RANDNOTIZEN: NOTES FROM THE EDGE
Nicholas Morris

Abstract
The ‘practice of art’ – taken here to mean communication through the expressive manipulation of objects – may be described as a torch-lit search, aided only by a fragmentary map: an artwork flashes up to briefly illuminate the location and imagination of the artist. In this text, Nicholas Morris uses self-examination to describe some examples of such moments of illumination for a Caribbean artist living first ‘at home’ and then in diaspora. A series of movements as a practising artist and educator, migrating between various locations in the Caribbean and in other cultural and linguistic spaces, are addressed in the following. They show up the unevenness of the existing support structures for art, as well as perceptions of appropriate creative or critical spaces in transitional regions and, finally, at the edge – for example, at ‘frontiers’ such as central Germany.

Keywords: Caribbean, diaspora, painting, installation, migration, multiplicity

Full text: http://openartsjournal.org/issue-5/article-7/
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2016s08

Biographical note
Nicholas Morris was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1967. Having spent his early life in Jamaica and Barbados, he received a BA in Visual Studies from Dartmouth College, USA, in 1989, a Postgraduate Diploma in Visual Art from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Scotland in 1990 and an MFA from Stanford University, USA, in 1994. A tutor for painting and installation at the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston from 1995 to 2001, he is now living, working and teaching in Darmstadt, Germany, and visits his grandchildren in Manchester, UK, as often as he can.
Related material to this article was presented at the two project conferences for ‘Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean’, held on 5–6 February 2013 (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam; KIT, the Netherlands Royal Tropical Institute), and 3–4 December 2013 (Institute for International Visual Arts, Iniva, London, UK). Visit the project webpages here.


‘Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean’ is a Research Networking and Exchange Project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

Published by The Open University (UK), with additional support from The Leverhulme Trust.
RANDNOTIZEN: NOTES FROM THE EDGE

Nicholas Morris, Artist and Art Educator, Kingston/Jamaica and Darmstadt/Germany

The first illustration is *Denkzeichen Güterbahnhof* in Darmstadt, Germany, a public memorial to the resident Jews and Roma who were deported to concentration camps from the local freight train station during the Nazi regime. It consists essentially of tracks and a glass cube measuring just over 150cm on each side. This cube is filled with the names of the deported, engraved onto glass that then was broken into shards.

To get closer to my work as an artist, it might be helpful to look at a few of the shapes I claim to contain: I was born in Jamaica and raised in Jamaica and Barbados. I have lived and been educated in the USA and the UK. My German passport is one result of that country’s naturalisation process and my loss of a Jamaican passport is a second result. My home today is in Darmstadt, roughly in the geographical middle of today’s Germany. I am of Ibo, other West African, Irish, English, German and Portuguese descent, as far as I know. My father’s grandparents were Sephardic Jews and I was raised more or less as a Protestant Christian. At least one great-grandparent of my mother experienced, as a child, actual slavery, as well as its official end in Jamaica; at exactly the same time but in a very different, nearby space, another child who also would become a great-grandparent of my mother lost the ownership of slaves he otherwise would have inherited. At home with two older generations of my family, English was spoken for shopping lists, Spanish for secrets and Jamaican for emphasis.

In the Caribbean, of course, such a family is not unusual. However, despite producing me – and very many others like me – I see the elements mentioned as remaining irreconcilable, instead of passively ‘melting’ over generations to form an unarticulated ‘pot’.

Forged through the ongoing movement from state to state, such lists of multiple connections could also be made in the future: my granddaughter may also one day describe who she believes to be. She may cite, for example, a Jewish father and a Muslim mother, both from families with histories of violent displacement, or

---

Figure 7.1: Nicholas Morris and Ritula Fränkel, *Denkzeichen Güterbahnhof* (Freight train station sign of thought), completed 2006. Glass, steel, wood, stone, c.250 x 300 x 500cm. Public installation, Darmstadt, Germany. (Photo: Renate Gruber)
she may examine the global geometry formed by linking the geographical and temporal points from which her forebears set off. Today, she speaks English and German and understands Bangla. She has three grandparents with Jamaican passports, but hers is British and she attends preschool in Manchester. Is she ‘Caribbean’? I do not really know. Perhaps I should be asking instead, what ‘being Caribbean’ will mean when she is old enough to articulate the concept.

In the house I mentioned, the maps I played with as a child were simple, bright-coloured tools. On almost all of them, Jamaica loomed large, while Ireland was easily noticeable, and Africa’s valleys were locatable in space but somehow, nonetheless, further away in time. Cuba was on a particular, separate map for ceremonies such as on those evenings when my grandparents would dance. Germany, the place brought to Jamaica in the trunk of an unimaginable great-grandfather – and the land in which I would be naturalised more than a hundred years later – was an unfocused white space. Two conversations in my early years in Germany show the differences between maps, on a terrain that this particular great-grandfather indeed may have been unable to draw. I will recount one now and the other later in this text.

Having just completed the Denkzeichen work, I was approached in the hall of my school by a fellow teacher. With the opening ‘Was fällt Ihnen ein?’ (a strong admonition that is formulated literally as ‘What is falling to you [from elsewhere, unexpectedly]?’ and would compare with an accusatory ‘What were/are you thinking?’), she questioned my being qualified to address the German past. Her argument was that an immigrant, fundamentally and inalterably unable to grasp the history of a new land in its breadth and depth, could not claim entitlement to publish an opinion on this history. She supposed that my opinion could be based only on a particularly incomplete knowledge. Sheer politeness would recommend silence: it would never have fallen to her, she said, to go to Jamaica to say anything to anybody. Her final question seemed to me even more aggressive and desperate: ‘Sind Sie Betroffener?’ ‘Have you been affected (by it)?’

In her statements and questions, I heard not only a reminder that I was not and could not be German, as well as the suspicion that I was not even Jewish or Roma, but furthermore an insistence that I was not really in Germany at all: that my work of art was a confusion between a sketch that I had drawn for myself and the land on which I had mistakenly assumed to be standing and looking. I stuttered to say that I had already seen precisely what she could not imagine: that most of the histories of my home region were tied to literally new objects with assumedly older meanings:

Figure 7.2: Denkzeichen, detail. (Photo: Renate Gruber)
‘African’ drums and ceremonial abeng horns in the village of Accompong, my grandparents’ ‘Irish’ furniture in Kingston or the slanted roofs of German-Jamaican houses in Seafor Town, prepared generations ago for snow that never came. All these were created under duress by people who came from elsewhere and chose, or were forced, to speak in new languages about the fragments of things that they had brought, found and made.

In this light, my accusing colleague’s last question may be seen as an attempt to locate me among the glass shards, implicit as an unborn ghost hovering beside the name of perhaps another great-great-grandfather who had never managed to leave Germany for Jamaica. This sort of vanishing – my not-being-there – would have made me easier for her to find.

The irony that my colleague was a German teaching French in Germany occurred to me only later. The first segments of my work were perhaps as simple as the childhood maps I have attempted to describe. I thought of myself as a still-life painter, making images of things to show other people what, where and how I thought these things were.

Citing the European still-life tradition seemed perfect and appropriate to me – as much as I thought about something so self-obvious at the time. Such a practice was ‘perfect’ in the sense that modernist investigations of simultaneities in form, surface, standpoint and time seemed graphically related to a sort of Caribbean multiplicity that I knew well. Still-life was ‘appropriate’ because of my continued acceptance of a Jamaican, middle-class privilege that, in its broadest sense,
specifically allowed the choice of a language.

One must remember, nonetheless, that upon my return to Jamaica in the mid-1990s, after studying and making art in the USA and Europe, I was just one of a newer generation of painters, photographers and installation artists in Kingston – including Petrona Morrison, Charles Campbell and Roberta Stoddart – who were also resettling there, or passing through. We had ‘come back’ after family emigration or education abroad, and were eager to ask through our artworks or in other ways about what Jamaica was, or might be or could be or should be. We were concerned about what one had missed and missed out on, as well as what one should have been catching up on. Of course, such observers and commentators were also, by their presence, changing the nature of the thing observed and, in turn, observing and postulating channels for this change. Several artists, such as Morrison and Campbell, assumed temporary roles as journalists and curators, while also publicly posing the unanswerable question of a ‘fair’ language for the discussion of art in Jamaica (Campbell, 1998, p.1D).

Contemporary critical texts, such as in the very first issue of the Small Axe (see in particular Paul, 1997) and an essay in the Jamaica Journal (Poupeye, 1998), as well as earlier public discussions surrounding the ‘Young Talent’ exhibition in the National Gallery of Jamaica (1995) and the ‘Young Generation’ exhibition in the Mutual Life Gallery (1993), suggest that significant and lasting insecurities were shared by these artists and their public. Linked to ideas of legitimacy, entitlement and the very ephemeral but very desirable

Figure 7.4: Nicholas Morris, Still life, 1992. Mixed media on canvas, 75 x 75cm. Private collection, Palo Alto, USA. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)
‘authenticity’ and ‘honesty’ of a work, these insecurities were perhaps comparable to those felt by my fellow teacher later in Darmstadt. In Jamaica, however, these particular qualities also seemed knotted with an equally ephemeral concept of ‘identity’, which was part of an unresolved struggle to integrate ambiguous ideas around the role and mandate of a ‘pure’ or ‘undiluted’ Jamaican artist, as already articulated by the curator David Boxer in ‘The Intuitive Eye’ exhibition at the National Gallery (1979).

In the mid- to late 1990s, installation artists such as Petrona Morrison and Lawrence Graham-Brown sought such authenticity through the personal voice that directly addressed issues of chosen and unchosen ‘otherness’ within specifically local contexts. Radical positions towards absolute Jamaicanness were being assumed by a group of mixed-media artists centred around tutors of the Edna Manley School of Art, where I had begun to teach. Curated during this period by David Boxer was the exhibition ‘Black as Colour’, staged at the National Gallery of Jamaica (1997). It presented an examination of the particularly Jamaican vocabulary of colour, material and texture, while a series of contemporary drawings by Robert Cookhorne addressed ‘authenticity’ in some of its personal, ethnic and political contexts by incorporating the actual hair of the artist himself. In several installations by the artist Cheryl Phillips (Netifnet Maat-Ra), the machete as a found object posed actual, physical danger. Declaring this tool and weapon to be

Figure 7.5: Nicholas Morris, Landscape, 1990. Oil on canvas, 90 x 90 cm. Private collection, Dundee, Scotland. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)
a more closely charged symbol of Jamaica’s past and present than the official images of the hummingbird or lignum vitae tree, her works essentially and effectively made their own space un-crossable and un-negotiable. A discussion of ‘authenticity’ in this frame was cast as the relation of the artist and viewer to ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ – or ‘nearer’ and ‘farther’ – spaces.

For my part however, I imagined my return to Jamaica as a negotiation similar to the processes taking place on the surface of an artwork. The elements in my paintings had broken apart into formal experiments with surface and high-key colour. Painting canvases on the floor, I imagined a viewer searching for landmarks from above.

Begun in Scotland, these imaginary views formed the conceptual basis for a later series of real and imaginary flags painted in Jamaica.

The soft fantasy landscapes had to be compared and combined with the hard meanings of flags. The painterly efforts were intended to introduce time, subjectivity and movement into these otherwise fixed spaces. My personal ideas about these flags had been tested. Having spent my early adulthood going between the Caribbean, the USA and Europe, I had been made very aware of the business of crossing and the separate business of staying; of the power concentrated at borders; and what may seem to be a simple, hanging, coloured cloth above a gate.

These paintings were sometimes also conceived as windows and they led to my first successful installations: a series of false doors. One of these was for the Annual National Exhibition in 2000, painted directly onto an inner wall of the National Gallery in Kingston. The institution itself is obviously an influential one in the region, and it may be imagined in part as a moveable set of gates between various stakeholders who steer and structure the production and maintenance of values assigned to art in Jamaica – an administrative agency that also certifies or assigns various values to Jamaican art for those outside of Jamaica.

These formal, painterly reductions also gave rise to a series of self-portraits. These sought to describe some unrealised ambitions, such as with *Self-portrait as a writer*. Or else the portraits resulted in a row of formal works intended to re-use the graphic mechanisms of the flag in order to convey intimate and incomplete messages to an imaginary and solitary viewer and reader. Over time, these images lost almost all colour and began to refer directly to the figure.
Figure 7.7: Nicholas Morris, *A view to Germany*, 1995. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 80 x 80cm. Private collection, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)

Figure 7.8: Nicholas Morris, *Self-portrait as a writer*, 1995. Mixed dry media on paper, 40cm x 50cm. Collection of the artist, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)
Figure 7.9: Nicholas Morris, *Please*, 1996. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 90 x 90cm. Collection of the artist, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)

Figure 7.10: Nicholas Morris, *Stay here*, 1996. Mixed media on paper on linen, 100 x 100cm. Collection of the artist, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)
Figure 7.11: Nicholas Morris, *THISISGEOVRCAL*, 1996. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 75 x 75cm. Private collection, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)

Figure 7.12: Nicholas Morris, *Come now*, 1996. Mixed media on paper on linen, 100 x 100cm. Private collection, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)
Figure 7.13: Nicholas Morris, *The two presents*, 1996. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 100 x 100cm. Collection of the artist, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)

Figure 7.14: Nicholas Morris, *M and H*, 1997. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 100 x 100cm. Private collection, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)
Figure 7.15: Nicholas Morris, NOMO, 1997. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 80 x 80cm. Private collection, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)

Figure 7.16: Nicholas Morris, The back tally, 1998. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 80 x 80cm. Private collection, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photo: Nicholas Morris)
My move to Germany over a decade ago came after the completion of this series of paintings. In practical terms, it was a more-or-less accidental result of a combination of familial and other factors. It also has meant accepting another set of markers on my back, partially replacing others.

My own experience of migrating to Germany has taken place within a larger context. Today, certain regions of Germany are experiencing the presence of diverse diaspora communities through a fundamental demographic change (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013a, pp.26–9). Despite the accelerating pace of immigration to Germany, the country often seems unprepared, institutionally and in practical terms, especially in its ability to grasp the ideas and tools of multiplicity that are already so familiar in the Caribbean and its diaspora. For instance, there is the case of ‘multinational’ families formed by groups of people maintaining their primary relationships with each other yet crossing borders, as temporary or permanent migrants, for reasons that include economic necessity and education.

Although such a background may not immediately be obvious in appearance or accent, it may be helpful to remember that in 2012 nearly one-fifth of the national resident population of Germany had a ‘background of migration’ (what is termed by the federal bureau of statistics, a ‘Migrationshintergrund’; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013b, pp.35-9, pp.357-74). Further, of the entire national resident population, the approximately ten percent in possession of a non-German passport may be found in some significant places: with an above-average concentration in the politically, economically and academically influential federal states of Baden-Württemberg, Hessen and North-Rhein-Westphalia, as well as in leading cities such as Berlin and Hamburg (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013a, pp.27–62).

The German nation can no longer be credibly described – if, indeed, it ever could – as a political community made up of a homogeneous citizenry, along the lines of a romantic notion of the ‘German folk’. Changes to the demography of Germany have brought consequences for policy development and the allotment of public funding for city planning and education. More pertinent to the cultural field are a variety of impacts of migration on cultural policy, recognised most easily in the official acknowledgment of the need for diverse ethnicities to have their days of holiday, and the fair provision of public spaces in which to celebrate them.

Nonetheless, as I have mentioned, the relinquishing of my Jamaican passport was an indispensable condition for my being given a German one. I want to quote the letter of law on the avoidance of multiple citizenship, which has been described by past and current governments as ‘fundamental’:

Ein Grundgedanke im deutschen Staatsangehörigkeitsrecht ist es, bei der Einbürgerung das Entstehen von Mehrstaatigkeit nach Möglichkeit zu vermeiden ...

(A fundamental concept in German citizenship law is to avoid the incurrence of multiple citizenship upon naturalisation when possible ...) (own translation; Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration, 2008, p.29 and Beauftragte für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration, 2013)

Here lies a conceptual framework that remains based essentially on *ius sanguinis*, the conventional ‘principle of descent’ or ‘blood principle’ anchored in German law for more than a hundred years, articulated in the *Reichs- und Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz* (Reichsministerium der Justiz, 1913, p.583). This concept still casts citizenship as being derived from an essential, blood-borne quality of belonging to a ‘folk’, and so maintains the idea of naturalisation as the field of a potential ‘conflict’ of blood, best circumvented by the removal or avoidance of other, implicitly ‘oppositional’, citizenships.

The apparent arbitrariness of land borders may continue to colour such ideas of conflict. In 2006, I drove from Bavaria to Bohemia to assume an art residency in the Czech Republic. It was almost twenty years after publication of *The European Tribe* by the British-born writer of Caribbean descent, Caryl Phillips, where he described his travels between nations of a continental Europe prior to the Schengen Agreement and divided additionally between ‘West’ and ‘East’ (Phillips, 1987). In the border area of Egon Schiele’s ancestral town of Český Krumlov or ‘Krummau’, the line that seemed to cut in two Slavic and Germanic cultural spaces has been raked over innumerable times. What is left is a municipality, with its hill and its lake, floating between two names, seemingly demanding a choice of which ground it may finally settle on.

I held at the time a Jamaican passport, a Schengen-area residence permit and a thick set of certificates identifying me as a cultural representative of the German federal state in which I still live. However, to the border guard at what had once been a section of the ‘East’–‘West’ political frontier (but now more vaguely represented a differentiation of national status within the European Union), my travel documents were incongruent and my status unclear. Bound to let me cross, he remained hesitant nonetheless and chose...
to speak to me in English, switching awkwardly from German. His command was for me to report to the police station in Český Krumlov. There, my practical identity either as a Jamaican or a German would be administratively determined and then would be used to plan my stay. As a Jamaican, I would be required to report to that station once a day, despite a residence permit that – in the theory of the Schengen signatories – entitled me to enter the country, work, and leave and return to the Czech Republic as I pleased. Of course, after driving on, I avoided the Krumlov police station for the next five weeks. This was my attempt to be Czech.

My painterly response to this episode was a series of small, light works about seeing and choosing. These works were among the last ‘pure’ paintings I have made to date. In 2001, I moved to live in a small town in central Germany that is arranged around a central triangle, which accommodates its marketplace, town hall and state museum. Initially, I felt this to be a place saturated with paintings whose purpose was well established, and there seemed to be little room for change, even less for an artist-newcomer. All the good spots were already taken.

I had come to Germany with my wife, Ritula Fränkel, the first Jewish girl born in Darmstadt after the Holocaust and who had spent twenty years in Jamaica for reasons all of her own. The work X-ODUS, a joint installation in the local Jewish community centre (later shown at the Jewish Museum in Berlin), was intended as a sort of beginning and an exercise in arrival and orientation. Both Ritula and I wanted to find images to describe the complex histories, whether general or specific, and the present-day perspectives of this community.

A series of site-specific installations followed and culminated, in 2008, with the completion of the largest collaborative project that Ritula and I had undertaken.
to date. This was an intervention in the foundations of a synagogue. The building was destroyed by local representatives of the National Socialist government in the Reichspogromnacht of 1938 and unexpectedly found during the construction of a hospital in 2001. In an architecturally complex process, the ruins have been incorporated into a simple concrete bubble attached at ground level to the body of the clinic. The inner walls of this new structure have been lit with a series of changing projections showing the differing contexts for the synagogue since its dedication in 1875, covering its changing presence, destruction and absence over the years. In a series of short films at an interactive terminal, Holocaust survivors recounted memories of the building and of their childhood in Darmstadt.

In short, in the course of my career as an artist, I have exchanged an apparently European approach to painting in the Caribbean for an apparently Caribbean strategy of installation in Europe. I close my discussion by noting that I have now spent more uninterrupted time in Germany than anywhere else in my life. I am still unsure of what that may mean.

Finally, I wish to re-tell the second conversation promised at the beginning of this text. Fourteen years ago, I stood in the classroom before a group of newly arrived Darmstädter pupils beginning the eleventh grade. I attempted perception exercises, as I always had done with students at the art school in Jamaica: ‘You’ve just come,’ I said, ‘you’re walking in new corridors and have to find rooms and labs. You need to get around. Somewhere in all of this general newness you need to find something newly new – something to help you orientate, to stay around or move away from, some particular feature of the place that you can rely on as a signpost. What do you see?’ The group was still for a long time and I was relieved when a girl in the back row raised her hand. Edna spoke very slowly, perhaps because it was so obvious: ‘Well, Mr Morris,’ she said, ‘it’s you.’
Figure 7.19: Nicholas Morris and Ritula Fränkel, **Erinnerungsort (Place of remembrance)**, completed 2008. Installation with found objects, electronic mixed media and photography, Public memorial, Städtisches Klinikum Darmstadt. (Photo: Andrea Stahl)

Figure 7.20: Nicholas Morris and Ritula Fränkel, **Erinnerungsort**, installation detail. (Photo: Andrea Stahl)
Bibliography


