Chapter 5

Three Spaces in Context

Over the last twenty-five years, spaces, which are generally referred to as ‘alternative’, ‘artist-led’ or ‘informal’, and which sometimes double as artists’ residencies, have sprung up across (and beyond) the Anglophone Caribbean. While some are focused solely on the visual arts, many facilitate a wider range of creative activities, but altogether, they represent a new, privately mobilized effort to connect the region’s artists across borders and disciplines outside of events like Carifesta. With the advantages of electronic networks and instant communications unavailable to previous generations, they have energized the art scene and generated a new sense of possibility, especially among younger artists. Towards the wider world, they project a new ’grass-roots’ image, which is nimble, restless and entrepreneurial.

A blog-entry by the young Puerto Rican artist Sofia Maldonado, which appeared in the Huffington Post’s ‘Arts and Culture’ section in 2013, conveys the excitement such spaces often spark in their community of participants. Reflecting on a residency at Ateliers ’89 in Aruba, Maldonado speaks of the “colonial past and post-colonial present”, which unites Caribbean artists, of their common desire for “establishing links (...) exchanging ideas and sharing their creative process”, and of the “economic and artistic limitations”, which “often compel young contemporary artists to turn their heads towards the booming capitals in the United States or Europe that have larger art budgets and art markets”. In response to all of this, she notes, “important creative networks have been on the rise in the Caribbean”. She mentions Ateliers ’89 in Aruba (opened 1989), Instituto Buena Bista in Curacao (opened 2006), Alice Yard in Trinidad (opened 2006/7), Beta Local in Puerto Rico (opened 2009), the Fresh Milk Art Platform in Barbados (opened 2011), and NLS (New Local Space) in Jamaica (opened 2012), but to this list can be added CCA7 (Caribbean Contemporary Arts) in Trinidad (1997–2007), Popopstudios (International Center for the Visual Arts) in the Bahamas (opened 1999), Tembe Art Studio in Surinam (opened 2009), the Groundation Grenada Collective
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(founded 2009) as well as a number of more short-lived spaces. Sometimes the aforementioned Galvanize-project and the arts journal ARC Magazine (launched 2011)\(^1\) are also listed as informal spaces. This chapter takes a closer look at three such spaces in the Anglophone Caribbean: Alice Yard in Trinidad, Fresh Milk in Barbados and Popopstudios in the Bahamas. The three are chosen, partly because of their prominence in the informal network constituted by the totality of these spaces, partly because their national institutional contexts range from weak to relatively strong.

Before undertaking this discussion, I feel compelled to underscore my awareness of the enormous (and often unpaid) labor that goes into the establishment and maintenance of such spaces. If my reflections here, as in the previous section, at times are critical, they are so alongside my recognition of the frustrations, as well as the enthusiasm that motivate them and, especially, their indisputable benefit to numerous artists. My occasional reservations notwithstanding, I am of the firm opinion, that the Caribbean cultural scene is enriched by such spaces.

Alice Yard

In the spring of 2007, I participated in the first round of regional consultations for the preparation of the Caribbean Crossroads of the World exhibition, which eventually took place in New York in 2012. The event was hosted by CCA7 in Trinidad—arguably the region’s premier ‘alternative space’ from its opening in 1997 to its closure a few months after the said event. Apart from minor stakeholders like myself, the participants were influential curators, sponsors and museum-directors from the region and the United States. As part of the programming, the group embarked on a tour that led from the National Museum and Art Gallery near Port-of-Spain’s savannah to the recently opened ‘Alice Yard’ in Woodbrook. In the museum’s foyer we were received by an official, who conveyed the director’s regrets. The latter had been expected to receive and guide the group through the collections, but, we were told, had been called away on urgent business. It was, however, scarcely a sense of urgency that emanated from the place.\(^2\) The art displays (confined to the building’s second floor) were presently being re-arranged and only a few works were visible, standing on the floor. A dripping air-condition unit broke the quietness of a smaller, climate-controlled room, and the overall impression matched the old cliché of the ‘dusty museum’ only too well. Nonetheless, the visiting curators responded to all of this with remarkable patience and looked at what was available with great interest.

Meanwhile, the organizers’ effort to contrast what they may have predicted
to be an impression of un-professionalism and institutional failure with a visit to the newly opened alternative space Alice Yard, was—at least as I gauged it—not entirely effective. The guests were first taken to the offices of the architect Sean Leonard, who, along with Christopher Cozier, the writer Nicholas Laughlin and the musician Sheldon Holder, founded and continues to manage the space. In this cool and elegant environment, Cozier spoke appreciatively about the Leonard-family’s gesture of making a downtown house available to the arts and, if the guests still couldn’t quite imagine the space, they at least got an impression of the founders’ enthusiasm. Upon our subsequent arrival to Alice Yard, however, several guests struggled to contain their confusion about the smallness and character of the space, which in no way resembled even a modest exhibition venue. For the most part, there was no roof cover, no significant wall- or floor-space, and no art on display. Skeptical glances were exchanged, for, to the point of audacity, this looked like any other backyard. If I left, that day, with the slightly embarrassed feeling of having witnessed a clash between vastly incongruous measures of success, Alice Yard has more than vindicated itself in the intervening years. When I visited again in October 2013, it was to attend a talk offered by the noted, UK-based art historian Kobena Mercer, who stated that it had been a long-standing wish of his to visit the space. If anyone was in doubt, it rang home the point that Alice Yard, by a long shot, had become the most renowned and influential contemporary visual arts space in the Caribbean.

Once a residential neighborhood lined with gingerbread houses, Woodbrook has become a largely commercial district. It is easy to miss the entrance to Alice Yard at 80 Robert Street (plate 16). There is no gate, and no other gesture than a small sign with the words ‘Alice Yard’ on the bias, and the short driveway itself, which motions the visitor past the grey-painted house towards the irregular yard at the back. At the end of the driveway, the caller faces a small multi-purpose space known as the ‘studio annex’, where refreshments are available on the basis of a pay-what-you-can system. A cement-wall, half-hidden by a patch of Heliconias, connects the studio annex to a low unpainted structure identified as the ‘band room’ on an online map of the yard. Adjacent to this is another small space fronted by two wide glass-doors with red-painted frames, lending a modernist touch. The tiny, well-lit room behind these doors (measuring no more than about 7’ x 9’) is the space envisaged by Cozier in the following rough note: “something that looks like a show window or an illuminated box? in the night but could also be a kind of stage for action & band ‘objects’ in the yard. One may not always have to enter”. On the other side of the ‘light-box’ is the original house, which contains a small apartment for visiting artists. In addition to the space in Robert Street, Alice
Yard has opened the ‘Granderson Lab’ in the Belmont district to accommodate works and operations that cannot fit into the original space. A former printery, the Granderson Lab lends space, free of charge, to designers and creatives of every discipline, who might in turn make financial contributions when able.³

Modeled on the Trinidian ‘mascamp’, Alice Yard is marketed as a “conceptual enterprise”, as a platform for “creative practice and critical dialogue” and as a “space for creative experiment, collaboration and improvisation”.⁴ There seems to be a deliberate effort, not only to reject the formality of a conventional gallery, but also to marry the impression of a public space with that of a domestic one. When the Alice Yard-concept was featured in the Global Africa-exhibition at the Museum of Art and Design in New York in 2010, a blogger mused over the space as “A grassroots contemporary art center-cum-backyard that’s located in a Port-of-Spain suburb in Trinidad, W. I., complete with its own outside sink that’s fitted with a ‘jukking’ board for scrubbing clothes”.⁶ A small pamphlet likewise reminds us of the rootedness of the space in ordinary Trinidadian life: “Four generations of children played and imagined in this yard, and now we continue this tradition”.⁷

In the Caribbean, and perhaps especially in Trinidad, the concept of culture has above all been associated with popular forms like carnival, calypso and steelpan-traditions. Visual art, as has been discussed, has struggled with a rather more difficult image given its material character and associations of exchange-value and ownership, elite traditions and individualist character. The discipline has, in the context of cultural policy, been regarded as an art form for the privileged few.⁸ It is, however, not only particular art forms, which have come to see themselves as continually marginalized in Trinidadian cultural policy, but also non-black ethnicities.⁹ This is reflected in the ‘Draft National Policy Framework for Multiculturalism and the Draft National Cultural Policy’ of 2013, which announces the introduction of a new cultural policy and the renaming of the Ministry of Arts and Culture as the Ministry of Arts and Multiculturalism¹⁰—thus immediately giving away the instrumental use of culture alluded to in the previous chapter. The new policy, it is stated, aims at removing the Afrocentric bias from existing legislation and practices. It is admitted that, so far: “(1) The term ‘Culture’ signifies manifestations that are defined as Afrocentric, i.e., Calypso, Steelpan, and Limbo; and (2) The Ministry with responsibility for Culture traditionally concentrates resources (financial, training, productions, etc.) on these African expressions of culture.” The overall objective of the policy-change is therefore to: “Create an environment that facilitates the development of the diverse forms of culture practiced by Trinidadians and Tobagonians within the ambit of a national culture of patriotism.”¹¹
The intention is thus to arrive at a more equitable representation of the nation’s cultural diversity than the previously implied Afro-Creole norm, though with a common thrust implied by the word ‘patriotism’. An appendix to the draft-policy moreover lists “Major civil society stake-holders in the cultural sector”. It includes numerous educational and non-profit organizations with a cultural scope, including the Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago and the Studio 66 Art Support Community, but surprisingly not Alice Yard. Unless due to ministerial oversight, the absence suggests that no effort has been made on the part of Alice Yard to cultivate a relationship with a government that regards culture as an instrument of nationalism, patriotism and multiculturalism.12

The National Museum and Art Gallery, which answers to this ministry, was once the Royal Victoria Institute. Established in 1892 as part of a broader initiative by the British Crown to promote knowledge and education in the Commonwealth, the institute was renamed the National Museum and Art Gallery in 1965.13 With its Dutch gables, curved pediments, volutes and fixed tropical louvers, the building is a fine example of Port-of-Spain’s eclectic Victorian architecture (plate 17). Dedicated to history, natural science and art, however, even this magnificent building seems too small. There is no permanent display of the national collection, but an upper level gallery is used for changing exhibitions. Though the room is grand and spacious, a succession of niches, windows and other architectural ‘events’ perpetually interrupt its walls, and the gallery arguably presents a curatorial challenge in itself. The exhibition mounted at the time of my most recent visit featured a wide range of Trinidad’s past and present artists, and offered what I thought was an interesting, if cursory, survey of the nation’s art history. Contrary to the 2007-fiasco, the impression one got was of a concerted effort to make the best of the available resources. The limitations of these were, however, quite evident in the exhibition, where most artists were represented by what might be considered ‘lesser’ works: though Trinidad has a lively secondary art-market, the museum is clearly not a contender, when important works come up for sale.

During my visit, I had an informal talk with a senior museum official, who volunteered that the difficulty in acquiring new works never relates to their possibly controversial nature, but invariably to its price. However, what really inhibits the renewal of the museum’s practices, she openly declared, is the ‘age’ (presumably meaning ‘ways’) and lack of specific training of the civil servants available to the museum. Asked about the ‘competition’ from alternative spaces like Alice Yard, she promptly exclaimed “I wish we could afford to bring in people of that caliber!” It seems fair to infer that such a museum is unlikely to be able to perform more than the most elementary duties of managing, cataloging and, to a limited degree,
expanding its collection, and even these tasks may be hampered by a lack of human and financial resources. Apart from wall-texts, no written information was available on the collections, or any part thereof. Since Trinidad has no published art history, the intrepid researcher is thus left to piece together a loose narrative on her own. Neither the government, nor any of its cultural or educational institutions, it seems, has taken any initiative to develop a historical or discursive context for the visual arts.14

This institutional vacuum has, however, not hindered the circulation of art among middle class Trinidadians. Since the 1960s, the local business-community and professional elite has offered considerable support to visual artists, though with a heavy concentration on those working around inoffensive themes in traditional media. Such support has ranged from private and corporate purchases to commissions for calendar-projects, competitions and annual awards. While well-known artists like Boscoe Holder and Leroy Clarke have made a comfortable living by selling works from their home, an extended sector of galleries and framing-companies has thus thrived on a considerable (albeit fluctuating) demand from the financially empowered. A history of galleries in the greater Port-of-Spain area would include the Icon Gallery (closed), Aquarela Galleries (closed), Gallery 1234 (closed), the Kiskadee Cultural Laboratory (closed), Art Creators (closed), Horizons Art Gallery, the 101 Gallery, Y Art and Framing, Medulla Art Gallery and Softbox Studios. Among these galleries, some have had a strictly commercial objective, while others—for example Aquarela (which has re-opened as the Medulla Art Gallery)—attempted to distinguish between “superficial art and art with depth”.15 Aquarela founder Geoffrey MacLean, however, concedes that his effort to support artists “who made strong socio-political statements”16 proved detrimental to the gallery’s survival. Suggesting a maturation of the market, the Medulla Gallery has, according to co-director Martin Mouttet, so far been more successful in not only showing, but also selling works by avant-garde artists from Trinidad and the wider region.17 In addition to these galleries, and of particular interest here, the history of this sector would also include ‘alternative' spaces, such as the ‘Visual Arts Environment’ (VAE) set up by Edward Bowen and Steve Ouditt in 1986 (in Bowen’s studio), to offer workshops and facilitate debate on the visual arts,18 as well as the Studio 66 Art Support Community, CCA7 and the Galvanize event of 2006. During an informal conversation about Alice Yard, one Trinidadian artist (who did not wish to be named) suggested to me, that, despite its open-gate policy, ‘the Yard’ could be somewhat intimidating—it ought, he said, “to be more like Studio 66”.
Studio 66 Art Support Community was founded in 1994 with the intention to “provide adequate forums for artists to express themselves and demonstrate their talents, so that they can play a greater role in the Spiritual, Social and Cultural life of our people. Studio 66 also seeks to promote Art as a major thrust in National Development and the development of national consciousness”. It is located at the home of founder, Makemba Kunle, in the village of Barataria on the outskirts of Port-of-Spain, and its events have ranged from exhibitions to Christmas-sales and meetings by the Philosophical Society of Trinidad and Tobago. The grassroots-image is quite literally evoked by the semi-enclosed architecture with wooden rafters and bamboo posts, imaginative makeshift screens and greenery peeping in here and there. Pictures on the studio’s Facebook page suggests a predominantly (though not exclusively) Rastafarian and Afro-oriented following, but the list of past exhibitors is long and diverse. Flipping through artists’ bios and pictures one notes a strong emphasis on celebrating small and big achievements, honoring elders and cultural icons. The unmistakable focus of Studio 66 is, as also explicitly stated, national development through culture. It therefore sees itself as operating in concert with, rather than opposition to, official policy.

If Studio 66’s location was a given, CCA7 may have had a variety of reasons for setting up in an industrial complex in the poor district of Laventille. CCA7, which was the initiative of Charlotte Elias, opened in 1997 and operated for the following decade, for the major part as an NGO with partial funding from overseas partners (including the Ford Foundation, the Prince Claus Fund, and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation). It was, besides, part of the transnational artists’ organization the ‘Triangle Network’ with affiliates across the globe. On the Triangle Network’s web-page, one can read that the purpose of CCA7 was “to host community and international workshops and residency programmes, along with extensive outreach activities.” Within its 18,000 square feet of compartmentalized industrial space, CCA7 had two exhibition-spaces and eleven studios as well as meeting- and administrative facilities. After its introduction of eight-week residencies, the space attracted artists from the Caribbean and further afield (including famous artists like Chris Ofili and Peter Doig, who now reside in Trinidad). The press release, which announced the closure of the space in 2007, announced that CCA7, by the end of its ten-year lifespan, had hosted more than seventy exhibitions, eighty-four residencies and six regional workshops. In the last four years of its existence, it also lent its premises to a free weekly film screening, and it was an obvious venue for events like the Caribbean Crossroads-consultation. Though perhaps riding on a wave of cosmopolitanist goodwill initiatives from
the metropole (translated into funding for satellite platforms and NGOs around the world), CCA7 certainly stimulated the perception of the contemporary Trinidadian art-scene as energetic and ambitious.

While the Laventille-location above all was affordable, it also projected a community-oriented image, which for many reasons would be difficult to satisfy. A confluence of local, international, social and aesthetic demands would be challenging for any cultural institution, and even more so in a society where institutional support is scarce and opportunity often a reflection of personal resources. Here, brokers of favors and exposure are always under scrutiny, and demand will inevitably exceed supply. The inability for CCA7 to serve all agendas and communities equally well eventually became a problem. Criticisms did not issue from the Laventille-inhabitants (who may largely have been unaware of providing a backdrop for the region’s most sophisticated contemporary art-centre), but mainly from segments of the Trinidadian arts community, who felt that the space was too elitist, too international in orientation and not sufficiently transparent. The writer and journalist Raymond Ramcharitar offered a number of searing critiques of CCA7, commencing with an assessment of the dismal circumstances and lack of state provisions for the arts, which encourage initiatives such as that of Charlotte Elias:

This neglect leaves a space for the phenomenon of artistic arbitrage, where an agency or agent is able to represent the neglected formal art of the country/Third World as socio-culturally equivalent to metropolitan art, and hawk it to metropolitan agencies for a healthy commission. This means grants, status and authority over the direction of Caribbean art—and this final point is of particular importance because of the lack of artistic policy or organizations for the development of art (...) in Trinidad, and in a lesser way, the Anglophone Caribbean.

While Ramcharitar’s critique often gets personal and his suggestion of “healthy commissions” may be inaccurate (as it would preclude an NGO status), it also expresses a legitimate frustration. The mission-statement of CCA7, he points out, suggests that “culture is our most underutilized developmental tool” but since the organization neither defines culture, nor development, it eschews any form of accountability. CCA7, he asserts, is part of a small, private (and comparatively privileged) network, which effectively has taken charge of the visual arts. When CCA7 eventually closed down, blogger Attilah Springer offered these final reflections in the Trinidad Guardian:
But the problem with CCA7 is the problem of Trinidad, in a way. It never seemed that CCA7 understood who or what it really was. And maybe it was lack of real funding or maybe it was lack of real vision (...). Every time I went to CCA7, I wondered how an art space survives without engaging the surrounding community. Not just of artists. Plenty nights watching films inside of that warehouse and the stench of my own filth filtering into my consciousness. Plenty nights watching art and listening to police cars scream past and helicopter searchlights looking and looking. Plenty nights watching art that reflected what was going on just outside and none of the people there to actually see it. But I suppose there is community and there is community. But even the artist community is fragmented, for a place so small.25

Another harsh critique, surprisingly, issued from Chris Cozier, one of the founding members: “In the long term, CCA7 simply provided an entry-point for foreign artists with solid connections to the international art market but did little to develop the visibility, critical understanding, and access to that international art world economy for the local artists in whose name it was developed”.26 It is uncertain whether such perceptions eventually conspired to dry up local co-funding for the continuation of the space. In a final press release, the management of CCA7 stated that “Despite increased international funding for our core endeavors, we continue to lack operational funding or much in the way of communal national support”.27

While far too small to take over the role of CCA7, Alice Yard has inherited some of its functions. Since its inception in 2006, the yard has lent its premises to visual artists, designers, residencies, literary and musical events, film-screenings, debates and public lectures. With no paid staff, it has been managed by its founders and funded on an ad-hoc basis by themselves and small donations. While its more recent NGO-incorporation in principle allows for grant-applications, Laughlin volunteers: “We’ve never applied for a grant or received one, and never had to pursue anyone’s agenda but our own. We’ve never been anxious about the resources we don’t have. Instead we’ve imagined the biggest things we can make happen with what we do have.”28 Long-term planning, in other words, does not seem to be part of its operative mode: Alice Yard prides itself of being an organic, ever-evolving idea and a concept, rather than a place. If any one text were to be considered a manifesto for Alice Yard, it might well be Charles Campbell’s short 2012-essay “Failure at the Yard”, which reflects on his experience as artist-in-residence. The beauty of the space, he suggests, is that “it really has very little of what would normally be considered essential for most studios. You won’t find an
easel or drawing board, an editing suite or tools for making, well anything (. . .). Instead of a closed studio and access to equipment, you get an open courtyard and access to people.”

Interviewed by Claire Tancons, Cozier explains the yard’s evolution into a space, which encourages “experimental, investigative contemporary art” and which supports projects in their start-up phase. The interview (and my own casual conversations with Cozier), supports the impression of a space operating in a largely impromptu manner with prospective artists inquiring about residencies or events, conditions negotiated (when possible, a small stipend may be offered, but resident artists are responsible for getting their own funding together) and things unfolding in an unscripted manner from there. According to Cozier “our flexibility, and our openness (. . .) allows us to respond to how creative people would like to use the space and collaborate in diverse ways.”

He dismissed my question about particular eligibility criteria or preferred aesthetic directions, but with its open space and limited display facilities, Alice Yard is particularly conducive to performances, outdoor installations and digital or video-works, which can be projected onto any plain surface, or to the construction of works, which later can be transferred into public settings (though other types of work can be accommodated in the Granderson Lab). To Tancons’s question: “Do you and Alice Yard proceed according to what could be called group affinities?” Cozier responds “We are simply proceeding. We are trying to build relationships with groups of artists and thinkers who are faced with similar challenges and are seeking creative solutions.”

The nature of these challenges is left unsaid, but the ‘visibly absent’ premise for the Galvanize-event suggests a main problem to be that of persuading the surrounding society, that making art is a worthwhile and serious activity. When the image and conceptual dimension of Alice Yard continues to grow, it is therefore primarily through an expanding network of participants and likeminded spaces, which Cozier extends to written venues like ARC Magazine, SX Space (an online branch of Small Axe) and Artzpub/Draconian Switch, which is co-published by Alice Yard. To what extent it also enters into conversations and exchanges with other local spaces, is less clear. I found it curious that Cozier, directly asked by Tancons about predecessors for Alice Yard, speaks at length about CCA7, but never mentions Studio 66.

Unlike Studio 66 and (albeit to a lesser extent) CCA7, Alice Yard does not state its aim as ‘national development’ (as established in section 1, Cozier is dismissive of both ‘nation’ and ‘state’). Yet, there is some assumption of a particular national culture in his contention, that Alice Yard cannot be considered an ‘alternative’ space, because it continues a long local tradition of “creating in the yard”
(what we are doing, he says, is what steel-bands and 'mas-camps' have done for decades). Cozier’s reason for refusing the ‘alternative’ label (because it belongs to the “cool, urban, romantic language” of New York in the 1980s) and other imported terms of reference is, however, contradicted by the irrefutable reliance on a poststructuralist discourse in the writing (by him and others) that has accompanied the rise of the Caribbean postmodern. The disregard for finished statements, grand narratives and binary terms like ‘us and them’, ‘here and there’ are virtually drawn out of a textbook in postcolonial theory, and so is the aesthetic valorization of process, experiment and transience. The claim of simply ‘being’, ‘doing’ or ‘proceeding’ without the burden of an over-determined historical or conceptual context is, in other words, misleading.

Though Alice Yard, according to Cozier, mainly serves younger artists (born after the late 1970s), it has also hosted more established ones, including Hew Locke, Charles Campbell and Ebony Patterson. In such situations, younger local artists often assist in executing projects, and it must be assumed that a certain intellectual osmosis is envisaged. It is therefore not inappropriate to regard Alice Yard as an ‘incubator’ (as well as a creative laboratory and conceptual enterprise): as was the case with Studio 66, this is where likeminded artists come together to discuss and execute their ideas. In the process, a shared, though always evolving, set of references and aesthetic codes develop. Unlike that of Studio 66, however, the aesthetic spectrum cultivated at Alice Yard largely corresponds with the Caribbean postmodern portrayed in section 1. The post-nationalist inflection is nonetheless oblique, for though the ethos at Alice Yard is distinctly cosmopolitan, it has all the trappings of the ‘local’—indeed, it is virtually (if inadvertently) modeled on Brathwaite’s vision of the 1970s ‘yard theatre’ in *The Love Axe* (I):

Yard was revolutionary in that everything about it not simply rejected/ignored the notions of traditional/colonial Euro-American theatre, *it provided a viable and creative alternative*. There was no house, no building. The theatre was as its name said: a yard (…). There was therefore no ‘fixity’, no ‘audience’, for one thing in the traditional sense; no gate, no entrance fee (…). Instead, there was simply those who came: invitation, rumour and, most important, those of the neighborhood, the street/community; those passing by who could see with the knowledge of ears: as in their own yards.33 (Emphasis in original)

Having set itself up against a generation of anti-colonial nationalists on the grounds of their lack of criticality and gradual estrangement from original goals and social realities, the post-nationalist avant-garde, which is deeply connected
with the region’s alternative scene, has arguably imposed a social and counter hegemonic mandate on itself. If, however, Alice Yard does not aim at ‘nation building’, but at developing communities of participants and sympathizers, it seems necessary to ask to what extent the exchange of ideas aims beyond this network, where works and artists inevitably operate in a closed circuit. Removing the work from the realm of ownership and prestige associated with conventional (or national) galleries and replacing the narrative expression with the conceptual language and interventions of a new avant-garde has, on that note, not solved the problem of estrangement, but arguably exacerbated it. The possibility that the artists of Alice Yard, despite the best of intentions, do not, after all, manage to engage its neighbors in meaningful conversation was not only hinted at by my interlocutor, who saw Alice Yard as slightly intimidating, but by Tancons herself, who observes that its audience consists mainly of artists and intellectuals. Indeed, the popular ‘yard’ connotations of the space with its inconspicuous location and open gate-policy, inadvertently draws out contemporary Caribbean art’s crisis of direction and legitimization (that it shares with the Caribbean left), which seems all the more profound, the more it is concealed by the excitement of activity, mass-mobilization and apparent success.

At the end of my discussion of the 1990s avant-garde in section 1, I concluded that, despite its ‘performance’ of social and political concerns, there is no apparent desire to convert these concerns into ideological commitment. In the case of alternative spaces, following through with the neighborhood orientation in a more sustained and deliberate manner would likewise imply a compliance with an already denounced nation-building project. All the same, one would have to be completely insensitive not to be moved by Laughlin’s Sunday-thoughts on the wonder and deep satisfaction of the collective endeavor, which does take place in ‘the yard’: “Thinking about last night’s Douen Islands event—and all the people who made it possible by sharing time, expertise, equipment, and labour—I was struck again by the generosity of our network and its immeasurable value”, or by Charles Campbell’s reflection on his residency at Alice Yard: “Informal open networks are one thing we do well in the Caribbean. While the impoverished state of our infrastructure, suffocating hierarchies of our institutions and Byzantine structure of our bureaucracies conspire to frustrate us it’s the informal networks which we turn to when we need to get things done. They are more resilient and efficient and the bonds of trust and responsibility that they create humanize us. They demand we share not only our talents but also our vulnerability.”
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Fresh Milk

In 2013, the National Cultural Foundation (NCF) of Barbados invited a group of Brazilian curators to visit the island with the prospect of brokering future opportunities for the nation’s artists. For the occasion, the NCF arranged an exhibition (titled E-create) that was meant to provide an overview of Barbadian art history and identify some contemporary masters. Every effort was made towards inclusivity and diversity, but, in the absence of a more adequate space, the exhibition was installed at the Sherbourne Conference Centre. Paintings and sculptures were mounted on walls, screens and plinths in halls, foyers, corridors and meeting-rooms, and the result was virtually chaotic. There was something for every taste, but with no clear sense of direction or indication of significant historical dynamics, viewers were bound to be both overwhelmed and confused. During their visit to Barbados, the Brazilian curators did, however, also pay a visit to ‘Fresh Milk’—a ‘platform’ for contemporary art founded by Annalee Davis—where a small selection of experimental works by younger artists had been compiled for the visitors. The outcome of the Brazilian visit was an invitation to Annalee Davis (and, subsequently, two artists of her choice) to take up a residency in Sao Paulo, and a standing invitation for future collaborations.

Fresh Milk is the first space in Barbados to explicitly designate itself as ‘alternative’ or (as preferred) ‘informal’.37 According to its mission statement “The idea for Fresh Milk developed over years of conversations around the need for artistic engagement among artists in Barbados, to strengthen regional and diasporic links and shape new relationships globally.”38 It is moreover described as “a non-profit, artist-led, inter-disciplinary organization, that supports creatives and promotes wise social, economic, and environmental stewardship through creative engagement with society and by cultivating excellence in the arts.”39 Unlike the urban backyard that accommodates Alice Yard, Fresh Milk operates from Annalee Davis’ studio in the rural district of Saint George. Reflecting the island’s seasoned tourism-industry, signs are generously sprinkled across adjacent parishes, guiding the prospective visitor through the Barbadian countryside. The last stretch of the journey leads through the mahogany-canopied driveway to Davis’ studio, which is located on a dairy farm and former plantation. Having parked in the shade of the massive old trees in the yard, visitors are directed past the ‘manager’s house’ (where Davis lives) and via stepping-stones across the lawn to the verandah that connects the house with the studio—an unpainted greenheart-structure nestled into the hill and well padded by foliage and greenery (plate 18). Guests are greeted by wind chimes, cool breezes, a casual array of chairs and, oftentimes, a couple of
friendly dogs. The studio was originally built as a workshop and showroom for Manipura, the furniture and home-accessory company, through which Davis for a while sought to supplement her income as a visual artist and part-time teacher. With its wall space interrupted by shutters allowing for light, ventilation and pleasant views, the space is divided into three sections: the front room is used for small exhibitions, and the middle section (known as ‘The Colleen Lewis Reading Room’) has been converted into a small (but by local standards extensive) art-library, which is open to art-teachers and students by appointment. At the very back, there is a modest office and workspace used by Davis herself.

If Alice Yard sought to cultivate a no-frills ‘back-yard’ image, that of Fresh Milk is, by contrast, rural, rustic and eco-conscious. Unlike the reserved and static elegance of the plantation house, this looks like a ‘green’ and transparent space with a light footprint, at once self-contained and open to the world. Apart from its nutritional and maternal connotations, the name ‘Fresh Milk’, however, also gestures towards the location itself—the dairy farm, the family business and the conversion of a plantation (established in the seventeenth century) into a modern enterprise—and signals an at once conciliatory, assertive and not entirely risk-free re-branding effort.

Since its opening, Fresh Milk has (like Alice Yard) hosted innumerable residencies, talks by local and visiting artists, writers and curators, in addition to readings, musical events, workshops, small exhibitions, book-launches, film and video screenings, and its visitors have ranged from researchers, painters, photographers, playwrights and puppeteers to animation, performance, installation, digital, video and social practice artists. Most events begin (or end) with a brief mission-statement, where a representative of the space speaks about its purpose and, during their stay at Fresh Milk, artists-in-residence are asked to engage in a community-outreach project and to write a blog that helps in promoting the space.

As at Alice Yard, the emphasis is on process, rather than product, on ideas and individual development, rather than finished statements. Events are efficiently managed by Davis and her assistants with occasional help from residents or students at the local community college where Davis also teaches. In an interview with the London-based researcher Mariam Zulfiqar, Davis explains one of the motivations for Fresh Milk as that of providing a support-mechanism for recent graduates of the Visual Arts programme at the college. Its educational and promotional initiatives have thus included a young artists/readers programme, and a series of privately sponsored public benches and ‘art boards’ designed by Fresh Milk-artists (plate 19). Another incentive was the desire to expand the critical
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arena in Barbados through interaction with contemporary artists from the region and further afield. Davis herself submits: “I often think of Fresh Milk as both a nurturing environment and an act of resistance. Offering a space that is safe for people to experiment and innovate, and to gather, talk, think and make, is an act of resistance.” She also explains that funding for the space, which (like Alice Yard) is a registered NGO, has come in the form of small private and public grants.

While such donations have allowed her to take on a paid assistant, Fresh Milk at one point hoped to establish permanent links with the University of the West Indies, the Ministry of Culture and/or other governmental organizations, including the NCF (not least on the strength of Fresh Milk’s ‘Brazilian feat’, where the desired outcome was secured by the private entity, rather than the governmental body).

The construction of the studio itself was made possible by the start-up capital awarded to Davis for the development of Manipura. Such grants were issued by a public/private venture-capital fund (BIM Ventures), which was established in the context of the DLP-government’s effort to develop the creative industries. Within a couple of years, the project was shut down for undisclosed reasons, sometimes leaving the prospective entrepreneurs midways through their projects and in situations of serious financial embarrassment. Davis, however, had used the funds to construct the studio/showroom, which now houses Fresh Milk.

The BIM-ventures travesty is but one example of the conflicting policy-gestures to which Barbadian artists have found themselves subjected for decades. Indeed, their dissatisfaction with cultural policy only seems to have increased with changing governments’ attempts to capitalize on the cultural sector by making it more self-reliant, perhaps because this effort has been cloaked in an encouraging rhetoric of stimulation, facilitation and loosely defined notions of ‘sustainability’, which, in practical terms, have turned out to mean that there still is practically no support for the experimental segment of the sector, which needs it the most.

While plans for a West Indian Gallery of Art can be traced to the 1950s, preparations for the establishment of a Barbados National Gallery commenced under the government of the Barbados Labour Party in 1998 with the appointment of a National Art Gallery Committee (the NAGC). In her opening remarks to a 2004 NAGC workshop, chairperson Alissandra Cummins confidently declared that: “Cabinet, by a decision reached in September 2004, approved the recommendation that Barbados should provide for the establishment of a National Art Gallery. These proposals contain provisions not only for the creation of the Barbados National Gallery with its own programming and permanent collection (…). It is anticipated that 2005–2006 will be the period during which this activity will
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move from a project phase under the National Gallery Committee to an established entity. To date, however, that promise has yet to be fulfilled and, since the replacement of the NAGC Committee with the National Gallery Board in 2012, the slowly advancing project ironically seems to have come to a complete halt. Plans for a national gallery still figures in the 2010 National Cultural Policy for Barbados, which continues to be centered on the promotion of Barbadian culture and the pursuit of “a greater sense of national unity, confidence and self-sufficiency”, “national pride” and “the development of cultural institutions and museums”. The objectives to be acted on most immediately are, however, listed towards the end: “(h) To establish an infrastructure which will facilitate the development of the economic potential of the culture sector, promoting cultural industries and entrepreneurship and emphasizing the importance of Intellectual Property”, “(i) To strengthen the existing bonds between public and private sectors to create and sustain a durable and dynamic partnership in the promotion of positive cultural development” and (k) To identify strategies for the funding of cultural activities” (my emphasis).

In addition to its National Cultural Policy, the Democratic Labour Party government approved a ‘Cultural Industries Development Act’ in 2013. “Cultural industries”, it is stated, “include those enterprises which provide the general public with commercially viable cultural goods and services that are developed for reproduction and distribution to mass audiences (...)” (my emphasis). In a language far more specific and business-like than that of the National Cultural Policy, the Cultural Industries Development Act details the government’s idea of public-private relationships. What the government offers creative practitioners thus boils down to tax exemptions as well as flex-loans for cultural entrepreneurs, whose projects are deemed viable by the ministry. Non-repayable grants may also be awarded for the purposes of training and development of the sector. Whereas Manipura might have been an obvious contender for such provisions, it is therefore unlikely that Fresh Milk, which does not have a commercial aim, would be eligible. The ‘Cultural Industries Development Act’ thus exemplifies what Burke describes as a transition from ‘the arts that cost, to the arts that pay’.

Unlike Alice Yard, which ostensibly seeks to maintain the greatest possible autonomy from government and a cultural policy attempting to enlist the arts in a multiculturalist agenda of ‘managing difference’, it will be noted that Fresh Milk has been keen to establish relationships with agencies of the state. In this case, however, the reluctance seems to issue from the latter, for which the platform may not be self-evidently viable in economic terms, nor inclusive enough to warrant public funding.
In the context of Barbados, the perception of the visual arts as a prospective and significant source of revenue is a relatively new one. It is no coincidence that Fresh Milk continues a long and almost exclusively female pioneering tradition, for, in the island's culturally conservative climate, painting and sculpture rarely qualified as a reliably income-generating, male occupation. Starting with the Barbados Arts and Crafts Society set up by Golde White in 1943, the running of galleries and educational efforts have typically been left to the initiative of middle class women artists (see also chapter 9), who did not need to make a living from such ventures. The Arts and Crafts Society later evolved into the Barbados Arts Council, which continues to operate a small gallery at the Pelican Village in Bridgetown. In the 1970s, the female stewardship was briefly interrupted by the efforts of 'The People's Art Movement' (DePAM). At the initiative of the painter Omowale Stewart, this movement emerged out of Yoruba Yard—a cultural centre dedicated to the development of a national culture, which was explicitly envisaged as Afro-Caribbean. According to Kamau Brathwaite, Yoruba Yard was "the most dynamic, self-contained and challenging cultural organization in Barbados" and it could arguably be regarded as Barbados first 'alternative space'. Alongside Yoruba Yard's effort at historical and cultural recuperation, DePAM was thus (like Studio 66) deeply invested in the nation-building project. Its stated objective was to bring art to 'the man on the street', but also to provide a professional forum, where artists could exchange ideas and experience. (It was in this (at least initially) supportive and idealistic environment that the careers of artists like Ras Akyem Ramsay and Ras Ishi Butcher began). Later galleries have often been studio- or home-based (for example those of William Bertalan and Norma Talma) and many have operated in conjunction with hotels, restaurants, cafés and tourist attractions—from the Hilton-Banks Gallery in the 1960s (closed), the Coffee and Cream Gallery (closed), the Art Gallery at the Tides Restaurant, and On the Wall with outlets at the Earthworks Pottery, Champers Restaurant and the Limegrove Lifestyle Center. Independent galleries with varying degrees of aesthetic discernment have generally depended on the personal resources of their owners. These have included the Dayrells Gallery, which was run by the artist Denyse Menard-Greenidge, and which focused exclusively on abstract art (closed), the Women's Self Help Gallery (closed), the Gallery of Caribbean Art, the Kirby Gallery (closed), the artist Joscelyn Gardner's Art Foundry, which endeavored to show and sell cutting-edge art (closed), my own Zemicon Gallery (closed), the Old Pharmacy in Speightstown (closed), the Aweipo Gallery run by the ceramicist Julianna Inniss (closed), and the Bridgetown Gallery (closed).
The Barbados Museum and Historical Society (BMHS), which occupies the premises of the old military prison at the Garrison Savannah south of Bridgetown, was founded in 1933. Under the directorship of Neville Connell (from 1949), it took an active role in promoting the visual arts by lending its facilities to occasional exhibitions. Many years later, the BMHS undertook the writing and publishing of a national art history (Cummins, Thompson and Whittle’s *Art in Barbados: What Kind of Mirror Image*?), and its current director, Alissandra Cummins chaired the National Art Gallery Committee and subsequently the National Gallery Board. The museum does not, however, have the facilities to display more than a fraction of its art collection, nor the resources to meet the needs for documentation and restoration. In 1996, the Art Collection Foundation (ACF), a philanthropic organization with local and expatriate subscription founded in 1984, set up the Barbados Gallery of Art (BGA) near the museum at the Garrison Savannah as a private effort to compensate for the lack of a national gallery. Already after a few years, however, the BGA ran into difficulties and eventually shut its doors and surrendered its collection to the Barbados Museum.

Since 1984, the NCF has managed the Queens Park Gallery in Bridgetown, which has hosted more exhibitions than any other space in Barbados (plate 20). Given the NCF’s focus on broadly popular art forms, its involvement in the visual arts has been centered on the annual *Crop Over* and NIFCA exhibitions, which aim at inclusivity, encouragement and community-representation. As was the case with Carifesta, many established artists have ceased to participate in these exhibitions because of what is perceived to be inadequate display facilities and low aesthetic standards, all of which has been interpreted as contempt for the discipline and its practitioners. This perception was further fuelled by the scandalous neglect of the Queens Park Gallery itself, which by 2011 had reached such an advanced stage of disrepair that the gallery had to relocate to a diminutive space at the Pelican Craft Centre for six years. Following the gallery’s reopening in 2017 (when Barbados hosted Carifesta), there has, however, been a palpable effort to develop a more ambitious programme. Apart from the Queens Park Gallery, the largest and most dynamic public exhibition space in Barbados today is the Punch Creative Arena at the Community College, which hosts intermittent exhibitions by students and established artists.

In view of this history, it seems evident that Fresh Milk not so much challenges an established art institution as it follows in the footsteps of those who have challenged the absence of one. That absence, it is widely agreed, is partly to blame for the difficulties Barbadian artists have experienced in attaining regional and international recognition, or even commanding prices for their work, which would
approximate a living wage. The problem with Barbadian cultural policy and the cultural industries concept is notably not that artists are averse to becoming ‘economically viable’, but that they (as Davis contends) are denied the institutional support and endorsement, which necessarily precedes the maturation and growth of the local art market (the difference between Barbadian artists and their government over the matter of ‘sustainability’ is, in other words, a matter of sequence).

Though both Fresh Milk and Alice Yard see themselves as part of an extended creative network, their motivation and ‘alternative’ status are slightly different. While the emphasis at both venues is on informed critique and individual growth in a collaborative environment, there is, to begin with, a notable difference between Fresh Milk’s bucolic surroundings and ecological ethos and Alice Yard’s open-gate, urban pan-yard image. While Alice Yard has developed a sharp and independent profile, Fresh Milk has been keen to establish public/private partnerships and less worried about institutionalization, and is also more direct in its promotional and marketing efforts (with books, journals, mugs and gift items on sale). Whereas Alice Yard thus insists on a high degree of autonomy and independence, Fresh Milk’s educational and nurturing efforts are in principle sympathetic towards a nation-building scheme (Davis herself has occasionally expressed the wish that a national gallery would soon relieve Fresh Milk of its self-imposed duties), but also more in sync with a small business ethos. Indeed, Fresh Milk is arguably more concerned with shedding an autonomy, which its critics see as chosen, and it sees as imposed. Echoing the critique leveled at CCA7, the response to a talk I gave about Fresh Milk in the early stages of my research was almost solely focused on the historical connotations of the plantation-environment (and the elitism of a location best reached by car) and Fresh Milk’s perceived lack of effort to reach a wider audience. Davis, however, saw these allegations as a reiteration of the ‘white stigma’, which has framed much of her oeuvre, and which she precisely feels she has redressed by opening up her personal space to the public (Fresh Milk thus approaches Yoruba Yard’s project of historical reconciliation from the opposite end of the social spectrum).

Like its Port-of-Spain counterpart, however, Fresh Milk orients itself towards new and experimental media and its aim is “to encourage resident artists to step outside of their comfort zone and not be pressured to have a final product at the end, to really challenge their practice”. Both spaces have moreover profiled themselves in opposition to mainstream art (as well as that of an older generation), both function as incubators for younger artists and both are invested in the promotion of new media and the aesthetic I have described as the Caribbean postmodern.
Popopstudios

Nowhere in the Caribbean is tourism more immediately visible than when you arrive in the Bahamian capital, Nassau. Rental-villas, time-share developments, resorts and hotels—some of them veritably futuristic in scale and character—compete for space in manicured grounds behind walls and gates along the coast road leading into the city. Disembarking cruise-ship passengers enter almost directly onto Nassau’s main shopping-street, where offers of duty-free watches, diamonds, designer-bags, beachwear, t-shirts and ‘Bahamian straw’ scream for attention and quick sales. Owners of pastel-colored buildings (stylistically suspended between Caribbean vernacular, American colonial and Disney) leave their doors open, hoping that puffs of air-conditioned coolness may draw customers in.

This façade is, however, only skin-deep, and venturing down the avenues perpendicular to the coast is almost like peeling the city’s make-up off, layer by layer. In a quiet district southwest of the city-centre is Dunmore Avenue. Until 2017, when the building was severely damaged by hurricane Matthew, this is where the determined visitor would find ‘Popopstudios ICVA’. Nothing about the area, or the place itself, seems an obvious match for the ‘international centre for the visual arts’ announced by the acronym. The slightly disheveled compound, which was once a guest-house, comprises a couple of buildings withdrawn from the main road and surrounded by a large garden, which, with its profusion of palms, cacti, bromeliads, heliconias and potted ferns, largely appears to take care of itself. A picket fence wraps around the property and, from the parking lot, a series of large concrete slabs leads past a fishpond and a casual arrangement of wicker-chairs towards the main building—a café-au-lait colored two-storey villa. In contrast to the linear detailing upstairs, the front-porch is framed by orientalizing concrete-arches. Painted bright pink on the inside, it contained lanterns in every shape and size, a paint-stained folding-table and a funky, half-melted pink plastic-chair, when I visited in September 2014. Above the entrance-door, a slender sign identified the place as ‘Center for Visual Art Popopstudios. Gallery, professional studios, public programming’ (plate 21).

The place looked closed, when I arrived, but behind the main building I discovered an annex with an open door. An old man peeked out from an upstairs window and willingly emerged with a key, when asked if it was possible to have a look at the gallery. This, it turned out, was Kendal Hanna—the Bahamas’ first abstract artist and now Popopstudios’ artist-in-residence. He led me through the backdoor, past a kitchen and dining-area, to an exhibition-space, which must once have been two adjacent living rooms. Spotlights were installed in the ceiling,
the walls were painted white and whatever windows there may once have been, were blocked out. *Arc Magazine* once suggested that Popopstudios “bills itself as a place for the advancement of alternative Bahamian visual culture, and it manages to do just that with an always-cutting-edge philosophy”.

The works on display were, however, extremely diverse. Though some did match the postmodern tendencies described in section 1, not all of them aspired to be cutting-edge. It was a congenial mix of photography, painterly abstraction (in the paintings by Kendal Hanna), naturalism (in the portrait of Hanna by a temporary international resident) and conceptual art—including some large three-dimensional pieces by the founder of Popopstudios, John Cox, and a ‘broken horizon-line’ by Heino Schmid. The displays were clearly not meant to convey anything, but a snapshot of ongoing activities in the space at this time. Hanna told me that he found the interaction with the younger artists inspiring.

Like Alice Yard and Fresh Milk, Popopstudios has functioned as an NGO, and its main purpose has not been that of showing or selling work, but of hosting artists’ residencies. Against a stipulated fee, each artist is thus offered a room and studio-space as well as access to a kitchen and the support of a collaborative and critical community. When one of the managers, Lisa Wells, showed up, she explained that residents are international or drawn from the most promising or eager students at the visual arts programme at the College of the Bahamas. The duration of the residency may be anywhere between one and three months. There have occasionally been exhibitions from which works were sold, and from time to time Popopstudios has offered art classes to the wider community. Its founder, John Cox, explains the origins and character of the space, which opened in 1999 (a few years after his return from art-school in the United States) as follows: “At the beginning (…) we wanted to create a community of artists who shared the same philosophical stance. It was about having similar intentions with our work—kind of bucking the system and its nostalgic view of the landscape, and challenging presentation (…). My work and work of close friends were not seen as part of the mainstream (…). The older generation had done their thing, but I felt like there was such a generation gap. I felt like we could cultivate something that took that momentum they started for Bahamian art and take it even further.”

My intermittent scrutiny of Popopstudios’s website and brief experience of its physical premises in Dunmore Avenue has suggested an entity far less concerned with projecting a specific image, or giving ‘the progressive’ a particular inflection, than Alice Yard and Fresh Milk. Instead of user-reviews (in the form of blogs or testimonials), the website has offered brief profiles of past and current residents in addition to advertisements for art-related events in the wider community. There
was, in fact, nothing about this low-key, unassuming space—with its bohemian hints of 1960s counter culture—that immediately explained why it appears to rank as a ‘first among equals’ on the contemporary Bahamian scene. However, with heartwarming unanimity, literally every member of the Bahamian arts community I spoke with credited Cox for the inclusive policy of the space and for his consistent endeavors to reach out (and across generations) to the wider arts community.

In scrutinizing the national cultural policy for the Bahamas (drafted in 2006) in preparation for my visit, I was struck by its well-informed and nuanced tenor, its extensive discussion of Bahamian history, as well as its suggestion that research and institutions may aid in the development of different sectors—not merely to achieve “a strong national identity and economic empowerment”, but also “cultural literacy”. The draft policy lists the actual and potential strengths of Bahamian culture, but also concedes current weaknesses, which range from its proximity to the United States and “strong Caribbean cultures”, a lack of self-confidence, geographical fragmentation, poor training and infrastructure, to the high-brow/low-brow stigma pertaining to different types of culture. Though there is talk of developing culture industries and inviting corporate partnerships and philanthropy, the instrumental approach seems significantly less pronounced than in its Trinidadian or Barbadian counterparts. It was astonishing, then, to find that under paragraph 4.1.1.12 dedicated to ‘Visual Art’, there are literally no entries (‘fashion’ however, which follows right after, has sub-headings for both fabric, clothing styles and body art). When the draft policy was written, the National Gallery of the Bahamas had existed for three years. It is possible, that the policy omission resulted from this institution’s quasi-autonomous status, but—as what could only be considered one of the nation’s most tangible cultural achievements—its complete absence from the document, with not a single mention, is nonetheless bizarre.

The National Gallery of the Bahamas, which was briefly preceded by the privately established, but short-lived Bahamian Museum and Art Gallery, is located in a well-preserved historical district of Nassau. In close proximity to Government House and the Graycliff Hotel, it is slightly elevated above the bustling port and tourist traps around Bay Street. It is housed in Villa Doyle, a mansion from the 1860s, which, over the years, has been occupied by Bahamian statesmen and notables. A small brochure about the building identifies it as “one of a relatively few examples of Palladian architecture in the Caribbean”, and Villa Doyle is indeed remarkably elegant with its symmetric articulation, timber balconies, columns, balustrades, louvers and almost ‘floating’ roof (plate 22).
Immediately upon entry into the gallery-wing, the visitor confronts a small semi-enclosed space. This is the ‘project-room’—a space, which the gallery lends to smaller or experimental projects that do not fit into its general programming. A walk through the exhibition *40 Years of Bahamian Art*, however, gave me the cursory, but instructive art historical overview I had been unable to establish prior to my visit, as well as an impression of both diversity, ruptures and continuity in Bahamian art. There were works by old and young artists in painting, sculpture, photography and installation. Individual pieces were meticulously labeled and intermittent wall-texts characterized each decade in general terms. I was told that such survey-exhibitions are mounted for a year at a time, while temporary shows rotate in the project-room and the galleries upstairs. At the time, there was a retrospective for Eddie Minnis, whose work can be described as nostalgic celebrations of Bahamian life.

The National Gallery of the Bahamas was established in the nation’s thirtieth year of independence. Though its first director, Erica James, opens her catalogue-text for the inaugural exhibition in 2003 by noting that the “ill-fitting concept of ‘nation’ that emerged out of the Enlightenment is dissolving and transforming” and the quest for identity as a “stable essence” is now, by many Caribbean theorists, seen as passé, she closes it by stressing that “It is the responsibility of Bahamian artists, art institutions, historians and critics to direct the Bahamian artistic in the global sphere. Otherwise they risk being defined and culturally deformed from the outside”.

She thus identifies the institution’s role as that of offering works by Bahamian artists the sufficient context to be understood on their own terms, neither isolated from trends in the international world, nor without a particular situatedness, which necessarily impacts their scope and meaning. The gallery must “ensure that the Bahamas does not become peripheral in its own discourse”, by working towards publishing and education, and by cultivating national and international relationships and transnational networks. Towards the end of her 2013-paper “Dreams of Utopia”, which reflects on her experience as National Gallery curator, James indeed encourages other Caribbean arts communities to keep pressuring governments to play their part in the development of the visual arts. She can do so with a certain entitlement, for the National Gallery of the Bahamas was itself established as a result of continued pressure from the arts community.

Asked what she saw as the particular challenges of a postcolonial National Gallery, the current director, Amanda Coulson, mentioned the absurdly small operating budget (which remained the same in 2014 as it was in 2003) only as a second contender. The greatest challenge, she said, is that of constantly having to justify the gallery’s existence to both the government, the government-appointed
board by which it is managed, and to the general public. Several of the gallery’s international outreach efforts have thus been met with rigorous questioning, if not staunch opposition (for example, when it sought exposure for Bahamian art at the Venice Biennale in 2013). Apart from standing up to such scrutiny and having to negotiate the very different aesthetic preferences of its various constituencies, Coulson cited another unusual challenge as that of handling works by artists, who are not already well established (thus echoing Poupeye’s observation that the postcolonial gallery typically has to make decisions, which are not already legitimized by an art historical canon or record). In fact, Coulson noted, she occasionally finds herself in the wholly unconventional role (for a national gallery director) of acting as ‘broker’ between artists and commercial galleries. Meanwhile, the National Gallery aims at establishing a healthy balance between community-oriented and international endeavors and changing the image of the Bahamas both externally and internally (by showing that “national art can also be critical”), and ultimately to engage in a kind of “national group-therapy.” The institution, moreover, seeks to cultivate new collectors among young professionals and is keen to explore different types of partnerships.

Among the gallery’s past and present partners, Coulson mentioned Popopstudios, Hillside House and the Doongalik Gallery, but particularly drew attention to the efforts of John Cox, who for a period also served as the gallery’s curator. She spoke of Popopstudios as a path-breaking initiative, which more than any other entity has contributed to the development of a contemporary scene in Nassau, but which nonetheless falls in line with the tradition for mentorships, collaborations and patronage of younger artists, that has continued from pioneer-artists like the late Brent Malone (frequently acknowledged as the ‘father’ of Bahamian art), Maxwell Taylor, Antonius Roberts, the brothers Stanley and (the late) Jackson Burnside, to contemporary artists like John Beadle, John Cox and Heino Schmid. From the days of the Chelsea Pottery (the famous British establishment, which, during its temporary relocation from London to the Bahamas from 1957 to 1962 became a center point for the artists of Nassau and New Providence), this community has ostensibly been unusually close-knit and supportive. During the 1960s and 1970s, Brent Malone had a succession of galleries (the Loft Art Gallery, the Temple Art Gallery, the Matinee Gallery and Marlborough Antiques)—all of which served to display and encourage works by younger artists as well as his own. Other past and present galleries in Nassau include the Jumbey Village Cultural Complex established by the Bahamian government (closed), Toogood’s Studio and Lyford Cay (both closed), the Doongalik Gallery (founded by Pam and Jackson Burnside, and in operation at various locations since the 1970s), which has
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endeavored to “give Bahamians an identity, neither British, African or American, but uniquely Bahamian, to be proud of”⁶⁹ the Jonkonnu Gallery (closed), Sting-rae Studio, the artist Antonius Roberts’ Hillside House, New Providence Art and Antiques and the experimental space Liquid Courage (closed). In addition, the Central Bank of the Bahamas offers an exhibition-space, as does the College of the Bahamas (the Pro Gallery), and the d’Aguilar Foundation has an extensive collection, which can be viewed by appointment.

The Bahamian arts community thus appears to have focused its collective energies on reaching common goals, rather than nourishing internal divisions. As a united front, it has accomplished at least three (tangible and intangible) things: putting enough pressure on the government to secure the opening of the National Gallery (which in turn sees itself as an integral part of the community), established a tradition for the encouragement and facilitation of younger artists, and instituted an annual event known as ‘Transforming Spaces’. The latter involves a round-robin visual arts tour of Nassau, where several galleries and institutions come together for a few days to showcase a wide range of works by local and regional artists, thereby actively foregrounding the visual arts in the public awareness.

It has been suggested to me that what is most significant about the Bahamian arts community is the desire to project an image of unity (actual or not).⁷⁰ Even if Popopstudios, as the nation’s first explicitly counter hegemonic space, has been widely and singularly acknowledged as the ‘midwife’ of a new artistic generation, it is equally credited for its inclusiveness and efforts to reach across generations and for its frequent interaction with other galleries and spaces, including the National Gallery. The only directly acknowledged oppositional dynamic today was between the arts community and the Bahamian government, which — despite the establishment of the National Gallery — remains skeptical of the discipline and its enthusiastic practitioners. Together, artists, galleries and the national institution thus appear committed to expanding and improving the awareness of and conditions for visual art in the national and international arena. The emphasis is, in other words, on maintaining a sense of community and preserving the inherent diversity of the discipline, rather than on promoting any particular aesthetic direction. Meanwhile, it seems likely that this apparent unity, at least in part, can be ascribed to the youth of its national institution. With no significant institutional memory or deeply entrenched practices, this has allowed for its ethos and practices to be shaped in close consultation with the current needs of the community it serves. Erica James precisely underscores how important it is for the institution to be policy-driven, in order to avoid political hi-jacking.⁷¹
In reflecting on how Bahamian artists (like their colleagues across the Anglophone Caribbean) have had to negotiate a confluence of local and external influences and demands. John Cox suggests that, until the 1990s:

many definitions of Bahamian post-independence were tied up in old negotiations of ideas of landscape and identity with very little commentary. The shared instinct of ambitious young artists was to revisit past ideas and begin breaking the molds of tradition. This came with the price of being labeled too avant-garde, not Bahamian enough or, by extension, too ‘foreign.’ It reignited an ongoing process of defining what Bahamian is in a changing world. This question of identity often presents itself to Caribbean art. Artists either seem to address it directly or are determined to avoid it—both of which accentuate the enormity of the issue.72

The paradoxical relationship between an aesthetic conservatism, which at once manifests itself in an aversion for what is perceived as ‘foreign’, and in the preference for a conventional idiom, which yet has the greatest appeal to the foreigner,73 is deeply suggestive of a dependence on tourism, which is nothing short of existential. The distinctive, but open-minded ‘national identity’ evoked by three generations of Bahamian artists has arguably been posited both within and against this absolute condition.

In 2014, it was announced that Cox had relinquished his curatorial position at the National Gallery to take up the role as creative arts director at ‘Baha Mar’—a gigantic resort-project, which was planning to undertake an extensive visual arts programme. Since many contemporary Bahamian artists have come to the fore partly because of their efforts to expose the nation’s many and various problems, including the mixed blessings of tourism, this move could only surprise. An optimistic entry at the Popopstudies’ website on July 6, 2014, however, read as follows: “For John Cox, creative arts director at Baha Mar, giving young Bahamian artists a leg up has always been high on the agenda. For five years, Cox’s Popopstudios has been offering summer residencies to up-and-coming Bahamian artists. Now head of the art department at the country’s soon-coming second mega resort, he’s extending the same opportunity to those interested in contributing to Baha Mar’s cultural agenda.”74

In her extensive discussion of the Baha Mar project as a new model for Caribbean cultural development, Angelique Nixon suggests that the partnership between Popopstudios and Baha Mar, though by no means an ideal model, represents a “possible site of resistance”.75 Seconding Cox, she avers that in an entirely tourism-dependent economy, this opportunity for artistic self-representation and
exposure of works to guests and hotel workers alike can be “a platform to empower ourselves and create a paradigm shift of identity”. Whereas Baha Mar thus may translate Popopstudios’s genuine community-orientation into exposure and sales for many artists (opportunities which a space like Popopstudios may not be well-positioned to generate), Cox’s consecutive leaps from managing an alternative space intent on “bucking the system”, to curating the national collection, and then onto managing a gallery (now known as The Current) and an arts programme at a multi-million dollar resort, nevertheless forces the question of what ‘alternative’ or counter hegemonic now means, and corroborates the perception that contemporary ‘counter culture’, whether by circumstance or, as here, by choice, has become an ally of neoliberal policy.

Summary of Chapter 5

In reflecting on the region’s contemporary scene Charles Campbell suggests that “Spaces such as Alice Yard in Trinidad, Popopstudios in the Bahamas and Fresh Milk in Barbados, as well as the pages of ARC magazine have become important incubators for the Jamaican artists now asserting their spaces in a global network”. This chapter has sought to describe how each of these spaces emerged out of particular national histories and institutional contexts. What the three spaces have in common is an emphasis on experiment, new media, community and collaboration, and, in a general sense, I submit that the regions’ alternative spaces perceive their own establishment and operations as a form of ‘activism’.

Whereas the oppositional character of these spaces more clearly has been directed towards government policy than towards monolithic institutions, their affirmative or counter hegemonic, nationalist or post-nationalist inflection varies with the overall character of their surrounding ‘cultural fields’. I have, however, deliberately meant to provide a background for arguing that alternative spaces depend on the presence of public (and relatively strong) institutions to assume a counter hegemonic function: only a combination of public and private spaces can provide a comprehensive representation of any nation’s visual arts spectrum, bridge generational gaps and help establish a productive dynamic between margins and centre. Disregarding the unknowable personal dynamics, which often determine the success or failure of partnerships and collaborations, it is interesting (though not necessarily a generality), that the most harmonious relationship between an alternative space, a surrounding community and a national institution was noted in the Bahamas, where the National Gallery is both young and comparatively resourceful. It is therefore only where such institutions exist, that
the function of alternative spaces can be both ‘oppositional and supplementary’ (like the micromuseum discussed in chapter 4) rather than the present—and odd—combination of ‘exclusive and compensatory’. In institutionally weak territories (like Barbados and Trinidad), alternative spaces thus tend to alienate certain factions of the arts community, while serving others extremely well: members of such communities indeed tend to become one another’s ‘publics’. The relationship between these spaces, the public sphere and neoliberal cultural policy is the subject of chapter 6.