemental' self – a spiritual form of the human being with which all Guyanese may identify. This posed for the artist and his audiences quite a challenge. As he told the visiting writer Andrew Salkey in 1970, 'We're having a little debate about Cuffy's image not being too right, you know'.[11] This was in reference to the search for what may serve as a suitable national 'symbol' for Guyana, leading Moore to protest that, 'No real nationalist would revere Cuffy really less, if he is depicted, as I think he should be, as a rough, tough, unkempt man, with matted hair [...]. If we have to pretty him up, we are ashamed of him, ashamed of our own, ashamed of our past.' (Salkey 1972: 98-99). Salkey reported that Moore in 1970 took out of his shirt-jack pocket 'a cameo likeness' of Cuffy that he had carved. That may well have been a prototype for the same repeating image in painted mud that Moore bequeathed to Guyana's Burrowes School of Art, based on the moulding techniques that he taught himself while working as a tutor at Princeton (fig. 4). Moore's mention of 'having a little debate' alluded to the divergence between elite and popular taste in Guyana in their attitudes to figuration. This became even clearer when the *1763 Monument* was realised six years later: opinion vocalised in the press showed disapproval of it, while Spiritists, who put themselves outside such debate, nonetheless began to embrace it, as they still do today.

Fig. 4: Philip Moore, model house (detail), (nd). Collection Burrowes School of Art.

Commentators have found it hard to sum up the meaning of Moore's artwork and have fallen into equivocating about its worth. Stanley Greaves, for instance, has written:

11 Salkey noted a newspaper editorial by Carl Blackman entitled "Is that you, Cuffy?", which asked "What manner of man was Cuffy, leader of the bloody Berbice Rebellion and now, Guyana's first hero?" Salkey 1972, 98.

> The Monument was a visionary work, characteristic of the artist and chosen to symbolize the revolutionary spirit the Government was encouraging. A nation-wide controversy arose, however, because the general population felt the image should have been more realistic. Another opinion expressed was that its atavistic 'African' quality did not allow other racial groups to accept it as a truly national symbol. The central figure symbolized the spirit of Cuffy (Kofi), who had led an extensive slave uprising against the Dutch in 1763. This presaged a similar event, identical in many details, but larger in scale, staged by Toussaint Louverture in Haiti against the French in 1791 (Greaves 2010: 180).

The Guyanese lawyer and polymath Rupert Roopnaraine has written expanding on this matter of the 'realistic':

> It is true that the popular rejection of 'Cuffy' [the monument], as he has come to be known and hated, has also to do with the fate of non-representational public art in the region as a whole. No Henry Moores and Barbara Hepworths for us. We like our monuments realistic, as recognisable as our next-door neighbours. (2012: np)

What Greaves and Roopnaraine mean by 'realistic', is less clear than what they have in mind as the 'popular' audience for art in the Caribbean. Who is this 'we' in 'we like our monuments realistic'? The lines are blurred in the Caribbean between monuments and other forms of historical remembrance including in cultural forms such as carnival or music, as well as ritual embodiment of the past. Moore's sculpture, regardless of his efforts to abandon naturalism or 'realism' in favour of a more ambiguous sort of figuration, was generally identified as African. That seems to have assisted in galvanizing two ethnicised publics – Indo- and Afro-Guyanese – in their responses to the monument. In 1976 there was resentment among East Indians about state money being channelled away from their community. Frustration about the arrested development of a monument (designed by Denis Williams) to the Enmore Martyrs – the five Indo-Guyanese labour protestors killed by police in 1948 – unveiled by Burnham on the anniversary of 16th June in 1977, was fuelled by speculation that funds set aside for the Enmore monument had been spent on the Cuffy one. In general, while trying to defend Moore's monument, Roopnaraine in his piece goes on to argue that the final product was never as Moore intended. He notes the production of another maquette for a monument that was never realised. It included a 'wheel of eternal revolution' (and reconciliation) made up of the cup, the coconut tree and sun – symbols of the main political parties at the time of Guyana's independence. Also, he reports that Moore's 'many disappointments' ran to the elevation of the *1763 Monument* on a plinth,[12] a measure taken to bombproof it in response to the current tensions.[13] Roopnaraine goes on to say: 'Philip Moore did not intend Cuffy to be in the sky […]. Bring him to earth so we can share in his power' (2012: np).

Power is the operative word. Moore's worldview was largely at odds with the social circumstances surrounding the work's commission, just as much as his expectation of having the final say on how the sculpture would be presented. But the innovations that Moore made through the aesthetic scheme for his figure, and the iconographical programme that he proposed on the monument's plaques, were not entirely unappreciated. Indeed, the monument has retained a sort of agency of its own

12 The eighteen-foot high plinth was designed by Albert Rodrigues, and includes five brass plaques.
13 See also: Stanley Greaves, 'Meeting Denis – A Mind Engaged', in Williams and Williams 2010: 180.

among Spiritists. A work of modern art, delivering on the conceptual aims of modernism, did not satisfy the tastes of the 'general population', but found a home and use within a religious community, a nexus of taste and belief at the margins of the nation. That is fascinating not simply for its conjunction of aesthetic and religious values (that would present it as a curio of Caribbean or postcolonial nation-building), as for how it forms a statement about the varieties of artistic modernism. The artwork enjoyed relative detachment and added a disjunctive force to the currents that whirled around it.

We can set this alongside a further reading, which does more than add to the mix of interpretations. Commonly ascribed to the monument among audiences today (generally in a tone of affectionate amusement, and with discrete explanation of the oblique angles of viewership required), the Cuffy figure seems possessed of a determinedly onanistic purpose. Its tense body leans backward on slightly bent legs, gripping an ambiguous yet suggestively phallic object at a jaunty angle. The mouth is open, the lips extruded in a definite circle. The figure's apparent arousal and sexual potency finds a metonym in the water that flows at its feet, descending over a series of pools. An especially vivid sense of the monument as such a procreative, irreverently self-pleasuring statement may be had from the director's office of the National Gallery of Guyana, Castellani House. This room may once have served as the bedroom of President Forbes Burnham at his official residence in the capital. That such a building would be later repurposed to house the nation's art collection seems to position visual representation at the centre of national political life. But the sculpted figure that he unveiled in 1976, may have masturbated most visibly from the physical standpoint had by Burnham. As it is very hard to see that this was an intended aspect of the monument's commission, this reading characterises art's refusal to conform entirely to a political leader's propagandist ambitions. It bears not at all on delivering the sort of grand historicism suggested in Greaves's parallel to the vaunted success of black revolution in Haiti. That no single point of view can be claimed to dominate for the sculpture, being at the centre of countless viewing angles, has probably helped the artwork to avoid the injunction of public indecency.

Conflict and Visualisation

In this Guyanese context for remembering histories of slavery, to the conflicts and trauma of the colonial past are accreted the frictions and disagreements that arose through a visualising practice. Moore's approaches through the *1763 Monument* to the matter of Cuffy's 'likeness', and the language of his bodily comportment, allowed the artist to take a stance that was directed simultaneously against colonial oppression (plantation slavery), privileged aesthetic taste, and postcolonial bureaucratic and party-political power. That Moore's rendering of Cuffy was three-dimensional rendering, is the fundamental to his attempt to hold these multiple viewpoints together, in an environment of dissent about how to see the past in the present. It became an occasion for testing modernism in special circumstances that it has seldom encountered in the northern metropole.

The discourse around commemoration of slavery and resistance in Guyana has condensed on the uprising of 1763 time and again, thrusting processes of visualisa-

tion to the fore. When the painting *Revolt* was finally shown in public in 1970, a political opportunity opened up for Cheddi Jagan, leader in opposition of the People's Progressive Party. A report in *The Sunday Chronicle* (Sunday 15th February, 1970) told how 'Dr [Cheddi] Jagan said that it was the PPP Government in office (but not in power) which insisted on the Aubrey Williams painting, '*Revolt*', being exhibited, and being found a resting place in the Public Free Library eventually; as it was the PPP which, during the early years of the annual History and Culture Week, drew Cuffy from his unknown resting place into the proud pages of Guyanese history …' (in Salkey 1972: 95).[14] With such continuing political importance put onto the figure of Cuffy and the role of art in stimulating public debate, it becomes easier to see what led to the commission of Moore's sculpture. Sculptural meaning in the urban space of Georgetown in the 1970s had become a live issue. Jagan pronounced how the removal of the statue of Queen Victoria from the lawns of the Law Courts 'had therapeutic value for the nation and the individual.' (Salkey 1972: 95).

But while that motivation or political will may have been fairly clear – to draw the rebellion of 1763 into the 'proud pages of Guyanese history' – neither work of art seemed capable of delivering on such an aim. Moore's sculpture offended a popular view of Cuffy's likeness, just as much as *Revolt* offended an elite one in its expected standards for art in Guyana. The situation was not helped by the process by which painting came into competition with sculpture. The search was well underway for appropriate modes of three-dimensional figuration that could displace the statuary of the colonisers, since the medium of painting itself became stigmatised for its connotations of European hegemonic taste. The Guyanese artist and educator Stanley Greaves recalled recently of a time when he and a small group of contemporaries (Emerson Samuels and Michael Leila) were granted permission to see *Revolt*,

> It seemed … more of a study than a finished painting for the following reasons. The left of the painting was occupied by a large silhouetted figure of a slave with broken chains on his wrists and holding a bloodied blade in a most obviously *improbable* manner. The silhouette itself *contradicted* the modelling in the pants dispelling visual unity. *Inaccuracies* in figure drawing were evident in the rendering of the small group, including the wounded and dead, to the right underneath the upraised knife arm of the slave. *Problems* of scale were evident in the relationship between the group and the dominant figure. These were compounded by a flattening of the pictorial space and *distorted* perspective not consonant with figure painting in a naturalistic genre.[15] (My emphasis)

Such open disparagement of the formal qualities of the painting would have aided the bureaucratic refusal to exhibit it publicly, emboldening the Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society that became custodian of the work in 1960. Evidently the spirit of rebellion that galvanised Cuffy and his followers – in their desperate violence and mobilised armed struggle – had entirely dissolved under the normative aesthetic appraisal meted out by the educated Guyanese who viewed the painting. Greaves recommends that compositions of painted figures ought to convey 'visual unity', should avoid contradiction, demonstrate accuracy with regard to scale, perspective, and so on. Above all he decries the 'unfi-

14 The article is quoted at length in Salkey 1972.
15 Communication by Stanley Greaves, read aloud in his absence at "Aubrey Williams: Now and Coming Time", a conference held at the University of Cambridge to celebrate the artist's life and work (April 26, 2014).

nished' quality of *Revolt*. That approach offers a clue about how the justification for the refusal was made on the basis of aesthetic value, masking the Society's ideological opposition to the painting's stirring anti-colonial message. Greaves offers a window onto that historical episode, intoning on artistic standards and his lasting reservations about the painting; a throwback to those dominant aesthetic values that prized illusionism and naturalism.

Caribbean-focused writing on art such as that of Greaves has tended to prioritise aesthetic production conducted within art's institutions. Preoccupied with the biographies and accomplishments of named artistic personalities and the 'appropriate' way to render the past, it frequently bemoans the state of the Caribbean's art-institutional infrastructure. Although I see an absorbing debate here about how well Williams's work of art qualifies to be a work of art – about how well he has performed in this instance in bearing witness to a historical scene – that would distract from the aim of understanding slavery and resistance in relation to visualisation and materialisation practices more broadly. We need to go a farther distance, indeed, beyond trying to judge the extent to which an object may come to count as 'art' (if at all). It is imperative to put into proper perspective the modern visual commemoration of slavery as having become an overwhelmingly but not exclusively institutional and monumental affair. What come to be overlooked are the wider everyday processes of material mediation: an entire sphere of culture that includes the practices of showing and signifying through the manipulation of physical form.

How did Cuffy and his followers materially articulate their aims and experiences? How may we recover the emotions that they embodied by aesthetic or performative means, their ephemeral acts of signification within the realm of visual perception? The fact is that the material record which may assist such a mode of inquiry is not much in evidence. But, asking new questions about the aesthetic means that were employed by enslaved people themselves could offer the seeds for a critique of the available historical record of rebellions, such as that of 1763. There seem to be no accompanying images or attributable artefacts surviving from that time, and so countering the authority of that absent record involves trying to address its very absence – whether that be textual, visual or material – while grappling with the significant lack of remains. A good starting point would be to admit that colonial power may continue to be served in a turn toward the study of works of art alone, without taking into view the wider material field. Fine art discourse, its traditions and institutions of production, its domains of reflection and reception, all these are nested within relations to visual and material practices at large. That has gone lamentably unaccounted for by the existing treatment of the controversies that surround artworks which commemorate resistance to slavery.

The destruction of plantation property may be considered just such an example of a primary visualising practice that issues from the hands of the enslaved. As well as an effective means to cease or set back sugar production, for rebels to make certain that 'the hill of fire glows red'[16] – as it does in *Revolt* – has signalled their serious intent and degree of organisation. 1763 became a scene of such incendiary signi-

16 Reference to Martin Carter's poem The Hill of Fire Glows Red [1951], see Carter 1997. See also Robinson 2004.

fication (much as had happened the previous year on Laurens Kunckler's plantation Goed Fortuyn, in the upper part of the colony of Berbice), when on February 28th every building at five plantations along the Berbice River burned except those in which the rebels established their headquarters. Second, there is the self-styling of 'Coffy, Governor of the Negroes of Berbice, and Captain Accara', to quote the opening words of a letter of negotiation to the Dutch that the illiterate Cuffy dictated to a young mulatto boy. It is a title that might suggest that he and the other rebel leaders signified their rank through their dress styles, regardless that the enslaved community was deprived of all but the simplest clothing – just as they were destitute of all arms except for rusting swords, fragments of iron and agricultural implements, and a few guns and pistols.

Regardless of whether they donned military or ceremonial dress, or even appropriated the uniform of the colonisers, it is known that Cuffy identified his rank just as clearly as he did his ethnicity. Of the two main ethnic groupings among the rebels, his background stood out from that of his officers, Accara, Atta, Fortuyn and Prins. Such ethnic differences among the rebels may have widened into a tragic division, with Cuffy's officers turning against him – a final challenge to his authority that led to his suicide. The suicide has the status only of an allegation, however, in Guyanese popular memory of the *revolt*, where it has been deemed beyond countenance (and a cruel fabrication within the colonial record). Certainly, a shameful end in self-sacrifice would conflict with 21st century (Christian) morality in the Caribbean. What may be surmised, however, is that the differences of ethnicity among the rebels could be marked by requisitely visual and material practices of personal presentation – hair, body decoration or marking – or personal possessions, as much as by language, kinship or religious affiliation.

Whatever form the material significations of difference took among the rebels, the bitter end to Cuffy's struggle is still today met with disbelief in Guyana, where even the slightest hint that his uprising met with failure is overwritten with Cuffy's patriotic, triumphalist commemoration. There is another contextually inappropriate chapter in the same narrative. The colonial memory of 1763, which gives prominence to injured and mutilated white bodies, lies beyond the accepted bounds of Guyanese national memory. It has been buried, little noticed outside the archive[17] except in the iconography of Williams's *Revolt*. According to a Dutch observer, the stockades of Cuffy's first stronghold carried the heads of white victims from a massacre at Peereboom. Such a display carried tactical advantages, aiding the rebels' cause by adding to the fatalistic mood felt by Van Hoogenheim who in turn called a special meeting of the colonial Raad on March 6th to address the colonisers' course of action. At the same time, two petitions were received from Cuffy begging the Dutch to leave Fort Nassau, before the whites' reluctant preparations to retreat were quickened on March 8th by another letter sent by Cuffy that warned, simply, 'Leave the colony'. Finally, that second message was underscored with portent by yet another startling visual index of rebel power: the racial designation of the bearer of the message and her state of presentation – Cuffy's white 'mistress', raped, dishevelled and in rags.

17 See also: Kars 2020.

Art as an Unreliable Medium

The artistic contributions of Williams and Moore are testament to two related controversies over attempts among artists to draw parallels between 18th century resistance to the system of slavery and conditions of the more recent past. Their most basic significance is that they show how circumstances for visualisation in the 1960s were distinct from those of the decade that followed. *Revolt* issued from a painter based in London who turned to the history of slavery in order to galvanise anti-colonial feeling in British Guiana, and was effective in provoking a proprietorial response among the colonial authorities in their attempt to decide what sort of art was appropriate for public display. Moore's *1763 Monument* belonged by contrast to a locus of political celebration in post-colonial Guyana that invested energetically in public gestures of nation-building.

In that later work, no longer is the armed rebel confronting the slavers and planters, nor does the rendering of its subject repeat Williams's interpellation to elite culture and the genre of European history painting. For Moore puts himself entirely outside the dilemma over whether to show shackles or manacles that are broken or unfastened, and he neatly sheathes the weapon of armed struggle. The formal codes of this uprising are more obscure: an elaborate system of body markings that resemble futuristic armour; the animals are held confidently in the hands; a silent mouth, yet shaped to suggest speech. Such is Moore's attempt to normalise a mode of figuration grounded in a private language of motifs and figural proportions that had nothing to do with naturalism or academicism. Gone is the antagonism toward colonial rule and the didactic appeal for independence that issued from the painting *Revolt*, and so too any supporting information such as sticks of sugarcane or colonials.

The visual impact of the *1763 Monument* much depended on the artist's embrace of the medium-specificity of sculpture itself, which does not presuppose the single viewpoint of painting – contra to the piece by Williams – thereby bringing out what the art historian Alex Potts has called the 'instabilities' of our perceptual encounter with works of modern sculpture (2000, 8). Returning to the matter of fire, while the illusionism of painting, as in *Revolt*, may readily convey the immateriality of the fire, such illusionism is far from an obvious quality for sculpture, and so it is missing from Moore's sculptural composition – where the standard iconography of uprisings and destruction, the burning house and cane fields, are all physically out of the question. More practically speaking, it was easier for Moore to add a pool and channel of actual water than to model flames or even to keep a fire alight. On this ultimate, crucially material point, the two works of art pull apart, suggesting the need to locate each respectively in a debate about the aesthetics of historicising slavery.

The recalcitrance of artworks, identified here by their incapacity to play a reliable role in historical remembrance, is quite hard to handle for all those involved – intellectually, emotionally, politically. With the visualisation of slavery there is always the potential for unexpected consequences and errant significations, but these may be taken as positive attributes once seen through the lens of modernism. Within modernism, artworks assert a degree of sovereignty through their materials,

an assertion that was palpable in Williams's and Moore's works where, in a basic sense, the various media available to these artists for conveying a common historical message have lent themselves to different outcomes. Accepting this open--endedness, it should then be possible to accept that the operations of artworks vis-à-vis memories of the past, may take place both at a fraught site of controversy and yet at the same time within a dynamic aesthetic locus, one that repays serious attention since it outlasts the artwork's contingent circumstances of production and its original historical reception.

Becoming attuned to that complexity surrounding the status of artworks can also deliver a keener sense of how art may actively position those people in whose lives it is implicated. Aubrey Williams was occupied with painting in the face of the rise of more public and also temporary sorts of creativity, such as sculptural production on the one hand, theatrical performance on the other. His attempt to recuperate the value of painting – when that was becoming an outmoded artistic medium in Guyana – took place in parallel with the diminishing status of painting in the northern Atlantic metropole. (In the words of Michael Fried (1967), painting had come to be 'at war' with theatre and theatricality in the search for a more authentic modernism.) While Williams's painted in London, the sending of *Revolt* to Guyana was evidence of that war having a long front that extended to the Caribbean. It had evidently mixed results for Williams. Moore sought to find his own measure of artistic authenticity, aside even from those that there were normative in Guyana (the European representationalism that he shunned). Such a desire subjected him and his monument to public imputations of failure.

Conclusion

In the field of visualising slavery, artists' negotiations with the sensitive subject matter of a traumatic past have emerged simultaneously with the wider experimentation and exploration of art's materiality. Artworks from Guyana that were key contributions to the politics of anti-colonialism (especially its uses of the past through commemoration of an uprising during slavery) are helping to understand why visual art in the twentieth century came under pressure, and was changed, through such a practice of commemoration. The events of 1763 in Berbice, called to remembrance in the twentieth century, were in no small part a pretext for trying to understand the creative possibilities as well as the limitations of art and figuration. The result was an uneasy impact on the relationship between memory, painting and sculpture, in a political climate of unquestioning faith in art as a means to intervene decisively in history. The matter of what counts as an 'acceptable' art for responding to an unacceptable past is evidently a sensitive preoccupation in the modern Caribbean. Thus, deciding what comes to constitute as 'success' or 'failure' in this domain has to be radically problematized. We must take into account works of art that commemorate episodes of resistance to slavery, as well as how historical episodes of resistance themselves are evaluated. It is notable that the viewpoint which sees the uprising of 1763 as a triumph has been borne out through the condemnation of examples of artistic remembrance of that historical episode.

The imperative to revisit histories of enslavement and resistance is at its most fascinating in those cases when artists have engaged with the intersecting breadth of challenges that visualisation may bring, from the ideological to the material. The process of confronting slavery as an affective theme, put into the hands of artists and put before their audiences, may be caught in a maelstrom of controversies over aesthetic value and the appropriate modes of representation. In short, it reveals the limits of artistic agency. I have shown how this agency is relative to the acute material differences that pertain between one sort of art and another – between painting as compared to sculpture – when they are used for the disclosure and elaboration of historical memory. Above all, these material contestations about the past take an unfinished form and substance, in what is nonetheless an abidingly discursive and emotional field.

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