



**Claire Tancons**

*Spring* [2008]

*En Mas': Carnival and  
Performance Art of  
the Caribbean* [2014]

*Up Hill Down Hall:  
An Indoor Carnival*  
[2014]

Trained as a curator and art historian, Claire Tancons has made the traditions and contemporary iterations of carnival, public ceremonial culture, civic rituals and popular movements, the focus of her sustained research. Her work examines and re-assesses 'the political aesthetics of walking, marching, second-lining, masquerading and parading', as modes of public address and communality, bringing the genealogy of the modern carnivals of the Americas and their diasporic counterparts to bear on both a history of performance and readings of current popular movements. As a curator she has pioneered processional performance as a critique of the exhibitionary complex. Her project 'Spring' was part of the 7th Gwangju Biennale (2008); more recently, 'Up Hill Down Hall: An Indoor Carnival' (2014) was staged in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London.

How do you define your work as a curator?

[CT] Much like my academic path, which seems to have been well thought-out in advance, but was, in fact, rather serendipitous, driven by interest and instinct rather than planning and timing, my curatorial work might seem quite coherent, whereas it also came out of personal interest and life experience followed by empirical research and experimentation. So I don't define my work. I direct it. Indeed, one could say that I curate in a directorial fashion more akin to the fields of theatre, dance, opera or, indeed, carnival. In any event, my work is always research-driven, context-specific and, to a large extent, collaborative, in various degrees, and at different stages in the process. I like to allow for a mix of rigour and nimbleness at the same time.

To use an anatomical metaphor applied to the field of dance: I build projects around a strong core so as to leave the members free to flow around it. I also think of my practice in terms of different bodies of work. So, for instance, my interest in carnival, performance, civic rituals and public ceremonial culture developed into a ten-year body of work, one which I may continue pursuing or return to. I have now begun engaging with another body of work around piracy, self-governance and infrastructure that I very much look forward to delving into.

What drew you to carnivals, and how do you formulate them in your research?

[CT] I was slowly pulled towards carnival in Trinidad in 2004. I didn't arrive in Trinidad with preconceived ideas or a pre-existing interest in carnival. But as I carried out studio visits with a wide range of contemporary artists, it quickly became apparent that carnival was not only central to Trinidad's cultural identity but also played an important role in contemporary artistic practice, whether in terms of the materials or techniques artists used, the subject matters they drew from or the installation strategies they devised.

Despite a long and well-established artistic tradition in the Trinidad Carnival, colloquially known as mas', short for masquerade, and the towering achievement of carnival designer and artist Peter Minshall, carnival was both that towards which artists were attracted and that which they resisted. It seemed safer to establish oneself as an artist to photograph, film or paint carnival than to actually 'do' carnival or, rather, 'make mas'. One of the artists who was beginning to dare and was coming out of the carnival closet, so to speak, was Marlon Griffith, with whom I have worked extensively for the last decade, ever since including his work in 'Lighting the Shadow: Trinidad in and out of Light' at CCA7 Gallery in Port of Spain. As he recently recounted (in an interview with Nicholas Laughlin for *Caribbean Beat*), my own conceptual inquiries into carnival gave him confidence in the possibility of drawing

his main artistic practice from it – much as his work later led me to envisioning the possibility of curating carnival and to do so as public processional performance. So, obvious though it might seem now, at first it required providing an art-historical lineage and devising a curatorial framework as preconditions for its visibility within an art context – something that I am now questioning.

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How do you see carnivals and artistic practice coming together? Are there specific artists who work with carnivals as a medium? Or is all carnival-making explicitly artistic?

[CT] Your first question is almost exactly the same question that was formulated to me by Dan Cameron when he asked me to write an essay about 'the relationship between carnival and contemporary art' for the catalogue of Prospect.1 New Orleans. It became *The Greatest Free Show on Earth: Carnival from Trinidad to Brazil, Cape Town to New Orleans* and, honestly, it's a pretty bad case in point about the pressure of legitimizing for the mainstream. It feels particularly preposterous from a place like New Orleans, where public ceremonial culture and its assortment of carnival parades, second lines and funeral processions are the cultural mainstream and museum culture is marginal.

Your second question can be answered more specifically in terms of local lineages of artistic traditions, which are more important and urgent

to trace than it is to formulate external legitimizing claims; so that, in Brazil, carnival's artistic directors are known as *carnavalescos* while in Trinidad they are known as masmen. And, of course, there is a growing score of contemporary artists of Caribbean and African descent who draw from carnival, masquerade and public ceremonial culture at large, to create works of performance including Marlon Griffith and Hew Locke, Meschac Gaba and Dominique Zinkpè, to mention only a few whose work I've recently curated or written about.

As to your last question, carnival always has an artistic aspect but is also always at the same time, potentially, in addition to a performance art form and an exhibitionary mode, a ritual of resistance and a festival of otherness. As a polyglot practice, carnival might not use all its tongues at the same time but they are always available and ready to articulate the language or speak the patois appropriate to or required by the circumstances.



**Actor Boy: Fractal Engagement, Charles Campbell, part of 'En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean' [2014]**

How important is it for you to establish the carnival tradition as a non-Western-centric form of modernism?

[CT] Part of my current preoccupation is to establish carnival's modern genealogy through the experience of the Middle Passage, in the aftermath of slavery and colonization, which includes the independence movements of the late 1950s, postwar migration and retrocolonization processes in former colonial centres in the second half of the twentieth century, etc. It is obviously not about excluding the influence of the West, which is central to these enterprises. It is rather about placing the emphasis on what became of carnival, on a much greater scale than in Europe at the same time,

on the other side of the Atlantic, from the eighteenth century onwards, which is when diverse cultural traditions from different populations – Native Americans, Africans and Europeans and later Asians – cemented into what we continue to call 'carnival'. I'm in part following in the footsteps of Joseph Roach's definition of circum-Atlantic performances derived from Paul Gilroy's conceptualization of the Black Atlantic. But I am also questioning the appropriateness of the very word 'carnival' to account for the variegated practices it came to encompass and that by far exceeded the European frame within which it continues to be placed.

'Spring', your project for the Gwangju Biennale, marked a moment of protest. Are carnival and protest inextricably linked?

[CT] 'Spring' was conceived in direct response to the context of creation of the Gwangju Biennale as a tribute to the city's 1980 Democratic Uprising and to South Korea's nationwide protest at the time, in the summer of 2008, against

the reopening of the beef trade with the US. The turning point in the conceptualization of the project was when, upon reviewing close-up images of the protests in Seoul, I recognized its carnivalesque tropes and decided to bring together these vernacular street performances and South Korea's democratic protest traditions with carnival's own. Another important moment was when I recognized the May 18 Democratic Square (which I was dismayed to see disfigured by the construction of the Gwangju Kunsthalle a couple of years later) as one of those 'vortices of behaviour', to quote from Roach – a site of performance – and elected it as the site for 'Spring'. Finally, each artist invited in the project drew from their own experiences, histories and practices: for instance, Marlon Griffith from the Canboulay riots in late nineteenth-century Trinidad, Jarbas Lopes from contemporary protest against the pollution of the Amazonian forest, or Caecilia Tripp, the project's filmmaker, who realized *Spring in Gwangju*, in homage to Fassbinder's *Germany in Autumn*. 'Spring' was a good example of how I conceive of carnival not as a theme but as a discipline or a field within which related artistic practices can unfold and as a critical frame through which to address issues related to the notion of civil society or to access the practice of the commons.

But there is another element of answer to what constituted mindful resistance and watchful vigilance

rather than protest in the making of 'Spring'. It lies in the mutual acknowledgment of the experience of people of African descent. To me, it is summarized in Okwui Enwezor's response to my project proposal for Gwangju. I no longer know if it's apocryphal or not but as I recall it Okwui said to me: 'Claire, I'm from Nigeria, I know what a masquerade is, I know where you are coming from, I think I know where you are going'. To me, this is equivalent to people in New Orleans who, upon picking up on my foreign accent and all at the same time recognizing my diasporic experience, say, 'Welcome home!' rather than ask, 'Where are you from?' In my mind, this speaks not of circumstantial protest but of more fundamental forms of cultural resistance and accommodation at the same time, often taking the form of public performance, that have allowed people from the African diaspora to survive and thrive.

Tell me about 'En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean', which took place across nine cities in six different countries, and 'Up Hill Down Hall: An Indoor Carnival' at the Tate. How do they represent the maturation of your ideas around carnival?

[CT] Both can be seen as the culmination of a decade's worth of investigative research, critical writing and experimental curation in relationship to carnival.

The most daring leap of 'En Mas' is in breaking national boundaries and being resolutely transnational across Caribbean island nations and their diasporic outposts in northern America and Europe. It was definitely enabled through collegial support and again, at the risk of sounding romantic, through mutual acknowledgment of a shared diasporic experience with my collaborator Krista Thompson, the artists and myself.

I think that these projects speak equally to the maturation of the art world. Though my ideas have kept evolving and were given opportunities to develop by Isolde Brielmaier in 2007, Dan Cameron in 2008, Okwui Enwezor in 2009, etc., and Catherine Wood in 2014, I think that the core formulation of my ideas was pretty well-established by 2009. For instance, the idea of reclaiming the processional as a curatorial framework for carnival performance, something that Catherine Wood also stipulated in her invitation to use the Turbine Hall as a processional space, dates back to 2007 as the title of my exhibition for the Rotunda Gallery, 'Mas': From Process to Procession', makes clear.

What drew you to working in the UK on a British-based carnival? It seems very different to your other projects in that here you are working at a colonial centre.

[CT] As I said before, 'Up Hill Down Hall' is a response to an invitation rather than a project I initiated. So I did not choose to do a project in London and, having been invited to do so, I did not initially set out to focus on the Notting Hill Carnival. But I realized that not doing so would be a missed opportunity and decided

to take up the challenge by relating the project to the Notting Hill Carnival's history of resistance to racism, a parallel development alongside black cultural studies with key figures such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer, and intricate entanglements with the formation of British cultural life from Linton Kwesi Johnson to Zadie Smith, to The Clash and Jeremy Deller.



**No Black in the Union Jack,**  
Marlon Griffith, part of 'Up Hill Down Hall:  
An Indoor Carnival'  
[2014]

What are the challenges inherent in curating performed events?

[CT] The challenge of live performance, when improvisation turns into unpredictability or scripts into unedited writing and scores into untuned music, when the potential of performance is actualized, is also what makes it most potent as a form of public address and audience engagement. What sets carnival apart as performance is its massive dimension in terms of audiences, participants and its monumental scale. The idea of crowd control starts to creep in and with it the same kind of impulses that bring state governments to send anti-riot police in the streets. Taming this impulse, which is inherent in the feeling of power that comes with scale and the desire for control that 'the masses' bring, is what I would recognize as one of many challenges in curating mass public processional performance. Performance in general is spontaneous and improvisational but within a mnemonic frame that structures movement and its delivery. I think of the work I do as creating the conditions of that emergence in response to and in relationship with given contexts and circumstances as part of the immaterial legacy of human gestures as protest, art and life.

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**Invisible Presence: Bling Memories,**  
Ebony G. Patterson, part of  
'En Mas': Carnival and Performance  
Art of the Caribbean', 27.04.14  
[2014]





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**Aerial view of 'Spring' around the May 18  
 Democratic Square in Gwangju,  
 7th Gwangju Biennale  
 [2008]**

◀  
**'Up Hill Down Hall: An Indoor Carnival'  
 [2014]**

Installation view.