

Caribbean Focus

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Report by Moira Jeffrey, Arts Writer

When the artist and curator Holly Bynoe recently took up her post as Chief Curator of the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas in Nassau, she found herself asking a number of questions about the practical capacities of such a national institution bearing in mind both “the moment and the context”.

How might she understand the gallery’s location, a 19th century villa on the crest of a hill that sits right between the finely preserved historical buildings of downtown Nassau and an adjacent slum? What balance should she find between a programme focused on engaging and collaborating with local audiences and the pursuit of her own intellectual and curatorial passions? What kind of public were those audiences and if they changed could the gallery change with them?

If these questions are perhaps local variants of universal issues for art institutions, Bynoe’s institutional approaches and developing curatorial programme is rooted in the specific complexity of the post-colonial Caribbean and framed in the context of its linguistic differences and various nationalisms, as well as its histories of slavery and indenture. “How,” she asked herself, “do we define cultural legacy in a place that practices cultural amnesia?”

The question of amnesia, was a recurring theme for both Scottish and Caribbean contributors at *Caribbean Focus*, an event at the National Galleries of Scotland which brought two voices from the Caribbean, that of Bynoe and the artist Christopher Cozier, a director of Alice Yard, in Port of Spain, Trinidad with two from Scotland. The artist Graham Fagen spoke about his practice and the curator Tiffany Boyle described her work with Jessica Carden under the name Mother Tongue. These four presentations were followed by a discussion chaired by Remco de Blaaij from Glasgow’s CCA. The evening was organised by British Council Scotland and developed in partnership with National Galleries of Scotland. This report was commissioned by SCAN and British Council as part of the event.

Bynoe, though she now finds herself in a national institution, is a product of the upsurge of informal and independent artist-led activism and scholarship in the Caribbean against a context of what she describes as “failure”, the invisibility of art historical scholarship and a “95% attrition rate” among contemporary art institutions.

She is, for example, co-founder and editor of the pioneering contemporary art publication ARC which develops exhibitions, scholarship and art writing and supports emerging and established artists. ARC also creates conferences and events emphasising sustainability, partnership and collaborative initiatives, “across all linguistic divides in the region.”

She is also involved in *Caribbean Linked*, a residency programme in Aruba connecting young and emergent Caribbean artists around issues of sustainable development, critical engagement and transnational co-operation. It is she says, “an act of resistance against nationalist systems, emphasising the sustainability of artists and the viability of local, by providing the necessary support that allows for regional integration”.

Bynoe is also a co-founder of the conference *Tilting Axis*, which aims to build infrastructure between several independent organisations operating between the Caribbean, the US, Europe, the global south and Asia. The first *Tilting Axis* conference took place over two days in February 2015 in Barbados. Alongside participants from the Caribbean, Brazil, the USA and Senegal were five Scottish curators. *Tilting Axis 2* will take place in February 2016 at the Pérez Art Museum in Miami.

Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has a strong historical relationship with the Caribbean, which in the last two decades has been re-examined in the light of cultural and artistic activism, as well as more recent historical scholarship around the legacy of colonial exploitation and the nature of the slave trade in the West Indies, mainly as it was directed through the sugar and tobacco industries and the plantation system.

Caribbean Focus was an attempt to bring such discussion into the realm of contemporary artistic and curatorial practice, exploring the possibilities of sharing current and future projects and opportunities for mutual learning.

A fertile area of discussion is that of artist-led organisation and institutional sustainability in the visual art sector, which in the Caribbean is often overstretched and poorly funded. In response, artists have been developing new ways of working.

The artist Christopher Cozier, who like Bynoe was one of a group of international curators visiting the UK in November at the invitation of the British Council, described the development of the distinctive and fluid model of artist-led organisation Alice Yard, which he described “as a collective project, it wasn’t something we founded, or something we raised money for.”

“I’m basically an artist who found myself writing about art and engaging with my colleagues when I returned to the Caribbean in the late eighties,” Cozier recalled. “It was a time of tremendous hostility to the contemporary as it was seen as a counter narrative to the national.”

In response, Cozier co-founded the visual arts organisation CCA7 in Trinidad with Charlotte Elias in 1995, but by the mid-2000s the challenges of funding the project and lack of political support created a crisis, “in a sense we were maintaining facilities without resources in a hostile environment.”

As part of a project entitled *Galvanize*, Cozier and colleagues ended up supporting projects outside the building in new locations in Port of Spain: in bars, tattoo parlours and out on the street. Cozier, the architect Sean Leonard and the writer and publisher Nicholas Laughlin facilitated an artist's project in Alice Yard, the outdoor spaces of a 1930s suburban house in the Woodbrook area, which had belonged to Leonard's great grandmother.

The yards of the area were already known for the production of dance and carnival culture and at Alice Yard a single event became a gradual decade-long development of artist-led practice. "I think Sean's vision was less about creating a space and trying to squeeze people in it than taking a finger and drawing a circle in the sand and then asking people if they want to jump into that circle."

Alice Yard has become a residency and production space, a venue and a fluid network that extends far beyond Trinidad itself. Over the years it has adapted as artists ask to develop and show their work there. It has hosted a regular TV production by a group of designers. When a band wanted a rehearsal space, a Japanese sound engineer came and helped set up a studio that is regularly used by local musicians. There is a glass box for discussion events. Cozier said: "Every time somebody asked to do something we designed it".

Cozier began just by looking very directly at what artists were doing, "we found that a lot of young people worked at night, musicians are nocturnal. There was a rise in interest in digital work and performative work." As a result, events, screening and exhibitions at Alice Yard tend to be one off, take place in the evening as social gatherings and are communicated and documented through artists' own activities on social media rather than formal publications or catalogues.

Alice Yard is founded on: "Critical discourse, a network and kind of experiment in how to do things, when the institutions around you are not necessarily functioning." It doesn't follow institutional methods of artist selection, or programming. "The vast majority of what we have done is by artists simply asking us if they can use the space," Cozier explained. "I think it's a reflection of the space we find ourselves in, not just on the island. There's a large diasporic community. An artist lives in London or in Toronto or New York and their work will be framed in a certain way in that context, and they may be curious about how their work would be received elsewhere, they ask 'are there meanings in my work that are being suppressed as my work gets squeezed into the binaries of the location?' There's a natural way of approaching us."

The artist Graham Fagen explained how over almost two decades he has developed a significant strand in his overall body of work that explored his personal encounter with the music and culture of the Caribbean and in particular his collaboration with the producers, singers and musicians of Jamaican Dub Reggae.

Fagen was brought up in Ayrshire, "I was taught at school that Robert Burns was my, and Scotland's, cultural heritage." Fagen says he felt estranged from much of

this culture, but as a teenager he was attracted to the music and lyrics of figures like Linton Kwesi Johnson whom he encountered on the post-punk music scene. Then Fagen discovered that Robert Burns had once intended to travel to Jamaica where he would have become an overseer of slaves on a sugar plantation, “I found out that my idle curiosity about musical taste was a fact, a historical link.”

He also described his growing anger when he discovered a deep and intractable silence about the true nature of the historical relationship between Scotland and the Caribbean. “My formal education left out very important facts about my cultural heritage, leaving a romantic notion of my culture.”

Fagen has worked extensively with the producer Adrian Sherwood and with musicians such as Ghetto Priest, most recently bringing the video of a new version of the Burns poem *The Slave’s Lament* to the Venice Biennale in 2015.

Tiffany Boyle co-founded Mother Tongue with Jessica Carden in 2009. She describes their work as “a research-led curatorial project: we work with emphasis on specific subject matter and on the presenting of international work in Scotland for the first time through exhibitions, discursive events, screenings and publications.”

In 2015, supported by the British Council, Mother Tongue undertook a four-week residency at Fresh Milk Art Platform, an artist-led interdisciplinary organisation in Barbados. The visit was timed just before the first *Tilting Axis* conference took place. For Mother Tongue this was a scoping visit including studio visits, visits to public and private collections, the university and the community college. The pair visited archives and engaged with students through seminars and screened an artist video programme.

Boyle said it was natural to think about producing a project on their return, and their proposal was a response both to the existing arts infrastructure in Barbados and to a historical moment in Scotland, “the re-evaluation of Scotland’s relationship to the Caribbean through colonialism and slavery”. The proposal for the project entitled *Rum Retort* is focused around an exhibition and performance programme situated at Pierhead Docks in Bridgetown, Barbados and planned for 2016.

Archaeological research recently revealed that the Bridgetown site was probably a former burial ground, possibly for slaves who died on the Middle Passage, but this history remains unmarked and the area is now a concrete car park. Mother Tongue is working with the architect Jude Barber in developing a pavilion to house the project, which will show the work of a number of Caribbean artists. The pavilion will also house a sister exhibition in Scotland to take place in Greenock outside the Beacon Arts Centre in the vicinity of one of the key sites of Scotland’s former sugar industry.

Boyle has also curated a small exhibition of the photographic works of Nevis-born, New York-based artist Stacey Tyrell for the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art’s *Pig Rock Bothy*, an outdoor space in the gallery’s grounds. Tyrell’s

work explores race, heritage and identity through photography. Her *Chattel* series of works, for example, explores the remains of the plantation system in Nevis including the remains of Scottish owned plantations, machinery and manufacture.

The subsequent discussion between participants focused on the nature of links between the regions and how historic relations might be understood in the present. One approach was the interrogation of our own understanding of such links such as is found in the ethics of personal narrative, self-examination and direct encounter found in Graham Fagen's work.

For wider ideas of curatorial practice, I wonder if the importance of the Caribbean/Scottish relationships in the visual arts might lie beyond conventional models that risk simply reframing colonial links for the post-colonial era or seek representational or symbolic redress for historical inequalities. Events like *Tilting Axis* instead focus on current realities and wider collaborative contexts. In particular, when considering models of artistic activism and curatorship, recent Caribbean scholarship and art practice might provide for a less centralised understanding of place and space in a world currently characterised by issues such as globalisation and migration.

The fluidity of curatorial practice as described by both Cozier and Bynoe offers an interesting local response to institutional failures and the perennial imperatives of fund-raising and politics that will be familiar in many jurisdictions, but it also suggests nuanced ways of working across national boundaries, geographical distances and linguistic divisions.

In her talk, Bynoe described the task of one of her recent curatorial projects, an exhibition entitled *Antilles: an ecology* that she curated with the educator Michael Edwards as an attempt "to fill gaps, to unmuzzle a range of voices and to debunk monolithic narratives." That might also serve as a useful mantra for future working together between Scotland and the Caribbean.