



# ART AND AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY CURAÇAO: TIRZO MARTHA'S *BLIJF MAAR PLAKKEN*

Kitty Zijlmans

## Abstract

*Through a discussion of the artwork Blijf maar plakken by Curaçaoan artist Tirzo Martha, this paper discusses how a collaborative artwork not only reinforces bonds between its participants, but also taps into a local community's cultural memory, prompting stories and creating cultural identity rather than merely representing or reflecting it.*

*This text is published as a counterpart to the contribution to Sustainable Art Communities from the artist Tirzo Martha.*

**Keywords:** contemporary art, the transnational Caribbean, cultural identity, storytelling, collaboration, Curaçao, Tirzo Martha, Instituto Buena Bista

**Full text:** <http://openartsjournal.org/issue-5/article-5/>

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2016s06>

## Biographical note

Kitty Zijlmans is Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory/World Art Studies at Leiden University and member of LUCAS, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society. In 2010, she was accepted as a member of the KNAW, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her fields of interest are contemporary art, art theory, and methodology. She is especially interested in the ongoing intercultural processes and globalisation of the (art) world, and increasingly collaborates and exchanges with artists in the context of the field of artistic research.

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.

To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, [www.openartsarchive.org](http://www.openartsarchive.org), follow this link:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/archive/1st-conference-sustainable-art-communities-creativity-and-policy-transnational-caribbean-6>

'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.



The Leverhulme Trust

# ART AND AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY CURAÇAO: TIRZO MARTHA'S *BLIJF MAAR PLAKKEN*

Kitty Zijlmans, Leiden University

In 2009, I was invited by artists David Bade and Tirzo Martha of the Instituto Buena Bista (IBB), the Curaçao Center for Contemporary Art, to visit the organisation and give a lecture for the local art community. It was a unique opportunity to be taken on a trip around the island by Tirzo Martha. Having been born and raised there, Martha knows Curaçao inside out and took my husband, Rudi Struik, and me to places a tourist could not easily reach. He showed us several of his art projects, including an installation entitled *Blijf maar plakken*, located in Bandabou, towards the northwest of the island. Produced in 2008, the work's title can be literally translated as 'Just Keep Adding On' but it also has another connotation, which I will clarify in the course of my discussion. For me, this art project was like a crash course in Curaçaoan society: it touches on the island's social stratification, the antagonism between countryside and city, and all kinds of local habits. Moreover, in its engagement with Curaçao's social complexity and politics, *Blijf maar plakken* transcends mere art practice by becoming what may be described as a socio-cultural intervention in its own right.

In this essay, my aim is to elaborate 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. As will also become clear, Martha's art project as well as the novels and columns of Curaçao writers Frank Martinus Arion and Boeli van Leeuwen testify deeply to the island's customs. The assumption here is that art may indeed open up ways to connect with people, tapping into their social and psychological competencies, revealing latent skills and thus forging more lasting bonds between not just the 'kids' involved in an art project but also any local inhabitants who are drawn into it because they feel addressed and invited to respond.

## The IBB

To give a clear insight into the nature of Tirzo Martha's *Blijf maar plakken* project, it is important to explain first how it is framed by the Instituto Buena Bista. The IBB was founded in 2006 by Curaçao-born artists David

Bade and Tirzo Martha in close association with the Dutch art historian Nancy Hoffmann, with the goal of creating a solid platform for art and education.<sup>1</sup> The IBB combines a pre-academy training institute for talented Curaçaoan youngsters aged between 14 and 24, and a laboratory for contemporary art through an artists' residency programme. The IBB is located in the Orkidia pavilion on the compound of the Klinika Capriles psychiatric hospital – perhaps not the most obvious place at first glance, but, according to David Bade, the location is 'totally inspirational' because of the site's integration in the local infrastructure. Here contemporary art is not detached from society but right in the middle of it. The IBB strives to see talented young people from Curaçao enrolled in Dutch art schools, allowing them to develop their recently discovered talent.

Curaçao lacks a proper art-education infrastructure, the IBB is laying the foundations for its development. Currently, aspirant art students tend to go abroad in search of further education. The choice of the Netherlands for art academies or other degree-level creative schooling is an obvious one: due to the island's history as a Dutch colony Curaçaoan students have Dutch citizenship and do not need to obtain a visa or a residency permit. Since 2010, Curaçao has been an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands and its citizens have Dutch nationality. Moreover, the students are able to speak Dutch (in addition to their native Papiamentu), and are entitled to school funding.

Some forty students are currently continuing their art training in the Netherlands and, apart from having to adapt to Dutch customs and the climate, overall, they are doing well. In order to increase the sustainability of the art infrastructure in Curaçao, the best-case scenario would be for these more educated art students to return to the country after their studies. As Bade and Martha told me when we met in the Netherlands in April 2015, some do return and are joining the IBB educational training programme as supervisors (Bade & Martha, 2015).

<sup>1</sup> Both David Bade (\*1970) and Tirzo Martha (\*1965) were born on Curaçao, Bade to Dutch and Martha to Curaçao-born parents. At the age of four, Bade moved to the Netherlands with his parents and later studied at De Ateliers in Amsterdam. Martha studied at the Akademia di Arte Korzou in Curaçao and subsequently in the Netherlands at the HKU University of the Arts in Utrecht and the Molenaar Fashion School. In 1999, he also attended a training and refreshment course dealing with socially-excluded children in anticipation of what he was going to develop in the near future in Curaçao. Following their education in Europe, Bade and Martha returned to Curaçao.

The achievements of the IBB are also recognised by the Dutch government, which subsidises the institute through the Mondriaan Fund and other funding bodies.<sup>2</sup> This shows how the IBB is firmly situated within Curaçao society while maintaining strong bonds with the Netherlands. One of the subsidisers, the DOEN Foundation, informed me that it sees the IBB's work as an important way in which the Netherlands, as former coloniser, can demonstrate its sense of responsibility towards the people of Curaçao (Stichting DOEN, 2014).

Postcolonial thinking and migration studies (Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993; Glissant, 1999) have led to the recognition that the community of Caribbean people can no longer be reduced to a single, regional geography. The Caribbean is as diverse as its number of islands and regions and has a huge transnational diaspora. But there is also a strong feeling of connection throughout the region as a whole, promoted by the exchange of information and experience between Caribbean contemporary art centres.<sup>3</sup> The IBB's connection to these networks of arts spaces in the region stimulates a flow of artists around the Caribbean. Moreover, through the IBB's residency programme, artists from all over the world visit Curaçao to work and teach its students. On its website and in many of the art projects and workshops Bade and Martha undertake internationally, the IBB is presented as an art centre that is stimulated by the urgency to create what I would call a specific cultural ecology, in the mutual interaction between people, their culture and the island. The art project *Blijf maar plakken* alludes to and connects with that local culture and habits, within the larger frame of social groups, hierarchies, institutions and power relations on the island. I will explain how this happens below. It should also be said that the project ties in with processes of globalisation, given that even such a small island as Curaçao is part of the global fabric of trade, finance, travel, the exchange of goods and ideas, and the World Wide Web.

### **Curaçao after the arrival of the Western colonisers**

For the Spanish explorers who first visited the Caribbean islands around 1500, the region served mainly as a stepping stone for the colonisation of the

Americas. They also called at Curaçao but soon left it aside because of its lack of natural resources, such as fresh water (for farming) or gold. The Dutch, however, who arrived in the early seventeenth century, saw the benefit of the islands' proximity to mainland South America for trade and further exploitation of the region. In the first decades of the seventeenth century, the Dutch made Curaçao a centre for the slave trade. Enslaved people were brought from West Africa to Curaçao and sold to nearby plantations or put to work on the island. Curaçao also served as a storage depot for European trade and a junction for international shipping, with people from all over the world crossing the island. The Dutch never left Curaçao. Because of its harbour and stable political climate, in 1915 Royal Dutch Shell chose the island to build an oil refinery, bringing work (it became the island's biggest employer) but also heavy pollution. In 1985, Curaçao's government nationalised the refinery and leased it to Venezuela's state-owned oil company PDVSA.

Despite its small size Curaçao is a melting pot. Not many of the original indigenous population, the Arawak, remain and because of the slave trade a large number of Curaçaoans are of African descent. Over the centuries, many ethnic groups have settled on the island resulting in its multi-ethnic mix. All these 'presences', to use a concept from Stuart Hall (1990), are very tangible. To Hall, the interaction of various historically developed cultural 'presences' creates a culture of diversity and difference. This is today's reality in Curaçao. But being an intercultural society does not mean that there are no social divisions on the island. Not only does Martha's art project *Blijf maar plakken* allude to this, and such social and ethnic differences are also a recurrent theme in Curaçao literature. The novels, short stories and columns of Frank Martinus Arion and Boeli van Leeuwen, for instance, attest to (ethnic) tensions and feelings of inequality and frustration. These more widely felt sentiments are mostly directed towards the more powerful and wealthier white population, the big companies (oil, among others) and hotel chains, which bring in their own employees and take the profits, leaving little or nothing for the local inhabitants. The tensions *between* the wider spectrum of the island's ethnic groups are also an undercurrent in their writings (Arion, 1973; van Leeuwen, 1988 and 1990).

With its Caribbean climate, beautiful beaches and reefs for scuba diving, the island derives much of its income from tourism. As Arion and van Leeuwen also point out, this money does not in the main flow back to the local inhabitants, but instead goes to the large tourism companies and hotel chains. Huge cruise ships stop at Curaçao, where their passengers alight

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information on the educational and artist programmes of the Instituto Buena Vista, see: <http://www.institutobuenabista.com>.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the art centres, projects and exchanges, see: <http://freshmilkbarbados.com/projects/map-caribbean-art-spaces/>.



to visit the historical sites of Otrabanda and Punda, and to shop at small pop-up markets. There are also commercial galleries that sell works by Curaçaoan artists to both tourists and locals, and much of this revenue benefits the local artists. While visiting Curaçao, I noticed a certain tension between the IBB and these galleries: whereas the IBB aims to establish an art infrastructure connecting the local, regional and international art scenes, the galleries focus primarily on the local market. The two appear to belong to completely distinct art worlds that have no interaction. In addition, there are feelings of inequality on the part of the local art galleries since the IBB is funded by the Dutch government and partly run by Dutch people.

Because Curaçao was a Dutch colony for centuries, the Dutch presence is still tangible in its institutions of government and administration, the education system and in business, in which many Dutch people or those of Dutch descent occupy powerful positions. Curaçao was under Dutch rule for so long and the prospect of simply erasing the island's colonial history is not without its problems and contradictions, with many Curaçaoans still feeling dominated by the Dutch.

The island faces many social problems due to unemployment, poverty and limited access to

education. There is not only a wide gap between the rich visitors and the local inhabitants, but, as will become clear when discussing the artwork in question, also between the Curaçaoan people themselves. It is precisely these tensions that are revealed by *Blijf maar plakken*.

### Negotiating identity

When we drove down to Bandabou to see the work *Blijf maar plakken*, I had no idea what I was going to see. The work is located off the island's main road in the district of Bandabou, a somewhat remote area (if one can speak in these terms considering Curaçao's small size: it covers an area of only 444 km<sup>2</sup>). But even on such a small island, issues such as the disparity between the city and the countryside are strongly felt. Bandabou is in the poorer, rural western side of the island. It has an arid, predominantly desert-like terrain and there are few employment opportunities for the local people, who consequently feel neglected. There, in a yard in the middle of nowhere, I was confronted by a large construction made from all manner of building materials and household goods and appliances (Figure 5.1). There were wooden planks, loose bricks, a rotary washing line with clothes hanging from it, a palm



Figure 5.1: Tirzo Martha, *Blijf maar plakken*, 2009, outdoor installation, mixed media, Bandabou Curacao. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)





Figure 5.2: Tirzo Martha, *Blijf maar plakken*, 2009, outdoor installation, mixed media, Bandabou Curacao. (Photo: Kitty Zijlmans)



Figure 5.3: Tirzo Martha, *Blijf maar plakken*, 2009, outdoor installation, mixed media, Bandabou Curacao. (Photo: Kitty Zijlmans)





Figure 5.4: Tirzo Martha, *Blijf maar plakken*, 2009, outdoor installation, mixed media, Bandabou Curacao. (Photo: Kitty Zijlmans)

planted in a toilet bowl, stacks of plates and washing-up bowls, a dozen coffee machines, rows of shopping bags hanging from a free-standing wall, Coca-Cola crates, an accumulation of religious objects and statues in a case with chicken-wire doors (Figure 5.2), a silver goblet filled with toothbrushes, trophies etc., etc. The installation's title, *Blijf maar plakken* (*Just Keep Adding On*), refers to Martha's gradual process of accumulation: continually adding elements to the structure (Figure 5.3).

As the artist explained, this practice of 'adding on' relates to a phenomenon that is emblematic of Curaçao's socio-economic problems. Curaçao's politicians ignore the nation's growing social problems while the population conceals its poverty with cosmetic displays of wealth through the accumulation of commodities. Many households have three cars, fridges or air-conditioning units, one or more of which is probably broken; that hardly matters as long as they *appear* to be well off (Figure 5.4). Perhaps the most visible aspect of this bluff is the phenomenon of people constantly building extensions (Figure 5.5). This also resonates in the novel *Double Play* by Frank Martinus Arion (1973) and the aforementioned columns that

Boeli van Leeuwen wrote for the *Curaçaosche Courant* in 1989.<sup>4</sup> According to van Leeuwen, the title 'Ingenious Anarchy' expresses in a nutshell the main trait of the Curaçaoan people: they know how to fix anything if they feel like it but they are more likely to just let it disintegrate (Figure 5.6). He writes that Curaçao has been in a 'permanent state of going to pieces' since Johannes van Walbeeck, director of the Dutch West India Company, first set foot on the island in 1634, and those who cannot cope with this had better leave (van Leeuwen, 1990, p.8). Thus, people flaunt their supposed wealth by continuously adding on to their houses, but let the rest fall to pieces. Arion's *Double Play* also describes this phenomenon and *Blijf maar plakken* mimics it.

Despite the rather less than positive reading this gives of Curaçao, local people responded very enthusiastically to Martha's project. After overcoming their initial surprise that what they saw could actually be 'art', they started to engage with it, recognising

<sup>4</sup> The weekly columns, written in his idiosyncratic, razor-sharp, humorous Dutch mixed with Papiamentu, Spanish, English, French and Latin, are collected in the volume *Geniale Anarchie* (1990).



Figure 5.5: Tirzo Martha, *Blijf maar plakken*, 2009, outdoor installation, mixed media, Bandabou Curacao. (Photo: Kitty Zijlmans)

elements and objects that are part of their daily life and environment. This was the point at which the installation really started to *work* on the viewers, as Martha clarified. Stirred by what they saw, people came forward with elaborate interpretations including stories about their experience of what it is like to live on the island. *Blijf maar plakken* set in motion trains of thought and emotions and prompted highly personal stories, creating a bond between the local residents and the work, as well as between each other. Clearly, the artwork appealed to them because it was *about* them, but it also left room for them to add on their own elements.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy (1993) discusses how for centuries storytelling and its performance have been foundational in creating alternative public domains in which new cultural identities are formed. The stories may have changed over time, but their significance has not. As in many other regions around the world,

the Caribbean has a strong tradition of storytelling. Important elements within this oral folklore tradition are the ancient Anansi stories, which can be traced back to the arrival of those enslaved from Ghana (Beckwith, 1924). The stories revolve around a cunning creature, usually a spider, but he may sometimes appear as a man. Curaçao's rich tradition of storytelling reveals much about social undercurrent, tensions and entanglements as well as local habits and beliefs. Much of Arion's novel *Double Play* consists of 'tales' told by four domino players to one another (or to themselves). This orality is strongly connected to politics, identity and cultural memory, as the stories prompted by *Blijf maar plakken* also indicate.

However, the work reveals more. With these kinds of interventions, Martha aspires to create a serious and critical bottom-up analysis of his complicated island community. He argues that the external world and in particular hip-hop culture influences the local





Figure 5.6: Tirzo Martha, *Blijf maar plakken*, 2009, outdoor installation, mixed media, Bandabou Curacao. (Photo: Kitty Zijlmans)

population through television, the internet and social media, with an impact on its aspirational fashions, lifestyles and ways of speaking. Parts of the population copy these sources uncritically, but because they lack the funds to purchase luxury goods, they improvise as best they can, creating inferior derivatives just to show off. The local participants in Martha's project recognised this mania for collecting things and understood its reference to people sitting around with little or nothing to do – since *Blijf maar plakken* can also indicate a condition of remaining 'stuck'.

Martha's analysis of Curaçaoan society through his artwork is simultaneously critical of local habits as well as being full of understanding of them. More than once during my visit, I heard the criticism that the (Dutch) media only see the rubble and the ruins on the island, not taking into account that the local culture has its own ways and should be respected for what it is. Ultimately, of importance for Martha and

what he wishes to propagate, is how people from the neighbourhood responded to the intervention. In fact, the work *Blijf maar plakken* is merely the material basis for activating a response from the community. In a play of estrangement and identification, it opens up a way of approaching socio-cultural issues such as belonging, identity and difference. The work itself speaks the local language and prompts stories, thus producing cultural identity instead of merely representing it.

### Working together

*Blijf maar plakken* was commissioned by the MAI Foundation (mai is 'mother' in Papiamentu), an organisation that strives to fight poverty and social problems on the island by helping to increase educational and social development of the deprived, as well as helping them to find employment. The foundation asked Martha to organise a project that would refer to the local social problems, especially

among adolescents, and people's response to these problems, in which Martha has a deep interest. I have noted how, in 1999, Martha had taken a training course in dealing with children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the Netherlands. The difficulty of bringing together people from underprivileged, rural Bandabou and the better off Punda (a neighbourhood of the capital Willemstad), inspired Martha to develop a project in which youngsters from the city (those he recruited from the IBB) and Bandabou had to work together. He was inspired to do so because the groups tend to discriminate against each other. The IBB kids look down on their Bandabou counterparts even though 85% of them come from low-income families themselves; a classic scenario of city-vs-countryside divisions.

Initially, the IBB kids were reluctant and the Bandabou kids felt they were being teased by their urban neighbours. To overcome this deadlock Martha gave them assignments according to their interests – building, making pictures, carpentry and so on – to make them feel comfortable and generate an environment of cooperation. Working on the principle that creative acts spur discovery and unleash the imagination, these tasks tapped into the participants' skills and interests, making them more eager to be involved and bringing to the surface latent talents.

A work such as *Blijf maar plakken* takes art into the realm of human interactions, turning it into a kind of training experience. For these young people such art can play a key role in their education and, considering the response of the adult community to the work, it also raised their cultural awareness. These forms of collaboration can stimulate creativity and artistic ability among both amateurs and aspiring professionals such as those who attended the IBB. It is dependent on first-hand experience: physical labour, as well as the fun of constructing a physical work with no predetermined plan. The project grew organically through the adding-on of materials and objects by the participants, and subsequently it grew further in the stories of the people whom it enticed. So *Blijf maar plakken* also stands for the adding on of stories, adding meaning to the work and reinforcing local culture.

Thanks to Tirzo Martha (and David Bade) I was fortunate enough to see the island of Curaçao not as tourists do but also to glimpse it from the inside. If we want to grasp something of the island's culture, communities and politics we need the eyes of the artist, and the engagement of a community through art practices, to offer an oblique perspective on its complexity.

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