

The Carnival Battleground – We Ready!

The struggle for cultural space in the public realm

Wednesday 11th March 2015

Ben Uri Gallery

London

“ I realised that, especially here in Europe, one of the strongest causes of resistance to multiculturalism and one of the deepest causes of the growth of racism in Europe is the refusal of diversity; the refusal of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity because the concept strikes at the heart of the way Europe has been building its own identity. That identity was based on the hierarchy of races and cultures. Diversity was not part of the philosophical thinking of the democratic movement in Europe.”

Doudou Diene, Special Rapporteur, United Nations Commission on Human Rights

There is a growth of Trinidad & Tobago inspired Carnivals throughout Europe that by their very nature pose significant challenges for their host societies as they are becoming very popular magnets around which so many social and political imperatives are being confronted. The Carnivals in Notting Hill, London, Paris and Rotterdam are the most remarkable in this respect.

For the Carnivals in London, Paris and Rotterdam, there is an acknowledged parentage from the Carnival in Trinidad & Tobago.

“Trinidad Carnival exists as a centrepiece in a vast diasporic network which circulates mas, concepts, persons, and all kinds of specific Carnival practices the diasporic Carnivals are not simply exports but also redistributions and reinterpretations of the ‘original’.”¹

If we accept this proposition, a number of questions immediately becomes evident. What are these ‘redistributions’ and ‘reinterpretations’? What is the accepted Carnival orthodoxy as seen by the funding and regulatory agencies, the performers, the spectators and the media? Are these Carnivals a challenge to the social hierarchies of their host societies or an affirmation of values and sense of community? Is Carnival free, licentious and spontaneous? Just a big street party? Are the essences of each of these events merely artistic excesses - costumes, bacchanal, calypso, Carnival queens, dancing to steelband and calypso, rum, food, colour, grandeur, height, flags, satire, theatre, masque, etc.?

How many of you remember the iconic British designer, Alexander McQueen. At one of McQueen’s exhibitions, he had an installation of a dress that spun around and that he sprayed with a coloured dye. This iconic moment in British fashion came several years after Peter

¹ Riggio. M.C. ed., Carnival, Culture in Action – The Trinidad Experience, Routledge, 2004

Minshall's, the Trinidadian Carnival designer's own production of River and Golden Calabash.

Carnival had made another notch in the haute couture of the London Fashion world.

But this is not the first notch nor was it a single lone incident. Carnival as an event and as an art form has had a distinctive impact on several aspects of British society.

Carnival as an art form and as an event or Festival has become a true exemplar of diversity of the arts.

The Arts Council recognises this by defining the arts of Carnival as Combined Arts. It is a combination of several art forms, each with distinctive characteristics and yet each occupying its own artscape and coming together to perform on the streets of North Kensington and Notting Hill each August Bank Holiday.

It is what I call my four Ms, the M&Ms of Carnival - Masquerade, Movement, Music and Mayhem in the public realm.

Carnival is thus performance in the public realm.

A major part of this integrated and combined performance is what I call, the Carnival mystique that lies in its unique ability to bring people of diverse backgrounds together into a harmonious whole.

So the Calypsonian, DJ, Pan Player, Dancer, costume designer and the cook; together make the Carnival. A Carnival that is chaperoned by the Police Officer, by Adrian Hodgson, St John Ambulance, TfL, The Steward and the visitor from outside Notting Hill. And of course the local resident hoping that each of these contributors would pay a £1 to use their toilet or NOT use their garden as a toilet.

This is British society in all its diversity.

Where else in Britain would you get a street Festival having as one of its participants the Folkestone Rock and Roll Club complete with Cadillac and dancers rocking and rolling to Elvis' Blue Swede Shoes and, not 300 yards behind, is a local Pastor from The Church of God exhorting audiences to take the path of righteousness and being drowned out by the symphonic sounds of the Mangrove Steel Band? Or where else would you marvel at the folk dancers from Sri Lanka with their quaint choreographic movements or listen to the street musicians from Rajasthan with their elongated trumpets and bugles confronting the traditional sounds of Carnival?

These things actually happened during the last 49 years of Carnival in Notting Hill. That is the Notting Hill Carnival.

A major event that has come to be the beacon of inclusion, a symbol of diversity and a sterling example of multi-culturalism at work. And despite its Trini roots, it is a festival that is now quintessentially British acquiring characteristics and features that stands apart from any other Carnival in the world.

For many British commentators, the word Carnival is now synonymous with Notting Hill.

Ask anyone from Scotland to John A Groats – You going to Carnival? And they will all know that you are talking about Notting Hill.

It is an event on top of the list of the Tourism calendar.

Carnival has become a symbol of London and certainly of Great Britain. What happens at the event – whether good or bad – makes world-wide news.

Carnival is thus a litmus test of how successful Britain is in making the nation great again. A good successful Carnival is thus an indicator of Britain at peace with itself. A great Carnival says to the world, London as the dynamic multi-cultural city is open to welcome more visitors and investors.

A riotous, disorganised Carnival is an indication of a city to be avoided. A city, like too many others, that are riven with division and discord.

Carnival is thus a barometer of British society.

And its success and its platforms upon which both the art form and the event are displayed must be managed, nurtured and developed. And these platforms must be populated by the best exponents of our art.

Carnival is not immune to what is happening here in London. In fact, Carnival as an art form has been shaped and continues to be shaped by society. Over its 48 years, the Carnival in London has seen women's liberation; the popularity of soca, bashment and Zouk; the runaway cost of living and a credit crunch, computer-aided design, the social network and digital marketing of mas bands, the production-line manufacture of costumes being overtaken by the Chinese and their made-to-order costumes, the popularity of synthetic fabrics, fishing rods, beads and feathers; the emergence of the entrepreneurial producers and performers as Band Leaders, the dominance of T-shirts and 'fun' Mas and the fitness craze with Zumba and aerobics.

Applied concurrently, these deceptively unrelated components had the capacity to irretrievably alter the form and content of the Notting Hill Carnival. The danger we are facing is that Carnival in the Grove is changing from a Carnival with a cutting-edge creative crucible, to a market-driven, manufactured commodity.

If we are to secure continuous contributions to British society, we need to address this change.

And this is the change that is at the heart of the struggle for cultural space.

So let me elaborate.

I want to pose one observation in trying to get some definitional clarity on the artistic boundaries that define Carnival Arts. Whether defined as 'combined arts', 'Carnival arts', 'Festival Arts', or 'live art'; these city Carnivals encompasses the extremes of performance culture. It is therefore not a singular art form but an integrated framework for live performances that are rooted in a diversity of disciplines and discourses involving the human body, space and time.

What then is this battleground on which the struggle for cultural space happens?

There is a general recognition and acceptance that Carnival, as part of its orthodoxy, is an art form. Peter Minshall, speaking at dinner with the author in 2007, said that*“it is Art when it is worn and danced to bring down the spirit. It is art when it connects up with the avenue, theatre, streets and pavement, alive and living.”*

This is the art form that reflects the diverse cultures of the European cities and their minority and migrant communities. And the challenges we face is the extent to which these Carnivals are recognised as a major festival contributing to the artscape and cultural identities of their host society; Carnival as part of our cultural landscape.

As artists, our place on this cultural landscape is defined by the artistic boundaries that define Carnival Arts. So I want to reiterate: Carnival is not a singular art form but an integrated framework for live performances that are rooted in several other art forms involving the human body, space and time.

One of these art forms is Mas. Mas is the seamless fusion of voice, music, movement, costume and text that enables its exponents to retreat into their internal world to find the avenue for the external portrayal of their many characters that are released explosively as they dance down the streets or on the stage proclaiming their beauty and self-worth.

‘The energy of the dancer and the moves of his body are transferred mechanically to the giants that dwarf him. The larger than-life figures, however, are so true to life; and the giant puppets are so true to the style, ease, colour, insouciance, freedom and earthiness of Caribbean people that they have entered our mythology as representative figures and spirit. At the same time they are Promethean, stealing the fire of the Gods.’²

The Carnival Mas designer can thus use this art form to address social issues, create innovative art forms and celebrate achievements. In fact, like all the Carnival Art forms, there are no boundaries to creativity. It is an open landscape on which the battles are enjoined, where there are cultural fault lines whose tremors excite us and where battles are fought – some literally.

When you look at a Mas Player, there is a complete synergy between the masquerader and the costume. However, in order to achieve this perfect harmony a considerable amount of science, physics, contemporary technologies and specialist skills have to be employed and factored in; from the gait of the masquerader, to the projected wind force, the anatomy of the particular player to the possibility of rain, to levels of sunlight, crowd density, weight of costume, etc.

This art and science must nevertheless be rooted in a historical reality so that interpretation can inform structure, colour and the occupation of space – the public realm.

Mas also embraces text, dialogue and word. From the Griot, Robber Talk, Toasting, Blues and Calypso to Rap we have always put stories of our daily lives into some form of lyric and song. They are also powerful forms of expression that create a renewed sense of identity and social cohesion and give direction to purposeful and productive community participation.

² On Minshall and reading the mas, Kenneth Ramchand, The Caribbean Review of Books, Feb 07, pp 32 –

From the young to the old, from the doctor to the street sweeper, from the full figured to the size zero, all find a place to display their beauty and worth in the public spaces that become the stages for the performances.

With such diverse participation, these artistic events in major European capitals mediate the challenge for acknowledgement, equality and sustained representation and presence of minority communities in the social, political and economic matrices of their host societies.

These large scale public events can be described as “contentious conversations between challengers and power holders” (Charles Tilly, 1998.)

These conversations and discourses are happening against a backdrop of changing demographics, a world-wide economic crisis, a greater willingness to return to current definitions and policies on belonging, citizenship and immigration. And, of course, the imminent general elections in May that make these conversations more relevant to the struggle for cultural space and future funding.

The Carnival artists and performers are thus becoming the ambassadors of equality, diversity and inclusion. And as ambassadors, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed if the art form and the event itself are to make any impact on policy and perception of minority communities in these cities.

I characterised this relationship between artists and society as a contentious conversation between challengers and power holders. The artist must assume the role of the challengers and in Carnival there are a number of areas where challenges need to be set down.

I want to focus on the intercultural dialogue that needs to take place in redefining the position of this street celebration in the society’s National Artscape and in so doing redefine its artistic and social orthodoxy.

Certainly in London, and to a lesser extent in Paris and Rotterdam, Carnival’s success is measured by the extent to which arrests and public disorder is reduced from year to year, not the brilliance of the Masquerade, the innovation of its art forms, the choreography of its dancers and the creative genius of its composers, designers or songsters.

The struggle is thus for Carnival to reassert and reshape its orthodoxy to give absolute prominence to aesthetic excellence and artistic performance. Within the Carnival footprint, each constituent element – performers, stall holders, stewards, spectators, emergency services, police, residents – are jostling for the use of space.

As Carnival Arts performers, we occupy these public spaces with all of these constituencies. And the challenge for us is not whether any one constituent has a legitimate right to occupy the space but how each of us will use the space, populate the realm, reshape it and develop it for the benefit of us all.

And that is the unique and complex feature of the struggle and battle for physical and artistic space that is a mirror of the wider struggle for recognition, justice and equal rights.

In that struggle for space, we need to consider whether Carnival art is a form of resistance and rebellion. Whether the ritual of the masquerade is the means for that resistance and if the Mas is a reassertion of new identities of resurgent communities whose heritage may be

in the colonised world but whose existence and futures are in the very cities where these events are happening.

The very essence of the continuation of the event and the reshaping of its use of public space is essentially a struggle for cultural and political space.

The resistance and confrontation occurs at every level of the organisation and management of the event.

It occurs in the battle for the control of space between the local authority and the Carnival Arts Arenas. Reshaping is a constant threat as Mas Bands struggle to populate the space to improve their performances, to increase their occupation and to make the Carnival experience attractive to a growing diversity of participants.

It also occurs in the ownership and control of the economic use of that space between stall holders, the individual sellers of merchandise, the pushers of illegal substances and the trading of the SMEs in the Carnival and surrounding areas.

There is also a struggle for space in the very heart of the Carnival.

The Notting Hill Carnival is now occupying space defined by two concentric circles, each of which is reserved for two competing constituencies that make up the Carnival. Two groups of performers and two publics. Two audiences.

The outer circle is populated by Mas Bands, Steel Bands and mobile sound systems. This is the masquerade, the Visual Carnival Symphony, according to Peter Minshall:

"I put colours, shape and form on these people and they pass in front of the viewer like a visual symphony".

The inner circle is populated by live music stages and static sound systems playing every major type of music on this earth. Decibels of sound emanating from banks of speakers on street corners.

And between these two circles are the stall holders and sellers of merchandise – legal and illegal.

During the day, these two Carnival groups are in harmony, each dutifully managing their space and providing entertainment to their respective publics and audiences.

But come 7 p.m. the inner circle closes down and its public, its audience, its listeners move to occupy the space with the other public in the outer circle. That is the Mas Players, the followers in T-Shirts, the spectators on the pavements. The merging of these two constituencies and two publics in this space changes everything.

The very nature of the Carnival changes. Constituents become combatants for space and the use of that space. Masquerade must battle with MTV. Costume must fight for performance space with the bands – some say GANGS – of young people who see the Carnival procession as a suitable space to occupy and conquer. To dominate. To assert their specific rights to walk on the road.

The Queen of Carnival must meet the King of Bling Bling. Clary Salandy, Lawrence Noel, Dexter Khan, Pepe Francis, Nolan Simmons, Jennifer Regis, Carl Morris and many others

must then fight for their space against the invasion of the bag snatchers, the clothes horses for Primani, the custodians of Sheffield's steel and the "bands" that have no music and no symphonies.

That my friends is a real challenge. And whilst I am still involved in Carnival, I will continue to make a degree of difference to what I love and cherish. And I take as my text the Minshal mantra:

"It represented more than feathers and sequins. They are sculptures, poles and cloth articulated by the limbs of the body, which acquire life because they are based on and follow the movements of the performers in a combination of dance and music, producing ever-changing shapes in Dionysian explosions."³

I want to continue making those explosions. I will not flinch from the battle of the Mas; the battle of the Masque vs Bums, Beads and Bikini. The struggle of the Theatre vs Dance Hall. Characters vs Jump & Wave.

So in my conceptual framework of Carnival is the struggle for space – physical and artistic space.

The Carnival Queen decked in all her finery. Regal in her appearance. Beautiful in her costume but fighting for the space to perform.

But she is one of many. Each struggling to occupy and hold space. Space is occupied by the roti vendor and the Polish hot dog seller. The forbidden. The ritualistic. The moral and immoral. The formal and informal. The black and the white. The Asian and the African. The Jamaican and the Brazilian. The heathen and the Christian. The Samba Band and the T-Shirt band. Chocolate Mas and Children's Mas.

We fight for space against the Carnival stewards who keeps trying to push us along.

But we occupy these spaces with all of these people. And as we discuss things today, we, each constituency, need to agree how each of us will use the space and develop it for the benefit of us all.

Set against this is the impact of the place shaping roles of the regulatory authorities who have unchallenged supremacy to define and shape the use of public space and the duration of its use.

The streets have always been seen as the "mean streets" where the dysfunctional and alien elements of minority communities conduct and ply their trade. Public places are thus ritualised as contested terrain that any occupation or use by minority communities must be controlled, monitored and policed.

Over the 49 years of Carnival in Notting Hill, the Carnival physical footprint has evolved to what it is today, with each change being mediated through the active engagement of Carnival's leaders.

The overwhelming impetus of the regulatory authorities is to create a processional linear route for the Carnival, more akin to a horse shoe rather than a circle, as this configuration is

³ Peter Minshall, 1990

best suited to the management of public safety and the control of public disorder. This use of performing space has the net effect of undermining the spontaneity that is essential to the public display of Carnival Arts and minimises the interaction with the public. The agit prop essences of the Mas Player's display (caraying) are being consistently moulded by these physical restrictions and, in time, could lead to aspects of the carnival art forms being divorced from its bacchanalia roots.

Thus the frequent instances of confrontation between artists and performers are around the operational use of this public space.

The regulatory authorities continue to define this space as being 'mean' and contested; the artists and performers as a stage without a proscenium arch but as an artscape. One is concerned with regulation and control; the other with spontaneity and freedom.

The conversations over the mediation of the use of this space has grown silent as concerns of terrorism, health and safety dominate giving the regulatory authorities the legal, operational and cultural high ground by which stereotypes are being reinforced, control ritualised, communities demonised and exclusion confirmed.

But this just reflects a long history of how the space has been defined as being unsuitable for such events. Chief Superintendent Patterson of the Metropolitan Police has sought consistently, during his stint at the Metropolitan Police of London, to stop the Carnival.

He said after the eruptions of violence resistance by members of the young black community on the streets of the Grove in 1976:

*"I am 100% convinced that Carnival has outgrown itself and is no longer suitable for the streets of Notting Hill or any other London streets in its present form."*⁴

Carnival from the perspective of one of the key regulatory authorities was unsustainable in the nation's major capital. He wanted to make the public realm off limits for Carnival.

For the minority communities, this defining of the most visible sign of their unique culture as a haven for anti-social behaviour and a challenge to the harmony of the geographical community by the introduction of alien forms of music, culture and practices all aligned to behaviours that are frowned upon can only result in further alienation from the norms of the society.

So even where there is recognition of a diversity to be embraced, the cultures that are evidenced by the Carnivals are seen as "extremes" and so inclusion can only be mediated with redefinitions and reinterpretations that makes the event more acceptable and tolerable to the host society – a market driven manufactured commodity?

Exclusion is thus confirmed. Otherness is confirmed. And reasonableness is elevated so that any complaints will be seen as being so extreme and unjust as to merit not being worthy of any serious consideration.

But ladies and gentlemen, we are facing up to every challenge. Facing up to these challenges are in itself quite enjoyable. Perhaps, the enjoyment comes with the artistic

⁴ Chief Superintendent Patterson, Race Today, September 1976.

battles to realise what you cherish the most. And the creative crucible in which this battle happens is beautifully described, again, by Minshall:

“It represented more than feathers and sequins. They are sculptures, poles and cloth articulated by the limbs of the body, which acquire life because they are based on and follow the movements of the performers in a combination of dance and music, producing ever-changing shapes in Dionysian explosions.”⁵

And I want my Dionysian explosions to happen on the streets unfettered by too many constraints, fully funded by the Arts Council and performed in the glorious light of innovation, creativity and spectacle.

© Ansel Wong
tsingtax@gmail.com

⁵ Peter Minshall, 1990

References

Alleyne-Dettmers, P., *Ancestral Voices: TREVENI – A Case Study of Meta-masking in Notting Hill Carnival*, 1996.

Connor, G., *Coming of Age*, 12 July 2004.

Hill, E., *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*, 1971

In Minshall Words, in Jacob, D., *The Greatest Show on Earth: Trinidad Carnival*, Daily Express, 1990.

La Rose, M., *40 years of the Notting Hill Carnival: an assessment of the history and the future*, July 2004.

Liverpool, H., *Carnival in Trinidad & Tobago: Multiple Meanings*, 15 July 2004.

Liverpool, H., *Rituals of Power & Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago, 1763 – 1962*, Frontline Associates, Chicago, 2001.

Sparks, S., *A Carnival Soundscape*, 2004

Wong, A., *Oh No, Don't Stop the Carnival*, 1 July 2003.

ibid, *The History of the Notting Hill Carnival*, April 2006

ibid, Lecture: *Claiming Public Space for Minorities and Challenging Exclusion*
4th International Practice Exchange: Interculturalism: Art & Policy, Thursday 16th December 2010

ibid, *Carnival – Roots & Routes, Report of the National Discourse on Carnival Arts*, Carnival Village & Ansel Wong, London, November 2009.

ibid, *Notting Hill Carnival – A Visual Symphony*, Caribbean Communities in Europe, Issue 8, Spring 2009, pp. 10 – 20.

Ibid, *Art's false borrowed face*, Foreword in *Contrasts, Textures & Hues, Exploring early printed images of people of African & Asian heritage*, Ed. Anita Jeni McKenzie, McKenzie Heritage Pictures, 2004.