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ON KARA SPRINGER

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Retinal Errantry and Spatial Precarity: Kara Springer's *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*

One of few Caribbean artists of her generation engaged with minimalism and abstraction, design and architecture, uncommon, or uncommonly known, to and appreciated in Caribbean art, traditionally construed as representational and figurative, painterly and sculptural, Kara Springer stretches different chords to her bow and seems to aim at targets different from the customarily socially and politically inflected trajectories of her contemporaries. Or does she? Might Springer not aim differently at similar targets instead or reposition these targets according to her very own spatial and sensorial coordinates?

A lightbox fashioned after LED-advertising signs strapped to a cart-like mobile platform hand-drawn by the artist herself puts both the artist and her work into a mutually dependent movement suggestive of a spatial sensibility attuned to both the environment within which the contraption could be wheeled and the female artist body that could carry it forth. The motif of an upright ladder beaming from the lightbox adds further spatial complexity to an assemblage, appealing as much to horizontal motion as to vertical elevation. Of her intentions for her new commission, *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, Springer has stated, "It is scaled to my body so that I can carry it around," and, at the same time, "It is beyond the comfort of what I can manage with my body."¹

Born in part of her current child-rearing experience and coming into motherhood, combined with her stated desire to engage with scale in relationship to her body, Springer's spatial sensibility is of a taller order than simply metric. Indeed, it seems as though she prefers to deploy a more organic spatiality despite the concurrent counter-impulse to "frame" and "have control over this form," to "instill symmetry and stillness." By what effects and affects might framing an object—framing a frame, as it were—simultaneously moving and still, and of which one's body is a part, be produced? And how might such embodied spatial assemblage participate in forms of affliction, social and otherwise? How do social affliction and spatial construction relate to each other?

The outcome of an ongoing conversation between an artist and a curator/critic, this essay is a reflection on, as well as the completion of, an artistic and critical writing process with a curatorial outlook. Altogether, the artist's work and the critic's essay question the very space of social affliction as a place from which to position oneself or as a location from which to look for spaces to push back against. This cultural location may be at once more relevant to, and informative of, the artist's process in relationship to

the space of the Caribbean, the sociospatial experience of blackness, and the spatial sense of the feminine self.

The imbrication of these various spaces wherein to locate the artist's culture—a culture that is uniquely her own—might itself be mirrored by the three-pronged overlapping processes that preceded the formalization of the current iteration of the work: an action in a landscape, a photograph, and an assemblage. For before there was a lightbox strapped to a wooden cart, before there was a color photograph of a ladder to the sky, there was an action and a landscape. After the completion and exhibition of the assemblage there might be other actions and other landscapes. The following extricates the various cultural spaces and creative processes of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, each always already superimposed onto the other(s), all imbricated into one another, ever precariously.

The Space of the Caribbean

The crispness of the clouds' contours, backlit by the sun against the blue backdrop of a fading day, belies the workings of digital photography. By contrast, the silver-toned body of water underneath is reminiscent of the era of the albumen print. Any sense of a Caribbean picturesque is absent. Yet the body of water covering this surface of the Earth is the Atlantic Ocean, and this piece of Earth is The Bahamas; the island, Providence; the city, Nassau.

The photograph, unlike what one might initially assume—owing to the improbability of such a sight, the perils associated with staging such a scene, and the flat rendition of the proverbial ladder to the sky—is not a montage. As the artist recalls, the ladder held up long enough before it fell over. Her attraction to the representation of the stairway to heaven, hackneyed though she acquiesces it is, endured. And though the ladder aims as surely for the sky as the water does for the horizon, its location in the ocean summons up other possible historical visions rooted within a Caribbean imaginary.

A ladder in Caribbean waters conjures up memories of the ships against which it could abut: ships of conquistadors and slavers then; cruise ships and tourists' schooners now. Under such considerations, the metaphor of the ladder to the sky acquires a more ominous meaning. Albeit typically also made of rope rather than solely manufactured from wood, a ladder to the deck of a ship rather than up to the sky suggests contrary motions, none representative of the artist's own motions while carrying out her invisible performance—diving underwater to secure the ladder and getting out of the shot for the picture to be taken by a collaborator or, alternatively, swimming back quickly to the shore to take the picture herself.

Neither slave thrown overboard, eschewing the use of a ladder, nor pirate climbing up to the promise of bounty, the artist instead acted as a shipmate, diving to anchor and gain access to the unknowable of a landscape steeped in a history from which she strives to

extract and abstract it. Equally unknowable and given equal weight are the heights of the sky and the depth of the ocean: the photographic composition gives as much space to the water coming forward from the horizon line, where the ladder at once disappears under and refracts over the surface of the ocean as a wavy shadow, as it does to the space above or rather beyond where the ladder ends in the blue.

By which criteria other than the physical landscape might a Caribbeanscape be considered? Might the contrast between the accelerated act of diving underwater and setting a precarious photo shoot on the beach versus the stillness of the resulting photograph and eerie atmosphere of temporary eternity account for the instable equilibrium by which so many Caribbean activities are carried out? Or might the likewise tentative setup of the LED panel, strapped onto a wooden cart, or the apparatus's errant motion through the Miami urban-landscape? What do the precarity and errantry of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, in its ongoing process of becoming, produce as discourse and practice of and with the Caribbean?

The Sociospatial Experience of Blackness

Of the two archetypal African-diasporic motives that have come to define aspects of the contemporary black experience and elements of the aesthetics of blackness, *errantry*, a quintessential Caribbean trope, articulated by way of Édouard Glissant, more so than *fugitivity*, which is common to African American contemporary thought, might better carry forth the artistic effects produced by Springer's work.

This artistic Caribbeanscape that bridges over errantry and precarity has been best expressed over the decades by Trinidadian artist, curator, and critic Christopher Cozier, most recently in a lecture for Berlin Biennial X, whose programmatic title "Intransigent Forms and Itinerant Ways (Looking at Shifty Things while Shifting)" threads just this linkage with *shifty* endorsing the meaning of the precarious and *shifting* standing in for errantry.

If a sense of the precarious permeates previous Springer productions—through the visual or material frailty of her media of choice: neon signs, plastered fabrics, streamlined sculptural structures, owing to her design background—her use of direct modes of address seem-

ingly more immediately rooted within a sociospatial experience of blackness provides additional insights into the way she structures physical space in order to open up frames of utterance.

Their System Is Not Working for Us (2017) was set in a vacant lot against the bleak blight of a Philadelphia neighborhood, and *A Small Matter of Engineering, Part 2* (2016), reading “white people. do something,” stretched across the lawn of the Temple University campus. The former, a vertical neon sign, the latter, a horizontal fabric banner. Both, beaming white letters against a black background, assert the space of blackness in aesthetic contrast with and in ideological opposition to the creeping coercion of institutional whiteness. *Let’s Get Free*, an in-process neon work in blue cursives rather than white block letters, emphasizes this American racial legacy and exhorts to exit from it.

A former Tyler School of Art student and Philadelphia resident, Springer, as a Canadian citizen of Jamaican and Bajan descent, could learn and apply such codes of duality, operative within the historically segregationist context of American society. Tellingly though, she resorted to no such divisive rhetoric or dualistic structure for a work that, with the title *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, revokes such procedures and invites instead processes one might call integrationist—in aesthetic if not ideological terms (bearing in mind the Caribbean’s own fractious politics)—with an emphasis on the seamlessness of the image.

Whereas Springer’s American work threads in material opacity, her Caribbean work deals in structural lightness. The uniformly black panels of the neon and fabric works make way to wide open wooden white structures, whether cubes or portals of sorts, abandoned on sandy shores or engulfed by a foamy sea that seem to diffract retinal preemption through architectural angles.

What other elements might *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants* provide in order to ascertain a Caribbean regime of visibility rooted within retinal errantry as a conceptual device to diffract the prehension of the context of blackness and abstract interpretations of the Caribbean landscape?

The Spatial Sense of the Feminine

Comparison with another older work of Springer’s—a color photograph of a pink-clad black woman with a tattooed cross on her back—provides further

elements to tease out another important aspect of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants* more readily verbalized by Springer than visibly embodied by the work: a spatial sense of the feminine.

Avoidance is key to understanding Springer’s choice and framing of her subject. For avoidance is double in this photograph: the subject’s election of her back for adornment, rather than her chest, where a crucifix would be more readily expected to dangle at the end of a golden chain, and the artist’s framing of her posing subject from the back as well, denying the viewer a formal encounter with her while simultaneously protecting her from the bearer of the gaze, in a formal metonymic operation of sorts where this willfully truncated subject, whose primary feminine attributes, bosom and bottom, are only hinted at, stands in for an image and embodiment of a self-possessed contemporary female subjectivity.

Supporting this view is the fact that Carmen Maria Machado’s *Her Body and Other Parties*, a collection of short stories weaving organic considerations of the feminine with an oneiric sensibility for the paranormal, comes into conversation with Springer around the making of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, whose conjunctive title emulates Machado’s own.² Bring into equivalence both titles, and the female body becomes the earth, its other parties, all the Earth’s inhabitants.

Formally, the work does not readily betray any overt stereotypical feminine trope—although this formal restraint could be considered one. One has to return to Springer’s aforementioned statements to understand how she negotiates space and scale in relationship to her gendered body in a constant back-and-forth with discomfort. While space and scale expand beyond the horizon line in the photograph, they contract no further than the sight of the gallery floor or of the pavement in the final assemblage.

Further spatial disorientation and contrary motion complicate a live encounter with the work with sharp horizontal (the sea in the photograph, the wooden platform of the assemblage, the floor of the gallery space), vertical (the ladder in the photograph), and diagonal (the strap holding wooden cart and LED panel together) lines. A sense of linearity prevails, with forward and backward motion the only alternatives for the platform on wheels. Only one’s projection into the sea and its evocation of swimming or sinking diverts toward a wider range of motions, bringing us back to the rotations of the Earth and the revolving futures of all its inhabitants.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kara Springer, conversation with the author, New York, 29 June 2018. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from the artist are from this interview.
- 2 Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories* (New York: Graywolf, 2017).