SUSTAINABLE ART COMMUNITIES: AN AFTERWORD

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Biography

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To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, www.openartsarchive.org, follow this link: http://www.openartsarchive.org/archive/1st-conference-sustainable-art-communities-creativity-and-policy-transnational-caribbean-12

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Mimi Sheller, Drexel University

This provocative collection on sustainable arts communities in the Caribbean teaches us not only about the ways in which knowledge is situated, as many Caribbean theorists have posited, but also attempts to situate artistic practices, institutions, and criticism – that is to say, the arts are seen as always engaged in complex, particular places rather than from an imaginary utopia (or dystopia!) known as the global 'art world'. Thus, the question of the sustainability of Caribbean arts pertains to a multitude of differently located situations, specific places, distinct identities, and varied practices, some of which are in the region, some of which are in the diaspora, and some of which are bridges in between. The essays in this volume raise the problem of how these multi-located arts communities (which are local, regional, national, and global simultaneously) may be sustained over time in all of their rich diversity, as a kind of complex cultural ecosystem full of creative niches.

It should not be surprising therefore that the question of sustainability has several different meanings and programmatic aims that emerge from this collection. I want to briefly reflect on three meanings of sustainability that emerge: first, institutional sustainability and the generational reproduction of arts communities; second, a slightly different facet, focused on how Caribbean artists can *sustain* or bear the weight of outside influence and global forces in relation to locality; and third, the question of the sustainability of a Caribbean identity as a particular social kind. Finally, I will add a fourth dimension of sustainability which is less foregrounded here, the role of the arts in addressing the issue of ecological sustainability of the Caribbean in a future of extreme climate challenges.

First, the collection shows us how the sustainability of local, national, and regional arts communities in the Caribbean (and individual artists and their careers) implies their capacity to be reproduced over time, and ultimately to be transmitted to the next generation. Erica Moiah James offers an incredibly knowledgeable and clear-eyed assessment of the cultivation of arts institutions, practices, and publics in The Bahamas, and their relation to regional and transnational contexts. She shows both the challenges and the possibilities for sustainability based on her own deep experiential engagement with local processes and histories. Her contribution is sobering, yet also hopeful. Also extremely hopeful is Marielle Barrow's presentation of the journal *Caribbean InTransit* as a bridge connecting spaces and institutions within locations/countries, a platform for creative, networked communities and connections between geographic locations, and a location for creating 'communities of value'. She shows us that so much can be done, despite severe constraints for self-sustaining arts publications. Annalee Davis likewise introduces us to the Barbados artists' collective Fresh Milk and asks probing questions about the sustainability of such informal spaces and creative initiatives in their dynamic response to the absence of infrastructure for the arts.

All three of these contributions lead us to think beyond economic challenges alone – which all arts institutions face – and to interrogate instead the reproduction of arts institutions, their generational turnover, and their changing relation to dynamic contemporary contexts. They ask us to think in terms of nurturing and growing healthy cultural ecosystems. To take this further, we should ask how such hopeful green shoots might be cultivated and transferred to other Caribbean locations – what can we learn from each other and share?

Second, sustainability might be thought of not only in terms of what can be kept going, but also what can we bear. How much weight of 'the global' can be sustained upon the backs of Caribbean artists? What is the burden of outside expectation upon Caribbean arts institutions and artists, and who is helping to support that burden? Therese Hadchity calls for paying closer attention to national contexts when discussing Caribbean arts. Despite the turn to more transnational, diasporic, or post-national perspectives, the celebration of the global in metropolitan art circles is contextually problematic for the sustainability of national arts communities and artists in the Caribbean. Global recognition comes at the price of succumbing to outside interpretations that position the Caribbean as a 'belated' time-space lagging behind leading developments that begin elsewhere. At the same time, metropolitan art critics, art institutions, and arts funding may anoint certain Caribbean artists as voices of the local, while ignoring others.

In either case, this leads to the perennial question of what *sustenance* might one gain as an artist from identification of oneself as Caribbean (or more specifically Bahamian, Bajan, etc.); and what dis-identifications or mis-identifications does it entail? Hadchity's critique of cosmopolitanism also shows how this might be a false dichotomy, for art operates in a dual register, with some successful contemporary

artists in Barbados being able to simultaneously speak to cosmopolitan audiences abroad and national audiences at home, demonstrating their complementarity.

Transcending the national in approaches to art may in fact reinforce internal hierarchies and fundamental inequalities by effectively silencing them. A related argument is advanced in Winston Kellman's call for an aesthetics of place. He too feels that the embrace of the global Caribbean 'runs the risk of over-determining the Caribbean', neglecting concrete events, experiences, and points of view that are locally situated and 'on the ground' in the present. The artist Tirzo Martha also questions the imposed political label of an Afro-Curaçao identity, and describes the emergence of the Instituto Buena Bista (IBB), the Curaçao Centre for Contemporary Art, which opened in 2006 as a locally grounded institution. He develops his own artistic persona through a character he calls Captain Caribbean. In her essay about Martha's social practice work, in which he brings rural and urban children together to collaborate on creative projects, Kitty Zijlmans 'elaborate[s] on the ways in which Martha's art practice can help with understanding how to establish a sustainable (art) community on Curaçao from the ground up.' Here, too, the emphasis is on a locally rooted and creatively sustained project.

Third, then, in view of these challenges to global and diasporic identities, we might consider sustainability in terms of whether a concept of Caribbean-ness can be sustained over time and space, and on whose terms? This pertains to how Caribbean identities are not only grounded in specific place experiences, but also travel into the world along different routes. Charl Landvreugd theorises the specificity of Afro-European identities and a 'problem space', as distinct from African-American or Black British trajectories. Again, this suggests the importance of national locations in navigating allegedly post-colonial, post-black, and post-national worlds. His innovative concept of Afropea suggests alternative routes and ways of rooting black identities in Europe, and more specifically of placing Suriname identities in the Netherlands. The work of Nicholas Morris, undertaken together with his wife Ritula Fränkel, also calls into question the routing of complex identities in Caribbean familial itineraries that in his case include West African, Irish, English, German, Portuguese, and Sephardic Jewish descent, now grounded in central Germany. They both call into question assumptions about what belongs within the kin group (to use an anthropological term) 'Caribbean'. Where might it be found? What children are the Caribbean's kith and kin? What gardens does it till?

Taken together all of the contributors provoke a sharper focus on what we mean when we say something or someone is Caribbean, and what it means to support Caribbean arts communities. Outside curators and critics so often get it wrong, imposing labels and assumptions, lumping together distinct locations without recognising their specificity, and importing indistinct global brands that water down, if not indeed drown out, local knowledge production and self-definition.

One of the most important lessons of sustainable arts communities to come out of this collection is the need to cultivate locally grounded ecosystems of arts training, art institutions, and art criticism, which do not simply catapult individual artists out of the Caribbean into the global circuits of metropolitan arbiters of taste, without some kind of payback. Can we speak of reparations owed to Caribbean arts communities by those circuits of power that have undermined their sustainability? Can we imagine new mechanisms for supporting the arts ecosystem in the Caribbean?

As CARICOM advances the region's call for reparations from European nations that profited immensely from the slave trade and the slave plantation system in the Caribbean, and as institutions such as universities are being pressed to examine their ties to wealth generated from slavery, we might ask that metropolitan arts institutions also examine the origins of their valuable art collections, which continue to generate so much profit today. If major European art collections can be traced back to wealth generated from systems of slavery do they not also have an obligation to make reparations to its Caribbean descendants? And would it not be most appropriate to channel that toward supporting arts institutions and artists in the Caribbean?

Finally, in concluding, let me turn to one more meaning of sustainability, indeed one of the most pressing. The discourse around sustainability is sometimes associated with three pillars. Sustaining arts institutions and art markets in the Caribbean might be associated with the economic pillar. Sustaining artists and arts communities might be associated with the social pillar. But the third pillar of sustainability concerns ecological survival and sustaining the future of the land, air, water, and flora and fauna, as well as people of the Caribbean. This aspect has not been taken up so much in this volume, but I believe it is also crucial.

Artists might be thought of as a kind of indicator species who flourish when their habitat is healthy, and whither and die away when it is stressed. They are also often very sensitive to social and environmental perturbations, sensing the world around them with

greater acuity and responsiveness. The Caribbean region today faces a wide range of ecological challenges, including human-induced climate change that is leading to ocean warming, rising sea levels, salination of aquifers, drought, and growing intensity of hurricanes due to sea-surface warming, all of which pose threats to not only biodiversity but the sheer survival of human communities. The most recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggests that these issues are only likely to worsen as climate change continues to affect the entire Caribbean region (IPCC AR5 WG II Report, 2014, Ch. 29). Other human-induced stressors include deforestation, soil loss, dying coral reefs, depleted mangrove forests, road building, and sand mining.

The Caribbean arts community might play a crucial role in drawing attention to these issues of ecological sustainability both at home and internationally. The heavy footprint of tourism in the region, as well as mining and resource extraction, originates from outside and it requires voices in the region and in the diaspora to call attention to its damaging impacts. Artists and arts institutions in the region might also be in a position to support local education and environmental initiatives that pertain to climate adaptation and resilience, including protecting what remains ecologically, as well as supporting recoveries from natural disasters. It may be that the sustainability of the entire Caribbean region (or at least some parts of it) will be put into question in the future, along with the very survival of Caribbean cultures, *tout court*. In that sense, the Caribbean diaspora will play an important part, not only as the seeds that have spread outward, but also as the rhizomatic transplants that will one day propagate the future culture of the Caribbean, wherever it may make landfall.