



KOLONIALISMO DI NANZI: ANANSI COLONIALISM

Tirzo Martha

Abstract

In his essay, Curaçao artist Tirzo Martha signals the problems and needs of Curaçao society to which he has given a voice through his art, performances and projects. For Martha, growing up on the island of Curaçao between the 1960s and 1980s was a somewhat surreal experience. The island's unstable social and political developments had a direct impact on a sense of community, with events such as the revolt of 30 May 1969 demonstrating how extreme and out-of-hand the situation had become. The economic decay that was tormenting the island gave rise to corruption and abuses of power in Curaçao's political, governmental and social structures. In the more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, people were cheating and hustling just to survive – a situation that step-by-step became the norm at all layers of society. Circumstances became so bad as to evoke the stories of Anansi, set within a contemporary colonial society. In response, a voice was needed that could encapsulate and communicate the needs of Curaçao society. It would speak to and from the visual arts, through actions, interventions and performances in the community, working to remove the burden of dysfunction and decay. The voice took many other forms before finally issuing from the fictive persona of Captain Caribbean.

This text is published as a counterpart to the contribution to Sustainable Art Communities from the art historian Kitty Zijlmans.

Keywords: contemporary art, Tirzo Martha, Captain Caribbean, Instituto Buena Bista (IBB), Afro Healing

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Biographical note

Tirzo Martha is a visual artist and co-founder of the Instituto Buena Bista, Curacao Center for Contemporary Art. As a socially and politically engaged artist, he seeks to turn his artworks into tangible actions that may contribute to the development and growth of Curaçao and the wider Caribbean.

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To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, www.openartsarchive.org, follow this link:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/archive/1st-conference-sustainable-art-communities-creativity-and-policy-transnational-caribbean-7>

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Through the narrative that I am about to tell, I hope to convey my deep concern for the future of art and the future of Curaçao, expanding on these themes to address the Caribbean as a whole.

The story begins

Growing up, I listened to Anansi stories. The stories that were told referred to guys walking around in layers of clothing with bizarre hair-dos, bizarre headgear, carrying bundles of stuff gathered together in such a creative way that it was impossible to tell exactly what it was. At the same time, these guys were walking in the killing heat of the sun, their bare feet on the burning asphalt. My parents were socially aware people, trying to help others; I was the kind of boy who also shared his lunch with three or four other students because they did not have anything to eat at home or to bring

to school. Sometimes they were absent from school for days because they did not have shoes or clothes to wear. I was a boy surrounded by people seeking refuge in religion in prayer and in their altars at home; a boy whose neighbourhood had at least five different churches from different religions, not to mention the religions gathering at the different homes (Figure 4.1). I was a boy confronted with politicians giving intensive performances during their political campaign in the neighbourhood, making promises that floated away with them, as soon as they left in their triumphal processions, leaving people even more desperate through the false sympathy they offered. This same boy helped people to collect whatever they could use, to build a roof over their heads to protect them from the fury of the Caribbean sun and the other elements. This construction was also their main luxury, keeping them in competition with neighbours who lived in more substantial dwellings. Looking back on all that the boy went through in those years, it is not so strange that he should become a man who walks around in goggles with a KFC bucket on his head (Figure 4.2).

The world the boy grew up in was beyond all belief. He was safe at home, certainly. Home was a place of comfort. But the moment he stepped out of his safe haven he was back once again facing a cruel reality (which would turn him eventually into the public spectacle of a man wearing a bucket for a hat). The boy's perspective was from the grass roots of a community that shares nothing of the humour and sense of irony that outsiders feel defines it. Consider those on our streets who are trying to survive by begging, hustling and being tricksters, trying only to



Figure 4.1: Tirzo Martha, *Caribbean Cathedral* (detail), 2013, installation, Museum De Fundatie (Netherlands). (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.2: Tirzo Martha, *Captain Caribbean performance still*, 2009, video loop 5 min, Curaçao.

meet their most basic needs in the most depressing conditions. They are the subject of everyone's cruel mockery and a system from which they yearn to be liberated. They want freedom not only from their dire living conditions, but also from the historical past that bequeathed our present traditions, values and myths. Ignoring such circumstances is easy for outsiders who consider Curaçao to be an island paradise, those who only see the beautiful, exotic and romantic parts of the country, dazzled by our big welcoming smiles. Sun, sand and sea, happy faces, music, dance, rum and entertainment. All that helps to conceal and forget our daily reality. It made this boy ask himself: Why? (Figure 4.3)

Why do I have to believe all the arguments that our politicians throw at us? Why should I be preoccupied with their versions of the past, while the present day is my immediate problem? Historical narratives have tended to be manipulated to suit the interests of the few – cliques that have tried to define our future. These were the political and financial powers that have aimed for independence from the Netherlands. In 2005, when a referendum was held, all their efforts seemed to have paid off. The people wanted autonomy (Figure 4.4).

One day, the same politicians pushing for independence decided that if the colour of your skin is black, then inevitably you have African heritage or so-called African roots. Being an 'Afro-something' is a label that gets stuck on people, and if you do not want to be labelled that way, then you are hardly a real native of the island. The politicians also decided that they needed more money to satisfy their greed. So they suggested exploring a whole host of topics as a way of reaching out to the masses: identity, slavery, colonialism, social injustice and so on. But this was a mere trick to keep the attention of the national community focused somewhere else, a distraction from what political leaders were actually doing.

I say a trick because this sort of behaviour, to attract sympathy and support, much resembles the antics of the all-time trickster Anansi. What has marked Curaçao in recent years is what I would call Anansi Colonialism, a system in which politicians have employed creole tactics, in the name of independence, but with the same miserable outcomes, strategies and structures as were the domain of the former colonists. Whether colony or independent country, Curaçao has nothing less than a exploitative political establishment, with a concomitant



Figure 4.3: Tirzo Martha, *Culture vs tradition vs politics vs history vs the people*, 2007, installation, dimensions variable. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.4: Tirzo Martha, *The Last Sonata of Curaçao*, 2010, installation with sound, 300 x 400 x 200cm, presented at the Curaçao Museum. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.5: Tirzo Martha, *Afro-Healing*, 2012, assemblage, 80 x 30cm, presented at Centrum Beeldende Kunsten Zuid Oost (Netherlands). (Photo: Tirzo Martha)

programme of the acquisition of territory – in the present circumstances, not foreign land, but the very ground on which we stand. The unequal relationship and abuse of power by the government reflects and confirms the characteristics of the old colonial structures, thinly disguised in a new outfit and executed by the country's own natives (Figure 4.5).

Anansi in real life

As the boy was growing up, he had the feeling that the social conditions and the behaviour of the politicians in his community were a vivid visualisation of the Anansi stories once narrated by his parents and at his school. The action and reactions from the community fitted almost identically with the patterns of the characters and circumstances of the stories. To illustrate this, here is a description of the Anansi, from the book *How Anansi Fooled the King*, a compilation of Anansi stories recorded by Nilda Pinto (2005):

Anansi the spider fooled not only the king but also the tiger, the devil and even his friends. He is not only a greedy lazy-bones but a super-clever smart guy, as well. He always finds a way to get

himself out of difficulties, especially by using the stupidity of others. As we say in my native language Papiamentu: 'Nanzi a bira rey', Anansi was now crowned King.

It was the anti-social situation that instigated the urge and necessity of the boy to communicate the conditions, frustrations, hopes and dreams that the people of Curaçao were experiencing. There was no space in the boy's head for being creative or artistic, no drawing or painting, just the daily images that went by. These images made him aware of the existence of the people's urge to find an escape from it all and this initiated the visualisation of a world rarely seen by others. No colours, no sunshine, no dreams of becoming rich; only suffocation and a longing for freedom and tranquillity. People were trying to find an escape by going back to their so-called roots in an attempt to understand what went wrong. However, this journey brought more confusion, division and injustice to the community. About these situations someone once said to the boy as an encouragement: 'There is always a light at the end of the tunnel', to which the boy responded: 'But this is the Caribbean and power failures are very common.' (Figure 4.6)



Figure 4.6: Tirzo Martha, *Tell Me the Truth*, 2003, performance, video loop 10 min, presented in Curaçao. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)

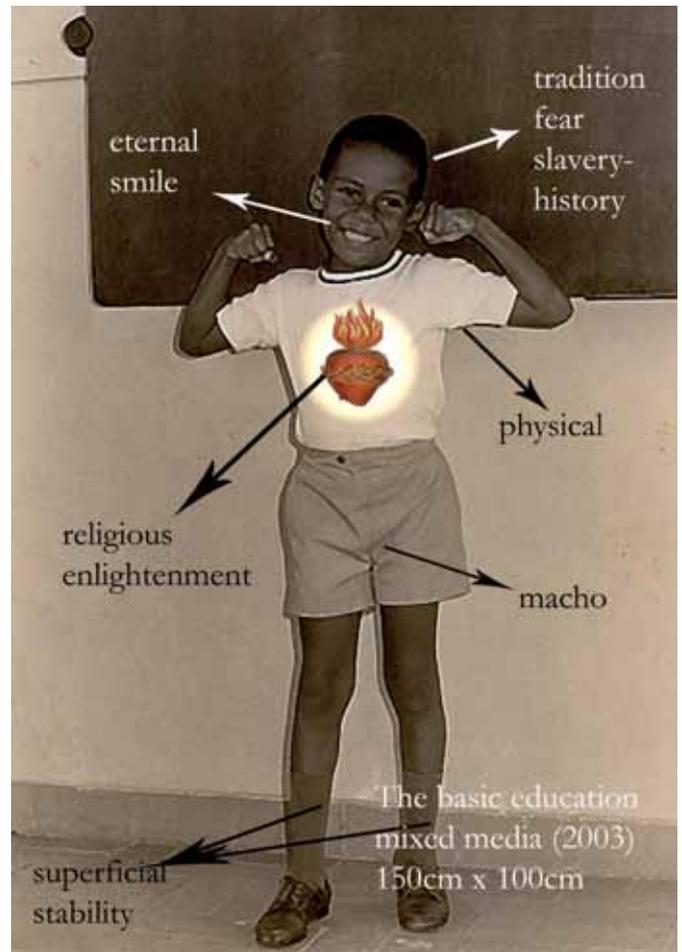


Figure 4.7: Tirzo Martha, *The Basic Education*, 2003, mixed media, 100 x 40cm, presented in Curaçao. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)

The Basic Education is meant to give more insight into the enormous impact the conditions surrounding the boy had on his thoughts. This is all based on the boy's reaction (Figure 4.7).

The boy said: 'Until now, I do not know why, but there is genuine fear of being confronted with the "freedom" promised by the political classes. I came to the conclusion that the same fear is used as a tool to avoid the disappointment and frustration that come with knowing how empty and meaningless such freedom can be.'

In this way, my answer to that question of 'Why?' may seem unorthodox to most readers. But still, for me, I hold out hope that beyond the current circumstances there is an actual, reachable, true sort of freedom – which has an essence, beauty and strength.

I believe that, for Curaçao, dreaming is the only realistic state of freedom. Everything around me is grey. Grey like the smoke from the refinery over the roofs of our houses. Grey like the concrete bricks of the houses that cannot be finished. Grey like the colour of the hair of the only people still working and trying to keep Curaçao society functioning. Grey like the last breath from our polluted minds and bodies.



Figure 4.8: Tirzo Martha, *Spirit of the Caribbean*, 2005, installation with video, 500 x 400cm, presented at Brooklyn Museum, New York. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)

The manipulations of the colonial era and slavery have made mental liberation and expression difficult. Often the 'Afro' label is used to imprint and to indoctrinate us, creating uncertainty and making people

fearful about their identities. This is what happens when people are told that their only background, the essence for their identity, has to be traced to the history of slavery, their so-called roots in Africa.

What is wrong with being just *yiou di Kòrsou* or children of Curaçao, as we have been calling ourselves, and not this Afro-Curaçao thing? What about having our own identity based on our own culture, context, opinions, and our own achievements, and being determined to move forwards towards a new future defined by ourselves? In this new future, not only Curaçao but the entire Caribbean will achieve real unity, supported by the involvement of all the islands and territories. Such a collective strength would make it possible for the people to remain in the Caribbean and to work, to strengthen their own countries instead of fleeing from it in search of better prospects. What they need is to be able to look their fellow countrymen in the eye, knowing that everything is going to be all right.

Living with these different thoughts and dreams brought the boy to the visual arts, which made communication, space and imagining a new world possible. This was the exact tool he needed to reflect and comment on the society he was living in. The arts offer an instrument that you can apply to criticise and comment on reality but also a strong framework on which to build and develop. For him, the arts were also the perfect medium to visualise the weird world he was experiencing and wanted to change. At the same time, the arts became a space that he desperately wanted to

share with others. It allowed room for comprehending the creation of a sustainable society, a society that is steady, strong and evolving.

The boy would go on to use the arts as a tool to make various interventions (Figure 4.8).

The first intervention

When the boy, now a grown man, finished his art studies, he was determined to go back to his society so that he could contribute to creating a new vision, perspective and direction at a political, social and cultural level.

Back on his native island, he started making his interventions and giving performances in public spaces. He was not going to wait for invitations for exhibitions in the local galleries or museums. Ultimately, that wasn't the reason for his engagement with art. He was creating his own conditions and outlooks, from which he could develop a new construction for furthering the visual arts and addressing social issues.

The boy, now a trained artist, began collecting objects and searching for unusual spaces to create his work. He constructed installations and gave his performances in the neighbourhood, in the local post office, in the carnival parade, or wherever he had the chance to perform. Even his parents' house was used as



Figure 4.9: Tirzo Martha, *Greetings from the Caribbean*, 2005, performance, intervention in public spaces in Curaçao. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.10: Tirzo Martha, *The invasion of The Netherlands supported by Chavez (Chavez had to stop at IKEA in Spain to buy himself a new presidential chair)*, 2008, installation with video, presented at the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe (ZKM, Germany). (Photo: Tirzo Martha)

a platform to show his work. Public spaces, monuments and so on, all became the perfect location at which he could elaborate and perform the images that were then still only floating in his head.

In tandem with this, Akvile Eglinskaite wrote about his artwork (Figure 4.10), a contribution to the exhibition 'Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989':¹

The installations and performances of Caribbean artist Tirzo Martha represent an ironic mirror of the socio-political state of Caribbean societies. With his multi-media, open works, Martha undertakes a social analysis and thus traverses the fine line between fiction and reality.

[The installation] *The Invasion of the Netherlands supported by Chavez (Chavez had to stop at IKEA in Spain to buy himself a new presidential chair)* is a remarkable collection of everyday objects – a construction made of used furniture, crockery, and various domestic materials. Reminiscent of improvised street barricades in the context of

political protest movements or of patchwork altars, among others, the work consists of IKEA furniture, collected as talismans of Western culture, of Caribbean souvenir articles, or small replicas of chintzy Catholic symbols.

Martha's ironic and sarcastic reflections focus on the present-day constitution of postcolonial Caribbean societies, marked by poverty and dependency on international tourism and other, more recent forms of slavery, and show the people's disappointments, the anger, and the daily fight for survival. At the same time, he refers to their dreams and the vitality of a new Creole identity and culture, which positions itself confidently in the area of the 'in-between'. In addition, Martha confronts the observers with the cliché of a colourful and naïve Caribbean art, or a corresponding attitude of expectation.

(Eglinskaite, 2011, p.71)

¹ Held at the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe (ZKM), Germany, 17.9.2011 to 5.2.2012.

The second intervention

As soon as he started making his art, he also began his social projects. He pursued the belief that art and these projects go hand in hand and cannot be separated.

He started giving workshops in schools. He took the students out onto the streets and worked there with them, together with other people from the neighbourhood. While these were taking place, he was asked to help rebuild the local (so-called) art academy, but by then, it was already too late. He was one of the five artists who fought to the end in the struggle to keep the academy open, even as the government decided that it was no longer going to subsidise the school and resolved to shut it down. He would not allow the matter to rest. He would continue to make art education a reality.

His next step was towards the local prison where he worked with long-term prisoners. He challenged them to use their skills and to make objects inspired by their hopes, wishes and dreams. For two weeks, he spent the whole day eating, relaxing and working with the prisoners. He asked them to work on developing their ideas, starting with the outline of a Christmas tree. It was a great experience to see how skilful and creative so many of the prisoners were. The result of this workshop was shown in downtown Willemstad.

In this period (1992-2003), financial grants did not exist. The one foundation on the island with the

financial means to support these projects did not understand them and could not see their added value. So the projects were executed with the materials collected by the artist himself. It was all very hands-on!

It was when he joined forces with his colleague David Bade and art historian Nancy Hoffmann, through the foundation Arte Swa, that he started to carry out social-cultural projects that were more lasting. For the results of such efforts to endure was essential for him in his aim to really help people. By creating conditions that can guarantee continuity, you can invest and structure the support you are giving to the people with whom you are working (Figure 4.11). You can then bring the various groups from your society together and let them work with one another, by using the creative processes presented by the arts to stimulate communication, to gain an understanding of one another and to develop social skills.

However, still at the back of his mind, the artist was thinking about the academy that had closed and the need to create a replacement, a place where younger talent could develop in a natural and healthy environment. He had in view a space dedicated to creating a collection of artworks that could be seen as cultural heritage in the field of the visual arts. This aspiration was nurtured by the experience of working with young talent during the Arte Swa projects (Figures 4.12 and 4.13).



Figure 4.11: Tirzo Martha and the Arte Swa team, *Social-cultural project with psychiatric clinic Capriles, 2005, Carnival parade, presented during Curaçao Carnival.* (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.12: Tirzo Martha and the Arte Swa team, *Social-cultural project with Juan Pablo Duarte School, 2005, Carnival Teener parade, presented during Curaçao Teen Carnival.* (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.13: Tirzo Martha and the Arte Swa team, *Social-cultural project with Juan Pablo Duarte School, 2005, Carnival Teener parade, presented during Curaçao Teen Carnival.* (Photo: Tirzo Martha)

The third intervention



Figure 4.14: IBB logo, 2012. (Image: Tirzo Martha)

It was at about this time that the two artists – Bade and Martha – really began to strive for the realisation of an institute where all of this could be possible. Consequently, in 2006, Instituto Buena Vista (IBB), the Curaçao Centre for Contemporary Art, became a reality (Figure 4.14). The institute also came to life in the same way that an intervention emerges. One day, there was nothing and the next day, there it was, standing and existing in a space where it had seemed so difficult to be. The IBB provides preparatory visual-arts-training for talented young people who have the ambition to continue at an art academy or in some form of creative study. The programme is supported by three artist-in-residence opportunities – a national one, an international one and a local residency – where the artists are also required to teach. Teaching allows the students to gather experience in a supportive

environment where they may develop their talents and skills. Each artist who undertakes a residency is also asked to leave a work of art behind, one made during their residency. In this way, a collection of artworks ranging from drawings to large installations came to life, and the collection is growing year by year (Figure 4.15).

Situated on the compound of a psychiatric clinic, the IBB came to collaborate with the nearby institution in an effort to change the way that the wider society sees it. For years, the clinic had been regarded as a place to put crazy people behind bars, to shut them away. Because of the earlier projects that Arte Swa had carried out with the clinic, we had a basis on which our collaboration could proceed. Every day, the IBB receives patients who come to the institute to paint, draw, build, record songs or just to chill for a while. In collaboration with the students at the IBB, the patients receive guidance and support. At the same time, the IBB still runs social-cultural projects with schools and other organisations. At least twice a year, there is also an action in public spaces for which the students create a project. Carnival, for instance, has regularly been a stage for these actions. Right now, the IBB is working on a sculpture garden for the clinic. This is a collaborative enterprise that includes patients, students and the artists in residence at the IBB. The sculpture garden is also an effort to bring people into the clinic and to create a new image of the clinic (Figure 4.16).

In March 2013, we finally received confirmation that we have been given a building in the same compound as the clinic. We are going to adapt it into an exhibition

space, a depot for our collection and an extensive library and archive. This rebuilt space will also be open to the public (Figure 4.17).



Figure 4.15: Tirzo Martha, IBB students and clients Capriles clinic, *untitled*, 2011, mixed media, 700 x 600 cm, Route Carnival parade Curaçao. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.16: IBB, students floating an installation on water, 2009, IBB Curaçao. (Photo:Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.17: Tirzo Martha, David Bade and IBB students, *Rocket of the Future of Curaçao*, 2012, sculpture, dimensions variable, Willemstad, Curaçao. (Photo:Tirzo Martha)

The fourth intervention

Meanwhile, against the background of all these activities, a new character was emerging, one who had been waiting for the right moment, living for years in the head of the boy and later on, in the mind of the artist. It was time to bring Captain Caribbean to life: a hero fighting for justice and equality, striving for a sustainable society. This is the hero who came to fight the Anansi who was governing the land and determining its course. With the blessing of the heroes resting at the National Heroes Park in Kingston, Jamaica, Captain Caribbean has become the central focus for the artist, and a vehicle through which he can combine his art and his socially engaged projects more directly (Figure 4.18).

The forthcoming projects will create a new vision of the issues being played out on his native island Curaçao and in the other Caribbean societies.

The artist's hope is that with both IBB and Captain Caribbean, he will be able to create more interaction, exchange, collaboration and unity in the Caribbean region (Figure 4.19).

With these actions, the artist believes that he can contribute to creating a sustainable society, and moreover, that he can foster greater insight into the added value that art has for the development of a new social vision, a new perspective and a new direction. All these activities will contribute to achieving greater appreciation of the arts and at the same time nourish them (Figure 4.20).



Figure 4.18: Tirzo Martha, *The Initiation of Captain Caribbean*, 2010, performance, video loop 20 min, Heroes Park Kingston (Jamaica). (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



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Figure 4.19: Tirzo Martha, *Captain Caribbean Receives His First Tula Stigmata*, 2013, performance video, video loop 5 min, performed in Curaçao. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)



Figure 4.20: Tirzo Martha, *The Resurrection of the Hereditary Performance*, 2013, performance video, video loop 3 min, performed in Curaçao. (Photo: Tirzo Martha)