

BIENNIALS & ART PRACTICES IN THE CARIBBEAN

CARIBBEAN INTRANSIT



Smithsonian
Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

*Sponsored by: Center for Global Studies & Latin American Studies
George Mason University*



Review of “Biennials & Art Practices in the Caribbean”
Written by Marielle Barrow
July 2012

“Biennials and Art Practices of the Caribbean” brought a wide array of experiences, projects and concerns into focus. The event was hosted by Caribbean InTransit in partnership with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) on June 28th 2012 at the CFCH as a fringe event to the Folklife festival. It was also in celebration of Caribbean-American Heritage month and listed in the calendar of the Allspice Festival of Arts & Humanities. The event included presentations via videoconference and invited respondents to submit three questions to moderators for advance consideration facilitating a wider cross-section of voices and issues from across the Caribbean to be heard. The richness of the presentations and questions by audience members present in person left little room to engage all of these questions, however they remain as effective structural points around which the conversation can be furthered via social media.

The four panels were designed in attention to bring policy makers, artists, academics, activists, curators and administrators together from across the Caribbean and its Diasporas. Forging collaborations and synergies would begin to establish a web as a framework for imagining a calendar of joint or collaborative events leading up to a trans-national affair.

Jose Ortiz, Executive Director of Artisphere, an arts center funded by Arlington County which boasts multiple gallery and theatre spaces, was the key note speaker who opened the event with his presentation entitled “Art Every Day: Building Community Through Artistic Collaborations”. He highlighted the Artisphere project “Art Every Day”, an interactive public art initiative imagined by artist Linda Hesh. The project was about art in everyday life and invited members of the public to share their impressions of art within the everyday routines of life.

Moderator of the first panel was esteemed Director of Cultural Heritage Policy, James Early who encouraged the audience to think on what actions open us to cultural policy perspectives and how our practices can help to shape cultural policy. He proposed Norman Girvan’s recent work *Pan- Caribbean Perspective: colonialism, Resistance and REconfiguration* as an effective tool in helping us to reflect on these questions.

Ambassador of Trinidad & Tobago to the USA, Dr. Neil Parsan noted that with 35 million persons in the Anglophone Caribbean and 17 million in the Dutch, Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean, our nations are often disadvantaged based on population numbers. Dr. Parsan noted the Carnivals derivative of Caribbean Carnivals worldwide including , Caribana, Labor Day celebrations, Notting Hill, Calibar Carnival, Nigeria, Baltimore, Washington DC, Miami, Houston and L.A and engaged the audience in understanding these ceded Carnivals as reciprocal forms of tourism. He also noted how education fits within this rubric.

Ivor Miller, cultural historian and Senior Fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art presented on Cuban art. He discussed various interpretations of Cuban artist Alfredo Lam’s work by communities as compared to its academic interpretations. Miller argued that the paintings signal an invitation to join the community in order to understand the true significance of the imagery within the paintings. Diana N’Diaye, curator at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage was the final presenter for the first panel. Dr. N’Diaye presented concerns of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival with a presentation entitled “Reuniting the Family: Learning from the African Diaspora Presentations at the Smithsonian”. She emphasized that the festival’s focus on people rather than objects allows curators, festival staff and scholars or other experts to work reciprocally with cultural practitioners from communities around the world. The festival aims to provide a space for intercultural dialogue. The Will to Adorn Project is the festival project for 2013, it is a “multi-year collaborative research and public presentation initiative focused on the diversity of African American identities as communicated through the cultural aesthetics, arts of the body and dress and adornment”. The theme for the project was inspired by anthropologist

Zora Neale Hurston's observation that the will to adorn is a central feature of African-American culture.

James Early re-iterated this process of engagement as one that allows culture to inform cultural policy from below obviating a top down approach that is at odds with community practices. In concluding the panel, Early outlined the structure and mandate of the Smithsonian. With nineteen museums and nine institutions and as the largest body of museums in the US, the Smithsonian is a public trust, stewards of the treasures of culture entrusted to them.

“Thematic Inquiries, Art and Programming Techniques” was the second panel that included, Tatiana Flores, Independent Curator and Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History and Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies at Rutgers University, Tom Ashcraft, Visual Artist, Associate Professor, Head of Sculpture, School of Art, GMU and Jorge Porrata, lecturer at the School of Art, GMU. The panel was moderated by Peter Winant, Associate Director, School of Art, GMU. Winant invited the panelists and audience to consider issues surrounding the notion of intervention. Flores presented a scholarly investigation of artistic practices and themes while Ashcraft took the audience through the process of Working Man Collective's engagement with communities. The triad was completed by Porrata's artistic intervention into the symposium as an artistic practice by engaging audiences in a work of performance art.

Panel 3 “ Power, Politics and Ideologies” was moderated by artist and curator M. Liz Andrews, who greeted the audience with the singing of a negro spiritual “ Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”. Her message was of the profound moment of intervention that these spirituals provide in harnessing the power of a people. Andrews posed a significant question that served as an underlying provocation for panelists presentations. –“ how can art be used to address structures of power within and from outside the Caribbean?”. Leah Gordon presented concerning the Haiti Ghetto Biennial as a Salon de Refuse for the 21st century. The event was motivated by the fact that often Haitian artists were allowed to and even invited to participate in exhibitions abroad but were denied visas to travel for the opening of these shows. The idea of salon de refuse signifies a refusal of the naïve label while registering a refusal of conventional art knowledge. Arthur Garcia brought together critical issues of design and crisis as central concerns. His innovative and dynamic business model integrates the client into the process of design while taking a holistic approach to the project

“What is the space of ‘transnational Caribbeans’? was the provocative question raised by artist and Fellow and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Lara Stein Pardo moderator of the final panel. Curator and General Manager of Art Labour Archives, Alanna Lockward presented concerning the notion of a “de-colonial aesthetic”. A group of artists and thinkers signed the De-colonial Aesthetics Manifesto on February 14th 2011 at an occasion furnished by the Transnational Decolonial Institute. Her presentation framed the exhibition Who

more pertinent than US as a parallel initiative to the manifesto while illustrating the 'non-Newness' of this aesthetic. Panelist Tatiana Flores questioned the use of the term aesthetic in its reference to non-western artistic practice but the issue remained, how does one contest legacies without deploying the terms of a legacy. Christopher Cozier, artist and curator Marielle Barrow, Editor-in-Chief of Caribbean InTransit and Marcel Wah, Editor-in-chief of CAW magazine were the final presenters of the symposium. Barrow's presentation entitled " Caribbean Arts: Trans-national Development Practices" asked " how through trans-national Caribbean practice do we ensure our contribution to an evolving Caribbean cultural policy and enable sustainable development of communities through the arts?" Marcel Wah spoke of the move to a cultural economy and elaborated on the current strengths and weaknesses of the Caribbean arts industry. Christopher Cozier presented via videoconference concerning the dual structures that Caribbean artists are forced to negotiate.

It is proposed that the event proceedings be collated as a text. The symposium provided a platform for persons invested in the Caribbean arts to present their approaches and concerns and discuss modes of synergy and collaboration.