



HAL
open science

From “poisoned gold” to “a dazzling gold”

Florence Ménez

► **To cite this version:**

Florence Ménez. From “poisoned gold” to “a dazzling gold”. Caribbean Science and Innovation Meeting 2019, Oct 2019, Pointe-à-Pitre (Guadeloupe), France. hal-02429742

HAL Id: hal-02429742

<https://hal.univ-antilles.fr/hal-02429742v1>

Submitted on 8 Jun 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Installation of land art *Sargasses menace* (*Sargassum threat*), Savannah of petrifications, realized by Avat'Art, the Association of Art Teachers of Martinique, june 2018 ©Florence Ménez

FROM " A POISONED GOLD " TO " A DAZZLING GOLD "

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SARGASSUM FROM THE ARTISTS' EYES

Ménez Florence

Anthropologist, Associate researcher, LC2S, Caribbean Laboratory of Social Sciences, University of the French West Indies

Member of REST – EEE, Scientific and Technical Expertise network on biological invasions in aquatic environments (IUCN, French Biodiversity Agency)

Sargassum natans and *Sargassum fluitans* appears off the coasts of Brazil and West Africa, and drift in rafts by NERR, the North Equatorial Recirculation Region, forming « a great Atlantic Sargassum belt [...] extending >8850 km and carrying a wetbiomass of >9million tons » (Wang 2019). The massive presence of sargassum since 2011 on caribbean coasts, "represents not only an environmental and economic disaster but a real threat to human health" (Resiere 2018), and gives rise to various treatments, physical and symbolic, the most obvious of which are political and sanitary. In reference to the works of Bruno Latour (1991), we considered sargassum as an hybrid disrupters « builders of nature and society » and as creators of bonds. The sargassum link the economic, political, medical, scientific, journalistic and social spheres through a system of relations, through rhizomes that are created, perpetuated or distended in the urgency of the crisis (Ménez 2019).

More unexpectedly, forms of artistic engagement in the public space have emerged in parallel with collective and individual mobilizations contributing to the translation of the nuisance as well as hopes of valorization. This communication offered to question on the Caribbean area artistic approaches and artifacts both as political acts and aesthetic gestures. The premise is to insert them as part of the mechanism for telling the story of the ecological phenomenon. The importance of art in approaching the problem cannot be overlooked : we are witnessing the emergence of these forms of interpellation in the public space and the integration of artists into the process of reflection on the representation of nature and its risks, in the invention of the modes of questioning society and public authorities.

Photographers, performers, videoartists, comedians, have established a plural and paradoxical relationship with these sargassum, polysemic and hybrid objects. Thus the sargassum is described as "inspiring" by a Martiniquan author of poetry slam Simone Lagrand. Likewise, Julie Bessard, a Martiniquan artist, will refer to sargassum as a medium to create an « *impressive writing on surface* » (interview with the artist, may 2019). This communication, based on an ethnographic field work held on 2018 and 2019, shows some of these writings scriptures, praxis and discursive patterns inspired by sargassum.

All art forms are represented and different popular cultural places and moments, such as the Carnival period, become conducive to the display of these non-neutral appropriations in Caribbean culture (Glissant 1997). In 2019, the MouvmanKiltirèlYoMin'm group, from Le Moule, a city in Guadeloupe, paraded with hats and costumes made of dried sargassum in a declared desire to denounce « *over consumption and waste production, chlordecone...* ». In addition to the urban spaces of the Carnival, natural spaces and social networks are used. In a parody of a song soberly entitled *Sargasses* (2018), Yannick Maillard, a comedian from Guadeloupe delivers an unmistakable political message showing its willingness to raise the awareness of a public beyond the island's boundaries. The Martiniquan artist Annabel Guérédrat on her performances *Ensargasse-moi* (*Ensargassum me*, 2015-) manipulates « *this material in a very instinctive, almost animal way* » (interview with the artist, april 2019) . She sees it as « *a way of reclaiming her territory, her land, in an ecofeminist mode.* ». The Martiniquan author-photographer Nicolas Derné with his video *Overflow* (2018) wrote about migration and displacement. For him its represent also an organic chaos that offers an opportunity to connect, to weave relationships between algae and space. In the same way, the installation *Sargasses menace* (*Sargassum threat*, 2018), builds forms of links, archetypal, rhizomes on the shoreline that shows the tension between the infinitely small and the macro-global. According to the creators, the association of art teachers of Martinique, the work shows "a writing track on a surface" creating a termite mound showing that the artist's function is also to transform, to transcend. Art works are not only confined to the artistic register but can also interfere in scientific contexts: the photographs of the Vincentian artist Nadia Huggins accompanied the *Understanding risk conference* held at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill Campus in May 2019.

This brief state of the art was intended to show certain aesthetic choices in the creation of an artifact that is capable of transforming the soiled nature, the attacked environment, into a system of visible and understandable signs. These works are polysemic, they function as a procedure of alerting, aestheticizing and transforming the way we look at the problem of sargassum. The perspective of artists and cultural producers deconstructs representations of the scourge and the crisis, interrogates the toxicity of sargassum in a different way, surprises, diverts the doxa, provokes. The sargassum problem thus develops into a strong source of entanglement of stories and the construction of collective or singular writings. The artist raises the question of "living with" and allows us to transform our view of the territory invaded by these brown algae. It makes it possible to envisage, at least in the collective imagination, a metamorphosis of the sargassum from "poisoned gold" into "dazzling gold" as wrote the artist Louisa Marajo (2019) on a poem that gives its title to this communication.

References :

- GLISSANT E., 1997, *Le discours antillais*. Paris : Gallimard
LATOUR B. 1991, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : essai d'anthropologie symétrique*. Paris: La Découverte.
MÉNEZ F., 2019, « La télé est morte. Algues brunes, corrosion, contagion aux Antilles », *Techniques & Culture* 72 « En cas de panne », p. 184-199
RESIERE D. & al., « Sargassum seaweed on Caribbean islands : an international public health concern ». *The Lancet, Correspondence*, Vol. 292, issue 10165. [On line] : DOI:10.1016/j.pocan.2018.06.009
WANG, M. & al., 2019 «The great Atlantic Sargassum belt», *Science* 365(6448): 83-87, Jul. 2019. [On line] : DOI:10.1126/science.aaw7912.