

## David Dale Gallery – Tilting Axis Report

Get a boat, a boat large enough for all of us and what we do, was a suggestion in jest to the solution of our problems. It was just one humorous interjection of many, among innumerable more deeply thought-provoking, and serious ones. But, it was one nevertheless that remained with me, and possibly piqued my interest the greatest. Just to clarify, the vessel I refer to is purely a metaphorical one. It may be a hybrid between an ark, a ferry and a cruise liner – but it is definitely not sea worthy, being a craft for abstract thought, and riddled with holes no doubt for that matter. But I'm mixing my metaphors there, though do indulge me in the idea a little longer. The boat serves to outline the difficulties facing contemporary art in the Caribbean, and through offering a hypothetical solution at least clarifies the issues if not hints at steps towards solving them.

There are three primary issues, a secondary one close behind, and a vast myriad of facets, edifices and historical weight between these and the other numerous problems further down the line. These primary concerns would be: geography; financial aid; and education – with communication a close second.

Now, it is not for me to elucidate these issues, as they will be far more eloquently and deftly dealt with by the residents of the region, only to stick doggedly to my metaphor and offer an interpretation of the issues.

Geography is the most evident, and simultaneously hard to overcome, problem. The spread of islands are incredibly difficult to move between, and therefore physically and culturally have a distance between themselves and also the main contemporary art centres, one that capitalist orientated air travel has seemingly exasperated rather than alleviated. Of which a solution would be... money. But unfortunately there isn't any.

The arts are chronically underfunded almost universally across the Caribbean, which is unlikely to change in the current economic climate, but it is an issue which dictates our current situation and problematises any future growth within the sector – and the private market doesn't contribute, though not that I can offer any guidance on that from my position. A problem which arises from... lack of education. Not education in general, but enlightenment of politicians – and strategy for the current and future students to be able to lift the region from its current problems through initiatives and informing future policy.

The secondary issue of communication is the spread of languages across the region, however through a combination of the incredible bilingual ability of the people I met, the universality of English, and the universality of visual art we have reached a temporary, if far from perfect, solution. So, if a boat (yes, sorry, still on that), and its historical precedent are the metaphorical solution how can we articulate the future?

Leaving that potentiality there for the moment I'll explain what I'm actually talking about. My colleague, Ellie Royle, and I were kindly supported by The British Council, to attend *Tilting Axis*, a conference on sustainability and connectivity within contemporary art in the Caribbean. The conference was attended by a fascinating selection of practitioners from the Caribbean region in addition to fellow colleagues from Scotland and those from further afield such as USA, Brazil and Senegal. Hopefully the documents which accompany this one will paint a full picture of the resilience, diversity, and excellence of the organisations and topics covered – though I have had to unfortunately limit myself in this text to my direct contributions and understandings. I have to offer the précis to our contribution though, that at all times I was mindful that the predicament being discussed was very much not ours. Although we were fully involved in discussions, and our contributions heard, I was ever aware that this was not our situation. And that we could assist in ways, but not find solutions – as that would need to fall to organisations in the region.

Instead of offering a description of the discussions that occurred, as again there will be written contributions from those much more qualified than I, I'll give an outline on what I drew from the two days – though I may need to offer a couple of recommendations to justify this text. Firstly, what was the most immediately striking, though long lasting impression, was the power within the room. Not necessarily a hierarchical power, although there were very prominent organisations represented, but the strength of the attendees and the power of what they produce. A room full of initiative and determination is hard to come across, though here it was in spades. You could get drunk on inspiration by spending just a little time there, over the course of two days the enthusiasm was so infectious, not one person I think could've left not committed to the aims of the conference. And this was exactly how our organisation returned, emboldened with a commitment to contribute and assist however would be helpful. Following on from this point, but distinct, was the intellect and aspirations of the discourse – this was pursued at a level that was both impressive and thought-provoking. The sort of discussions in which you cannot help but feel a duality of being elevated, but needing to elevate yourself to meet it.

The propositions I drew from the conference can really be surmised in two(ish) ways. Firstly, and more importantly back to my boat, The vessel which satisfies all fulfilments of a boat is the internet – and this needs to be exploited in the maximum. Through the internet we can accomplish all the cultural exchanges required, travel thousands of miles, improve education through pulling resources, position and advocate for groups towards funders, and communicate to the fullest extent – the organisations involved have obviously begun this, though there are much fuller extents to explore. The sequel to this, and in keeping with a maritime theme, is presenting a common face and formalising. Much like the *HMS. Tilting Axis*, there is a strength and weight in pulling resources and presenting as one common face. Of course the activities between organisations are multiplicitous in nature, though this will serve to attract attention and weight to all the constituent organisations'

aims – this strategy is commonplace and highly successful. And, what we can do we will, this goes almost without saying – but we have thought about it and are taking steps to implement it, which is important. The first of these steps suggested by fellow UK colleagues Mother Tongue, and undertaken in partnership with other colleagues CCA, Glasgow, is to initiate a mentoring programme for Caribbean curatorial practice. Each of the organisations possess a great wealth of experience within this (and diversity too), but most importantly a commitment to the region and its development. Curatorial practice within the emerging scene is foremost in my mind to changes and improvement, curators who will showcase new artists to new audiences, and I believe we all have a role to play in this education.

To conclude, I want to offer my deepest thanks to Tilting Axis for the invitation to participate – there we forged lasting connections which I cannot understate, and in particular thanks to Fresh Milk and Annalee Davis for their wonderful hospitality and introduction to Barbados and the wider region. We look forward to contributing more in the short term and participating in further Tilting Axis events.

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