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Conversation with Tirzo Martha

Preamble:

It will undoubtedly be particularly interesting to have this conversation with you, given the extent of your artistic engagement and the importance that the very notion of engagement can have from both an individual and a community perspective.

The perception and interpenetration of the multiple roles you play in society, especially as a committed artist and co-founder of the Instituto Buena Bista - Curacao (IBB), is an atypical and unprecedented profile.

Nevertheless, there seems to be no boundary between your condition as an artist and that of co-entrepreneur of an artistic education structure as federative as IBB.

On the contrary, what is most noticeable is a vast educational project that is a vector of social transformation, all of which is carried by an immense energy.

The fusion between the artistic approach and the educational project demonstrates a certain determination to introduce a specific posture that is both attentive to the island's context and to the capacity for reflection of those who are ready to reconsider a good number of pre-established paradigms.

Today, it is a question of broadly approaching your action within IBB under its aspects, notably aesthetic and critical, in order to identify the way in which your students' sharpening of their artistic practice is taking shape from a general point of view. In support of all this work and thanks to the anchoring of the place, this discussion intends to reopen the reflection on the plastic questions and representations of identity, as well as the self-definition of the artistic body. It will also question the means of artistic action and cultural structuring as vectors for the development of Caribbean art.

Tirzo Martha, how would you define yourself today?

Defining myself is quite complicated as I look at myself as an ongoing project exploring and implementing possibilities and benefits through art, not only for art sake but also for our contemporary societies and their problems. I firmly believe that our needs and urgencies can find their ways through creativity and expression.

Paradoxically, the other would also be able to define you through the singularity of your posture. In the sense that the artist Tirzo Martha cannot be seen from distinct and contextualized angles, but through a unique posture consistent with artistic actions, whether they are individual, collective, art for art's sake or art with an educational aim. This inversion could be interesting for a better apprehension of the whole and impregnation of your functioning, which goes beyond the purely artistic field. Thus, the function of intentionality should be grasped in resonance with societal needs derived from the actions that you present.

It would be interesting if we could approach the IBB project as a real starting point, as a tool for the development of Caribbean art and as a vehicle for a concept to the world(s).

The IBB may have started as a project, but now it has become more than a concept. It's a way of enriching and developing not only the Curacao and Caribbean contemporary art but also to develop new practice and visions, mentalities and younger talents for the visual arts. At the same time the IBB has developed a structure in which you're not only developing the talented youngsters and the arts but we're also developing bearing surfaces in the community in order to carry these young talents, the visual arts and creating new perspectives and social developments in the society. A good example of the engagement of the IBB is the fact that it is situated on the premises of a psychiatric clinic where the patients of the clinic are also part of the daily educational program of the IBB.

From an external point of view, the young people trained at IBB give an impression of great freedom in the development of their creative process and imagery. This shows a concern for openness in the way they question the place and a rather innovative approach. This operation probably requires individualized support so that, in the end, each of these artistic approaches finds its rightful place in relation to the expectations of the student and the institution.

About the issue that emerges between the institution and the posture of young artists whose artistic sensitivity seems to be preserved above all else:

I'm a little cautious about this because I don't want to generalize. What I do miss a lot in the young artists most of the time is the need and urgency in the work and this absence of need and urgency can also be seen in the institutions.

Your investment - even across the Atlantic - to keep this school alive, involves the deployment of strong actions and common reflections. For example, in your performances, the posture of your students is remarkable because of the involvement of a participative approach that values creativity, innovation and freedom of expression; this clearly places a political discourse at the heart of the educational system, as well as taking into account the societal dimension. I am thinking here of Captain Caribbean.

The development of the community is a responsibility of all of us. We need to develop ourselves in order to be able to deliver quality contributions towards development of the conditions surrounding us. Education and formation are not here to help us get a diploma, a good job, earning a lot of money and beautiful possessions. No, it is about developing ourselves and using this knowledge, experience and vision to help create conditions in which more people can get the opportunities to develop and move forward with their lives. This way we create more space for ourselves to be able to live a life of better quality. Through the performances of Captain Caribbean, I try to show people that it is not about having super powers, but the abundance in knowledge, experiences, visions and guts will create the possibilities for you to grow and develop in life.

Art is therefore a real vehicle for personal and community development.

Apart from the development of the artistic project, do you see it as a means of emancipation, a contribution to social transformation and a recalibration of artistic criteria in the accompaniment of young visual artists on Curacao?

I consider it as a development of awareness but an awareness with different important goals. Goals that all together will contribute to the creation of a new society with a new mentality as a result of new patterns for thinking combined with a new imagery to challenge new ambitions and visions. Under these conditions, the development of not only a need for emancipation will arise but also a determination of actions needed to activate these strive for the right to exist.

What about the social dimension of this exercise, what does it mean to you?

In this exercise, you bring the different experiences, references, interpretations and backgrounds together and create a collective of the different layers, mentalities and approaches in the community. By doing this you create a more realistic reflection of the daily realities and struggles in the society that are formed as a consequence of the necessity to survive each day again and again.

Consisting of large-scale pieces, your work is also participatory. This is a recurrent feature of your creative process. Perhaps we could go back to this interaction between your work and the public, whether they are students or just visitors. I am thinking in reference to your exhibition "Look At Me Now" at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Participation has always been of great importance to my work and David Bade's work. The involvement of others in the process and the making of an artwork will abstain the artwork to be the production of only the vision of one character, in this case the artist. It will take the artists idea out of the isolation of his studio into the perceptions of others, which will create multiple layers and dimensions to the artwork. For example, in our resent project/exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam we involved visitors to the Slavery exhibition in the process of creating 10 sculptures for the 10 main characters in the exhibition based on the comments, reactions, emotions, etc. of the visitors visiting the exhibition. This action has proven that we sometimes tend to generalize opinions written in reports or researches about or societies but in practice, the realities have proven to be different. It shows that each individual, based on personal references and priority, do have their own opinion and need. You can't tell the story without the other protagonists getting a chance to tell their side of the story.

The question of the point of view, of the place from which one speaks and of which one speaks is obviously essential.

In the light of your book "I Wonder If They'll Laugh When I'm Dead", published by Rob. Perrée in 2017, your life's work unfolds unabashedly. The titles speak for themselves, as do the works to which they refer. The notion of dialogue between art and the diverse seems important, however; art is anything but an isolated act.

The depiction of the daily scenes or the Caribbean nature in traditional figurative or naive paintings are up until today mostly considered as Caribbean art. Through this imagery people has created an idealistic depiction of the so-called paradise and its natives. An attractive and open invitation for tourists. This in order to quench their thirst for the exotic. In my work, I create a diorama like visualization of the realities dominating our Caribbean communities. The constructions and objects are identifiable but the combination or composition in which these structures or objects are put together refer to our mentalities. The dialogue between the artwork, the spectators and the community creates an intervention in each other's space, mentality and movements.

On the one hand, we are aware that the stumbling block of representation in the so called Caribbean visual arts is inseparable from a long-fashioned imaginary. However, your work challenges and confronts a disturbing, unfiltered and almost disquieting reality that forces us to reflect, but according to other paradigms.

Considering that the island should not be a straitjacket in the case of artistic creation, can you tell us about the All You Can Art project between IBB, Curacao and the Netherlands? What about the relationship to the island, to the Caribbean, to Curacao, but also to History?

All You Can Art, short AYCA, is an extension of the IBB but in the Dutch context. All the activities exercised by the IBB in Curacao are practiced at the AYCA. Just like at the IBB there is a preparatory training for youngsters and besides that there are exhibitions and social practices in collaboration with various organization from the field of health care (for example: psychiatry, house for elderlies, homeless people, etc.), schools and art academies. This practice of making art together on location and in the mobile workshop makes art accessible for more people. The structure used in the AYCA is highly appreciated in the Netherlands because of its direct and effective approach towards the society and its tangible results. *All You Can Art* is the very first winner in the Netherlands of the *&Award* in 2018 for involving and connecting people. The same actions we would like to practice in the Caribbean region in order to create a better relationship with the Caribbean where we could develop more exchange and collaborations. This is a priority for us because we believe that there must come a change in the relationship between the islands in the Caribbean. There is too much division and distrust between the islands and we need to change this in order to define a better future for our Caribbean communities.

There is a real awareness in education today of the need for institutions to get to know each other better, to create links and to build bridges of collaboration and support, particularly with young people in the learning phase. Although the task is immense and requires some time, it is possible if the will is there. The need to exchange and the need to know oneself in order to surpass traditions and oneself must necessarily find the means to be accomplished in order to exist better.