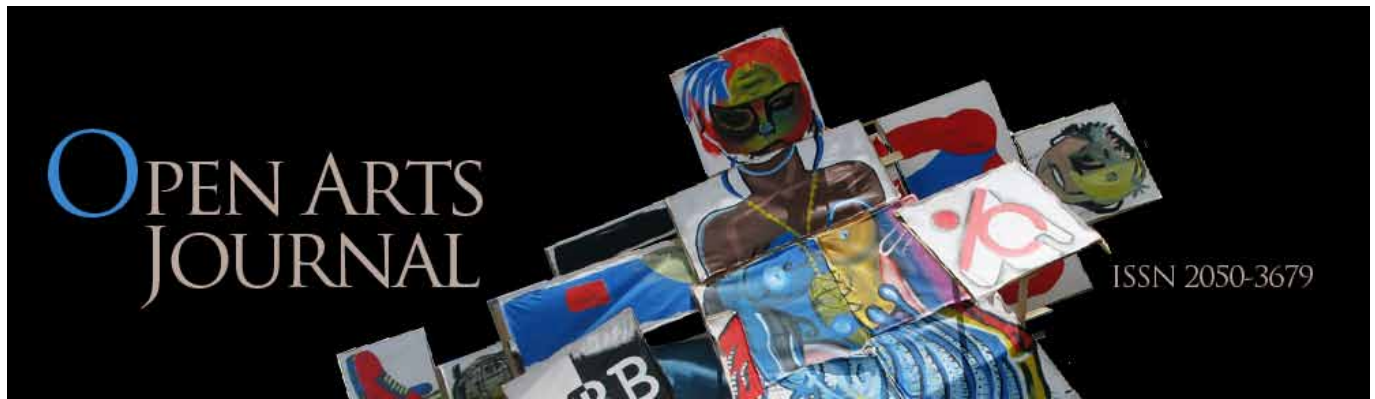




SUSTAINABLE ART COMMUNITIES: CREATIVITY AND POLICY IN THE TRANSNATIONAL CARIBBEAN. INTRODUCTION

Leon Wainwright

Abstract

This themed issue of the Open Arts Journal, 'Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean', brings together academics, artists, curators and policymakers from various countries in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean and their diasporas, the UK and the Netherlands. It explores how the understanding and formation of sustainable community for the Caribbean and its global diaspora may be supported by art practice, curating and museums. The collection was developed through a two-year international research project (2012-14) led by Leon Wainwright, with Co-Investigator Kitty Zijlmans (Leiden University), focused on major public events in Amsterdam and London. The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO/Humanities).

Keywords: art, Caribbean, diaspora, sustainability, community, creativity, policy, the Netherlands, curating, museums

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Biographical note

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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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SUSTAINABLE ART COMMUNITIES: CREATIVITY AND POLICY IN THE TRANSNATIONAL CARIBBEAN.

INTRODUCTION

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The Open University**

Sun, sand and sea, happy faces, music, dance, rum and entertainment. All that helps to conceal and forget our daily reality.

Tirzo Martha, '*Kolonialismo di Nanzi: Anansi colonialism*' (in this volume)

Perhaps one of the most lively and yet troubled cultural landscapes today anywhere in the world is the contemporary Caribbean. The region underwent dramatic changes in the later part of the twentieth century which it is still coming to terms with today. It has suffered severe economic and political crises since the decades of independence of the 1960s and 1970s, and weathered an array of globalising currents that are putting particular pressures on small islands and territories in this interstitial zone of the Americas. In a climate of mounting national debt and instability, countries such as Suriname saw many years of civil war while other nations, including Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, have suffered numerous episodes of political violence and social unrest. The neoliberal aspirations that shape tourism-oriented economies – Barbados, Curaçao, Aruba – are carried on stormy waves of volatile commercial return. Whether voluntary or forced, Caribbean migration has continued apace, to a point where the identities of Caribbean people can no longer be easily associated with a single, regional geography. The challenges to a Caribbean community – fractured by distance and threatened with uncertainty – are being faced by a transnational, global diaspora of people who live on all the shores of the Atlantic. This community is engaging more deeply than ever in re-establishing and maintaining a sense of connection, countering their displacement by building networks, undertaking travel, and exchanging ideas and information.

It is the arts in particular that hold a crucial role in enhancing these networks, creating a shared ground for exchange and understanding. Global change may

have serious, seismic implications for a sense of Caribbean community, but the contributors to this volume share the view that a genuinely meaningful response can issue from an inclusive, open and dynamic sphere of activity such as that of the arts. The arts have remarkably porous borders, a wide appeal and a purchase on everyday life that runs both ways: drawing in participants as well as engaging arts audiences, while being able to reach out and shape cultural policy, education and public institutions. The arts in their cognitive capacity reflect on the bonds of community, while being an imaginatively critical and affective force that can have a lasting historical agency. At root, the arts exemplify the dynamic and far-reaching influence of culture in maintaining a sense of identity and in giving meaning to quotidian social relations. They help to extend the reach of the Caribbean community and provide a common framework in which members invest in novel, complex and often very individual ways.

Multiple perspectives

This collection sets out a range of perspectives on such processes, identifying the crucial need to foster a sustainable *arts* community to support and nurture the broader Caribbean culture and society. Equally, it attests forcefully to the view that visual art in particular has a specific contribution to make in forging a more sustainable community. We grant considerable international and comparative attention to a little-studied topic that spans the scholarly and professional fields of art and heritage. Our contributors are artists, policymakers, curators and art historians drawn from the Caribbean (Jamaica, The Bahamas, Barbados, Curaçao and so on) and the several locations of its global diaspora (the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany and the United States). They have found instructive comparisons between key linguistic regions of the Caribbean and its diaspora – namely the Anglophone and the Dutch – as a means to negotiate this complex geography, tracing how it crosses national lines and encompasses countries in Europe and North America.

The various parts of this diverse landscape have little knowledge of one another, despite their shared colonial history within the Caribbean and similar patterns of subsequent outward migration to the former imperial metropolises. There is a need for greater awareness of these matters of spatial scale and place, connection and disconnection, and global-local tensions, asking how they bear on making the arts a revealing and contested horizon for envisioning community. As such, this volume underscores the necessity for multi-sited accounts of the breadth of Caribbean art communities, and for

greater mindfulness of the contemporary difficulties and opportunities presented in this distinctive cultural zone.

This collection also outlines the continuing reverberations felt from the developments and outlooks that characterise the Caribbean's recent history of art. During the immediate years of independence, visual practitioners were expected to take the lead over other areas of the arts, such as music or performance, in assuming the social responsibility for representing the nation or the Caribbean region as a whole. Today, artists often try to level this ground, seeking pathways toward wellbeing, and employing visual imagery in tandem with more popular forms of culture, such as time-based, participatory instances of public spectacle. They have exercised art's growing capacity to represent an ostensibly shared cultural experience, and as an instrument for conserving a Caribbean heritage, and have explored the inherent difficulties of understanding the changing nature of heritage in relation to the contingencies of everyday life. Artists occupy a transnational terrain where migration and movement may become the very focus for artistic investigation, with the result of broadening definitions of Caribbean heritage in relation to issues of sustainability.

Art and infrastructure

A widely debated issue in relation to the sustainability of Caribbean culture and community is the infrastructure for artists and art. Caribbean artists, who have been historically underrepresented in the centres of the 'global North', are placing increased emphasis on the need to share their perspectives. Offering critically illuminating scholarly, creative and policy-oriented understandings of sustainable community, our contributors propose a range of analyses and models for a lasting and efficient infrastructure of art production, circulation, reception and memorialisation. The sources for such models are themselves temporally and spatially diverse. Some of them hail from countries of the Atlantic region beyond the Caribbean, which the Caribbean refers to, learning from certain elements and adapting others to its local needs. Conversely, as this collection suggests, the issue of sustainability is something that a transnational diasporic community such as the Caribbean is also addressing in its own unique ways, searching intra-regionally for instruction and initiative. In any case, all authors agree that the resources for exploring the full range of options and conceptualisations of sustainability in the arts have yet to be found. What emerges is a set of claims and polemics about what adequate infrastructural support exists in the Caribbean region

itself, how to influence the arrangements for that provision, and why Caribbean people are seeking to transcend such circumstances by striking up viable alternatives.

Artists' voices

Artists who are based in the Caribbean region itself are contemplating a precarious future, and we have tried to demonstrate the need to appreciate how they cope. The lessons that may be learnt from such experiences for the larger Caribbean community are salutary. The role of cultural institutions in Europe and the Caribbean in turn demand direct scrutiny, as we search for reciprocal ways to grant more support and understanding to the practices and lives of Caribbean artists. As we argue in multiple ways, their help in building a sustainable arts community that centres on the needs and voices of artists is vital.

Many of the essays here focus on the setting up not only of institutions generally, but of networks of various kinds, comprising a mix of formal and informal arts infrastructure. The setting up of networks for those whose professional interests are in the area of visual art has disclosed the specific needs, aspirations and obstacles that are associated with the aim of inaugurating and maintaining a sense of Caribbean community. Such networks are contending both with the distributed nature of contemporary art communities at large (the 'global art-world'), and the archipelagic scattering of Caribbean territories, together with the 'submarine' connections between the geographical Caribbean and its diasporas. New lines of support and communication are being found that intersect and fuse Caribbean interests with those of the globalising art market, with its new spaces of display and forums for debate. As we reveal, however, there are also tensions and frictions between them: disconnections between the micro- and macro-markets for art, and rifts and differentiations among regimes of representation that become palpable through attempts to problematise the contemporary master narrative of a unified and inclusive, postcolonial art community.

The Caribbean and 'the global'

With these differences in view, certain visual practices that we highlight respond creatively to the issue of how to build lasting connections and communities to circumvent the economies and discursive categories of 'the global'. While Caribbean people are asking how to see the way toward alternative, longer-term prospects for understanding and supporting themselves, this widely felt desire to sustain a robust and vibrant community has inspired a plethora of critical responses from the arts. Not without irony have such questions

led to a critical look at how the Caribbean's celebrated diversity and transnationalism is mirrored in the vocabulary used to effusively promote art's globalising currents.

But extolling the alleged benefits for all of contemporary cultural exchange in an expanding field may give little heed to the lived experience of individual artists in relation to globalising processes. For many Caribbean artists, the 'milk and honey' myth of globalisation has covered over their actual struggles to negotiate a livelihood in conditions of inequity. Much of the elaborate theorising about the cultural virtues of global cross-fertilisation and transnational mobility seems unaware of Caribbean experience on the flipside of globalisation. This is an adverse outcome of commodifying the imagined geography of interaction, cultural intermixing and global movement that has long been identified with the Caribbean among cultural analysts. At the same time, the theory machines of 'global contemporary art' (metropolitan curatorial mission statements and interpretative texts, art criticism, advocacy arguments for the charitable funding of art in the 'global South' etc.) are intrigued by accounts of the arts that make a virtue of 'dissensus' among its participants. That authoritative commentators are diverted by the thought of a resistive underside of life in the arts may be a sign of their remove from sites of struggle, as much as how self-alienated such struggles become when their principles and narratives are mediated and adapted to satisfy metropolitan taste. Art of the global contemporary has latterly come to be portrayed as a pedagogical place of productive disagreement, fractious yet bountiful social critique, and redemptive if spectacular culture clash. Yet the means, let alone the will, to take part in such a scene of encounters are not roundly shared by art communities of the Caribbean, nor is the sense of hope that this is a battle that the Caribbean can win on its own terms.

These issues, which bear on the future prospect of sustainable art communities, are especially pertinent across the linguistic divisions of the Caribbean. The more common channels for comparing Caribbean experiences cross-linguistically have tended toward Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanic contexts, and the spectrum of creolisations among them. This has not only overlooked English and Dutch interactions, it has also hidden the losses of dismembering the Caribbean region according to its language units. Bridging the boundary between these typically separate linguistic contexts has caused us to refocus on the primary matter of how and for whom different languages feature significantly in the arts, and the extent to which linguistic diversity is constitutive of the arts at all.

Meanwhile, as we have looked at the challenges of building a sustainable community for the transnational and diasporic Caribbean according to the means offered by the arts, we have paused to reflect on the expectations that may be placed on the arts to serve such a role. The English and Dutch contexts of the Caribbean and its diasporas appear to overlap in their debates on this very issue of how to unpack the values that are laid upon the arts, and how a normative term such as community may share parallels with the normativity of unexamined notions about aesthetics and creativity. Our starting point is to defamiliarise all such terms with attention to the specificity and contingency of art as a discursive practice. Through our political economy of art, we have tried to sketch, in episodic and often localised patterns, how various stakeholders in the contemporary art scene in the Caribbean and its global diasporas (international art agencies, regional art organisers and local bureaucrats) are positioned vis-à-vis international capital, foreign, regional or national cultural policy priorities, and flows of funding. Just as importantly, adopting a self-reflexive mode of debate, we raise the important issue of how claims for a sustainable future for art of the transnational Caribbean have come to shape and direct such policies, to justify the operations of institutions and organisations for the arts, and the morphology and movement of money.

Interventions and contestations

Above all, we hope to provide through this collection an intellectual intervention for the arts that uncovers the myriad ways that artists and arts organisers envision and 'frame' sustainable community in the local and global art environment. Our discussion of this field has highlighted the historical and current shifts in such framing on the part of organising bodies, policy makers and artists, especially the competing claims over what constitutes artistic 'success', 'creativity' or 'innovation'.

In particular, this brings out the implications for cultural production when resources and opportunities are scarce. Competition, whether market or interpersonal competition, is likely to remain among the main challenges to the notion of sustainable community for the Caribbean, not to mention in the contemporary art-world more widely. Here is a space where a sense of community and the principle of social cohesion may be unsteadied, riven or evacuated from creative practices altogether. Individual artists, for example, can sometimes be celebrated as a 'success' in promotional literature, or may ably orchestrate declarative images of their status and achievements such as through social media. But the yield for the Caribbean art community at large is doubtful and still

unsubstantiated. That suggests the prestige or star system surrounding a compact set of Caribbean artists falsifies the 'trickle down' model of broader cultural development.

Other modes of framing the issues that surround sustainable art community may be detected through attention to generational differences. There may be generation 'gaps' that complicate viewpoints on the arts and seem to distribute competitive roles over the meaning and value of the arts. Here it is worth digging beneath the professed claims among artists, organisers, curators and bureaucrats about how generational background orients their personal motivations for taking part in the arts. Generational differences are a guide but not a rule to understanding the range of approaches being taken to life on the artistic stage: seeing art as a platform for the demonstration of cultural altruism, (national) community building, group-consciousness raising etc., or else, polarised to the other extreme, as a launching pad for individualism, a means to gain personal prestige by accruing cultural capital and converting it to material profit. These options can also become fused. An artist who garners a degree of public support and acclaim may also see sustainability as a matter of trying to fit simultaneously within a number of markets for art – from local tourism-related or everyday commercial sites, to commissions and sales from the financial sector or private collectors, whether at home or abroad.

While the policy frameworks designed to deliver a greater economic impact from the arts may employ buzzwords such as creativity, innovation and sustainability, these can be at odds with existing conceptualisations of the arts. For instance, members of communities that have long demanded clearer official objectives and support for the arts may have imagined less instrumental outcomes. Mindful of such disappointment or outspoken disapproval, several government manifestos in the Caribbean have sharpened their rhetoric, arguing harder about the necessity in straitened times for the state to roll back its official involvement, ostensibly to avoid stifling private investment and a diversity of views. Culture and tourism are arranged under joint economic targets when art is regarded as having the potential to become a significant 'industry' for the Caribbean. In response, such measures have been met with alarm in some quarters of the arts community, doubling their efforts to draw a bold line between popular and high art and trying to reinforce those categories, even in the face of examples of art practice that seem to dissolve them. The very same buzzwords – sustainability, community etc. – may also be wielded by bureaucrats trying to justify the spending of public money on projects with

no proven or obvious public benefit. These are cases of unrealised or uneven arts policy, when government resources are squandered through unchecked personal spending. They meet the goals of finding community with arts and heritage bureaucrats outside the Caribbean (largely disconnected from the region's needs and art historical past), and generally sustaining the careers of public servants in the arts and arts education, by funding their private cultural tourism.

Very rarely do the visual arts seem to yield such plain rewards, however in both the formal and informal infrastructure for the arts, substantial long-term, in-kind support often comes from perennially committed volunteers and enthusiasts. Some of these unpaid culture workers will explain that their purpose is to become 'professionalised' in the arts, that their efforts are galvanised by trying to achieve 'blue chip' standards. For a region of the world where there are very few such individuals or benchmarks that identity is all the more esteemed and taking on its mantle can feel like an end in itself. These sorts of participants in the arts may bend their backs in the hope that one day art and artists of the transnational Caribbean will gain 'recognition' and 'visibility'. But these too are pliantly abstract terms, with the result that objectives and concerns for the future of the arts can clash with or diverge from one another, regardless of their apparently shared rubric.

Morality and the environment

What seems to be held in common, across all such motivations for getting involved in the arts, are some distinctly *moral* views. There may be impassioned opinion about how the arts are of civic worth or a matter of local pride; how culture can restore a sense of place deemed missing or misrepresented; or how art may become a vehicle for cultural 'autonomy' and 'freedom' – making amends for years of colonial rule and imperial geo-political dominance over culture's arbiters of value and the uses of culture as an agent of control. While participation in the arts bears out for its members a social distinction – distinguishing the members of that community *as a community* – that logic of participation has a moral dimension. Such a community derives a strong sense of belonging from ostensibly shared aspirations and beliefs that are morally encoded, and its membership requires continual, duty-bound maintenance. Participants make themselves present and convey their views in increasingly inventive ways, acts of moral persuasion sometimes projected over considerable geographical distance.

Caribbean art communities have also on occasion based their *raison d'être* on the need to make clear

how they should be differentiated from the wider Caribbean society, particularly in its alleged indifference to the arts. There is a moral tenor to the polemic set against local authority figures, 'philistines', and even generalisable straw men who supposedly still cannot see how culture 'improves' society. If this leads into a moral maze of deliberation over the case for envisioning culture as a value-added activity which 'enriches' the socio-economic, that is hardly surprising in a context of underinvestment. The relative scarcity of resources points to the need for radical responses to the challenges of community building and the current patterns of communication and knowledge exchange.

The present collection and the project that brought it to fruition bear broad similarities with the existing means of networking, yet they extend its geography by channelling the international transmission of opinion and the performativities of artists, curators, arts organisers, to include stakeholders, audiences and readers that have hitherto paid little attention to the Caribbean. This difference has helped to deepen the process of self-identification for members of an arts community whose moral economy we should hesitate to delineate as simply another political field. The results expose the deeper foundations and style of practices of community-building through a robust exchange of knowledge.

Emboldening the moral case for the Caribbean to achieve a 'sustainable art community' is the ability of that phrase to conjure up associations with a more established and urgent discourse: the global environmental movement, with its warnings about the human-animal misery and world disasters of pollution, the extraction industries, climate change, species collapse, ecological degradation. There is a persuasive energy that comes from the general acceptance of the terminology of environmentalism and it exploits the blurring of distinctions between two loci of rhetoric. The scalar sizing-up of the Caribbean moral case in support of the arts comes about in association with an expanded field of ethical engagement. Here the extant (local) moral economy of Caribbean community is articulated to the codes of a more global-facing morality: a simultaneously spatial and ethical aggrandisement of aims and objectives – planetary sustainability, interspecies community – which are mutual responsibilities thought to transcend cultural contexts and frontiers.

The same metaphor of sustainability has to be handled with care, however, and never embraced tout court. For example, the term sustainability can be co-opted by those who stave off opposition to cutting state provision for the arts – 'the former high level of investment just wasn't sustainable' etc.

While the transnational Caribbean brings plenty of cases of appropriated terminologies that reverberate productively in the cultural field, the currently operative terms – sustainability and community – seem especially prone to subversion. Their otherwise ameliorating potential may be lost through discursive articulations with undisclosed, self-serving ends, and lip service paid to aims and concepts that appear to be underpinned by consensus but are set to starkly contrary or recalcitrant purposes. This is why, through the following commentaries, we have counselled vigilance toward the uptake of any such language and the temptation to prescribe 'what art of the Caribbean needs'. Instead, we sound a cautionary note: the very notion of a sustainable art community is at its most ideological when it comes to seem uncontroversial, and in response we have placed its terms under scrutiny.

Transcending boundaries

By drawing the parameters around the Caribbean for such a discussion about the future of both art and community, the editors of this volume have aimed for a particular viewpoint onto a wider expanse of transdisciplinary discourse. Through a range of examples and cultural settings, we have tried to establish a clearer sense of how diverse stakeholders have come to frame issues of cultural development and sustainability in ways that may work around, against or with one another. The difficulty of how best to describe and explain the contestations taking place in the Caribbean – over what should count as mutual and collective benefit in the arts – is maximally felt. As we will show, what is happening in the transnational Caribbean calls for a sharpening of the current intellectual means to demystify the arts, especially to ground its practices in a critical cultural geography. That the evidence we offer will problematise the initiatives that have issued from art history (after taking its 'global turn'), is second only to our central interest in pursuing social justice for the arts without dissipating our energies through academic in-fighting.

In closing, this volume gestures toward the need to hone our attention to how globalising processes may have uneven (and often detrimental) consequences for the arts community in the Caribbean, and for the wider expanse of transnational and diasporic Caribbean people. It shows up the many challenges in the way of influencing cultural policy and curatorial practice, and the institutional and public reception for Caribbean artists. Our concerted symptomology of this field tries to increase collaboration across all of the boundaries that have separated these areas of activity and interest. At its core is the concern to improve the apparatus for exchanging knowledge and experience within and

across national and linguistic spaces, envisioning a better register of results. We hope that readers will appreciate our shared effort to convey the importance of the Caribbean's art for cultural constituencies that identify with the Caribbean. Of course we are also seeking to reach those who are concerned more generally about how ideas about art and community come to intersect in the social imaginary. Ultimately, we hope that this collection reinforces the belief in contemporary art's role and potential to win through, and to remain sovereign, despite the present uncertainties about the sustainability of art's communities, and the obstacles that stand in the way to a clearer sense of belonging and togetherness. Above all, we have aimed to show how holding up the Caribbean for discussion can help to furnish the way for the arts to become an emancipated space of convergence – discursive, social, ethical, material, imaginative and emotional. In the final analysis, that convergence would be at least as much a collaborative venture as compiling this volume has been.

The background to this volume

This collection has its origins in a two-year international research project (2012–14) that explored how the understanding and formation of sustainable community for the Caribbean and its global diaspora may be supported by art practice, curating and museums. It was led by Principal Investigator Leon Wainwright (The Open University, UK) and Co-Investigator Kitty Zijlmans (Leiden University), together with an organising team comprising Wayne Modest (Research Centre for Material Culture, the Netherlands' National Museum of World Cultures), Tessa Jackson OBE (Iniva, the Institute of International Visual Arts, London) and Rosemarijn Höfte (Leiden University). The project successfully fostered networks of exchange and collaboration among academics, artists, curators and policymakers from the UK and the Netherlands, as well as various countries in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean and their diasporas. Two major, two-day events in Amsterdam and London allowed the opportunity to address in detail the role of networking and exchange for a community focused on contemporary art of the Caribbean. Well-prepared and often vividly illustrated presentations were combined with roundtable and themed panel discussions, informal summaries of the discussions, and interaction with a wide public that attended both events. This enabled the project to encompass a considerable breadth of relevant issues through the sharing of diverse viewpoints. Additionally, we benefitted from the timely production and posting of video material following the first conference, which many speakers watched in

considering their interventions to the second event. Continuity was also established through attendance at both events by every member of the project team, who served as panel chairs and delivered formal presentations from a background of original research.

We wish to thank all of those who took part in staging these events, including the staff at the two host arts organisations, and especially Heather Scott and Jim Hoyland of The Open University. Conference I took place at the Tropenmuseum (Royal Tropical Institute), Amsterdam, on 5th and 6th February 2013. Speakers included: Petrina Dacres (Jamaica), Marlon Griffith (Japan/Trinidad), Rosemarijn Höfte (Netherlands), Tessa Jackson (UK), Erica James (US/Bahamas), Roshini Kempadoo (UK), Tirzo Martha (Curaçao), Wayne Modest (Netherlands), Nicholas Morris (Germany/Jamaica), Alex van Stipriaan (Netherlands), Leon Wainwright (UK) and Kitty Zijlmans (Netherlands). Our second conference took place at the Institute for International Visual Arts (Iniva), London, on 3rd and 4th December 2013, with the speakers: Alessio Antonioli (UK), Marielle Barrow (Trinidad), Charles Campbell (Jamaica/UK), Annalee Davis (Barbados), Joy Gregory (UK), Therese Hadchity (Barbados), Glenda Heyliger (Aruba), Rosemarijn Höfte (Netherlands), Yudhishtir Raj Isar (France/India), Nancy Jouwe (Netherlands), Charl Landvreugd (Netherlands), Wayne Modest (Netherlands), Petrona Morrison (Jamaica), Jynell Osborne (Guyana), Leon Wainwright (UK) and Kitty Zijlmans (Netherlands). Dedicated project webpages may be read by going to The Open University website, where extensive digital resources, including video footage of all presentations, round table discussions and contributions from our international audiences, may be found: <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/sac/>

Finally, we would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and its Dutch counterpart, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO/Humanities) for the research networking and exchange funding that supported this project under the 'Sustainable Communities in a Changing World' joint initiative. Alice Sanger, Tilo Reifstein and Peter Heatherington worked assiduously to bring this publication to fruition, along with Simon Faulkner and our team of peer reviewers. We are especially grateful to Mimi Sheller for her superb and insightful Afterword. Personal thanks from Leon Wainwright are due to the Leverhulme Trust for the Philip Leverhulme Prize in the History of Art that enabled the completion of this publication, and Kitty Zijlmans extends her gratitude to the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts of Leiden University who lent their financial support to the production of this volume.