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Artistic Autonomy in Non-Autonomous Contexts: Reframing Collective Agency and Insurgence from Caribbean Artist-Managed Spaces



View on Mayaro Beach, Trinidad. Wikimedia Commons

Overview

Dr Carlos Garrido Castellano's research focuses on the crossing between **socially-engaged art, art institutionalism and coloniality**. Through an examination of both theories and practices emerging out of spaces subjected to different forms of colonial domination in Africa, Asia and Latin America, he analyzes how these constitute an **alternative genealogy** that can be useful in delimiting emancipative landscapes in our present.

What brought you to study art residencies or to focus your research efforts on a specific residency program?

Doing research for my PhD in contemporary Caribbean art, I realized that artistic production and artworks represented only a small part of the whole set of creative practices taking place in the Caribbean. I started then examining how residencies and artist-managed spaces were configuring an alternative way of understanding the role of contemporary art in the definition of Caribbean public spheres.

In your research you do not talk specifically about artist residencies, but you prefer to use more general terms such as artist-managed spaces or even “small art organizations”.

It is very difficult to find a term, there are many different kinds of people and each of them has their own word to name those activities. Within this scenario, we don't really need to define things, because in a sense those spaces are not perfectly defined, they are not sitting within one category and they don't even want to be defined.

How do you think your research contributes to the general knowledge of art residencies around the world?

My research this far attempts to define how art residencies and other institutional practices configure alternative artistic landscapes globally.

One point of particular interest is that you are talking about the creation of an “alternative artistic landscape”, would you go more in depth on this?

All of this began when I was doing my PhD and went to Caribbeans and Central America, I started looking at cities there and realized communication is very hard. You know what is going on in Miami, but it is much more difficult to know what is going on in Guadeloupe or Puerto Rico. In this context having small spaces has been essential. When you don't have economic support or national organizations funding the arts, these spaces make entire difference, they fill the gaps. For example, Trinidad doesn't have any kind of museums nor public or private, but they have this crazy history of small spaces, self-organized by artists since the 1990s. It is true that in those spaces artists could join different conversations and welcome other artists from all over the world.

The analysis of the contexts of those organizations is a big focus of your research. What kinds of specific interrelations did you find?

First of all, it is important to understand that context does not mean location. Something I am trying to think is how international fundings is determining who goes to these places and who doesn't, that happens everywhere. In Kenya I found this interesting dynamic in Nairobi, where you have many artists going there from neighbouring countries, but also international countries, you have this huge organization, they were very successful and then suddenly they had a huge problem with funding, so the entire organization collapsed.

Understanding context for me is also the study of how people in general – and not just organizers and artists – act within this framework. The difficulty comes when you have this model where the fundings that you receive don't allow you to have the freedom to decide which event or exhibition you want to put up, and so you cannot react according to the reaction of your audience.

What are the key learnings on art residencies out of your research investigation?

The mobility and cultural exchanges provided by art residencies have been essential in dismantling the centrality of national cultural politics in postcolonial contexts. They have also contributed to the development of South-South cultural relations. They have relativized the influence of mainstream cultural centers, complicating the landscape where artistic exchanges take place.

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<http://www.comparatistas.edu.pt/en/research-team/full-members/carlos-garrido-castellano.html>
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13504630.2017.1303370>