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George Struikelblok, 'Ik wens, Ik hoop, Ik denk, Ik wil' ('I wish, I hope, I think, I want'), 2010. Found table mirrors and felt-tip pen. Courtesy of the artist. Copyright of Job Janssen and Jan Adriaans.

Figure 9

George Struikelblok, 'Ik wens, Ik hoop, Ik denk, Ik wil' ('I wish, I hope, I think, I want'), 2010 (detail). Found table mirrors and felt-tip pen. Courtesy of the artist. Copyright of Job Janssen and Jan Adriaans.

Taste and geographical movement in contemporary art of the Caribbean

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Abstract

This article offers a case study of an officially sponsored arts programme that culminated in two exhibitions staged in 2010 which sought to offer a cultural ‘exchange’ between the cities of Paramaribo (Suriname) and Rotterdam (the Netherlands). Discussion focuses on individual artists and works of art, in order to examine the significance of taste for understanding dynamics of power in the various forms of transnational geographical movement that the programme entailed. In recent decades, attention to processes of global change has occupied a central place in academic writing about contemporary art. While this scholarship has taken a largely progressive form, beyond the academy in the sphere of public art exhibitions, adoption of such conceptual vocabulary has often brought rather more mixed outcomes which this article explores critically.

Introduction

While the Caribbean has long been of interest to scholars in the humanities and social sciences, serving as a virtual laboratory for the study of ethnicity and racial difference,¹ it has more recently attained a seminal status in academic commentary concerned with transnationalism and border crossing, the cultural aspects of migratory movement such as cultural transmission, acculturation and intermixing (Hitchcock 2003). A sense is beginning to emerge, however, that the Caribbean is somewhat overused, or has become over-represented, in such attempts to understand social and cultural fields in relation to the process of globalisation. Vigorous debate among scholars about the politics of knowledge production has touched on the extent to which theorisations of Caribbean cultural experience – Caribbean responses to the effects of globalising processes that have happened over a wide historical span – are coming to be generalised for global modernity as a whole. Such generalisation has held the result that the particularities of Caribbean historical experience are overlooked, at the risk of introducing certain false parallels. Writing within historical sociology and mobility studies, Mimi Sheller has asked: ‘What miscommunications have taken place in the translation of Caribbean “creole” languages and cultures into the self-constituting ideas of mainstream Western modernity?’

(Sheller 2004: 175). Sheller shows that this process is part of a longer history of ‘consuming the Caribbean’, once confined to material goods and commodities such as sugar, cocoa and coffee, but to which we should now include the region’s intellectual and cultural products. In what follows, I explore this relationship in further depth, taking it to be the broader social background for understanding those cases in which art, as well as artists of the Caribbean, have been subjected to discursive classification, mediation and consumption. Most significantly, these processes take place within broader practices of taste. Attention to taste is crucial both to the study of contemporary art in the Caribbean as well as to critical accounts of cultural conditions writ large.

The sociologist Herbert Gans made the widely-quoted observation in 1969 that: ‘the most interesting phenomenon in America ... is the political struggle between taste cultures over whose culture is to predominate in the mass media, and over whose culture will provide society with its symbols, values, and world view’ (Gans 2009 [1969]: 357). Attention to taste with regard to art has generally followed the lead from Gans in identifying the parameters of class, education and other social distinctions. It is notable that such theorisations have focused on a given national space rather than across national borders. The present case study show how taste operates through circulations within a globalizing and transatlantic field. The focus for discussion is the interconnectedness of the Caribbean to the Netherlands, patent in two art exhibitions that were staged during the year 2010. Titled *Paramaribo Span* and *Paramaribo Perspectives*, the exhibitions exemplified the changing postcolonial relations between Suriname and the Netherlands. More specifically, they provide instances of transfers across fields of taste. Taste in this context (and what I variously refer to in this article as ‘taste-making practices’ and ‘taste-formation’) may be seen to operate in various ways. It is detectable in discriminations made about what sort of art is deemed appropriate and deserving of support in the context of a public arts programme. Analysis of the rubrics of taste can yield particular insights about issues of power, helping to understand better the impact of both the support given to art and artists of the Caribbean by public organisations, and the reception of such art and artists in public space. There are tensions between the aesthetic preferences promoted by northern metropolitan agencies (arts organisations, public galleries) and those of art communities of the Caribbean which have come to be of intense interest to such agencies. As such, while we may refer relatively straightforwardly to the consumption of art of the Caribbean, we must also take into view what may be described as *the consumption of artists*. Caribbean artists circulate within patterns of labour and consumption in the field of

contemporary art in a way that shows up the inequalities of transnational and globalising processes. Consequently, this article pinpoints how Caribbean artists offer their labour in a context of taste-making. It establishes how their art is framed by the tastes of audiences, patrons and cultural policymakers of the ‘global North’; how they try to cope with the frictions entailed by such an exchange of labour; and what are the means and opportunities available to artists when they try to sustain alternative fields of taste.

Art and artists at *Paramaribo Span*

In February 2010 I was invited to join a public discussion associated with an art exhibition in Suriname’s capital city, Paramaribo. Arriving in Suriname, I soon came to realise the extent of Dutch patronage for the exhibition. Entitled *Paramaribo Span*, this was the final phase of *ArtRoPa* (an acronym indicating both Rotterdam and Paramaribo), a four-year programme jointly held in the Netherlands and Suriname. The programme was designed as an exchange between the two countries through artists’ residencies, visiting lecturers, exhibitions and various publications, and at the time of my Suriname visit, enthusiastic plans were being made for this activity to have an afterlife in the Netherlands. This duly took place in the form of the exhibition *Paramaribo Perspectives*, and various supporting events at the publicly-funded contemporary art space in Rotterdam (known as TENT.) which I attended during September and October of 2010.ⁱⁱ

In Paramaribo I encountered a broad policy of promoting cultural diversity in the arts, exemplified in the various official measures taken in the mid-2000s for developing multiculturalism in Amsterdam (see, for instance, Uitermark et al., 2005) and the seminal publication *6(0) Ways: Artistic Practice in Culturally Diverse Times* (ter Braak et al. 2010). The perception of ethnic and cultural differences that this policy framework brought, once extended to Suriname, served to reify cultural difference and diversity. It perpetuated the idea of Caribbean artistic values as being distinct from those of the Netherlands, demonstrating an official taste for art that stands at a cultural remove from Europe, art that is perforce different for being produced at a global ‘periphery’, ostensibly away from the metropolitan art ‘mainstream’. Such taste-informing policy was clearly identifiable in the work undertaken by organisations within Suriname itself. Enabling sponsorship to operate along local bureaucratic channels, these ‘partners’ included De Surinaamsche Bank, which hosted the main venue of the exhibition on its grounds. Around the programme was gathered a circle of artists, curators,

arts writers and organisers from Paramaribo. The programme framed this assemblage as a Caribbean counterpart to the numerous artists from the Netherlands who took part, most of whom were based in Rotterdam and not of Caribbean descent. A further range of participants were invited to bring an expansively ‘international’ dimension to the central axis of connection between Suriname and the Netherlands, including the artist Christopher Cozier, who served as one of the exhibition’s curators, the writer and editor Nicholas Laughlin, and designer and artist Richard Rawlins,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as a cohort of writers, art historians and curators from Jamaica, Venezuela, and the United States, as well as myself from the UK.

For my account of the *Span* programme in the following, I have chosen to focus on just two of its participants, the artists Dhiradj Ramsamoedj (b. 1986) and George Struikelblok (b. 1973).^{iv} Ramsamoedj’s ‘Adji Gilas’ works were shown at an ‘off-site’ exhibition location in a domestic space belonging to the artist’s family, which I visited on the evening that the installation was opened to the public. [Figure 1] One piece of this assemblage, set up in a darkened room, was a figure made from split wooden sticks, about sixty centimetres high, apparently in motion and lit from the side. [Figure 2] A strong directional spotlight cast a shadow on a nearby wall, above a family couch and other household furniture. This installation, and others in the house, was dedicated to the artist’s paternal grandmother, his *adji*. It was primarily a play on scale since the room in which it was assembled is not a conventional display space; not in size, nor by the fact of its other, more everyday use as a bedroom, with a position at the back of the house, as is standard in the region’s architecture. Ramsamoedj has indicated that as a child he was always afraid of this private space. [Figure 3] There is an opening in the ceiling, a trapdoor into a loft, which he came to find ominous and the artist had a lingering memory of elderly relatives spending their dying hours here. The shape on the wall literally overshadowed this scene and its memories of a very personal family history. Ramsamoedj’s placement of his wooden sculpture employed a dramatic device that relied on its viewer glancing directly at it, thereby placing the figure’s shadow at the edges of the field of vision. The inclination of the form gave the impression of its shadow moving as if toward the viewer; it was subtly posed as to appear to be stepping earnestly forward, entering the sphere of attention.

Struikelblok’s contribution to *Paramaribo Span* was at the main exhibition site, outdoors in the grounds at the rear of De Surinaamsche Bank. His piece, entitled ‘Groei’ (growth), was made up of a cage, set on a plinth, which became the home for hundreds of hatchling chickens. [Figure 4] The artist’s plan was for them to remain there, fed, watered and sheltered in their temporary home. They would eventually have to be freed when their cages became cramped

as the days and weeks of the exhibition went by. Their imperceptible growth during a visit to the exhibition would in time become all too conspicuous, with the birds needing more space and attention than the artist had given them. Floating somewhere between installation, performance and living sculpture this work was an injunction to the viewer to feel empathy for the young birds, creating a space of metaphorical association and emotion. Interested in the incremental changes of chicks as they grow, Struikelblok created a sense of the need for intervention against a metaphorical rising tide, the increasing confinement of birds as they helplessly filled their cage.

The works of Ramsamoedj and Struikelblok are part of these artists' negotiations over the dominant tastes that formed during the period of anti-colonialism when official support grew for visual art and it came under scrutiny as a site of national heritage (van Binnendijk and Faber 1995). Such nationally sanctioned forms of representation are problematised in these works, just as they are by artists of the post-independence generation elsewhere in the Caribbean (Wainwright 2011). Their contestations are integral to this art, as their practitioners try to position themselves and their generational and ethnic identities within the Suriname art community in the attempt to take charge of the terms on which art practices are valued. This underlines that there is no single artistic taste in Suriname and that even between Ramsamoedj and Struikelblok there are different approaches to that practice. Struikelblok has an established place in the Suriname art market, but it is confined to his painting practice alone, which hardly featured in *Span*, compared to his contribution to the installations, video, performance and more conceptual works that comprised the programme. Ramsamoedj was given mixed praise from the local audience at *Span* for choosing to show his work in an improvised space away from the established, formal venues of display and sale for art in Paramaribo. His works yearned for the recognition that Suriname's art community had hitherto withheld, not only for his own art, but for that of his peers in Paramaribo. *Span* thereby became a platform to register a shared frustration about the country's perceived paucity of places for art display. It represented a moment of hope about what could be achieved with external support from the Netherlands and the wider Caribbean.

From Paramaribo to Rotterdam

In one of the rooms of the 'Adji Gilas' installation in Paramaribo was an arrangement of metal cups carrying the image of Dhiradj Ramsamoedj's grandmother, his *adji*. [Figures 5 & 6] This is the part that he chose to reassemble in Rotterdam. To do so presented a rather practical

challenge of retaining the specificity of place and the intimacy of the original work. TENT. has rather vast rooms, with high ceilings, pristine walls and a smooth concrete floor, replicating the 'white cube' of modernist display. Consequently, it was a challenge for the artist to find a suitable format for objects that were previously installed in markedly different surroundings.

He began by changing the walls in order to occupy a wider space, around double the size of the original one in Suriname. The sense of intimacy was to be retained by ensuring that the spacing of the shelves was also narrow. [Figure 7] In the original work, visitors could step into the space and look around at the walls and back at the door. Where they had entered was then surrounded by shelves, holding cups on either side. In Rotterdam the entrance was at the corner of the room, near a plinth for the artist's books. On the opening night in the Netherlands, an assistant stood impassively turning the illuminated pages of the books whereas in Paramaribo that role was taken by Ramsamoedj's sister, whose participation completed an installation that had all along relied on the collaboration of various family members.

The artist told me that during the preparations his family enjoyed seeing his progress in transforming the house into an exhibition venue. Even so they were skeptical about what would happen when the public arrived, asking 'What will people actually do? Will they come just for the mugs?' When an audience did materialise he relished their surprise as well as that of the art community in Paramaribo for whom the idea of opening one's home to the public had never been so fully explored.

That Suriname background soon receded from view, however, as the installation moved to its second context. Here in Europe, the transfer of its meaning was especially hard to achieve for Ramsamoedj. As he remarked, 'This is not an intimate place for me. I had to make it intimate and give it some home-like feel.' He addressed this by lowering the lighting in the gallery, similar to the levels in the house, and created an interior of rough wood panels, batons and shelves. With a carpenter's precision he copied the appearance of the structure of the walls in the Paramaribo house, where the beams are visible, only covered by a panel on one side and left open on the other. The result was a whitewashed construction that mimicked a room in the tropics.

There were some other, less tangible ways that the artist tried to carry over the installation's original associations in Paramaribo. He spaced out the wooden framework in keeping with the proportions of his grandmother's body. 'I used the height of my grandmother for this height, and I used her shoulder span for this width,' he indicated to me as we walked together around

the gallery. In discussing the work, it became clear that something like Le Corbusier's 'modulor' system had generated its dimensions. Indeed it resembled the systems used in many buildings in Rotterdam dating from the time of De Stijl. This process may be taken as a formula for addressing a Dutch audience, with a tacit reference to patterns of design within the national canon. 'I knew I needed something logical for the measurements for this installation, so why not use her measurements for this.' It was a logic that ensured the outcome would be far from arbitrary, both mathematically and in locating the work in a Dutch design milieu. The element of measuring was kept private from the exhibition audience. Once it was pointed out to me, my relationship to the installation altered. It ceased to be an architectural and domestic space transposed from the Caribbean and became instead an abstracted body based on personal geometry. Even so, here was a reconstructed installation whose formal properties had been modified in its meaning reframed by a mode of taste that pertains to the Dutch context of 'white cube', contemporary gallery display. This is not to suggest that the work somehow lost its site specificity, but that the transition it underwent in being relocated to the Netherlands required the artist to demonstrate his skills of assembling artworks so that they may accord with the local conditions of consumption which here would indicate a taste for the tropics satisfied on the terms of a Northern poetics of 'neutral' viewership: the scrubbed and plain surfaces of a public space that signifies 'contemporary art'.

George Struikelblok's contribution to *Paramaribo Perspectives* also faced similar challenges of relocation. Initiating an entirely new installation, he filled the floor of the first room of the exhibition with circular mirrors standing in plastic frames, for a work entitled 'I wish, I hope, I think, I want' (2010). [Figure 8] When preparing the work, he bought several hundred of these and approached orphanages in Paramaribo, asking if their children would like to take part in a collective work of art. They were asked to write or draw on the glass in coloured pens:

They write what they miss, what they like, what they want to be, everything. Some of them write I miss my father, I miss my mother, I want to be a pilot, I want to be a police officer. And some of them, the small ones, make a picture. Like that one, you see a mother and a father holding a child. And so you see why I had to do this, to show what they want. Some of them have a car, big house; some of them have flowers, and they're all different. Each one has a different story.

On some of the mirrors were pictures of houses, which the children drew as a means to place themselves in an imaginary home. For one of the mirrors, I noticed that its glass appeared to

be broken, only to see that the cracks had been delineated in ink. On the reverse side of many of the mirrors I saw the pictures that they came with from their manufacturer in China. There were pop stars and fashion icons, set against airbrushed mountain scenes. One was a yacht; others carried the commercial symbols of beautification: whitened skin and long eyelashes. For the most part the artist had removed these printed pictures and presented empty frames. [Figure 9]

As with much art made by children, these images offered a space of personal projection. Yet the overall authorship of the work rested with Struikelblok, reframing the children's marks. As such, the installation tended toward the same political message as in his work with caged birds. A child's dream for a happy future became a dream for Suriname. One of the children had put 'keep smiling'. In many other mirrors were heartfelt statements of hope, wishes for prosperity and for a successful life. The imagined future is a prosperous one where the family is the basis of society. As Struikelblok confirmed in our interview: 'In this one it says, "I miss my uncle. He is in Holland. I also want to go to Holland". In this one, "I want to graduate", and she hopes that a lot will change in the orphanage.' Ideas of individual progress appeared alongside the desire for migration. Others were less direct, even unfinished, and read: 'This is my dream car', and then were left blank.

These two contributions to *Paramaribo Perspectives* share some clear common ground. Their artists have worked with multiples and manufactured materials, and found or used objects, to which they have added coded marks. Both installations involved the manipulation of light. For 'Adji Gilas II', as in Paramaribo, a great effort was made to control the light that came into the room. Struikelblok filled a much larger expanse with relatively small objects, in a challenge to hold the attention of viewers in a room with a very high ceiling. It must be said that the unease that both artists felt was less to do with cultural differences than the fact that their artworks were exhibited in the formal setting of a large room in an exhibition gallery, at a remove from the contingencies of display in Suriname, where the public 'white cube' gallery is less well-represented than the taste for art displayed outdoors, or in open-to-sky architectural spaces, in commercial galleries and in improved settings such as school rooms or in and around urban streets and their furniture. The aesthetic and in particular spatial concerns that artists articulated in Suriname were consequently lost from view on their move to the Netherlands.

The display and reception of these works was also a circumscribed one, situated in a political economy dominated by Dutch priorities for arts programming and curating. It was a difficult

site for making visible their artistic concerns balanced against some external expectations brought to the art of Suriname. The inadequacy of audiences in the Netherlands to grasp the contextual and critical depth of much Caribbean art became obvious in this episode of movement, and the Dutch art programmers who anticipated an uncomprehending public would then try to ensure the presentation of a more ‘recognisable’ sort of art. In my interviews with them they were plainly preoccupied with the question of whether Caribbean art was ‘good enough’ to be shown at all, and concerned about a loss of reputation for the Dutch artists who took part in the programme. ‘I’m not sure I can even talk about it.’ One bureaucrat told me. ‘The whole thing was just really bad, really bad for the artists.’ When I asked, ‘Which artists?’ the response came quickly: ‘The Dutch ones of course’. Curators in the Netherlands evidently saw little of their own bureaucratic role in shaping these unsatisfactory circumstances. They would reproduce the very structures of inequality that their founding interest in expanding and opening up to a wider world was intended to disrupt (or at least to understand better).

The creative effort that the Caribbean artists of *Span* share may be seen as an instance of negotiation with such a set of pressures, tastes and cultural values. What was really striking about the artworks themselves included in the two exhibitions is how they actively questioned the underlying processes and purposes for the entire art *ArtRoPa* programme. Struikelblok chose to put at the centre of the meaning of his works the limitations of space and resources for his growing chicks, and the topic of migration raised by children, with their aspirations to move to the Netherlands. Ramsamoedj highlighted why his works were best viewed in-situ in the Caribbean, in the home of his grandmother, and how displacing such sculptural content to the TENT. would throw up problems of translation which are instructive for the lessons to take away about such processes of cultural displacement. Indeed, both Struikelblok and Ramsamoedj tackled the problems and pressures of mobility – the path of movements across the Atlantic between the cities of Paramaribo and Rotterdam – as individuals who themselves have shuttled back and forth between global metropole and global periphery throughout their art education and careers. The attendant discomfort and actual mistreatment that Caribbean artists told me about would become integral to their decisions about how to participate in these exhibitions and what works of art to produce. This is best summed up by what one artist had told me, about how he had felt ‘infantilised’ at the hands of the Dutch curators. Fitting then that Struikelblok should make a work that conveyed his empathy for homeless children.

All such critical questioning among these artists, and by way of their works was, however, hiding in plain sight; it could not be grasped or heard under the circumstances, and a fuller evaluation of that surrounding situation is needed in order to explain why that came to be the case. The value of these artworks becomes clearer through an exploration of the interconnections between the national settings in which these artists have lived and worked. As I am about to show, this demands particular attention to the transatlantic geography in which taste is encoded by way of cultural policy and arts programming, and in particular the urban dimensions of that process.

Taste and contestation

Paramaribo Span provoked often heated debate, mostly away from the programmed platform for discussion, and from the press. Much of this followed a line of accusation about Dutch interference and paternalism, while complaints were also levelled at the heavy diplomatic focus of the opening ceremony. The Suriname premier gave an address alongside the corporate and Dutch sponsors, yet the participating artists were not scheduled to speak. One of the artworks – which was intended to serve as the signature work for the entire exhibition – was censored in preparation for the opening event. Toward those participants who were not from Suriname or the Netherlands (including the co-curator from Trinidad) questions were asked about the appropriateness of their participation, with the suggestion that they were somehow ‘out of context’ in a Dutch-speaking programme. This was despite that the programme being billed as proudly international, with an accompanying book published in English and Portuguese.

The basis for the entire initiative was evidently a desire to forge continuing relationships between Suriname and the Netherlands, with a core sense of the two countries sharing a connection not through dominance from the Dutch side but more entwined and equal relationships. Thus, emphasis was laid on a celebratory idea of Caribbean transnationalism that could epitomise a mutual experience between the Caribbean and Europe. *Span* sought to foreground the post-independence dimensions of two countries’ relations and the idea that the development of Caribbean art and empowerment of its artists was taking place after successful ‘removal’ of the disadvantages and legacies of colonial rule.

For some of the artists and audience of *Span*, however, this more redemptive vision came at the expense of sober and much-needed scrutiny of the actual processes and conditions of curating and producing contemporary art in the Caribbean. During interview they explained their desire for a distinctively postcolonial examination of how the shared art environment of

the transatlantic manifests latter day imperialism, the associated problems of nationalism, and conflicts between the aesthetic preferences of the former imperial metropole and its periphery. Some felt that these were implicit in the exhibition itself; the Suriname-Netherlands coupling was far from incidental and therefore demands critique, perhaps by comparing it with historical episodes of colonial dominance when political control has been exerted through the sphere of culture. Looking more to the future, it was frequently emphasized that the axis of connection between Suriname and the Netherlands is but one of several that artists from Paramaribo are considering as they look elsewhere for opportunities, in countries within the wider Caribbean, and in the United States and Canada.

Accordingly, when drawing historical parallels to the colonial past, it pays to consider the geographies that were in view for those who contributed, and to examine these in light of the spatiality of capital and the labour structures that underscored the programme. Both exhibitions, in Paramaribo and Rotterdam, were framed by a largely managerial idea of cultural transnationalism, matched with a particular discourse of taste. The conceptual framing of the two exhibitions was pressed into the service of some Dutch domestic interests, in tension with those of its participating artists and audiences. This put a question mark over the programme's accompanying proclamations about the virtues of free movement, its stated recommendation of the need to turn away from anachronistic ideas of culture as a matter of purity and privilege, in favour of hybrid, 'creole' and transnational creative community.

When I interviewed artists in Suriname about their interactions with Dutch visitors (especially those officials charged with the responsibility for shaping an international arts programme), I was struck immediately by their sense of suspicion. Many felt that the foreign purveyors of 'good taste' had arrived in the Caribbean to adjudicate over its art, selecting works and artists in the manner of cherry picking 'the best'. Such artists spoke of their anxiety about the potential for the imposition of an externally formed sense of taste, and the danger that an unrepresentative selection of works of art would be chosen for subsequent display in Europe. They were concerned this would risk further disconnecting such art from its context of production and mischaracterize the art community in Suriname. Artists thus specified such concerns as having to do with taste. They saw a fraught relationship with patronage, consumption and meaning, how works of art are apprehended and presented, and how their artists are to be held in posterity.

If Caribbean artists have struggled to have their art taken seriously within a complex geography of consumption, this episode of interaction between Suriname and the Netherlands demonstrated how art and artists experience the political economy of taste that spans this geographical field. Artists in Suriname argued that the *ArtRoPa* programme reasserted some older relations of Dutch dominance, modifying these for the twenty-first century. The words ‘agency’ and ‘arbitrator’, used in association with artists from Suriname, appeared in the press release from TENT. and became a telling indication that the programme was an instance of international political relations. An initial statement read: ‘*Paramaribo Perspectives* examines the role of the artist as agent of changing cultural, political and social relationships.’ The intention was clarified further in a subsequent one: ‘Against the background of the current political rift between the Netherlands and Suriname, *Paramaribo Perspectives* positions the artist as arbitrator of the changing cultural, political and social relationships.’ This rewording can be seen to be connected to the row over the protection from extradition enjoyed by the Suriname political leader Desi Bouterse, following his conviction in absentia in the Netherlands in 1989, a row that heightened with his coming to power in Suriname during the same year as the exhibition.

If Dutch metropolitan curators and arts programmers have handled the Caribbean’s art in a way that ‘positions the artist as arbitrator’, such an approach to policymaking and public engagement in the arts may also be described as a practice of taste. This is just as readable in the way that art and artists of the Caribbean were shown in Rotterdam, where an assertion of taste from Dutch curators came into tension with the priorities of the artists they supported from the Caribbean. That tension points to the need for a thorough re-assessment of the overall rhetoric of ‘exchange’ and representations of the Caribbean and Europe as somehow freely associating through their coexistence within a culturally borderless, transnational community. Art’s changing status in relation to discourses of globalisation deserves particularly careful evaluation. This episode of ‘exchange’ saw such artworks first being consumed within the Caribbean region under the sign of Dutch patronage, before moving to a second site of consumption after a round of closer selection. In each setting, the parameters of taste were formed within a matrix of curators and arts organisations, programmes of funding and nuclei of cultural policy in which Caribbean artists certainly had a stake but were barely allowed formal stakeholder status.

Taste and rights

Analysis of the geography of the two exhibitions of 2010 in the *ArtRoPa* programme can illuminate the role of taste in relation to a matter of rights over urban space. The spatial dimension of the programme's attendant aspirations, patterns of funding, and its flows of capital is essential for any assessment of what was driving the involvement of Rotterdam arts programmers to 'span' the distance to Paramaribo in the first place. A constructive way of thinking about the urban dimension of the programme is to consider the surrounding aspirations for growth and development of the city of Rotterdam, and how these have characterized the management of its social and economic changes. A guide here can be found in a study of global geography such as David Harvey's work on 'the growth path of urbanization under capitalism' (Harvey 2008: 24), especially when growth, as he writes:

... presents the capitalist with a number of barriers to continuous and trouble-free expansion. If labour is scarce and wages are high, either existing labour has to be disciplined—technologically induced unemployment or an assault on organized working-class power are two prime methods—or fresh labour forces must be found by immigration, export of capital or proletarianization of hitherto independent elements of the population (Harvey 2008: 24; cf. Lefebvre 1996 [1968]).

Harvey's phrase 'hitherto independent elements' is pertinent in view of the post-imperial context of these spatial relations. In the present case, one such source for labour had been found in artists and their products – indeed, their art *work* – from Suriname. Caribbean artists are frequently compelled to move from the region for the duration of an event or exhibition and this practice was central to the business model for *Paramaribo Perspectives*. (In other programmes, art and artists are drawn from among the resident Caribbean diaspora in the Netherlands). Evidently this is labour of a particular kind, with a symbolic value thought to help in creating the conditions for growth in a city like Rotterdam, as part of 'the perpetual need to find profitable terrains for capital-surplus production and absorption', to quote Harvey again (2008: 24). If Rotterdam's 'growth path' has led on this occasion to Paramaribo, then the ideology of the 'multicultural city' has become both a condition for production and an end product in itself. This is nowhere suggested more graphically than in the logo adopted for the *ArtRoPa* programme: a suspension bridge notionally linking the two cities. It is also spelled out in the programme's mission statement to stimulate 'creativity and diversity' and to generate 'cultural infrastructure'.^v

If Harvey's gloss on the 'growth path' of capitalism suggests that cities such as Rotterdam would see traffic flowing into it from a region such as the Caribbean, in the specific case I have been discussing, the picture, in reality, is more complex. There are inequalities in place with such relationships and the movements of artists has taken mainly one direction. Chandra van Binnendijk reports from Paramaribo that 'The recent exchange programmes are a sensitive issue in the art scene. ... There is considerable dissatisfaction with the content of the agreements, and rumbles of discontent can be heard: far fewer Surinamese students or artists go to the Netherlands than vice versa' (van Binnendijk 2010: 54). Looked at in this way, the declared intention of the *ArtRoPa* programme – to establish a creative 'dialogue' between artists who might take this as a chance to usefully compare notes on art, figuratively speaking – was patently not met. The programme reproduced in miniature the wider social facts about Caribbean migration to Europe, in contrast to European free movement and tourism to the Caribbean. Even more vividly, the precariousness and the casual or 'freelance' nature of the labour of Caribbean artists, exemplifies the role of human capital in the 'new cultural industries' (McRobbie 2009), here mapped onto a global North-South relation and its art environment. Remaining with Harvey, however, as was discernible from my interviews, artists of the Caribbean are also considering how to assert their 'right to the city', which is both a right to Rotterdam *and* to Paramaribo: the right to take part in the metropolitan art scene in Europe, as well as for artists to be agents in shaping their own urban spaces in the Caribbean.

These exhibitions thus became a site for the problematic reconstituting of relations of consumption in the visual field through efforts to create a semblance of multicultural order, harmony and shared creativity.^{vi} It was suggested to me in conversation with Dutch bureaucrats working in the arts that such an official presentation of the virtues of an expanded cultural field for the Caribbean is essential for adequate representation of artists of ethnic minorities living in the Netherlands. Those artists who belong to the significant historical immigration of Surinamese (van Eijl 2009) and the second and third generations in the diaspora, have indeed remained largely invisible from the Dutch contemporary art sector. An intended outcome for *Paramaribo Perspectives* was to bring contemporary art from Paramaribo to the attention of art audiences in Rotterdam; there was a concomitant aim to reach Caribbean diaspora audiences in the Netherlands in order to widen their participation in spaces such as TENT. This was in line with a discourse of supposed complementarity between arts programming, urban regeneration and measures for civic and minority integration in the city of Rotterdam.^{vii} The question remains, however, of which groups have come to be the chief beneficiaries of that

process, and what can be understood of the discontent that issued from it during this ‘exchange’. These being the operative priorities for the programme, participating artists of the Caribbean could only ever find themselves paradoxically absent from the taste-making practices of a cultural programme that was billed to represent them.

Evidently it repays interest to disentangle the rhetoric of cultural exchange from the actual, lived experiences of Caribbean artists. While artworks are always processual practices by which aesthetic meaning is created, mediated and controlled through the variety of contexts, the supposition that interactions between artworks and their audience happen in a shared and apolitical field is misplaced. The present example belies the stated show of inclusivity and community that issued from the literature surrounding *Paramaribo Span* and *Paramaribo Perspectives*. The lines of division and difference are evidence that Caribbean art and artists were not in this case accorded their place in an open and expanded, common cultural field, where their artworks may be classified by their intrinsic value. ‘What cultural producers have in common is a system of common references, a common framework; in short, what I have referred to as the “space of possibles”’, writes Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2012 [1993]: 179). However, what was at issue in the Suriname-Netherlands example is that access to the cultural field was not held in common. Being uneven and inequitably shared, this particular ‘space of possibles’ was nowhere free from tensions and antagonisms. We need look no further than the two iterations of Ramsamoedj’s installation at different locations, two versions that make palpable some virtually opposing models of taste, to observe this in action. The first is grounded radically in place, biography and the local ecology of the art community in Paramaribo; the second, a de-personalised context in Rotterdam where objects are put into a temporarily built room and in that somewhat sterile space, take a regimented order. This redisplay of the ‘Adji Gilas’ project was according to aesthetics and ‘standards’ of proportion and public presentation from which any story of the artist’s tribute to his family members was submerged to a point of near invisibility – diametrically at odds with his ambition for their full recognition. Each of his cups underwent a journey from home to abroad, and a concomitant transformation of the domestic by way of another regime of taste, derived from Dutch cultural policy through curatorial practice and public display.

A central premise of this article is that the term ‘global’ is celebrated in countries of the North Atlantic far differently from how Caribbean communities appear to have understood it. The movements of works of art between the Caribbean and the Netherlands has become a scene for negotiating the term’s significance. It is not always to the benefit of Caribbean artists when a

link is made between their art practices and the discourses of intermixing and free movement within an ostensibly shared, transnational cultural field. Such an association does exist, but it hardly takes the shape of the easily drawn, fashionable one that runs through the language of many curators, arts organisers, funders, policy makers and audiences in Europe's metropolitan centres. I have illustrated such tensions between the aesthetic preferences of Caribbean artists and Dutch curators. Yet the situation is complicated by the apparent exclusion of artists of the Caribbean diaspora resident in the Netherlands. These individuals were effectively bypassed in the selection of artists for *Paramaribo Perspectives*. Assigning to the Caribbean region a 'globalising' profile – its diaspora included – may have come to distort a sense of the actual experiences of Caribbean communities in their lived and geographical differences. Arts programming has sought a synecdoche to those communities in the figure of the individual artist; it has invested in an idealisation of Caribbean artists and their works as in free global movement; it is motivated in part by concern for 'inclusion' of the widely dispersed, transatlantic Caribbean diaspora. But there is every reason for exposing this discourse as a taste-making practice that treats artists and art works as signifiers of transnational movement. We must ask how such a particular taste is perpetuated and what is the likely scope of its ongoing effects.

Transnationalism has become the leitmotif of both Caribbean-focused research and for exhibition curating, with Caribbean artists and their works being presented as the material embodiment of an imagined space of global cultural diversity.^{viii} Yet the ethical, political and aesthetic concerns of Caribbean artists are in dramatic tension with dominant tastes and networks of consumption that shape and deploy a celebrated poetics of 'globalised' contemporary art. In response to that promotion of a shared transatlantic culture focused on the visual arts, George Struikelblok drew attention to the desire to migrate, expressed by children, individuals who are the least likely to participate in the cultural labour that has brought artists from Suriname to the Netherlands in recent years. Once the situation is described in terms of differing tastes, we can better see the conflict between an established appetite for free-flowing, borderless transnationalism on the hand, and a much more quotidian, bounded and contingent sort of visual production on the other – one which elucidates (and literally holds a mirror) to metropolitan idealism in the field of exhibition programming. Through metropolitan interest in art of the Caribbean, it is ethnicity and difference that have become the preferred signifiers of the commoditised novelty of such art. Thus, art of the Caribbean enters as an ethnicised sign in service to the demand for 'diversity' and in the 'growth path' of metropolitan development.

Such ethnicising of art works is the subtext for the presentation of art of the Caribbean as a site of fluidity, ‘creolisation’, borderless community, and so on that is associated with the supposed transnationalism described in contemporary art discourse. It has led to the generation of a secondary, complementary allocation of space and resources away from an actual locus of power associated with the art ‘mainstream’.

Extending this sort of intellectual inquiry to a context of larger scope – at the very least one that takes in the countries and territories of the wider Caribbean region – would allow a comparison of how artists of have approached the tastes and ‘global’ values of the contemporary art field. It would help to pinpoint where they have confined their roles to accommodating those values, or else entered that territory in a more agonistic manner, or indeed with a more influential stance and with far greater agency. This would pay attention to the specific circumstances of artists and the social aspects of this cultural field, providing the key to the critical and emotional character of any further such relationships of putative ‘exchange’.

Conclusion

This article has unpacked the background to a particular instance of the promotion of Caribbean artists, examining practices of taste, putting them under systematic and empirical scrutiny. It has set out the salient contradictions inherent in the adoption and framing of art and artists of the Caribbean when a celebratory discourse of ‘global culture’, which approaches globalising processes as nothing other than an unalloyed good, is examined in an alternative light, as if ‘from below’. The picture offered by cultural commentary on art of the Caribbean (Paul 2003, 2007; Barson and Gorschlüter 2010; Poupeye 2011) during the first decade of the new millennium captured many ‘success stories’ about the region’s artists. While these seem to furnish the conclusion that the Caribbean has come to enjoy a high degree of agency – by virtue of its many examples of movement – the foregoing discussion contradicts any such idealised picture of an ostensibly open and borderless global cultural field. Indeed, Caribbean artists have continued to stand in a position of disadvantage within a discursive hierarchy of global ‘difference’; there is a painfully unequal relationship between the taste regime of the art mainstream and how Caribbean artists experience that field of practices.

The stereotypical idea of the Caribbean as an accessible and yet exotic zone of the western hemisphere has long prevailed in the reception of the region's art within the North Atlantic (Wainwright 2011). This has been supported by a general inability, guided by the same hegemonic discourse, to accept that contemporary art is quite 'at home', or indeed that contemporary art exists at all, in such a 'marginal' space as the Caribbean.^{ix} These judgements of value, even of 'quality', are thus a clear matter of geography; spatiality itself has become central to such processes of mediation, setting the limit conditions for Caribbean artists' participation in the contemporary art field. I have recommended the task of mapping out such North-South power dynamics as they cohere through art practice, policy and funding, and have looked in particular at the role of taste, where what may be called the 'taste for difference' has seen art of the Caribbean pressed into the service of multiculturalist and urbanist agendas among arts organisations of a key North Atlantic metropole. In this cultural economy, markers of taste have issued from outside the Caribbean region and formed the landscape of value in which artists move in global space. The coupling of Suriname and the Netherlands through art exhibitions in 2010 was revealing of the sorts of positions that artists and their works have adopted in response as a way of coping with these circumstances.

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Notes

ⁱ Among the vast literature on Trinidad alone, see: Herskovits and Herskovits 1976 [1947]; Crowley 1957; Yelvington 1993. An extended bibliography appears in Khan 2004.

ⁱⁱ *ArtRoPa* commenced in February 2007 and was funded by the Centrum Beeldende Kunst Rotterdam (Rotterdam Centre for the Arts). *Paramaribo SPAN: Hedendaagse kunst in Suriname* (in English *Contemporary art in Suriname*) marked the 145th anniversary of De

Surinaamsche Bank, 26th February until 20th March 2010, held at the Bank's premises in the centre of Paramaribo. The accompanying catalogue was published in three editions, Dutch, Portuguese and English (Meijer zu Schlochtern and Cozier 2010). It followed the 2009 exhibition at Fort Zeelandia, Paramaribo (20th February to 1st March): *Wakaman: Drawing Lines, Connecting Dots: Contemporary Art Suriname* (Grantsaan and Jungerman 2009), funded by the Intendanten Culturele Diversiteit Project, an initiative of the Fund for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB), Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

ⁱⁱⁱ Together these three Trinidadians oversaw the associated website in the form of a blog: <http://paramaribospan.blogspot.co.uk/>

^{iv} This builds on my work around Indo-Caribbean artists elsewhere in the Caribbean (in Trinidad), relating to the matter of artists' agency and its limits (Wainwright 2012).

^v 'Doel van ArtRoPa is het versterken van de culturele infrastructuur en het bevorderen van de interculturele dialoog. Dit betekent uitwisseling van ideeën en het stimuleren van creativiteit en diversiteit. Juist kunstenaars hebben de mogelijkheid om verbindingen tussen verschillende culturen te leggen, samen te werken en als sleutelfiguren ervaringen uit te wisselen.' www.artropa.nl

^{vi} Notable, and indeed problematic, is that during the *Span* programme there was a line of questioning about the participation of artists, curators and writers from other parts of the Caribbean, outside the Dutch colonial and postcolonial territories. Issues of North-South relations in regard to art practice and the right over representation (as much as the right to the Caribbean's cities) of course extend to other Caribbean nations and relationships with their former or continuing colonial metropolises. Part of the problem with multiculturalist agendas seems to be one of representation in general, implicitly not only of the Caribbean but also of the European nation (in its status as the ex-colonizer). The ability to facilitate multicultural encounters and 'exchange' by European nations is a demonstration of the ability to construct and circulate a cultural identity that seems outwardly progressive, championing diversity and inclusivity as much as being a site of self-reflection and attuned to past historical injustices. In the effort to do so, however, and not without irony, the energy invested by such agencies in compartmentalizing and ordering the subjects and zones of 'difference' only goes to show up the ambivalence of such self-representations.

^{vii} A detailed and reasoned dismantling of this approach to regeneration in Dutch cities has been given with regard to Amsterdam (Uitermark et al. 2005).

^{ix} As the Jamaica-based writer Annie Paul has quipped in defense of the region, 'What, conceptual art in the periphery? Perish the thought. And the thought does perish under the circumstances' (2003: 29). Evidently, the 'primitivism' that was first famously visited upon Caribbean communities – when the Surrealist writers and artists of the modernist avant-garde began corresponding with francophone Caribbean intellectuals (Fijalkowski and Richardson 1996) – has been refashioned countless times over the subsequent decades.