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Voids and Representation: Surveying the Growth of Artist-led Initiatives in the Caribbean

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I do not claim to be unique. Like most [people] in the creative field, I straddle many roles and frame myself in a number of ways: Barbadian artist. Writer. Editor. Communications and Operations Manager for artist-led initiatives. I consider each role as vital, or that each [one] feeds into the other. In some ways, I feel like both an insider to the Caribbean art scene, as well as an outsider. There can be a perceived chasm between working practically in the arts and working in arts administration or advocacy, even when the two intersect. The latter often involves dwelling on the fringes to gain an overview of what is happening in the region, as well as studying models of arts organizations further afield. These are the kinds of boundaries constantly negotiated by those involved with independent or artist-led initiatives. Here, I aim to investigate how, or if these initiatives envision responding to, enriching or developing the local arts environment, and the value of forming regional and international connections to these pursuits.

The emergence of initiatives such as Ateliers '89 in Aruba, founded in 1989, or El Espacio Aglutinador, founded in 1994 and the oldest ongoing independent art space in Cuba, paved the way for other [informal initiatives] across the Caribbean, such as Popopstudios International Center for the Visual Arts in the Bahamas (1999); Beta-Local in Puerto Rico (2005); The Instituto Buena Vista (IBB) in Curaçao (2006); Alice Yard in Trinidad (2006); L'Artocarpe in Guadeloupe (2009), ARC Magazine (2011); The Fresh Milk Art Platform in Barbados (2011); New Local Space (NLS) in Jamaica (2012); and 14°N 61°W- an informal gallery in Martinique (2013), to name just a few. These have largely been in response to the region's lack of governmental support and infrastructure surrounding the arts.

However, these organizations, while doing groundbreaking work, face insider/outsider contentions within their own countries. There is a level of resistance to understanding contemporary art [even among other artists] and an assumption that it represents elitism, despite many of these platforms considering themselves to be grassroots, based on their proclaimed principles of openness. Rejecting the somewhat intimidating 'white cube' aesthetic, a number of these initiatives operate out of atypical spaces and incorporate the sites' unconventional stories into their work. Instituto Buena Vista's location on the same physical plant as a functioning psychiatric clinic allows for cooperative programmes to be designed for the artists and students to work with some of the patients, breaking down societal stigma associated with mental illness. Fresh Milk is on the site of a former sugar plantation, now a working dairy farm, and rather than shy away from this loaded [past], it strives to open up avenues for conversations about its history, while building an inclusive environment that reclaims land which once signified trauma and exclusivity.

While these are examples of ways in which informal

collectives work from the ground up with the communities around them, the idea of who is considered an 'insider' or 'outsider' is complicated in a region whose history of colonization and consequent denial of voice continues to affect our mentality. I see this tension playing out in Barbados; both personally and professionally, subtly and overtly. For instance, remaining 'authentic' can be of great concern within the Caribbean context. The cultural melting-pot [in the region] was forged from a plethora of diverse influences – some retained, some enforced and some adopted. Due to the complexity of our identities, we may become hyper-aware or protective of them, which contributes to nationalistic attitudes and a certain pressure to assert ownership. But how can authenticity be defined? To what extent is an 'authentic' representation of the Caribbean dictated by generalized views and expectations, which actually flatten the hybridity and complexity that connect the islands in spite of differences.

Artist-led initiatives tend to challenge the nature of culture and embrace alternative thought processes and practices. Does that detract from their grassroots status, making them 'inauthentic' or less relatable? Is this penchant for critical thinking suggestive of the same exclusivity/hierarchy they protest, or does it instead foster an environment where people who fall (or walk) outside of (nationalist) norms can feel safe in their expression and find a sense of belonging?

The introduction of the publication *The Politics of Caribbean Cyber Culture* (2008) by Professor of Popular Culture and Literary Studies at the University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus, Curwen Best, begins "Caribbean culture, as we know it traditionally, died in the decade of the 1990s." (Best 1) In a workshop held at Fresh Milk in late 2014, Trinidadian/Bahamian writer Christian Campbell referenced the fact that, as Caribbean people, we are perpetually moving across boundaries; whether physical shorelines or via the constant translating we do within the region itself and in an increasingly globalized world. Campbell's notion of movement beautifully encompasses the breadth of the Caribbean, acknowledging that the languages we speak and the references we draw on extend beyond different linguistic [or geographical] territories. Our cultures and dialects are in fact translated/transferred across the globe, resulting in an ebb and flow of influences going out, as well as coming in. While this movement is expressed as fluid process, it may in fact spark a variety of issues and concerns.

Concepts of cultural retention, cultural erasure and cultural renewal are in such precarious balance within the Caribbean that there is always a fear of tipping the scale. These issues undergird distinctions between culture and heritage. How can we make clearer the difference between the two, facilitating progress, without one threatening the other? Best shares in this regard that, "External factors have occasionally threatened the demise

of traditional phenomena, but they have also resulted in the forging of new and renewed phenomena" (Best 12). Best approaches this issue from different angles, raising issues of power and who controls the bulk of what we see on the Internet and in the media. While these arguments are certainly valid, it is equally valid for someone of any culture to take an interest in and interrogate or respond to what they encounter through international access. The concern then lies less in immeasurable authenticity and more in ensuring equity and respect in how cultures are engaged with and acknowledging the power dynamics that arise when looking at internal and external gazes or influences. The arts play an interesting role in this negotiation of culture and heritage.

Many Caribbean contemporary artists act as a medium for exchange in broader cultural contexts. Functioning alone in the arts can be isolating in the largest of countries, let alone the smaller islands. Despite the benefits of virtual connectivity, mobility within the region remains riddled with challenges. Having the support of a community can be crucial in mitigating this isolation and many independent or artist-led initiatives take up this mantle of community-building when governing bodies have let it slide. But insularity can occur even within the most open of organizations and personal relations can become fraught. Finding myself experiencing isolation even while existing and operating within a community-building regional artist-led initiative shook me. While my conviction in making a change in the arts did not falter, I became consumed with the difficult question of whether or not there is enough of the multifaceted support necessary to keep these types of spaces relevant and afloat, or if the spaces I worked for (Fresh Milk and ARC Magazine) have run their course.. Maybe, I thought, it was time to take a step back and listen to fellow artists and creative activists locally, regionally and internationally, to gain some perspective myself.

Late 2015 was a challenging period for Fresh Milk, as many of the issues with which the platform had been grappling came to a head, such as sustainability, the intrinsic value of the organization to the local and regional arts communities and how to move forward approaching its fifth anniversary. To this end, Fresh Milk has been undergoing an evaluation, which has, among other things, stirred conversations around culture, race, diversity, inclusivity and longevity. This is a necessary yet overwhelming process, requiring not only looking critically inward, but also at the society in which we (myself as part of a two-member team of Fresh Milk) function.

In the *Directory of Autonomous Contemporary Visual Arts Initiatives – Latin America* (2014), one of the opening essays titled 'Some Hypotheses about Autonomous Contemporary Art Initiatives' by Jorge Sepúlveda T. and Ilze Petroni states:

There is a difference between an artist, an art collective and art initiatives. The first carries out his/her own desire through material transformation using material means. The art collective carries out the desire that the members have beforehand agreed on among themselves. Autonomous art initiatives make real the desire of the other. (Petroni and Sepúlveda T. 35)

Though the specifics vary from country to country, a common thread tying these organizations together is the recognition of a void in the arts community and the drive to fill it. However, just as important as the similarities between the spaces are the differences between them. caryl* ivrisse-crochemar, curator and founder of the independent contemporary gallery 14°N

61°W, refers to the "quasi-invisibility of French Caribbean artists, even within the region" which highlights unfortunate disparities across the islands.

Despite the large gaps in visibility and support that they are created to fill, the majority of these artist-led initiatives are at least partially self-funded and supplement this by applying for grants, or using crowd-sourced funding and other means, to support their programming. New Local Space, for example, funds each residency through a vigorous Kickstarter Campaign . Alice Yard has actively decided not to apply for grant funding and has a fluid mode of working in which they offer a location for artists to create work freely, without requirements or restrictions. Alternatively, the Instituto Buena Vista (IBB) receives some support from Dutch funding entities. I had the opportunity to visit IBB in 2012 for a collaborative project with Fresh Milk. Their main activities revolve around education and the idea of giving back to the country from which one comes. In an interview I conducted with co-founders Tirzo Martha and David Bade, I was inspired by their ardent belief in moving beyond a single moment; investing in a new wave of artists, rather than focusing on the individual.

The *Directory of Autonomous Contemporary Visual Arts Initiatives*, which included part of the Hispanic Caribbean in its research, included the initiatives' various mission statements, as well as views on the roles and relevance of these initiatives to Latin America. The book itself has become a tangible representation of the network and volume of initiatives in these territories, in that way reminding me of Fresh Milk's online map of art spaces in the Caribbean. Neither of these archives see themselves as complete. Both are ongoing and invite those who are interested in doing so, to share information so that these resources can grow. The French and Spanish-speaking Caribbean are admittedly blind-spots for most artist-led initiatives in the English-speaking Caribbean. While this is not intentional, it reveals the effect of historical divisions that were imposed on the region, and illuminates areas in which links need to be strengthened.

These linguistic and cultural divisions highlighted another area in my discussions with artist-led initiatives: that is, if there are concerns around who is included/excluded from these initiatives, why are artists and art-activists not approaching one another as creatives to explore aligning visions? What might be preventing this kind of discussion and collaborative work and what are some of the obstacles to this kind of alignment of vision/collaboration/discussion?

There is no singular guideline for creating an independent art initiative, nor any rule that says that as an artist, you are obliged to create one. According to the essay 'Zones of Resistance' by Kamila Nunes, which addresses Brazilian autonomous spaces, if entities such as these were to reach the stage where they were "...established as a model, a formula that dissolves the principle of freedom which guarantees their existence" (Nunes 42) then they would enter the realm of private institutions. Perhaps the fact that Fresh Milk has had the freedom to go through restructuring sheds a positive light on its autonomy. Sustainability is still a goal – financially, physically and spiritually. If we are supporting the arts and maintaining that they are a viable and positive part of society, then we need to establish and demonstrate that in our own practices. A key factor is that, as obvious as it may seem, there is no such thing as sustainability for such spaces without the artists themselves.





Reaching out to practicing artists in Barbados, the Caribbean and the diaspora for their views on artist-led spaces was enlightening. A recurring word among some artists, when I asked about their local art communities was “fragmented,” with “several different groups [hosting] events geared towards fostering better relationships among creatives and the public, but tending to stick to their own circles.” At the same time, there were those creatives who felt part of a strong support system in their community, with one artist in New Providence, the Bahamas, describing it as “extremely close knit and ever growing...nurturing, accepting, and vibrant.” This in turn inspired her to give back by working at galleries and educational institutions. Another form of giving back, which is sometimes overlooked, is purchasing artwork, letting artists know that “people not only support them but love the work enough to want to own it.”

In terms of how artists feel these artist-led initiatives can better serve their communities, listening and carefully assessing circumstances are at the heart of the matter. Whether artists are in need of professional guidance, workspaces, or opportunities to show their work, network or make presentations, there must be an active dialogue for these malleable entities to be shaped cooperatively and grow organically. Every artist I surveyed expressed that they would be willing to participate in programming run by independent or artist-led initiatives, with a notably positive response being given to the annual regional residency programme Caribbean Linked . Taking place at Ateliers '89, each edition of this programme includes artists from across the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanic and Dutch-speaking Caribbean.

Artists in the diaspora shared similar sentiments as their regional counterparts, but expressed doubt as to whether efforts should be diverted into diasporic outreach when these initiatives already have their work cut out for them locally. An important element of this was the stated mandate of each space or initiative. Michèle Pearson Clarke, a Toronto-based Trinidadian artist put it this way:

I think it is important to define whether an organization, exhibition or residency is interested in the perspective of artists living and working in the region, those of us in the diaspora, or both. All are equally valid, but tensions can arise when it is not clear who is being included and who is being excluded.

ARC, for example, expressly includes the diaspora in its demographic and has grown to reach over 70,000 people. Holly Bynoe, Director of ARC Magazine and Chief Curator at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas shared that “[by capitalising on] social media and with internet proliferation changing the region’s landscape, we began to look at new opportunities to connect professionals and other interested parties.”

Another trend has been artists in the diaspora seeking out projects or residencies in the Caribbean as a way of reconnecting with their roots or exploring how their work might evolve or be read through this local or regional frame of reference. Returning to ideas of respectful and equitable exchanges, the risk is when those coming from the diaspora project their own expectations - which may be coloured

with nostalgia, or understandably shaped by their own local experiences - on to a place, and do not hold the culture and lived realities of its inhabitants in the same esteem. This may lead to a kind of neo-colonial lens that is in some ways more difficult to discuss, as levels of privilege and disenfranchisement become complicated in these shifting contexts. Investing in local artists was one of the reasons visual artist Annalee Davis founded Fresh Milk in Barbados in 2011. One requirement of Fresh Milk’s resident artists is to complete some form of community outreach. This can occur with the general public, Barbadian artists, or students ranging from the primary school level to BFA students at Barbados Community College. However, small initiatives with big visions seem inevitably to find themselves reaching past their original mandate when they see another deficit not being tended to in the art environment. This can lead to these initiatives becoming overburdened or stretched too thin. By extension, it may also invite criticism from observers, who view them as failing their core group or over-stepping their bounds.

On the subject of stepping outside of boundaries, how best can artist-led initiatives in the Caribbean work in tandem with international arts spaces without bending to externally-prescribed criteria? Every artist I contacted answered affirmatively as to whether they would exhibit or attend a residency internationally, regarding it as an opportunity for learning, growth and broadening their outlook and individual art practices. Similarly, independent and artist-led initiatives agree that strategic partnerships with organizations abroad are essential for sharing work and transcending our territorial limits. But the value of these relationships does not erase memories of historical conflict, or justified fears of the exoticification and ghettoization of Caribbean art.

Too often, there have been exhibitions that use the label ‘Caribbean’ in a narrow way, stereotyping the work into what is deemed representative of the region according to uninformed, foreign assumptions. That being said, just as Caribbean-based artists do not want to be stereotyped by others, it is more productive to judge each encounter on its own merits and allow for the possibility that these spaces might present genuine opportunities for exchange. In 2014, I attended the opening of the exhibition Alles Maskerade! at MEWO Kunsthalle in Memmingen, Germany, which looked at manifestations of Carnival across several cultures. The show included work by Barbadian artist Ewan Atkinson, Trinidadian artist Marlon Griffith and co-director of the Ghetto Biennale in Haiti, Leah Gordon, but their contemporary takes on festivals were displayed in conversation with pieces from Europe, Africa, Latin America and Australia. Curator Axel Lapp, rather than compartmentalize the artists based on nationality, brought together an inclusive exhibition about the ideology of masquerade in expanded cultural contexts, drawing remarkable connections.

When the Chief Curator of the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), Tobias Ostrander, first visited Fresh Milk in 2014, he gave a presentation about PAMM and expressed interest in what he called “Strategic Regionalism,” seeking to create increased dialogue between the Southern United States, the Caribbean basin and Central and South America. He also made mention of the danger of falling into the familiar issues of stereotyping or misrepresentation, but relayed a desire to

attempt to mitigate these shortcomings. This has solidified into actions such as PAMM becoming one of the core partners along with Fresh Milk, ARC and Res Artis that came together to make the first iteration of the Tilting Axis conference a reality. Held at Fresh Milk in February 2015, this meeting – built on and made possible by the decades of groundwork already put in by Caribbean creatives advocating for regional cohesion in the arts – wove its way into the fabric of Caribbean history. Participants from independent, artist-led and formal Caribbean arts organizations gathered in one location, along with groups from the UK, US/China, Senegal/Paris and Brazil, to form action plans around the sustainable development of contemporary Caribbean art.

I will not speak at length for the attendees, as their own reports are housed online and it would be a disservice to summarize their forthright accounts about the value of the meeting; as well as anxieties from 'insiders' and 'outsiders' about how this [conference] would be received. This platform too was not without its shortcomings and contentions, and like the online map of Caribbean art spaces, not everyone was represented – but working with what was available, the founders persevered because of their conviction that it was crucial to take that first step. Also like the map, Tilting Axis is ongoing, expanding and learning. A midpoint meeting was held at the invitation of Videobrasil in São Paulo as part of a Public Programme at the 19th Sesc Festival and Tilting Axis 2 was hosted in February 2016 by PAMM. Other unlikely collaborations are also springing up from the conference, such as a budding partnership between the Barbados-based Fish and Dragon Festival (a celebration of cultural dialogue between Barbados and China) and China Residencies (a comprehensive online directory of China-based artist residencies which cultivates creative exchange).

As part of my research for this piece, I interviewed Gaëtane Verna, Director of The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, Canada. Having no prior engagement with the gallery, this conversation gave me some helpful perspective from an international institution that has not had much involvement with the Caribbean. At the end of the conversation, I developed an affinity for the gallery in relation to the struggle of balancing local and international art fairly, while trying to adhere to mandates and meet expectations.

In 2014, The Power Plant hosted the exhibition Pictures from Paradise: A Survey of Contemporary Caribbean Photography, organized by Wedge Curatorial Projects, Toronto, in the shipping containers behind the gallery. When asked if holding this exhibition drew a diasporic crowd, Verna said it did, but as she mentioned – “it would be great if the people that came out for this Caribbean work came to other shows as well.” The nature of contemporary art is being able to speak to a plurality of experiences – is this not why [some] in the region are adamant our work can be shown without the prerequisite of being dubbed 'Caribbean', but appreciated for its quality and message? Underrepresentation is an undeniable problem but it must be balanced with seeking out meaningful and varied engagements that allow us to become part of a wider conversation rather than implicit in our own invisibility. Likewise, international institutions have the responsibility to reflect on their own positions of power, preconceptions and biases when attempting to reach an equilibrium working with marginalized spaces and communities..

Although the key word in artist-led initiatives is artist, everyone who has pledged themselves to creative causes ought to be recognized as integral parts of this cultural ecosystem. Perhaps there could be a greater focus on mutual empathy: with organizations ensuring the artists they cater to feel represented and heard, while these artists in turn do not negate the work and representation of those behind the initiatives – many of whom are practicing artists themselves. The interactions between artists and artist-led initiatives are part of a symbiotic relationship that has enormous potential for growth, if nurtured under the right conditions, and with collective input.

I do not claim to be unique [in the struggles and achievements I have been part of in the Caribbean arts ecosystem], but I do claim to be part of something larger than myself. What felt like a difficult process [of reassessing Fresh Milk's role and purpose] has become necessary growing pains. Even if it results in permanent stretch marks, it will act as a reminder of how far we have come, how far there is to go, and reaffirms my commitment to the development of contemporary Caribbean art.

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Biography: *Katherine Kennedy is a Barbadian artist and writer. She graduated with a BA in Creative Arts from Lancaster University, UK (2011). She currently works for the Fresh Milk Art Platform in Barbados as the Communications and Operations Manager and has contributed to ARC Magazine of contemporary Caribbean art as a Writer, Editor and the Assistant to Director. Through these platforms, she has coordinated and managed programmes such as the Caribbean Linked residency & exhibition programme at Ateliers '89, Aruba, and the biennial Transoceanic Visual Exchange (TVE) international video, film and new media exhibition. Her written work has been published with platforms such as Sugarcane Magazine (Volume 1, Issue No. 3) and Robert & Christopher Publishers in the A-Z of Caribbean Art (2019).*