(De)Constructing a National Gallery in the Caribbean

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BACKGROUND:

In 1947 British Council Art Officer John Harrison made his first visit to Barbados and was informed that art simply "did not exist on the island", and, as Harrison later reported, it was also "implied that Barbadians were art-hating rather than art-loving and... that there [was] a certain complacent indifference" .1 The post World War II propagandist motives of the British Council were quite openly elucidated: "to explain to colonial people those aspects of British civilization, knowledge of which is not naturally transmitted through the administrative link, and to aid by sharing of British educational, social, and administrative , that progress towards self government which Britain pledged to maintain".2 Although its activities were not without controversy in the island, generally the organisation was regarded as a saviour in the cultural desert that was the colony of Barbados and the 'spiritual home' of the island's cultural societies.

In the short time that Harrison worked in Barbados (1947-51) he quickly established himself as an expert on Caribbean Art, separating artists into 'primitive' and 'sophisticated'. The former, he surmised, "have discovered, without instruction, the joys of painting, and exploiting their own visual reactions to the world around them. The latter have either been originally trained in the tradition of Western Art or, former primitives fallen from grace, are trying to find their salvation within its bounds... On the whole the primitive, or semi-primitive seem more exciting".3 This concept essentially established the criteria by which Caribbean art would be defined and judged. Such perceptions did not radically change over the next fifty years.

INTRODUCTION:

At the August 1998 opening of the Barbados Museum's seminal retrospective, "Art in Barbados : What kind of Mirror Image", an exhibition forming part of the AICA Southern Caribbean's first regional symposium, Culture Minister, the Hon. Mia Mottley surprised her audience by announcing the establishment of a National Art Gallery Planning Committee. This was not the first time such plans had been announced. In the early 1970s a National Gallery had been identified as an essential part of the development of the historical Barbados Museum. The Art Collection Foundation, a private trust, was established in the 1980s specifically to acquire an art collection for the benefit of all Barbadians. In the early 1990s the National Cultural Foundation was charged with the responsibility for developing plans for such an institution, with a committee representative of all the cultural institutions on the island. None of these initiatives however resulted in the much anticipated institution.

The draft National Cultural Policy for Barbados (1995/96) finally endorsed the need for a

national gallery, and in 1999 the ruling Barbados Labout Party's manifesto Agenda for the 21st Century articulated their intention to establish not merely a national gallery, but a national heroes gallery and national standards for museums.

Critical for the development of this new museum for a new millennium has been a broad ranging consultative process with the various interest groups, both regionally and nationally. Consultations with potential partner agencies and institutions as well as public opinion surveys have been revealing, not so much for what positions are taken with respect to the new institution, ranging from suspicion to extravagant expectation, but for what is not understood, expected or anticipated of this new organisation identified as a 'national gallery'. While it is evident that virtually all agencies wholeheartedly endorse the establishment of a national institution for the conservation and interpretation of the visual arts of Barbados, the concept of what a national gallery is or should be , how it should operate, particularly in relation to other heritage and educational agencies, is not well defined or appreciably envisaged. Programmes will clearly need to be initiated immediately at all levels for this process of development to be recognized. At the same time, the on-going dialogue has led the committee to analyse its own assumptions about how the institution should function.

WHAT IS A NATIONAL GALLERY :

From the outset, the committee was aware that although our terms of reference were to make recommendations to the Government of Barbados for the establishment of a "National Gallery of Art", such terminology was employed out of a convenience; the intention of the government would immediately be understood. Although politically successful in galvanizing public interest in the idea, it lacked the intellectual rigor of examining the historical and cultural interpretation of such an institution at the dawn of a new century.

Traditionally a National Gallery has implied a building and the collection of works which it houses and displays. However, the committee has evolved a broader conception of a National Gallery, which is not simply a singular building housing a permanent collection of artworks; but rather a satellite system of sister institutions which share a number of common resources and programmes. The primary focus has been on establishing an infrastructure running throughout society rather than / or not just that of one centralized headquarters. In this way the National Gallery can be integrated into community experiences in order to foster increased interaction between the visual arts and the Barbadian public.

In a small society with limited financial resources it is vital that government and private sector funding are sourced to support existing infrastructures rather than duplicate everything in one central monolithic structure, which eventually becomes impossible to adequately finance.

A NATIONAL COLLECTION

At the same time the nature of a core collection has been debated. Questions have revolved around

-what should we collect? And how? And why?
-how should the work be presented
-who is this work being collected and displayed for?
-who is validating the works as nationally important?

Previously, it has been assumed that the National Gallery needs a permanent collection. One central reason is the desire to document the tradition of painting and sculpture in the country. There has never been any ongoing opportunity to see a collection of paintings which attempts to document the history of Barbadian art. Within the English-speaking Caribbean this traditionally is seen as a very brief history, beginning with the efforts of the 'pioneer' artists in the 1930s and 1940s during the early debates on Caribbean nationalism and identity. But to undertake this comparatively modest task is almost prohibitive – given limited financial resources and the restricted accessibility of much of this work.

A so-called National Collection does exist in the form of those works of art owned by the State. A survey commissioned by the National Gallery Committee documented over 800 works located at approximately 30 different sites. This was almost double the original estimate, indicative of the under-documented and under-managed state of the 'collection'. These body of work, acquired without any ongoing consideration to the building of a cohesive national collection, has been described as "an ad hoc collection of artworks of diverse media and quality – many of inferior standard."4 This cataloguing report also highlighted frequent instances of mishandling which have placed many of the works in significant peril, and in some cases resulted in extensive and unnecessary damage.

While a number of these works have been identified by the committee to enter the collection of the national gallery, this process will not occur without some contention. And it certainly cannot be seen as forming an adequate core collection.

It is interesting to witness institutions like the Tate now questioning traditional chronological and authoritative narratives in the presentation of their permanent collection. It is in the Caribbean, where this imperial narrative was firmly implanted through the colonial process, that some of the most seminal challenges arose such as those of Marcus Garvey and Aime Cesaire.

But in addition to a philosophical tenet, this approach becomes one of necessity – at least in the context of one monolithic ongoing history due to the unavailability of the necessary work. The Barbados Museum has already mounted displays of Amerindian artifacts and objects from the early colonial period of the 17th to 19th centuries – prints, watercolours, furniture etc. With an umbrella relationship with sister institutions, the National Gallery is then free to concentrate on work from the post 19th century onward.

If the burden of establishing an 'authoritative' historical collection is not the primary role

of the National Gallery, it allows greater liberty to provide opportunities for the presentations of diverging scenarios – through different resources – and then to use the limited funds to collect more contemporary work.

Basically the intent is to establish a more open, flexible structure that can fluidly adapt or re-present itself. This includes a building – not only affording flexible exhibition space – but even its location in a public space people are likely to frequent for a variety of reasons. The exhibition of works can draw on other resources such as private collections for loans, as well as exhibitions brought in work from the region. The committee has also questioned the type of work to be presented including the interaction of popular and high culture.

The way work is presented may also be more open– given the dearth of professional curators and the inability to take on large staff, the gallery can draw upon free-lancers, including those outside the profession to assemble a body of works. Computer technology can be utilized as a way to appeal to a wider and younger audience as well as providing access to those who do not normally frequent such an institution through interactive programmes in the gallery and on the internet. It is anticipated that audiences will be able to comment on what they have seen and create their own exhibitions from the National Gallery database as well as cross reference works of art to calypso, crop-over, carnival or cricket.

Another aspiration is to expand the collection and exhibition programme to include work from throughout the Caribbean in order to break down some of the insularity. This will operate in conjunction with a research centre. In a time of renewed political Caribbean integration, and the unhindered movement of artists and their work within the region, the idea of establishing a new national structure seems anathema. It is understood that although we continue to refer to this new structure as a "National Art Gallery" that its eventual nomenclature will be rooted in our history and the anticipated requirements of the visual arts of the region and their audience.

It is telling that at the same time that the National Gallery committee was established, another committee on national reconciliation was created, charged with addressing perceived tensions between the various racial and ethnic groups which make up the population of Barbados. In addition, the National Heroes Committee has presented proposals for the creation of a national heroes gallery as well as the removal from the centre of Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, of an early 19th century bronze statue of Lord Nelson. Although commissioned by the citizens of Barbados, and subsequently a well-known landmark (famed for pre-dating the statue in Trafalgar Square in London), it is now regarded as incompatible with contemporary notions of Barbadian heroes.

Today, 34 years after independence from Britain, Barbados is at the crossroads of redefining or perhaps, defining for the first time its history and culture. Such debate has assisted in the articulation of our ideas for the structure and purpose of a National Art Gallery, which go beyond its nineteenth century origins and assumptions.

NOTES

1. John Harrison, Last Thoughts on Art in the British Caribbean ' in the Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, XIX: II, 1952, pp.53-57
2. Annual Report , The British Council,1950-51
3. John Harrison,[1949], 'A Survey of Painting in the British Caribbean', in BIM IV:XI p.224
4. Anne McDonald Report, "Catalogue of the National Collection of Barbados", National Art Gallery Committee report, 2000.