BREAKING THE FRAME:

ART IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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by

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Abstract

In the last 15 years, development donors have begun to fund the arts in the South in response to development's 'cultural turn' that urged a more holistic approach to development practice. However, conceptions of art's agency in the context of development remain highly varied. Donors with an instrumental approach claim that the arts contribute to such extra-artistic outcomes as post-conflict peace-building, effective communication of educational messages, and economic growth through cultural tourism and through the creative industries. Other donors argue that the cultural sector provides a critical public space important to the development of more just and democratic societies. Some postcolonial critics go further, arguing that the critical agency of art in the South lies in its ability to stand as an alternative imaginative space to development, one not reduced to development's crises and deficiencies, and one from which alternative cultural imaginings can be constructed by those usually framed as the 'subjects of development'. This thesis responds to this latter claim by exploring the possibilities of this somewhat paradoxical question: to what extent can development funding support artistic processes that construct an alternative imaginative space to development itself?

This question is explored through a grounded case study of one highly dynamic contemporary artist-led initiative based in Managua, Nicaragua, but operating throughout Central America. The organisation, called EspIRA/La ESPORA, was founded in 2005 and has received almost all of its funding from development donors to date. In all of the claims for art's agency listed above, the voices of artists themselves are missing. The close examination of EspIRA/La ESPORA reveals the range and complexity of the agency that these artists claim for their own practices, in relationship to context(s) that they conceive as multi-scalar. It also reveals the practices through which donors appear able to support the resistant and constructive forms of agency suggested by postcolonial critics, as well as the practices and policies through which donors reinscribe development's dominance as a signifying framework. Finally, the thesis draws out particularly productive tensions in the relationship between art and development that emerge from this analysis, and that offer opportunities to deepen the donor community's critical engagement with art and with artists in the South.

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I must also, sadly, acknowledge the recent passing of David Craven and Virginia Pérez-Ratton – two outstanding documenters and promoters of Central American art, whose ideas this thesis dialogues with. Their untimely passing is a tremendous loss.

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List of Abbreviations

ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States
AECID	Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarollo
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GNI	Gross National Income
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MFA	Master of Fine Arts
MUA	Mujeres en las Artes
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NZAID	New Zealand Agency for International Development
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SFAI	San Francisco Art Institute
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
TfD	Theatre for Development
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Chapter 1: Art and international development: paradox and possibility

> *[. . .]most Western donors consider Africa to be a zone of emergency, a fertile ground for humanitarian interventions. The future is not part of their theory of Africa – in the very rare cases such a theory exists. For them, Africa is not only a land of empiricism. It is also the land of a never-ending present, a serial accumulation of "instants" that never achieve the density and weight of human, historical time. [. . .]*
>
> *Under these circumstances, it seems to me,* the function of art in Africa is precisely to free us from the shackles of development both as an ideology and as a practice. *It is to subsume and transcend the instant; to open the vast horizons of the not-yet – what my friend Arjun Appadurai calls 'the capacity to aspire'. Such too is, at least to me, the function of cultural criticism and of critical theory because art cannot thrive in the absence of a strong critical theory tradition.*
>
> *In circumstances under which millions of poor people indeed struggle to make it from today to tomorrow, the work of theory and the work of art and the work of culture is to pave the way for a qualitative practice of the imagination – a practice without which we will have no name, no face and no voice in history.[. . .]*
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> *I hate the idea that African life is simple bare life – the life of an empty stomach and a sick and naked body waiting to be fed, clothed, healed or housed. It is a conception that is structurally embedded in 'development' ideology and practice. [. . .] This kind of metaphysical and ontological violence has long been a fundamental aspect of the fiction of development the West seeks to impose on those it has colonized. We must oppose it and resist such surreptitious forms of dehumanization.*
>
> (Mbembe, 2009, final section. Emphasis in original.)

Introduction

This thesis investigates Professor Achille Mbembe's contention that art and cultural criticism in so-called 'developing' countries constitute powerful sites of agency from which to counter the reductionist framing of development practices, and through which to construct an alternative cultural imagining. Mbembe argues that the development community (consciously or unconsciously) discursively constructs Africa as 'a zone of emergency', defined by its problems and its people's most basic needs. Development discourse[1], he suggests, continually reinscribes Africa in reductionist terms which are not

[1] Hall defines discourses as 'ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about,

only inaccurate – 'going against people's own daily experience' (2009, final section) – but which incur 'metaphysical and ontological violence' (ibid). Mbembe claims that art, on the other hand, is a fundamentally different field of action that can counter such violence through articulating more complex forms of subjectivity (not limited to deficiencies, needs or immediate crises), and through its imaginative and transformative capacities.

In the last 15 years, a growing number of international development donors have begun to fund the arts in the development context, as part of broader efforts to diversify development practice beyond the kind of 'base materialism' that Mbembe critiques. Development's increasing diversification and democratisation, influenced in part by a 'cultural turn' in the 1980s and 1990s, recognises a wider and richer array of desired development outcomes beyond simply material survival. These include self-esteem, empowerment, freedom and opportunity. Through these processes development funding has entered the artistic sphere and art has entered development.

This thesis, therefore, starts from the following paradox. If part of the agency of art in postcolonial, economically disadvantaged countries is to provide an alternative imaginative space to development, can development funding really be used to support this process? To what extent, and in what ways, does development funding for the arts transgress and transcend the reductionism and 'ontological violence' inherent in the development imaginary and contribute to a more expansive and progressive cultural imagining? Or, are the agentic possibilities of artistic production inevitably reduced through development's framing?

The fragile new cultural space created by development donors' support of artists' organisations in the South[2] is a complex and contradictory place in which to explore agency. It encounters a defence of artistic autonomy, with many arts projects

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forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society' (1997, p.6).

[2] Researchers in Development Studies are inevitably vexed by having to decide on appropriate and accurate terms for the different geographic and political sites in which their research is located. In this thesis I have chosen to use the terms South and North, while recognising that they are not geographically accurate, that they imply a false separation, and are inevitably reductionist. They may be, however, as McEwan (2009, pp.12-13) argues, the 'least problematic means of distinguishing between relatively wealthy countries and continents (Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada) and relatively poorer ones (Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific)'. The positive aspect of the terms North and South (their neutrality in the face of the hierarchies implied by the terms 'developing' or 'First' and 'Third Worlds') is, in my opinion, also their weakness. People in Central America often use the terms 'Third World' or 'periphery', precisely to point to their relatively marginalised position.

characterising themselves as independent and some donors intentionally supporting that independence. Yet it is also characterised by a political climate in which culture is increasingly captured for expedient use (Mirza, 2006; Yúdice, 2003) both in a compensatory way, as neoliberal governments reduce their involvement in the social sectors and the arts are called upon as engines of urban regeneration and social inclusion, and by grassroots actors who call on culture as a vehicle for activism. This inherently intercultural space is further complicated by its inevitable engagement with ongoing postcolonial contestations over the terms of recognition for artists from 'peripheral' countries in global art circuits still dominated by Europe and North America and the complex politics of multiculturalism and cultural diversity.

Performance in El Sauce: the spark that generated this enquiry

My personal encounter with the tensions and possibilities of development-funded arts began late in 2004, when I had the opportunity to watch a number of performances in El Sauce, a rural town in northern Nicaragua[3]. Although my research ended up engaging with very different actors in urban Managua, my experiences in El Sauce and the questions that they raised have continued to motivate my enquiry. The first performance was a play about globalisation staged by a group of farmer-actors called Teocoyani[4]. The play educated local agricultural workers about their poor terms of trade under economic globalisation, and recommended that they rely on their own wisdom and resources. Alfredo Rivera Lara, the director of this group, also ran music lessons for a group of barefoot boys who came together to play local folk music (drums, recorder, guitar) which, in this part of Nicaragua, includes polkas[5]. They were working towards performing in an upcoming regional music festival. Rivera Lara's wage for teaching music was paid for by the Norwegian aid organisation NORAD as part of a programme for Nicaragua's musical development.

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[3] This experience was made possible by Dr Julie Cupples, who was undertaking research into popular political engagement and citizenship in El Sauce (see Cupples, Glynn & Larios, 2007) and who invited me to accompany her. I am indebted to her for this enormously valuable experience.

[4] Members of this group performed frequently and toured internationally during the first Sandinista administration (1979-1990) which was renowned for its participatory and democratising cultural policies (see Craven, 1989 for an extensive discussion).

[5] Central America has had a long history of immigration and miscegenation, not only from Spain and parts of Africa via the slave trade, but also from Europe, China, and the Middle East (Pérez-Ratton, 2002, p. 6). The polka struck me as interesting because it was another form of dislocation: a polka – here? Although I later learned that polka, although originating in Eastern Europe, has multiple variants in many parts of the world. It also demonstrated the complexity of cultural production: its sometimes surprising diversity and its intertwining with specific histories.

Later in the same week I saw another play by a different group of farmer-actors from a neighbouring village. This group called themselves *Luz del Horizonte* in tongue-in-cheek recognition, as one of the actors told me, that the light (*luz*) is always far off. Their hilarious farce was performed at a meeting of farmers and local government to celebrate the end of a regional environmental project. Officials and farm workers alike fell about laughing as the hapless subject of the play enthusiastically sold off his land to foreign investors, was convinced to buy expensive foreign fertiliser that poisoned his local river, changed to the production of a mono-crop for export that only further depleted his land of its productivity, and was left penniless on a barren bit of dirt. Talking with the actors afterwards I learned that *Luz del Horizonte* had previously received funding from a Danish development agency but that funding had run out. Now they struggled to get bits and pieces of acting work where they could, such as this commission from local government.

This idea of funding the arts as part of the development project sparked my curiosity and I wanted to know what Denmark and Norway were doing funding theatre and music in rural Nicaragua. While the two theatre projects could be accommodated fairly easily within conventional development practices as 'communicative tools' for furthering a mainstream development agenda (in this case enhancing the sustainability of rural livelihoods), the music project – which seemed to be more concerned with supporting creative expression – was less easily accommodated.

I had not heard a whisper about the arts as a post-graduate student in development studies. The arts seemed about as far away from the 'Washington Consensus' (that sees economic liberalisation as the primary route to national economic development and hence to wider social development) as it was possible to get. The arts also failed to figure in more human-centred approaches to development (focussed on basic needs, empowerment, sustainability and oriented around the Millennium Development Goals)[6]. Amid the grind of more utilitarian development considerations these performances seemed to offer something effervescent and energising. They also spoke of situated and complex cultural histories.

[6] The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2000, are a set of specific, measurable targets to be met by 2015 across eight key development areas (poverty reduction, education, gender equality, child health, maternal health, combatting HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability and global partnership). They have proved to be a very important tool for securing international consensus and to keep poverty on the global agenda (see NZAID, 2005, for example).

But it was complicated. Was thinking about polka-playing in rural Nicaragua simply an avoidance of thinking about intractable poverty and structural inequalities, or was there something more than that going on? It seemed to me that these practices had a focus on agency: they didn't frame the recipients of development aid as victims but instead recognised their creative and imaginative capacities, the importance of affective experience and the complex nature of subjectivity. They also responded to and intervened in very particular contexts. Furthermore, they gave me an alternative subject position to occupy. Here I could escape being a development studies student for an hour, and become a member of an audience at a play or at a music performance. It felt like a different kind of encounter and subjective experience. These artistic practices seemed emancipatory in some ways, but in which ways and to what extent?

There was, after all, something disturbing about Norway funding a programme of musical development for Nicaragua. Was this some kind of neo-colonial practice in which old Europe (self-proclaimed world cultural leader) was 'helping' the New World to 'get culture'[7], and if so, whose culture on whose terms? And what happened to these highly talented, hopeful groups, like *Luz del Horizonte*, when funding disappeared? Was this group formed in response to development initiatives or did it exist over a longer time period in response to different aspects of its context? The difference I perceived between teaching music and 'theatre-for-development'[8] also raised questions. While it seemed like a sound idea to use dramatic narrative to more effectively communicate information, what about more autonomous or experimental forms of artistic practice? In places where the state's support of the arts is minimal, would funding the arts through development skew artistic output towards more socially 'productive' practices, and did this matter? How emancipatory were these practices really?

[7] I am suggesting here a neo-colonial echo of the well-known colonial 'motif of the torch-bearing European continent bringing the light of civilization to as yet uncivilised countries overseas' (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p. 141) , asserting cultural superiority as a strategy of colonial power.

[8] 'Theatre-for-development' (TfD) encompasses a range of approaches from a straightforward use of theatre to convey development messages (such as AIDS-prevention strategies as part of a public health campaign) through to more activist-oriented participatory approaches based on the consciousness-raising practices of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal (see Connelly, 2010). These approaches share an emphasis on generating behavioural change and they prioritise social intervention over artistic values.

The non-instrumental case: EspIRA/La ESPORA

I had a sense, even in El Sauce, that arts practices that resisted easy instrumentalisation would provide the most productive ground for examining art's possibility to challenge the primacy and reductionism of development's framing. After all, instrumental cases could far more easily be accommodated *within* development. Non-instrumental practices, on the other hand, were clearly liminal if not fully external to development's concerns. My primary interest was not in asking how development could 'capture' art for its own ends, but rather what it was that artists were doing beyond fulfilling the demands of a mainstream development agenda. In what terms did *they* conceive of their own agency and the social incidence (if any) of their practices? Focussing on non-instrumental practices would enable me to explore the agentic possibilities that were particular to art and art practices beyond the direct utility associated with development.

With this in mind, I decided to explore the agency of non-instrumentalised arts practices (supported by development donors) through a grounded, ethnographic, study of a highly dynamic and multi-faceted visual arts organisation, EspIRA/La ESPORA. Founded in 2005, and based in Managua, Nicaragua, EspIRA/La ESPORA is an independent artist-led educational initiative with the primary goal of fostering a critically responsive contemporary art community in the Central American region[9]. It provides critically engaged, dialogue-based arts education to emerging artists in Nicaragua and throughout the region. Since its inception, the organisation has received the bulk of its funding from development donors such as Hivos (the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries), Arts Collaboratory, the DOEN Foundation (all of which are based in the Netherlands), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation for Development (AECID). Of particular value to this thesis, is EspIRA/La ESPORA's complex conception of its own agency and social incidence. While it sees its practices as strongly socially engaged, that engagement is not couched in utilitarian or extra-artistic terms but is based on a relational understanding of art and society.

By focussing this research on an arts initiative that prioritises arts practice over a development agenda, and by seeking to understand the broad engagements of a group

[9] Central America is the name given to the isthmus that connects both halves of the American continent and includes the following countries: Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. For a map, see Figure 13, in Chapter 6.

of artists beyond their direct social incidence, this thesis, in a sense, de-prioritises development and prioritises the arts. This positioning grounds the claim of this thesis to make an innovative contribution to the literature. There is little development literature that engages in a sustained way with the perspectives of artists and their practices.

This positioning also enables a certain politics. It responds to Mbembe's claim that the agency of art in the development context lies partly in the way that art exceeds development. The impossibility of full incorporation gives art critical distance from development. EspIRA/La ESPORA projects a view of Central America that is not framed by poverty or 'underdevelopment', although its practices go on amidst Nicaragua's chronic power and water cuts, and public transport strikes, the organisation lacks physical resources, and students frequently pull out of courses due to family and work commitments. Part of EspIRA/La ESPORA's motivation is to demonstrate that Central America is also *a really great place in which to make art*, and it generates a vibrant critical community that encourages young artists and thinkers to stay in the region. In the organisation's practices, questions of form and aesthetics are as important as the discussion of social conditions or lived experience. Moreover these two fields are seen to be connected.

Focussing on non-instrumentalised art also allows me to examine agency across the breadth of arts' practices, beyond their utility as tools to achieve development outcomes, and even beyond their potential to resist development discourse. Their liminiality in relationship to development encourages a broader exploration, able to address the context-specific projects in which artists are engaged, whether or not they have a development-oriented focus. In this way the thesis contributes a more expansive and nuanced articulation of the social engagement of arts practices in the South to development thinking.

The thesis can broadly be divided into three sections. The first, which encompasses Chapters 1-3, opens up the question and discusses the theoretical and methodological grounding. The second section, comprising Chapters 4-6, is broadly ethnographic, describing EspIRA/La ESPORA's diverse practices, the specific context (the symbolic and material conditions) in which it has emerged and to which it responds, and its approach to social engagement. The following and final section (Chapters 7-9) focuses more specifically on questions of agency and subjectivity in the complex negotiation

between art and development. Here I focus on the tensions that exist in the relationship between the two, a relationship which appears on the one hand to offer significant emancipatory potential, but which does not yet escape the marginalising aspects of development practice that Mbembe critiques. An Appendix is also attached that provides a brief overview of Nicaraguan history and some comments on its art history, intended as a general introduction to those unfamiliar with the country.

The scope and nature of the arts

It is important at the outset to clarify the scope of the arts as discussed in this thesis. I want to start by acknowledging that definitions of 'art' are culturally determined and change over time (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p.19)[10]. This thesis is primarily concerned with the work of contemporary visual artists and much of the discussion remains limited to their particular practices. However, the broader discussion around donor support for the arts as part of development has a wider scope. Here the discussion includes arts practices across a range of genres including literature, the performing arts (theatre, music, dance), the visual arts (an increasingly wide range of genres) and film. It also includes past artistic efforts in the form of monumental cultural heritage (such as the Mayan ruins at Tikal or Copán), and 'intangible' practices such as festivals or processions, folks songs and chants which have gained greater international recognition since UNESCO's adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003[11].

Smiers (2003) points to some general characteristics of the arts which are useful to introduce here, as they are significant for the arguments in this thesis. He describes the arts as '*specific forms of human communication*', specific because 'what they communicate is usually more dense, more focussed, possibly funnier, or more reflective, than we are used to in our normal daily contacts' (ibid, p. 10, emphasis in original). Furthermore,

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[10] See Taliaferro, 2011, Chapter 2 for a review of philosophical debates about what constitutes visual art. See Smiers, 2003, Chapter 1 for a discussion of general characteristics of the arts and of cultural differences in valuing the arts.

[11] An example is the satirical drama '*El Güegüense*' or '*Macho Raton*', performed regularly throughout Nicaragua, but particularly during the celebrations of San Sebastián in January. The play (which includes music and dance) is a syncretic production combining aspects of indigenous and Spanish cultures and portraying interactions between the indigenous (represented by the character El Güegüense) and the colonisers, with El Güegüense using clever verbal tricks and subterfuge to undermine colonial authority. The drama was granted the status of Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005.

these specific forms of human communication often 'take place in specific *places* that tell us that something special is happening, for instance a theatre, a gallery, a magic circle in a city square where a clown performs her act' (ibid, emphasis in original). While an art experience may 'exist as a rather separate social phenomenon, such as a concert or film' (ibid), the arts are also often part of other social activities: one may walk and whistle or hum, for example, and arts practices contribute to architecture, design, fashion, film, and other 'symbolic and image production industries' (Featherstone, cited in Smiers, 2003, p. 11). The arts contribute to the construction of subjectivity: they 'mould our mental framework, our emotional texture, our language, our tonal and visual landscape, our understanding of past and present, our feelings about other people, our sensibility' (ibid). They contribute to our cultural understandings and frameworks. They are also producers of ideology, and are highly partisan. As Arnold Hauser has pointed out: '[a]rt' stands in the very closest connection with social reality [. . .] Art is partisan through and through [. . .] Every aspect of art is a perspective' (1985, pp. 21-24).

Together these divergent aspects demonstrate that the arts are not 'innocent adornments' to life (Smiers, 2003, p. 9), but are 'an arena of struggle' (ibid, p. 1; see also Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 64) where 'emotional incompatibilities, social conflicts and questions of status collide in a [. . .] concentrated way' (Smiers, 2003, p. 3). Debates over the value or legitimacy of art objects, over the right to make such judgements, over who has the power to speak about art objects, are all struggles of power which both reflect and intervene in broader cultural struggles. The pervasiveness of the arts in so many aspects of our lives, their concentrated communicability, and their constructive relationship with both personal and communal systems of meaning should be borne in mind throughout the thesis.

Theoretical location and considerations

The arts remain a very marginal aspect of development practice but, as Nederveen Pieterse points out, development studies itself is 'a field in flux' (2010, p.1), and at least nominally open to the influence of emergent or liminal practices. How to conceptualise development itself is the subject of ongoing debate, as are the most appropriate strategies to achieve that development (however conceived). If one adds to this the fact that theoretical attempts to systematise development are often 'already overtaken on the

ground' (ibid, p. 11) through emerging combinations of actors and changing priorities, then you have a highly complex and mobile field of academic engagement.

In the post-war period, both liberal and critical theories of development prioritised economic growth and modernisation. However, radical critiques in the last 20-30 years challenged the primacy of national economic performance as the chief indicator of development, and generated an alternative hegemonic understanding of human-centred development (with emphases on meeting basic needs but also on capacitation and enlarging people's choices)[12]. Nederveen Pieterse (2010, Chapter 6) argues that both of these approaches to development (development as economic growth, and human-centred development) can now be considered mainstream, although they continue to exist in tension with one another. This tension is evident in the institutional split between the reform agenda of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Group on one hand, and the UN agencies (such as the United Nations Development Programme or UNDP) focussed on human-centred development on the other.

In broader terms, these radical challenges to liberal development have resulted in the democratisation and diversification of development, greater reflexivity in the development community, an increased focus on local participation and empowerment, and the recognition of cultural diversity. This shift is important to this thesis in that it demonstrates the mobility of the development field – the possibility for broadening and diversifying development thinking and practice in response to critique. It is also important because funding for the arts emerged out of those critical challenges in response to calls to support cultural diversity and to broaden the parameters of development to make it more holistic[13].

Among these radical critiques of development was an analysis of the discursive power of development policies and practices, the way in which, as Mbembe points out, development practices construct the South in limited and stereotypical ways that signal

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[12] For in-depth discussions of this major shift in development thinking see Peet and Hardwick, 2009, and Nederveen Pieterse, 2010. Human Development, as adopted by the UNDP, is conceptually informed by the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on capabilities and freedom (see, for example, Nussbaum, 2000 and Sen, 1993) and is concerned with 'enlarging people's choices and enhancing human capabilities (the range of things people can be and do) and freedoms, enabling them to: live a long and healthy life, have access to knowledge and a decent standard of living, and participate in the life of their community and decisions affecting their lives' (UNDP, n.d., 'Origins of the Human Development Approach', paragraph 3).

[13] The historical emergence of arts funding in development, and the implications of that process for the character of that funding, will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

the necessity for external intervention. Mbembe argues that art's agency in relation to development lies partly in its capacity to counter that discursive violence. In what follows I discuss the critique of development's discursive strategies before opening out and extending my own research question in relation to that discussion and to my experiences in Nicaragua with EspIRA/La ESPORA.

Development discourse: critical arguments from postcolonialism and postdevelopment

> *In June 2008 I was in Managua, sitting in on a workshop at La ESPORA, in a small room with white concrete walls, in director Patricia Belli's house. The workshop was being conducted by Argentinean artist, project coordinator and development consultant Claudia Fontes*[14] *who had asked students to bring along works they considered successes and works they considered to be failures in order to investigate their criteria for evaluating their own work.*
>
> *Jullissa Moncada presented a work that she considered to be a failure: it was a painting of a pile of shit buzzing with flies she'd seen on the street (her work often explores the abject in everyday life). Fontes looked thoughtfully at the work and commented that she thought it looked like a map. Alejandro Flores, another young artist, immediately quipped* 'un mapa de Nicaragua' *and the room exploded into laughter.*

This thesis starts with Mbembe's observation that the theories, practices and structures of development discursively construct a social imaginary of the global South that is reductionist and stereotypical, and has multiple (and usually negative) effects. One of these effects is the internalisation of such images, as voiced by Flores above, who (albeit jokingly) instantly associated the place where he lives with a landscape of excrement. Critical studies have also demonstrated that development's reductionist representations have far-reaching material effects[15]. This thesis is oriented towards trying to understand the ways in which art (funded through development) might counter such discursive violence. In doing so it intersects with critical approaches from postcolonial and postdevelopment researchers. With postcolonialism, it shares a critical engagement with

[14] Fontes was an established contemporary artist in Buenos Aires when she received a scholarship from the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam for a two-year residency starting in 1996. Arriving in the Netherlands she was disconcerted to find she was perceived as someone from a 'developing' country and this experience influenced her work during her residency. Returning to Argentina she established TRAMA (see http://www.r-a-i-n.net/projects/trama/), a major project of horizontal exchange among artist-led initiatives in Latin America and further afield, which ran for six years and was partly supported by the Rijksakademie. More recently Fontes has worked for Dutch development agencies on evaluations of their arts and development strategies and her work in this capacity will be discussed further.

[15] Mitchell (1995), for example, has described the way in which USAID's agricultural policies in Egypt were influenced by representations of the Nile valley as 'overcrowded'. This framed the problem of a lack of food security as internal to the country, masking the broader, international politics of how aid programmes had contributed to food scarcity through policies that displaced small-scale farmers.

representation, discourse and agency, and with the role of artistic production in processes of representation, and also in counterwork (as explained further below). With postdevelopment it shares a focus on social practices that exist alongside, without being defined by, development, a desire to 'render possible the dissemination of knowledges outside the unified, powerful view of the "development" industry' (de Vries, 2007, p. 35). Both postcolonialism and postdevelopment seek to historicise and problematise the development imaginary, and are productive, therefore, for a thesis that investigates the critical potential of art's liminal positioning in relation to development.

The critique of development's discursive power emerged strongly in the 1990s as one of a plethora of critical perspectives that responded to an apparent 'impasse' in development (Booth, 1985; Schuurman, 1993 and 2008). This impasse was triggered by the empirical failures of development (a reversal of human development indicators in the 1980s led to them being labelled 'the lost decade'); a growing awareness of the environmental limits to development as economic growth; and the collapse of the socialist paradigm as an alternative 'grand theory' to modernisation and neoliberalism. It was also influenced by postmodern perspectives (informed by postcolonial and feminist scholarship) in the humanities and the social sciences that analysed development as 'shaped by a Western and masculinist bias', as a project that 'claimed universality but derived from particular interests and understandings' (Kothari, 2002, p. 35)[16]. If development wasn't achieving its empirical targets, then what was it achieving? Critics argued that development practices were actively maintaining unequal relations of power.

The discursive critique is associated most strongly with postdevelopment thinkers (see Crush, 1995; Escobar 1995a; Esteva and Prakash, 1998; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997). These critics portrayed development as an amalgamation of texts, practices and institutions that constructed a certain way of thinking, talking about and imagining the South and its people that, in turn, justified ongoing external management and intervention. Development, they argued, was always seen as 'the cure' and never 'the cause' (Crush, 1995, p. 10), whether or not its interventions could be considered successful and despite its evident failures. In this sense the development imaginary was argued to have a phantasmatic quality – it involved a 'social production of space' that was 'bound up with the production of differences, subjectivities, and social orders'

[16] While critiques of development appeared as early as the 1960s (Potter, Binns, Elliot & Smith, 2008, p. 12), they gained considerable traction in the 1980s due to development's increasingly evident failures, postmodern criticism within the social sciences and the increasing pressures of globalisation.

(Escobar, 1995a, p. 9). 'Development', argued Escobar, 'is not simply an instrument of economic control over the physical reality of Asia, Latin America and Africa. It is also an invention and strategy produced by the "First World" about the "underdevelopment" of the "Third World" (Escobar, 1995b, p. 212). In response, postdevelopment critics called for the abandonment of development and sought to imagine a postdevelopment era (Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1995a, 1995b). Other critics like Nederveen Pieterse (2010, p. 12), however, viewed the analysis of development's discursive power as conducive to a more politically reflexive form of development: the focus on discourse, he argued, adds 'a level of reflexivity, theoretical refinement and sophistication to development studies; and thus [. . .] open[s] the politics of development to a more profound engagement'[17].

The postdevelopment critique of development's discursive power draws on and overlaps with critiques coming out of postcolonial theory. Escobar's key text on development as discourse, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995a), refers to and parallels the work of a number of postcolonial scholars. It builds on Foucault's work 'on the dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality' but also the '[e]xtensions of Foucault's insights to colonial and postcolonial situations by authors such as Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, Chandra Mohanty, and Homi Bhabha [which have] opened up new ways of thinking about representations of the Third World'[18] (Escobar, 1995a, p. 5). Escobar extends these insights to the South as a whole as constructed through the discourse of development.

Although development studies and postcolonial studies have, historically, been mutually antagonistic,[19] there have been a number of recent calls for closer and more constructive

[17] He warns that the weakness of the focus on discourse may be an avoidance of issues of power on the ground, a problem I hope to avoid through a grounded ethnographic engagement.
[18] Escobar lists Mudimbe's 'The Invention of Africa (1988), Mitchell's 'Colonising Egypt' (1991) and Mohanty's 'Under Western Eyes' (1988) as Said-inspired projects analogous to his own, focussing on the discursive construction of Africa in Mudimbe's case, Egypt in Mitchell's and Third World women in Mohanty's.
[19] Development is seen as embodying 'one of the dominant western discourses that postcolonial approaches seek to thoroughly challenge and destabilize' (McEwan, 2009, p. 1) and postcolonialism has been accused of showing a distinct lack of interest in the material concerns of development – 'whether the subaltern is eating' (Sylvester, 1999, p.703). Sylvester describes the major differences between the fields as follows: 'Development studies is an applied field of social science – managerial in thrust, practical in orientation, and in thrall historically to economic theories and technologies. It aims to develop theory and practice that can assist countries of the so-called Third World in achieving economic targets and higher, sustainable standards of living. Postcolonial studies is not an applied field. Associated with the humanities, and often based in academic departments of language, history, and cultural studies, it re-

engagement between the two fields (see Kapoor, 2008; Kothari, 2002; McEwan, 2009; Simon, 2006; Sylvester, 1999), in efforts to construct what Kapoor calls 'a more just development' (2008, p. xvi). McEwan argues that a focus on 'the significance of issues of language and representation, and understanding the power of discourse and its material effects on the lives of people subject to development policies' is one major strategy through which a postcolonial approach can contribute to a more critical development studies (2009, pp. 30-31). While postcolonial theory is very diverse (McEwan, 2009, pp. 17-26) and tends to be used as 'an umbrella term' (Kothari, 2002, p. 39) the analysis of representation remains central to postcolonialism's concerns: 'the term postcolonial is increasingly used to describe that form of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once-colonized third world comes to be framed in the West' (Bhabha cited in Mongia, 1996, p. 1). Certainly postcolonialism's 'unrelenting vigilance to essentialising gestures' (Kapoor, 2008, p. xv) offers critical muscle with which to contest the reductionist forms of representation that Mbembe and postdevelopment critics associate with the development imaginary.

In addition, and of particular significance to this thesis, postcolonialism has always been alert to the ways in which artistic production has been manipulated through cultural politics to construct discursive dominance (see Pratt, 1992, with regard to Latin America, and see also Said, 1993). In the development context Cheryl McEwan suggest that art can provide a form of postcolonial counterwork. As she points out '[i]t is not simply marginalization, dispossession and exploitation that form common ground for the making of subjectivities in the contemporary period: rather, there are plural arenas in which economic, cultural and political identities are made' (2009, p. 155). In particular McEwan analyses literary and artistic works from the South as strategies of 'writing back'[20] – agentic enactments of 'resistance and reconstruction' (ibid) – that have the

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examines a long historical, cultural, and spatial record in which colonies and postcolonies appear as (problematic) children of European history. Postcolonial theory also looks at interpenetrating hybridities all of us experience as a result of the world-historical experience of colonialism. While development theory creates spaces between places deemed developed and those less developed. Everyday lives feature in the novels, films, and testimonials that postcolonial studies examines, whereas development studies generally conceives of the Third World as a problematic of progress that can be arrayed well in statistical terms' (Sylvester, 2006, p. 66).

[20] This term was picked up by postcolonial studies to refer more specifically to the ways in which canonical texts in English literature have been 'rewritten', often from the point of view of marginalised characters representative of an 'Other', by writers from former colonial nations as a means of disrupting the authoritative voice of the coloniser (see Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989). Possibly the most widely

potential to disrupt hegemonic development discourse and attest to the heterogeneity of lived experience and the agency of those on the receiving end of development assistance. In a similar vein Lewis, Rodgers and Woodcock (2008) have recently argued for fiction to be regarded as a valid form of development knowledge in order to deepen and complexify understandings of development processes and contexts.

The form of counterwork that McEwan suggests, however, appears to be limited to the capacity for artistic products to comment (from an embedded perspective) on social, political, neo-colonial or developmental issues (2009, pp. 156-161)[21]. By limiting one's reading of artistic texts to their portrayal of social issues, however, I would argue that one reproduces the focus on problems, issues and difference that is set up by development discourse[22]. This thesis goes further than McEwan in its discussion of the agentic capacities of the arts, by considering the agency in aesthetic and formal aspects of arts practice and in the multi-scalarity of much arts practice. It further extends the possibilities that McEwan sees in art by examining artistic *processes* rather than focussing solely on the art object.

The development discourse: emergence and characteristics

There is a significant literature on the historical emergence of the development discourse and its characteristics (see Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1995a; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997; Ziai, 2007). Here I will briefly review the main points of that literature before pointing to some of my own experiences of the impact of the development presence in Nicaragua. Firstly, however, I want to clarify that the 'development discourse' as described by postdevelopment scholars such as Arturo Escobar is itself a discursive construction. Development theory and practice is, as I have already indicated, malleable and increasingly diverse. However, hegemony has not entirely given way to heterogeneity. I will argue that powerful discursive constructions remain and while development might indeed be a 'contestation of interests' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 9), some of those interests are aligned with very powerful actors, and have been

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cited example is Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which she tells the life-story of Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad, Creole, first wife in *Jane Eyre*.

[21] As such, she could be said to represent what O'Connor describes as the position of the 'traditional left' who 'saw the critical function of art residing in its techniques of representation, of it generating a realist account of the world' (2010, p. 29).

[22] This point will be elaborated in Chapters 7 and 8.

stabilised over time, and other are more fragile and emergent. In discussing 'the development discourse', therefore, I recognise it as a powerful construct, but I also recognise its instability and contingency.

The point at which the terms 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' moved into common parlance to describe a particular 'imaginative geography' (Said, 1991, p. 49) that divided the world according to 'accomplishment' or 'lack' is generally regarded as President Truman's 1949 inaugural address. In it he lamented that 'more than half the people in the world are living in conditions approaching misery' (cited in Escobar, 1995a, p. 3) and announced his plan to assist them. Postdevelopment scholars argue that the development discourse was embedded in the post-war period with the establishment of the international development institutions (the United Nations and the international financial institutions such as the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund), and a new focus on the giving of aid in exchange for political allegiance that characterised the Cold War (Ziai, 2007, p. 4), known as the Truman Doctrine. It was in this post-war period, Escobar argues, that 'poverty became an organising concept' and 'the essential trait of the Third World', with 'economic growth and development' becoming the solutions (1995a, p. 24). In the 1960s, Development studies emerged as an academic discipline in Britain (Harriss, 2005; Kothari, 2002, p. 38)[23], signally the consolidation of 'development' as a major frame of reference.

While both postdevelopment and postcolonial writers attest to similarities in disciplinary strategies between colonial and development politics (Escobar, 1995a, p. 9; Escobar, 1995b, p. 213; McEwan, 2009, pp. 88-92; Power, 2003), postcolonial scholars tend to pay more attention to the temporal continuities between colonial and development practices (Kothari, 2002, pp. 36-39; Kothari, 2005; McEwan: 2009, p. 88; Power, 2003, pp. 28-32)[24]. McEwan, for example, points out that '[t]he story of slavery, colonialism and imperialism reminds us that global relations remain shaped by power dynamics that have existed since the fifteenth century' (2009, p. 9), and Kothari (2005; 2006) undertook research with English colonial service officers who had, post-independence,

[23] Harriss describes the establishment of The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex in 1966 and the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia in 1973 (2005, p. 23).

[24] Escobar mentions that the principles governing the development discourse are the same as those governing colonial discourse (1995a, p. 9), and he does point briefly to antecedents of the development discourse (ibid, pp. 26-31) but he reads the development discourse as emerging distinctly in the early post-World War II period. Cheryl McEwan discusses in more detail the historical connections between colonial and development discourses (2009, pp. 135-143).

gone on to work in the development industry, some to teach in development studies. She argues that 'the boundaries and distinctions that formerly marked the power relations between colonizers and the colonized continue to be played out, and are reinscribed in the relationship between development administrators and recipients of aid' (2002, pp. 38-39).

One of the central features of the development discourse, according to its critics, is that it homogenises a vast diversity of lived experience by lumping together two-thirds of the world under an umbrella-term associated with lack or deficiency: be it the Third World[25], developing countries, lesser developed countries or even the Global South. Ziai argues that President Truman's 1949 address instantly classified Africa, Asia and Latin America as 'in need of "development"' (2007, p. 4). Gustavo Esteva explains the effect of this characterisation:

> On that day, two billion people became underdeveloped . . . from that time on, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of other's reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in the terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority.
>
> (cited in Ziai, 2007, p. 4)

Depicting the South in terms of lack, these critics argue, is reinforced through the indices used by multinational development organisations to 'rank' countries. The World Bank uses Gross National Income (GNI), for example, to differentiate between high, middle and low income countries. The UNDP's Human Development Index also classifies countries according to 'very high human development', 'high human development', 'medium human development' and 'low human development' although it uses a broader measure of human well-being that includes life expectancy, literacy, education and standard of living. These indices are used to justify intervention, as are the associated discourses of crisis, hazard and vulnerability (McEwan, pp. 131-135) commonly invoked within development practice.

[25] Although the term 'Third World' originally was used to denote nonaligned states in the Cold War environment, it has since become synonymous with poorer nations and has taken on a hierarchical connotation.

By using the image of the inverted mirror, above, Esteva refers to an aspect of the development discourse common to other ethnocentric discourses – the use of binary constructions to create an inferior 'Other'. It is argued that the development discourse constructs the South as negative 'Other' in reference to the normative 'advanced' Western industrialised world. McEwan points out that binary oppositions have a long trajectory within western knowledge (2009, p. 122) and that they are 'not innocent, but are bound up in logics of domination and have material consequences' (ibid)[26]. The South is constructed as lacking in opposition to the material abundance of the North; it is seen as backward (or 'traditional') in opposition to the advanced (industrialised) North; uncivilized as opposed to civilized; poor as opposed to rich; underdeveloped/developing in comparison to developed.

Development 'subjects', furthermore, are frequently represented in stereotypical, simplistic, and usually negative terms as victims, lacking agency. The power behind such stereotyping lies in 'the repeated use of restricted forms of description [which] can, intentionally or otherwise, "fix" ideas of a place in our minds, and shape the way we respond to it' (Williams, Meth & Willis, p. 9). Escobar argues that the development discourse constructs 'a veritable underdeveloped subjectivity endowed with features such as powerlessness, passivity, poverty, and ignorance, usually dark and lacking in historical agency, as if waiting for the white Western hand to help subjects along and not infrequently hungry, illiterate, needy, and oppressed by its own stubbornness, lack of initiative, and traditions' (1995a, p. 8). These kinds of stereotypes can also become internalised. Kothari argues that development discourse, like colonialism, engenders a sense of inferiority in Southern subjects but at the same time a feeling of confidence in the North, its people and its products (2002, p. 37). This internalisation was expressed eloquently by Alejandro Flores in the EspIRA/La ESPORA workshop described earlier. Escobar argues that this process, whereby people 'came to see and define themselves in [development's] terms' is one of the defining features of the modern (post-war) development era (Crush, 1995, p. 11; and Escobar, 1995b, p. 212).

The media also contribute to such narrow and negative representations. An infamous cover of *The Economist* magazine (May 13-19, 2000), for example, ran with the headline 'The hopeless continent', beneath an outline of Africa filled by a photo of a young man

[26] For a clear discussion on how binaries function in reference to postcolonial and development thought see McEwan, 2009, pp. 121-128.

with a gun[27]. Williams et al. point to the widespread paternalistic 'use of mothers and children in news reporting on crises and disasters in the Global South' and to stories that 'focus on "White heroes" going to rescue the darker-skinned starving and dispossessed' (2009, p. 37). The aid industry's advertising campaigns often portray Africa as Mbembe (2009, final section) describes, as 'an empty stomach and a sick and naked body waiting to be fed, clothed, healed or housed'. The African continent is, of course, not the only subject of such reductionism. Central America is frequently stereotyped as a region of violence, poverty and natural disasters, as this assertion in Britain's Guardian newspaper attests: 'Nicaragua is famous for its misfortunes: the Somoza dictatorship, the civil war, the impoverishment, the natural disasters' (Khaleeli, 2007, paragraph 9).

It is important to emphasise that these discursive constructions have material effects, as well as psychological ones. McEwan points out that 'the idea that former colonies were deficient' was fundamental to the logic of modernisation theory (2009, p. 131)[28]. Other researchers have provided detailed accounts of the way in which more recent development projects are constructed (through language, institutions and practices) in particular ways that mask the political underpinnings of their analysis of development 'problems', and that impel 'solutions' that frequently offer more to donors than they do to recipients (see Ferguson, 1990, and Mitchell, 1995 as discussed previously).

Research and teaching in development studies also contribute to the discursive construction of the South (Williams et al., 2009; Yapa, 2002), a point I am very aware of in writing this thesis. The South is vastly underrepresented in terms of academic research and, when students are introduced to it, 'it is often via a set of problems – such as poverty, debt or environmental degradation – and the development theories and policies used to "solve" these' (Williams et al., 2009, pp. 2-3). Even when discussing the

[27] While a recent study of the coverage of Africa across a range of British newspapers indicated that it is not 'as marginalized, negative or trivial as it is often accused of being' (Scott, 2009, p. 534), other reports (Biko, Gore & Watson, 2000; DFID, 2000; Wall, 2007) suggest that media coverage of the continent remains highly characterised by negative stereotypes.

[28] Modernisation theory (dominant from 1950 to the 1970s) argued that if the 'underdeveloped' countries followed a series of stages (Rostow, 1960), essentially compressing processes that took place during the Industrial Revolution in Europe and removing barriers created by 'traditional societies', they would quickly 'catch up' with 'developed' nations in, as McEwan points out (2009, p. 132), both economic terms and in terms of 'civilization' (see also Willis, 2005 on the social and cultural significance of modernisation theory). In practice this often meant the promotion of large-scale industrial projects in the South. Finance was often provided at little or no interest in exchange for Cold War loyalties, a situation that changed dramatically in the 1970s and contributed to the rapid escalation of the debt crisis which still impacts many Southern nations.

disciplinary location of this thesis, one of my early supervisors said to me 'if Nicaragua is your context, then development is your discipline'.

Observations from Nicaragua

The research for this thesis was carried out in Nicaragua which, as noted, is susceptible to negative stereotyping (associated with poverty, natural disasters, violence, the dictatorship era, or civil war) in the international media. Some of my experiences there also attest to both the high visibility of the development industry and to an internalised perspective of lack or deficiency. When I first drove through rural Nicaragua I was immediately struck by the visual impact of development billboards on the landscape. In many places roads were lined with placards bearing the names of various development organizations – both local and international NGOs and bilateral donors. A rural school, for example, would bear a large placard announcing that USAID had paid for the school building. In Granada the local hospital was simply referred to as 'the Japanese hospital' because it was built with Japanese funds (the rumour being that Japan was generous to Nicaragua in terms of aid in exchange for Nicaragua offering pro-whaling support on the International Whaling Commission). Taxi drivers in Managua invariably asked me if I was one of the many NGO workers who are constantly arriving and departing the city and told me a number of (at times ribald) jokes about NGO workers and their interactions with Nicaraguans. Taxi drivers also talked to me about their country in negative terms, as *estancado*, meaning stagnant or blocked.

When Alejandro Flores joked in workshop that the painting of a pile of excreta looked like 'a map of Nicaragua' he was alluding to what my Spanish teacher Silvia Sandoval described as a very common (she used the term 'pathological') sentiment – that things of value come from outside the country rather than from within it. The brother of one of EspIRA/La ESPORA's students commented to me that he hoped his brother would leave Nicaragua, that there was no future for him there. Another of the students had just had his family held to ransom by a *coyote*[29] whom his brother had paid to help him cross into the United States. The mythology of the glittering possibilities of 'the North' and the poverty of 'home' appear to have changed little since they were fictionalised in an Oscar-nominated Guatemalan film called '*El Norte*' in the mid-1980s. Patricia Belli,

[29] A person who smuggles illegal immigrants, typically from Latin America, into the USA.

founder of EspIRA/La ESPORA, hates the idea that nothing of value can be made in Nicaragua. Her determination to create a high-quality, critically engaged, contemporary art school in the country is partly motivated by a desire to disprove such assumptions, and to demonstrate that great art can be made in Nicaragua, by people with few material resources but with intelligence, audacity and creativity. Furthermore, she argues that an internalised sense of inferiority, coupled with the political and economic marginalisation of Central America, are reflected in the local visual imaginary: she sees the region's 'symbolic reality' as 'plagued by mechanisms of domination and submission' (EspIRA, 2010, p. 2)[30].

Within the cultural sector in the region as a whole, there is a recurring trope of invisibility. Literary critic Ana Patricia Rodríguez raises the question of 'why, for many people, Central America figures as an unknown nebulous zone' (2009, p.2). An edited volume celebrating the cultural sector in Central America begins with an introduction entitled '*Centroamérica está en el mapa*' (Central America is on the map) – the need to proclaim as much revealing the precarious nature of that 'placing' (Oyamburu, 2000). In the opening paragraphs the editor describes Central America as 'an invisible region' and laments that it only tends to come to the world's attention in times of severe adversity, but he follows this with a more positive claim based on signs of an emerging cultural renaissance: 'beyond the catastrophe Central America exists and reclaims its place' (ibid, p. 7). This is a similar argument to that put forth by Mbembe, albeit in a different context: beyond the catastrophe (the South as imagined by development) the South reclaims its place. Furthermore, he suggests – like Mbembe – that artistic practices have a significant role to play in reclaiming that place.

Other cultural actors echo this sense of isolation and invisibility. In a short documentary that EspIRA/La ESPORA (2007) made about its practices, Patricia Belli described the necessity of creating 'place' out of a 'non-place'. Fellow artist Raúl Quintanilla talked in the same documentary about starting from 'nothing'. Costa Rican actress and cultural activist Sylvie Durán also describes arts practices as 'part of [what has become] the invisible, the dark corners' (2004, paragraph 15).

This sense of invisibility cannot be wholly attributed to a discourse of development that ranks Nicaragua as the 115th in the world (the third lowest in the Americas after Haiti

[30] All of EspIRA/La ESPORA's documentation is written in Spanish, as are many other texts consulted through this research. In all cases, the translations are mine.

and Guatemala) in the Human Development Index[31]. Partly it is a matter of geography and geopolitics, with the tiny Central American isthmus often overshadowed by its neighbours to the North and South. Development researchers point out that Central America is 'often considered as a footnote in discussions regarding the larger and more economically developed nations of South America' (McIlwaine & Willis, 2002, p.1). No doubt a complex historical, political, geographical and cultural set of factors also contributes, among the most significant being the frequent external interventions into the region as larger powers struggled to maintain their influence over the possible construction of another canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (see Tijerino, 2008, Chapter 10)[32]. The feeling of invisibility can also be partly attributed to the dramatic drop in interest in the region by international media following the civil unrest of the 1970s-1990s and, in Nicaragua, the end of the Sandinistas' utopian decade in power when it lost the general election in 1990.

In the cultural sector specifically, the sense of being invisible may also relate to the way in which the interests of artists fail to figure in the development agenda that

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[31] See http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/NIC.html for the UNDP's most recent summary of Human Development Indicators for Nicaragua.

[32] Booth and Walker (1999, p. 26) describe how '[i]nternational pressures battered Central America after 1850' as Britain and the USA (both interested in constructing a transisthmian canal) vied for control in the region and intensified existing conflicts between Liberal and Conservative factions. The influence of the USA has been particularly strongly felt in Nicaragua. In 1855, for example, American filibusterer William Walker arrived in Nicaragua with a group of mercenaries, allied himself with out-of-power Liberals, and ousted the Conservative government. The USA immediately recognised the new government and Walker's intention to seek US statehood, but he was driven out of the region in the following year. In 1909, when Nicaragua's Liberal dictator José Santos Zelaya considered making a canal deal with Germany, the USA (already committed to the construction of the Panama Canal) sent US troops to Nicaragua to help foment a rebellion against him. Zelaya resigned, and the new government 'granted the United States a canal-rights treaty that effectively guaranteed that Nicaragua would never have a canal' (ibid, p. 27). The USA maintained an almost continuous military presence in Nicaragua between 1912 and 1933 and their 'occupation', and close relationship with national governments who 'generally followed the dictates of Washington, even when they clearly went contrary to Nicaraguan interests' (ibid, p. 36), triggered the peasant rebellion led by Augusto César Sandino. During this conflict, which resulted in the USA leaving Nicaragua in 1932/33, the National Guard was significantly supported by the USA and strengthened under the direction of Anastasio Somoza. Somoza had Sandino assassinated in 1934 and seized control of the government in 1936. The brutal Somoza dictatorship (continued by his two sons after Somoza's assassination), controlled Nicaragua for almost 40 years until the popular F.S.L.N. uprising in the 1970s. During those 40 years the Somozas retained a cordial relationship with the USA which gave them generous amounts of aid 'despite ample evidence that the Somozas and their accomplices were stealing much of [it]' (ibid, pp.37-8), and military support. By the time of their overthrow the Somozas' National Guard 'was the most heavily U.S.-trained military establishment in Latin America' (ibid, p.38). After the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 the USA continued to intervene with a crippling economic embargo against Nicaragua and their support for Contra rebels amid the ensuing civil war. External influence continued in the post-Sandinista era in the form of structural adjustments policies (or SAPs) which were instituted throughout the region in the 1980s and 1990s due to the escalating debt crisis (see White and Dijkstra, 2003 on debt in Nicaragua). In 1995 Nicaragua had the highest per capita debt in the world (Watkins, 1995, p.181) and was required to institute economic reforms in order to receive debt relief from the IMF and World Bank. While debt burdens did reduce, this tended to be 'at the expense of increasing income inequality and exacerbation of poverty' (McIlwaine &Willis, 2002, p. 9).

characterises much national policy. The arts do not appear in Nicaragua's PRSP[33], for example. It also relates to the generalised absence of Central American artistic products in global circuits, and, to the lack of an established critically engaged wider cultural community of educators, critics, distributors, and promoters – a situation, however, which is beginning to change, as this thesis illustrates.

Together, these examples demonstrate a sense of discursive violence, and internalised feelings of inferiority, invisibility and 'placelessness' (Pérez-Ratton, 2005a, p. 221) among many subjects in Central America. This situation is not met with resignation or passivity on the part of artists and cultural workers in the region, but by a highly energetic determination to create cultural infrastructure, deepen critical engagement and diversify artistic practice and, in doing so, to contribute to 'the creation of *Place'* (ibid, p. 213, emphasis in original). These practices both contest the reductionism and hopelessness of an association with 'underdevelopment', and actively contribute to self-conscious processes of reconstruction and diversification.

The dominance and instability of discursive formations

It has been convincingly argued that representing 'the development discourse' as a monolith denies the heterogeneity of development practices and denies the will to development that exists in the South (de Vries, 2007; Nederveen Pieterse, 2000). Yet it is also clear that the power of discourse and representation continues to be a central organising trope in Northern engagements with the South: Power points out that 'international development forms the common base of knowledge around which "Third World" societies are understood' (2003, p. 107). Underscoring this point, McEwan cites a 2001 survey by VSO in Britain, which demonstrated that '80 per cent of British people associate the developing world with "doom-laden images of famine, disaster and Western aid"' (2009, p. 132). McEwan further argues that the 'notion of the Third World as unique, different, other haunts development studies today' (ibid).

Development may well be an increasingly heterogeneous field, and the subjects of development aid may well enact various forms of agency in response to, or despite the

[33] PRSPs are Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that national governments of 'underdeveloped' countries have to produce to satisfy IMF requirements in exchange for being guaranteed loans or debt relief. In 2006 I looked through Nicaragua's PRSP with staff from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Managua, but we found no reference to the arts.

presence of, development organisations, but the development imaginary that repeatedly 'fixes' large areas and groups of people in simplistic, homogenising and decidedly negative terms, persists. My own experiences attest to this in Nicaragua. Moreover the power of discourse remains of major significance to development studies and to the subjects of development. It remains critical both in terms of a self-reflexive awareness of how development studies' own language and framework contribute to representing the South in particular ways (see Williams et al., 2009)[34], as a subject of study in its own right (see Schech & Haggis, 2000, Chapter 3; McEwan, 2009, Chapter 4), and as a necessary point of reflection for those who wish to contribute to a more just development project. It also continues to be something that development subjects negotiate in their daily lives, and contributes to the shaping of their desires (de Vries, 2007).

Having made a case for the dominance and impact of negative representations associated with development, I would like now to reiterate my earlier point about the ultimate instability of discursive constructions. The instability of representation is visible, as Bhabha points out, within the very act of stereotyping. Stereotyping is, he argues, an ambivalent strategy that 'vacillates between what is always "in place", already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (1999, p. 370). Furthermore the idea of an 'imaginary' attests both to the boundaries or limits of what is able to be said or imagined, but also to the power of 'imagination' itself to think things other than as they are. As Appadurai notes, '[o]n the one hand, it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled [. . .]. But it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge' (2001, p. 6).

Spaces of agency, counterwork and a 'politics of possibility'

In development studies, many researchers are now actively responding to the discursive violence associated with development by adopting a range of strategies that destabilise development representations of lack, passivity, inferiority and deficiency. In doing so,

[34] This contemporary textbook on development geography, for example, is framed around a fundamental concern with 'the ways in which the Global South is represented' (Williams et al., 2009, p. 9) in order to 'unsettle "commonsense" ideas about the Global South and to interrogate the routes through which these ideas are developed and reinforced' (ibid, p. 25).

they aim to contribute to new ways of thinking about, and engaging with, the South (Curry, 2003, p. 406, McGregor, 2009; Williams et al., 2009). Some academics are rewriting development textbooks from a perspective that challenges development's discursive power and re-orients research towards a more complex engagement with lived experience, recognising that '[p]eople's actual lives in the Global South do not begin and end with the current concerns of the international development community' (Williams et al. 2009, p. 17; see also Power, 2003). Taking a different approach, a Latin American postgraduate student at New York University (NYU) made headlines in 2010 for organising a design competition entitled Design for the First World (Dx1W)[35] in which 'Third World' designers were invited to submit designs that addressed one of four problem areas in the 'First World': obesity; ageing population and low birth rate; consumption rate of mass-produced goods; integrating the immigrant population. That such an initiative seems surprising and amusing, and garners significant media attention, confirms the enduring power of the dominant discourse. A further group of scholars, somewhat ambivalently associated with postdevelopment[36] (see Curry, 2003; Escobar, 2004; Gibson-Graham, 2005, 2006; McKinnon, 2008; McKinnon, Gibson & Malam, 2008; Santos, 2004 and see McGregor, 2009 for an overview), consciously posit so-called 'developing' areas as diverse places of possibility and highlight the agency and complexity of development subjects. They seek alternative ways of imagining and enacting social practices away from the focus on 'development as both the problem and solution of the predicament of postcolonial subjects' (de Vries, 2007, p. 35). This thesis contributes to this broad, hopeful and performative research platform, by investigating the possibilities of art to counter the development discourse and contribute to alternative imaginaries.

Focussing on practices and spaces (such as art) that have a liminal relationship to development draws attention to agentic and constructive practices that exist alongside and in spite of powerful actors and marginalising practices. The concept of liminality is used by postcolonial scholars to indicate "'in-between" space[s] in which cultural change may occur' and regions 'in which there is a continual process of movement an interchange between different states' that allow for the emergence and elaboration of

[35] See www.designforthefirstworld.com.

[36] While these authors are, in many cases, proponents of postdevelopment, some remain critical of aspects of postdevelopment thinking. McKinnon et al., for example, 'challenge the singular and abstracted representations of power employed in much of the anti-development and post-development literature', arguing for 'more diverse and emplaced visions of power' (2008, p.275).

new subjectivities (Aschroft, , Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 139). Constructing art as a liminal site in relation to development allows for movement and emergence. It refuses to over-inflate development's 'homogeneity and consistency' and therein reinforce its dominance (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p.118) – a criticism that has been levelled against postdevelopment's proponents. McKinnon et al. (2008) point out that there is a problematic performative aspect to conducting research that focuses on the *dominance* of discursive power[37]. They argue that focussing on 'the fixity of power wielded by normative colonial, neo-colonial, or hegemonic economic discourses' fails to reveal 'the places or moments in which power is unfixed, when it moves through subjects and opens up opportunities for the new to emerge' (McKinnon et al., 2008, p. 275)[38].

My research, then, explores the agency of the arts in terms of both resistance (against dominant discursive practices) and construction (in terms of cultural processes existing both within and outside of development). In doing so it maps productively onto anthropologist Sherry Ortner's contention that agency exists in two interrelated modes (she describes the relationship between them as that of the two sides of a Moebius strip). One she describes as a mode of *resistance* towards dominant structures, and the other she describes as a mode of *projects* that are *constructed* 'within a framework of their own terms, their own categories of value' (Ortner, 2006, p.145). Paying attention to both of these modes reveals the full extent of agency.

This approach, that pays attention to the agency of development subjects in constructing their own 'projects' alongside, or in spite of, the presence of dominant actors, is associated with an ethical stance that 'takes as its starting point the viewpoint of those who refuse to play the game of victimisation' (de Vries, 2007, p. 41). Furthermore asking how artists conceptualise their own agency contributes to critical approaches that argue for the agency of development subjects in articulating their own agendas for change rather than positioning them as victims who need externally determined solutions (see Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, Chapter 1). I adopt these perspectives not only as an ethical standpoint: they also emerged logically from my

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[37] Similarly, Doreen Massey argues that 'othering' and 'antagonism' are not 'the only relation[s] that we can ever have across a boundary and [they are not] everywhere' (Massey, Human Geography Research Group, Bond & Featherstone, 2009, p.417).

[38] For Katharine McKinnon this has pushed her analytical framework away from (or beyond) Foucault's concept of governmentality which focuses on 'the points at which power becomes fixed in certain normative discourses or acts of governing' and towards Laclau and Mouffe's logic of hegemony, which draws attention instead to 'the points where power is moving or unfixed' (McKinnon, 2008, p. 289).

experiences in Nicaragua. The artists and the artist initiatives that form the focus of this research strongly articulate their own centrality and consistently demonstrate agency, professionalism, creativity, extraordinary energy and dynamic risk-taking. For example, the productive possibilities I observed in EspIRA/La ESPORA include, but are not limited to: constructing cultural infrastructure, developing critical capacities and spaces, developing professional skills (in curating, design, publicity, project and event management, teaching, computing, television production, journalism, animation), constructing multiple sites for the experience of and discussion of plural cultural identities (at exhibitions in a number of countries, at regional workshops, through local television production, within regular teaching practices), developing an education facility with a very high standard of instruction, contesting subjectivities at a local, regional and international level, strengthening intra-regional networks.

Together these elements contribute to what I am calling a 'politics of possibility'. The phrase is taken (and its sense adapted for my own use) from Gibson-Graham in their book *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006, p.xiv). It immediately resonated with me as a productive means of describing both the enormously constructive energy I witnessed among artists in Nicaragua, and of referring to the self-consciously performative academic research platform in development studies to which this thesis contributes. In this thesis a 'politics of possibility' connotes alternative ways of thinking about the 'objects' of development (Southern subjects); a strategic starting point based not on lack but on capacity; an acknowledgement that discourses of development can place limitations on the possibilities of development subjects; attention to the fixity of representation but also to actors, structures and practices as politically constructive and potentially transformative; and an intention to articulate other aspects of lived experience that have a liminal relationship to the development imaginary (and therefore contest and expand that imaginary). It admits that the development space contains inequalities of power but examines the diverse and messy instances of those power relations, looking for the productive possibilities in and alongside development interactions.

The possibilities of art

This thesis examines the ways in which art is able to contribute to such a politics of possibility in the context of development. At least superficially it would seem that art has considerable potential to contribute to alternative social imaginaries; to highlight the agency, intelligence and creativity of Southern subjects; to resist development's reductionisms by demonstrating the complexity of subjectivity and lived experience in the South; to contribute to reflection and expression both within and outside of development's framing. Artistic practices appear able to contribute significantly to what Mbembe calls the struggle to 'write our name in history and to inscribe our voice and our face in a structure of time that is future-oriented' (2009, final section), and to contribute to the construction of place.

Indeed there are growing calls both from within mainstream development and from outside it for art to exert a transformative influence in relation to development. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has recently argued for the creative industries to boost economic growth in the South (UNCTAD, 2008, 2010). UNESCO argues that the arts contribute to cultural diversity, conflict resolution and social inclusion (UNESCO, 2009). Postcolonial critics like Mbembe argue for the arts to provide an alternative imaginative space to development and Cheryl McEwan argues for art to engage in postcolonial counterwork, or 'writing back' in the development context. Meanwhile these somewhat contradictory hopes for art's agency are being juggled by artists in the South who are grateful for the development community's resourcing, but who also have their own agendas.

This thesis examines the possible agency of art within this complex, contradictory yet hopeful terrain. Methodologically, it steps back from the claims made by policy-makers for art's direct productivity and asks instead how a group of artists in the South view the agency of their own practices. In examining the possibilities for development funding to support art's agency, it also engages with the material, political and cultural conditions of possibility for the production of art in a particular context, going further than postcolonial critics like McEwan who analyse texts-as-counterwork as already existing objects.

To conclude this introduction, then, I would like to return to the paradox with which this thesis started. Is it possible for development donors to support the arts in a way that preserves their liminal relationship (and the inherent power of that liminality) to development, or is the development community's approach to art inevitably reductionist?

Chapter 2

Chapter 2: Development's 'cultural turn' and the emergence of funding for the arts

Introduction

To understand the agency of development-funded arts practices it is important to examine the mechanisms and frameworks of understanding through which the arts have been incorporated into development. At the close of the previous chapter I pointed out the significant hopes that exist for art to exercise agency in the development context but I also noted the somewhat contradictory ways in which those hopes are articulated by different actors. In this chapter I trace the trajectory of art's entrance into development (through development's 'cultural turn'), and I discuss the implications of this trajectory for the ways in which art has come to be framed and valued in development. I describe the different actors involved and point to some of the complexities around implementation that arise from such a diversity of actors and approaches. Finally I point out the ways in which my own research responds to some of those complexities.

I would like to begin with some definitions and general remarks. The concept of culture is difficult to define in relation to development studies, not least because 'the conceptual starting points' for the recognition of culture's value in development are 'highly diverse [. . .] and in many cases theoretically incompatible' (Radcliffe, 2006, p. 17). Different academic disciplines define and treat the concept of culture in different ways (ibid) and different development actors perceive and value culture in different ways. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I adopt Radcliffe's definition of culture as 'the material products, patterns of social relations, and structures of feelings produced by multiple actors, who are differentially positioned in power relations, political economies, and social reproduction' (ibid, p. 16). While Radcliffe's definition importantly emphasises the dynamic and contested nature of cultural constructions and meanings, I think it important to add that culture signifies *shared* understandings within communities, nations or social groups (see Hall, 1997, p. 2). It is also important to make the distinction between the material world and the symbolic significance that we attribute to it. Culture does not exist in material objects (such as art works) themselves but those objects can be *constructed* as culturally significant through processes of language, meaning and representation. Within this dynamic and constructivist understanding of culture, the

arts (and the associated social and critical dialogue about the arts) are an active part of cultural meaning-making. Smiers refers to the arts as both 'factories and repositories of cultural meaning' (2003, p. 150). As such, they are neither neutral nor simply decorative, but comprise (like culture) an 'arena of struggle'.

I should also make it clear at the outset that there is no consensus that the arts *should* be considered part of development's brief, and this remains a fundamental tension. In the previous chapter I pointed out that mainstream development practice now encompasses both market-oriented reforms (focused on generating macro-economic growth) and human-centred development (focused on self-reliance, basic needs and community empowerment). The arts do not, however, find a natural home in either of these conceptions of development. The arts have long been viewed as 'one of the limits on, or protests against' the capitalist principle of unlimited accumulation (O'Connor, 2010, p. 9), and Bourdieu has argued that the artistic world is 'largely emancipated, at least in [its] most autonomous sectors, from the rule of money and interest' (2003, p. 67). Yet even in the discourse of human-centred development, the arts are unlikely to be highly valued, as their contribution towards 'basic needs' and self-sufficiency is not obvious[1].

In the context of development, the arts may be viewed as a luxury, or as irrelevant to the grim realities of poverty-stricken nations, more concerned with stimulating their economies, increasing access to potable water, or extending electricity services[2]. The idea that the arts are irrational, or are frivolous in comparison with more serious or worthier aspects of life has a long history in the Western intellectual tradition. Plato argued that the arts were emotional and irrational, and had no part to play in the Republic. Parallels can be drawn with development, if development is perceived as a technical rationalist project. Rousseau argued that the arts were frivolous, with 'no cognitive or educational value', and were, moreover, a dangerous distraction from the 'nobler commitments' of 'work and family' (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p. 61).

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[1] It has been argued that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have been so significant in targeting and structuring aid over the last 10 years, but which do not mention culture, have resulted in a narrowing of the development agenda, partly through the mechanistic, 'money-metric and donor-centric' way in which they have been taken up by the development community (Vandemoortele, 2009, p. 369). Thus, the MDGs 'are seldom used to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking and action' (ibid, p. 356).

[2] In fact funding for the arts does not take away funds for other sectors but is almost always proffered as additional funds. SDC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, for example, started funding the arts in 2001 as an additional 1% on top of their existing aid budget (SDC, 2003).

Development donors who support the arts argue to the contrary, that art is not separate from life, but an essential part of it[3], a valid form of knowledge creation, and a significant contributor to social well-being. Some argue that the arts 'provide spaces where freedom of expression and mutual understanding can flourish'; they can 'provide a means for reflecting on and coping with post-war and post-disaster situations', 'give people a sense of place, community, pride and identity', 'discuss subjects that would otherwise remain hidden', and 'stimulate job creation, trade and tourism' (Prince Claus Fund, 2010, p. 25). Others argue that the arts contribute to broader democratic processes through 'critical debate and the exchange of ideas', and can 'play a role in conflict prevention and management' (Ministry of Education for Finland, 2007, p. 4). The need, however, to respond to claims of art's irrelevance and claim a 'useful' and applied space for art in the development context has influenced discourse, policy and implementation, as this chapter will demonstrate. Whether or not subjects in the South have the right to entertainment, pleasure, reflection or contemplation barely registers in the debate.

The emergence of development support for the arts: a brief genealogy

> *The articulation of culture and development is both a renegade notion at odds with established practices and a new brick in the wall of clichés.*
>
> Nederveen Pieterse (2010, p. 64)

The limited arts funding that does exist in the development context emerged in response to development's 'cultural turn' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010; Radcliffe, 2006; Radcliffe and Laurie, 2006; Rao and Walton, 2004; Schech and Haggis, 2000), which was propelled by the desire to democratise and diversify development thinking and practice. The 'cultural turn' itself, however, accommodates a variety of approaches to culture. One approach is to make development more self-reflexive by pointing out its own cultural underpinnings, another is to understand local cultures better in order to make the implementation of mainstream development projects more effective, another sees culture as an untapped economic resource and still another sees it as a resource for

[3] See SDC's policy brochure 'Culture is Not a Luxury' (2003); the Prince Claus Fund's tenth anniversary celebrations based around the theme 'Culture is not a luxury' (2006); and Els van der Plas's (Director of the Prince Claus Fund) address to the European Network's International Conference on Culture and Development entitled 'Culture is a Basic Need' (2007).

political activism. As Nederveen Pieterse points out in the quote above, there are many contradictions involved in development's 'cultural turn'. These contradictions are also evident in development's funding of the arts.

Although culture has always been part of development, or rather, as Arizpe points out, development has always been embedded in culture (2004, p. 163), culture was, for a long time, 'one of the great areas of neglect in mainstream thinking about development policy' (Jolly, Emmerij, Ghai & Lapeyre., 2004, p. 210). Over the last 20 years, however, a discourse around culture's relationship to development has grown in 'visibility and salience' (Radcliffe, 2006, p. 1), and has become 'a core feature of development since the late 1990s' (ibid, p. 2).

Radcliffe lists five key reasons for culture's rise in prominence within development over the last 15-20 years, although – as she points out – each one encompasses a number of divergent perspectives: 'the failure of previous development paradigms; perceptions of globalization's threat to cultural diversity; activism around social difference (gender, ethnicity, anti-racism); the development success stories of East Asia; and the need for social cohesion' (ibid, p. 3).

As I signalled in the previous chapter, the 1980s saw a crisis in development thinking (see Booth, 1985; Schuurman, 1993, 2008) which was precipitated by a reversal in human development indicators, and a crisis of faith in development's 'grand theories', both of the political left and of the right (associated with the demise of the Cold War). No single development model appeared to be globally applicable and the desire to impose one particular (Western) model was implicated in a process of cultural homogenization, furthering the loss of distinctive cultural traditions (Radcliffe, 2006). If the development project was failing, it appeared to be at least in part because it didn't take into account different cultural contexts both in the formulation of development objectives and in the implementation of development projects. Nederveen Pieterse points out that the emphasis on culture in development emerged at the same time as a 'retreat from structural and macro approaches in favour of micro and actor-oriented approaches' (2010, p. 64). 'If agency is prioritized over structure (such as the state, the national economy)', he explains, 'the cultural worlds and maps of meaning of actors become vital variables' (ibid). One can see here the beginnings of the arguments that would later be developed by postdevelopment critics into an attack on development's

homogenising tendencies and the promotion of locally-grounded, culturally-specific agency.

While development appeared to be failing to achieve its practical and measurable objectives, critical input from feminist and postcolonial writers on the representation of the South[4] influenced postdevelopment critics such as Arturo Escobar (1995a) who highlighted the cultural embeddedness of development theory and practice in 'Western capitalist political economies and the cultural histories of European colonialism' (Radcliffe, 2004, p. 3). Meanwhile, the relative success of the East Asian economies and their improvement in human development indicators provoked debate about the contribution of cultural factors (in particular the Confucian tradition) to these outcomes. Nederveen Pieterse notes the growing polycentrism associated with accelerated globalisation as a further impulse behind development's cultural turn (2010, p. 64).

The emphasis on the contribution of culture to social cohesion emerged following the Cold War with the rise of intra-state conflicts frequently characterised as culturally driven. Arizpe notes that '[o]f the approximately one hundred sixty wars that have occurred since 1945, most have taken place within nations, and especially since the end of the cold war, a very great number have been driven by ethnic, religious, or cultural discourses' (2004, p. 164) [5]. Policies, therefore, that value the inclusion of marginalised cultural groups within social, economic and political processes were increasingly seen as a means to social stability (for example Gould, 2003; Malloy, 2005; World Bank, 2003; World Bank, 2011, Chapter 4).

Affording culture a more prominent place in development thinking has not resulted in a new hegemonic paradigm, but rather in a variety of approaches that exist in tension with one another. What they have in common, however, is a more positive and enabling view of culture than that of modernisation theorists in the 1950s and 1960s who saw 'societies steeped in traditional cultures' as an impediment to the process of 'market-oriented development' (Rao and Walton, 2004, p. 10; also see Schech and Haggis, 2000,

[4] For a discussion of the impact of critical postcolonial feminist perspectives on development see Radcliffe, 2006, pp. 12-13. For a discussion of postcolonial theory and its impact on development, see McEwan, 2009, Chapter 3.

[5] Debate about the accuracy of such 'culturalist explanations' (Radcliffe, 2006, p.7) has not impeded a discourse around the potential of enhanced cultural understanding to promote peace and stability.

pp. 9-11)[6]. On the other hand, there is considerable scepticism that development's cultural turn has simply 'added' culture to the dominant development paradigm without profoundly challenging it and diversifying it (see Apthorpe, 2005; Clammer, 2005; Da Costa, 2010; and Nederveen Pieterse, 2010)[7]. Critics argue that the 'cultural turn' has simply created a focus on the culture of poor 'Others', and failed to reveal the culture of dominant actors (Da Costa, 2010) and the more fundamental conception of development itself as a cultural performance (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 72). Dia Da Costa (2010, p. 502) argues:

> [. . .] under the guise of revealing the face and suffering of the poor, development with a human face leaves unmarked the 'human' face of those invested and engaged in domination, exploitation and dispossession. Moreover, a review of the literature on 'culturally appropriate development' reveals that not all meanings of culture and value are equally valued, circulated, or traded. Considering this discrepancy, the paradigm shift marking the so-called cultural turn pastes a new label on an old bottle.

The contradictions found in development's approach to culture are paralleled in the way in which the arts have come to be conceptualised in development. The arts are variously seen as: expressions of cultural diversity – a bulwark against the homogenising effects of globalisation (and development); contributors to social cohesion through enhanced intercultural understanding; enablers of economic growth through cultural tourism; more effective means (through community theatre for example) of transmitting development messages at the local level; or activist markers of cultural difference through which to make political claims (including contesting development). These approaches tend, to varying degrees, to locate art as something 'out there', as a 'resource to be tapped' which, Nederveen Pieterse warns, is a general weakness of development's approach to culture. It misses the point that culture, as noted in the previous chapter, 'is an *arena of struggle*' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 64, emphasis in original).

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[6] This perspective continues in the work of some theorists such as Harrison and Huntington (2000) and within broader neoliberal approaches which operate from a macroeconomic perspective with little reference to cultural differences and inscribe 'a new kind of universalism' (Watts, 2006, p. 31).

[7] Local cultural contexts, for example, may simply be utilised more effectively to implement mainstream development projects – hence the World Bank's enthusiasm for hiring anthropologists. See Cernea, 1994 for a compendium of writings by anthropologists and sociologists working for the World Bank.

The role of UNESCO[8]

If it seems somewhat surprising that it took so long (over 30 years) for culture to be recognised as significant to mainstream development, this may be due both to a 'flight from culture' and to the way in which the international development and financial institutions were established following the Second World War. Radcliffe and Laurie suggest that mainstream development failed to deal with culture because of its 'colonial legacy and the culturalist explanations of modernization' (2006, pp. 233-234). Similarly Arizpe argues that the 1970s saw an intellectual 'flight from culture' due in part to 'white man's guilt' but also due to a reluctance on the part of Southern intellectuals to be characterised by cultural stereotypes (2004, p. 171). She also points out that culture was splintered off from 'development actions among different UN agencies, national ministries, and international and nongovernmental development organizations': whereas development was 'constructed exclusively in terms of economic growth' and seen as the responsibility of the Bretton-Woods institutions (the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund), cultural and political concerns were addressed by the UN and UNESCO (ibid, pp. 164-7). This divide remains to some extent, with the World Bank still measuring development progress using economic macro-indicators[9], but the UNDP developing more people-focused indicators such as the Human Development Index (Watts, 2006, pp. 34-35).

Certainly a strong interest in culture and cultural diversity were evident within the UN and within UNESCO from the inception of these organisations, which were formed, in part, to avoid the kind of extreme cultural intolerance demonstrated in the Second World War[10]. The UN Charter states that 'the United Nations shall promote . . . international cultural and educational cooperation' (cited in Jolly et al., 2004, p. 210); rights to cultural expression were enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948[11], and UNESCO was specifically charged with promoting

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[8] UNESCO stands for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
[9] Where human-development-oriented concepts such as 'social capital' have entered the World Bank's discourse, they tend to be discussed primarily as contributors to economic growth (see, Grootaert, 1998 and Watts, 2006, for example, on social capital).
[10] The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights was charted when the extent of the atrocities committed by the Nazis during the Second World War came to light, in order to define more clearly the human rights of the individual.
[11] The UDHR defines everyone's entitlement to 'the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable to his dignity and the free development of his personality'. Article 27 specifically details the right 'freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement

understanding between cultures as a means of averting 'wars that begin in the minds of men' (cited in Arizpe, 2004, p. 166). UNESCO's first Director-General, Sir Julian Huxley, noted the importance of cultural diversity or 'unity-in-diversity' as a prerequisite for peace in 1947 (Stenou, 2007, p.87).

Since that time, UNESCO has continued to be a key driver in developing, promoting and legitimising a discourse of cultural diversity and in attempts to democratise and diversify development practices through a closer engagement with culture. In the late 1970s and early 1980s (and following decolonisation) UNESCO turned its attention to endogenous development (see ibid, pp. 100-110) in which culture was seen as contributing 'one possible autonomous means of progress' (ibid, p. 103). Cultural diversity began to be articulated as the means through which different strategic end goals of development could be derived[12], that is – as radically transformative in relation to existing development models. Such thinking generated a series of high-level international meetings and initiatives to draw the development community's attention to the importance of culture to development. These initiatives culminated in the UN Decade for Cultural Development (1998-1997) out of which, in the mid-1990s, emerged dedicated culture funds to support artists in the South.

International initiatives pave the way for the establishment of culture funds

These initiatives, which I describe below, include: UNESCO's World Conference on Cultural Policies in 1982 (Mondiacult); the UN's World Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997); the World Commission on Culture and Development and its landmark report *Our Creative Diversity* (1996); the publication of the first UN World Culture Reports, and the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (1998) and its subsequent Action Plan. They all promoted greater reflexivity among development actors about their own cultural underpinnings, argued

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and its benefits' and to have 'the protection of the moral and material interests' as an author of literary, or artistic, or scientific works.

[12] UNESCO's interest in endogenous development in the 1970s runs parallel to the cultural turn in the academy and to the emergence of dependency theory and its call for autonomous development. Nederveen Pieterse therefore called UNESCO's approach at the time 'cultural dependency theory' (2010, p. 66) in which culture and development are allied with the nation-building of the postcolonial state and culture tends to be subsumed under a political agenda. This, of course, begs the question of whose culture is given priority and sets up tensions between local and national cultures and against plural strata that include race, gender, age, class and so on. He points out that UNESCO also advocates a broader pluralism and that the complexity of this dualist stance is not sufficiently addressed by the organisation (ibid, p. 66).

for culture's role in enabling development projects to be carried out more effectively, and argued that culture was a site for generating different understandings of development itself. Together they have provided a frame of reference for integrating cultural policies into development, and legal instruments with which to lobby for greater support for culture within development, and for the arts as a vital aspect of culture.

Although these events, publications and agreements themselves focussed on the broader concept of 'culture', and only mentioned the arts in passing, they are still of importance to the thesis. In a concrete sense, they constructed the discourse through which dedicated arts and culture funds emerged. Even today, almost every donor's arts and culture policy references these initiatives[13]. However, they also demonstrate the ongoing struggle to legitimate culture within the development community. This struggle is embodied in a tension, which I will return to throughout the thesis, between a drive to demonstrate culture's (and the arts') instrumental contributions towards development goals to secure mainstream legitimation, and a desire to remain true to the radical promise of culture to disrupt and transform mainstream development practice.

Mondiacult

In 1982 UNESCO held the first World Conference on Cultural Policies (known as Mondiacult) in Mexico City[14]. It was a seminal event in generating discourse about the relationship between culture and development, although its conclusions failed to significantly influence mainstream development policy which continued to focus 'on the economic mechanisms of what was largely seen as a unidimensional economic process' (Jolly et al., 2004, p. 211). Mondiacult did, however, adopt what for UNESCO would become a foundational definition of culture as 'the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group' and 'includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs' (UNESCO, 1982, paragraph 6). This demonstrates the gradual change from UNESCO's

[13] See for example, AECID, 2007; Ministry of Education for Finland, 2007; Hivos, 2002; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005; SDC, 2003.

[14] The conference itself was the culmination of a growing interest in cultural policies in the 1960s and 1970s as 'the need for material support to cultural development became increasingly obvious' (Stenou, 2007, p. 101). Antecedents included the Intergovernmental Conference on Institutional, Administrative and Financial Aspects of Cultural Policy held in Venice in 1970, and the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Bogotá, in 1978. Further regional conferences were held in Helsinki (1972), Yogyakarta (1973), and Accra (1975) as discussed by Stenou, 2007, pp. 101-105.

initial use of the Western intellectual idea of culture as 'a universal longing for meaning and quality in human existence' that emphasised the importance of cultural heritage and artistic practice (Arizpe, 2004, p. 163) [15].

Importantly for this thesis, it also described the role of culture as the matrix through which people are enabled to express themselves and reflect critically:

> It is culture that gives man the ability to reflect upon himself. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings, endowed with a critical judgement and a sense of moral commitment. It is through culture that we discern values and make choices. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievement, seeks untiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations.
>
> (UNESCO, 1982, paragraph 7)

The Mondiacult conference broadened UNESCO's framework for culture, and it also challenged narrow, economistic conceptions of development. It argued for 'humanis[ing] development', focussing on its qualitative aspects – 'namely the satisfaction of man's spiritual and cultural aspirations' (UNESCO, 1982, point 10). It advocated broadening the development paradigm to include a greater range of human experience and endeavour (including artistic practice), and legitimising a variety of development ends, defined through diverse cultural perspectives. The resulting 'Declaration' has a small section on the arts, arguing for the creation of social and cultural conditions of independence for artists, free from 'political, ideological, economic or social discrimination' (ibid, point 28); promoting arts education; and advocating raising 'public awareness of the social importance of art and intellectual creation' (ibid, point 29).

UN Decade for Cultural Development 1988-1997

The impetus behind Mondiacult was taken up in the UN's Decade for Cultural Development[16]. The decade had four main objectives: primarily it aimed to increase awareness of the cultural dimensions of development, but it also aimed to affirm cultural identities, to broaden cultural participation, and to promote international

[15] For a detailed discussion of UNESCO's involvement in culture and development debates, including a genealogy of its understanding of the concept of culture, see Stenou, 2007.
[16] This decade was proposed by the Group of 77 that represents the interests of a majority of Southern countries at the UN, and a handful of European allies (Arizpe, 2004, p. 175).

cultural cooperation (Stenou 2007, p. 108; UNESCO, 1999). The UN Decade generated numerous international meetings, as well as publications and normative standards[17] that together promoted greater awareness of the relationship between culture and development (including, in a minor way, the cultural work of artists). It also continued to promote a more expansive and transformative concept of development itself – 'not synonymous with economic growth alone' but as 'a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence' (UNESCO, 2009a, paragraph 1).

World Commission on Culture and Development and *Our Creative Diversity*

As part of the UN Decade, UNESCO and the UN established an independent[18] World Commission on Culture and Development[19] in 1992 to further explore the relationship between culture and development and to propose practical measures to manage arising issues. Chaired by former UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the Commission produced what is still regarded as a significant contribution to the debate (Jolly et al., 2004, p. 214), the report *Our Creative Diversity*. This report continued to challenge mainstream conceptions of development, stressing the embeddedness of development *within* culture and pointing out 'the cultural assumptions of development thinking and cooperation, from Eurocentrism to racial bias (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 79)[20]. At the same time it argued for mainstreaming the concept of culture in development in the same way that 'the environment' had been mainstreamed through the promotion of the concept of sustainable development[21]. It broadened the range of

[17] Meetings included the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development held in Stockholm in 1998; publications included *Our Creative Diversity* and the initiation of the UN's *World Culture Reports*; and normative standards refer to UNESCO's declarations, recommendations or conventions such as the Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist approved (albeit as non-binding) in 1980.
[18] Although the report relies heavily on the input of individuals closely associated with the UN and UNESCO it does not officially represent the views of either organisation, just of the Commission.
[19] The idea was proposed by the Nordic nations' representatives in UNESCO. The Nordic nations have continued to take a significant role in extending the debate around culture (including the arts) and development, and in operationalising some of the outcomes of these debates (see UNESCO, 2003 for an example of Norway's support for art projects in poor countries). Interestingly Achille Mbembe is particularly critical of attitudes that he encountered in representatives of Nordic nations who appeared to work on the assumption that 'Africans could only speak as "victims". In the course of expressing their solidarity with Africa's past struggles, many Nordic countries have unfortunately encouraged the sense of victimhood some Africans intellectuals and politicians have been peddling all along – which they try to mask under the guise of anti-imperialism' (Mbembe, 2009, question 6, paragraph 3).
[20] That this point (which today seems rather obvious and which perhaps has always been obvious to those on the receiving end of development assistance) needed to be so laboured underlines the way in which development as economic growth (and as a Western rationalist project) had, and still has, such a hold on the development imaginary.
[21] Through the Bruntland Report, the Rio Summit and other international publications and projects.

cultural goods and expressions worthy of protection, away from UNESCO's noted bias 'towards the elite, the monumental, the literate and the ceremonial' (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996, p. 31), to encompass 'intangible cultural heritage'[22], emphasising the living social context in which cultural goods are produced and reproduced.

The arts were mentioned, again, in a rather piecemeal way in this report which was oriented towards a broader conception of culture. Where they were mentioned, they were framed largely in terms of their contribution to contemporary social issues: their value in terms of social cohesion (in the face of concerns about the instabilities of increased globalisation); their contribution to a culture of innovation (in recognition of the increasing value of knowledge and symbolic goods in the global economy), and the need for their protection in trade deals (with the increase in trade agreements during the 1990s). With increasingly diverse communities within nation states (partly through economic migration), enhancing intercultural understanding was seen to promote social cohesion. In this context 'supporting new, emerging, experimental art forms and expressions' was, according to the World Commission (ibid, p.41), 'an investment in human development'. 'Creativity', which the arts are characterised by, was also argued to be a neglected area with potential as a rather vaguely termed 'social force', operational across multiple sectors (ibid, p. 23). The World Commission advocated state support for the arts (while recognising the advantages of more diversified funding including corporate sponsorship and the not-for-profit and voluntary sectors), in order to address 'market failures' and provide a 'socially optimal level of goods and services' (ibid, 1996, p.42)[23].

Our Creative Diversity was conceived as a 'call to action' (Pérez de Cuéllar, 1996, p.10) and it advocated the establishment of a more permanent vehicle to continue discussions on culture and development. To this end it proposed a number of follow-up projects including the 1998 Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development and the publication of regular World Culture Reports to 'survey trends in culture and development, monitor events affecting the state of cultures worldwide, construct

[22] Article 2 of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage defines it as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage'.

[23] This thesis, however, shows the Central American states' questionable capacity and interest in taking on this role.

quantitative cultural indicators, highlight good cultural practices and policies and analyse specific themes of general importance[24] accompanied by policy suggestions' (UNESCO, 1998b, p. 5).[25]

The 1998 Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, Stockholm

The Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development was charged with transforming the ideas raised in *Our Cultural Diversity* into policy and practice[26]. It aimed to strengthen cultural policy within development, integrating culture into conceptions of sustainable development; to encourage participation and creativity in cultural life; to strengthen policy around the protection of cultural heritage; to stimulate the cultural industries; to promote cultural and linguistic diversity on the Internet; and to secure resources for cultural development. It was a huge event bringing together representatives from 149 countries and mixing artists and intellectuals with cultural bureaucrats and development professionals, and it was instrumental in generating international funds to support artists in the South.

The 'Stockholm Conference' was notably marked by concerns around globalisation which was seen both as a challenge (increasing cultural interaction, increasing cultural conflict, the threat of cultural homogenisation) and as an opportunity (increased contact with diverse cultural manifestations, and hybridity[27] as a positive engagement with diversity). Once again, the protection of cultural goods in free trade agreements was highlighted as an area of increasing concern due to the rapid escalation of trade in cultural goods, and the increase in neoliberal economic policies that aimed to reduce protectionist measures. Jolly et al. point out that world trade in 'printed matter; literature; music; the visual arts, both cinema and photographic; and radio and television

[24] These themes included the economic potential of the cultural sector, developing an ethic of pluralism, refining the definition of culture (towards a more fluid and dynamic concept), protection of cultural goods in trade agreements, and methodologies for generating cultural statistics.
[25] Although the World Culture Reports have not been published biannually as planned, World Reports on cultural themes continue to be published by UNESCO. See, for example, *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue* (UNESCO, 2009b).
[26] It also built on parallel work undertaken by regional actors such as the Pan-African Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in 1998 and the European Task Force on Culture and Development's report *In From the Margins* (1997) which examined the potential for cultural policy to empower cultural minorities and disadvantaged social sectors.
[27] Hybridity has been seen as the counter to essentialism – a creative engagement with difference that 'liberat[es] the subject from notions of fixity and purity of origins' (Werbner and Modood, 1997, p. 21). For an extensive discussion of the notion of hybridity in both celebratory and more ambivalent terms, see Werbner and Modood, 1997.

equipment – almost tripled between 1980 and 1991, from $67 billion to $200 billion' (2004, p. 215). The concern was that if cultural products were not protected, a nation with less powerful cultural industries would be flooded with material from nations with massive media conglomerates (the USA is the example usually given) at the expense of local production. The end result of this process over time would be a significant reduction in cultural diversity and an increase in cultural homogeneity.

The film industry is probably the most often cited genre in this debate, as it is here that the global imbalances (in particular the dominance of the USA) are the most obvious. Under a subheading entitled 'Diversity Destroyed in Less than a Decade' Smiers (2003) gives numerous examples of dramatic falls in national film production (in Turkey, Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria) following free trade deals, liberalising policies and the resulting massive influx of film from Hollywood[28]. Arguing against the inclusion of film and television production in the 1993 Uruguay Round of GATT, former French President Francois Mitterand argued that '[w]hat is at stake is the cultural identity of all our nations. [I]t is the freedom to create and choose our own images. A society which abandons the means of depicting itself would soon be an enslaved society' (cited in Shapiro, 2000, paragraph 9)[29]. Despite advocates of cultural diversity securing some protection for cultural goods within free trade deals, Smiers argues that such protection actually has 'minimal' effect (2003, p.176)[30].

The main outcome of the Stockholm Conference was the publication of an *Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development* (UNESCO, 1998a) which focussed on a range of issues similar to those raised by the World Commission: mainstreaming cultural considerations within development practice; promoting creativity and participation in cultural life; the potential for culture to act as a peace-maker by enhancing mutual understanding; the need to democratise understandings of culture (away from elite constructs); the need to ensure freedom of expression as a human right; the need to protect cultural heritage (considered in a broad sense and including tangible and intangible forms). It placed an

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[28] Turkish cinema, for example, had been flourishing until a free trade deal signed in 1988 allowed major US distributors to flood the market. By 1992, 'it had become impossible to find a Turkish film – or a film from any other European country – being screened in any cinema in Turkey' (Smiers, 2003, p. 103).
[29] The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, ratified on September 12 2001, which was a response, in part, to these tensions, confirmed the distinctive nature of cultural goods and services as 'vectors of identity, values and meaning' which must not, therefore, be treated as 'mere commodities or consumer goods' (Article 8).
[30] Smires, here, points to the overwhelming dominance of US-produced cultural goods in Canada, despite cultural exemptions in its free trade agreement with the USA (FTA) and with North America including Mexico (NAFTA).

increased focus on the economic potential (enhanced through professionalization, active management and expanded educational opportunities) of the cultural industries so long as the trade rules for the sector could be made fairer[31]. The *Action Plan* also outlined a particular role for 'creators' as making an 'essential contribution' to 'improving quality of life, to promoting identity and to the cultural development of a society' (UNESCO, 1998, Point 13) and it strongly advocated providing more resources, both human and financial, for cultural development.

Support for the arts in the development context emerged then, through the broader 'cultural turn' in the 1980s and 1990s that aimed to democratise and diversify development practice, and reveal its cultural biases, in response to a crisis or 'impasse' in development thinking. The cultural turn was articulated, however, in ambiguous terms. It aimed to offer both a radical critique of mainstream development practice (in line with those of postcolonial and postdevelopment scholars) and suggest alternative development approaches starting from specific and diverse cultural locations, at the same time as it argued for mainstreaming 'culture' within existing practices. There is an evident schism between a desire to prove culture's value to development in order to strengthen its credibility among mainstream actors, and more radical articulations of culture as fundamentally contesting development goals and practices. In development's cultural turn, culture is seen both as an economic resource and as important in 'improving quality of life, [. . .] promoting identity and [. . .] cultural development' (ibid). These contradictions are found just as clearly in development's support for the arts.

Partly because this discourse emerged through UNESCO, which wanted to broaden its definition of culture away from the arts and letters towards a more anthropological conception of culture, the arts tended to only be mentioned in passing in the initiatives associated with the UN Decade for Cultural Development, and yet the way in which the arts are framed within development has clearly been influenced by these broader discussions.

Of particular importance to this thesis is the way in which the cultural turn became associated with 'local culture' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 67). This can be seen in the

[31] The conference was not only celebratory but issued a number of cautionary warnings regarding the need to balance the economic imperative with respect for culture, and the imbalance in access to technological innovations such as the Internet.

focus on micro and actor-oriented approaches in the face of distrust in the grand narratives of modernity, and in the conceptualisation of the local (local cultures) as agentic in relation to the perceived threat of cultural homogenisation. Nederveen Pieterse suggests that the cultural turn welcomed 'crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to strengthen the case for erecting cultural boundaries [and as such] it reflects a politics of nostalgia' (ibid, p.70). This thesis will demonstrate some of the problems generated by this attachment to a rather romanticised conception of the local.

Beyond UNESCO: take-up by mainstream development organisations and the drive towards instrumentalisation

The growing recognition of 'culture' by development actors was not limited to UNESCO, although UNESCO was its most vociferous proponent. The World Decade for Cultural Development instigated a flurry of activity amongst a range of multilateral development actors attempting to address the question of culture in relation to their practice. The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)[32] began to focus on 'culturally appropriate development' (Arizpe, 2004, pp.174-5; Radcliffe, 2006; Rao and Walton, 2004; UNDP, 2004; UNESCO, 1999). In the 1990s the UNDP adopted the broader conceptual framework of Human Development, as discussed in Chapter 1. In 1998, the World Bank joined with UNESCO to host an international conference on 'Culture and Development at the Millennium: the Challenges and the Response' and then published its report *Culture and Sustainable Development: A Framework for Action* in 1999[33]. In that report it admitted that the World Bank was a relative newcomer to the debate but that incorporating 'local forms of social interchange, values, traditions, and knowledge [that] reinforce[s] the social fabric' (Duer and Levine, 1999, p. 6) would make development more effective. This quote gives a succinct encapsulation of the World Bank's approach to culture: it emphasises the local cultures of others rather than reflexively examining its own cultural bias, and its emphasis on 'reinforcing' the social fabric suggests entrenching what is, rather than embracing culture's transformational capacity.

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[32] In 2004 the UNDP based its annual Human Development Report around the theme of *Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World* (UNDP, 2004), promoting multiculturalism, diversity and cultural freedom. See Nederveen Pieterse 2010, pp. 77-82 for a critique.

[33] Also in 1998 the IADB and UNESCO co-sponsored a summit of Latin American and Caribbean Ministers of Culture and, the following year, convened a forum on Development and Culture.

The meetings convened through these initiatives frequently brought together experts from the distinct spheres of economics and culture (and their different conceptual bases were duly noted): '[t]hose in the economic domain are reluctant to admit that the estimation of culture involves a wide range of values, of which economic values are but a single dimension' and '[t]hose on the cultural camp do not sufficiently appreciate the role that economic factors play in the enhancement of culture and cultural heritage' (Government of Italy and UNESCO, 1999, p. 4). They also tended to generate a slightly different and less self-reflexive discourse to that of UNESCO. Culture was clearly seen as a property of 'Others' and there was a strong focus on instrumentalisation with emphases on indicators, measurability, transversal linkages and cost-benefit analyses. The resulting documents usually adopted economic modes of expression (see Government of Italy and UNESCO, 1999; UNESCO, 1999). The executive summary of the report from the 1999 meeting between the IADB and UNESCO, for example, raises the following questions:

> As financial institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank begin to consider ways of unlocking the economic, educational and social power of culture, questions such as the following need to be addressed. What are the benefits of investing in culture? In what spirit and in what sorts of cultural endeavours should investments be made? What rationales and what policies would best support the integration of culture in the development agenda?
>
> (UNESCO, 1999, Executive Summary, paragraph 4)

This discourse is not self-reflexive and does not challenge the dominant development paradigm, nor does it challenge any of its own cultural assumptions and biases. 'Culture' is viewed as an external resource than can be brought in to existing development practice while the culture of existing development practice remains invisible and uncontested, and the rhetoric of investment implies the continued reification of an overarching economic framework. It also emphasises the way in which 'the case for C&D [culture and development] is generally made in instrumental terms' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 73). This is a depoliticising perspective that fails to learn from the promise of development's cultural turn.

The question of instrumentalisation

This instrumental approach is pervasive – although not uncontested as this thesis demonstrates – in the development community's approach to the arts. Art's agency is usually couched in terms of what the arts can contribute to other non-artistic goals or sectors, rather than the value of the artistic sector itself. These contributions must also be quantified. To this end there has been a strong drive to develop and assess cultural indicators[34] in the South in order to establish 'baseline data'. UNESCO actively promotes the generation of indicators for the cultural sector and, when I visited their San José office in 2006, they had begun to compile cultural indicators for Central America and had just published a working document (Castellanos, 2005)[35]. This document explained that the development of indicators is driven by a desire to tie the arts more closely to other policy areas: economic, commercial, social and fiscal (Tiburcio, 2005, p. 5). Although the focus on indicators does suggest instrumentalisation, it also signals a valuing of the arts and a desire to be able to incorporate them within the frameworks of development.

A strongly instrumental approach to arts funding is not unique to the development context, although it may be accentuated in that context. It is important to recognise that increased instrumentalisation of the arts is something of a global phenomenon in the current neoliberal political climate (see Mirza, 2006; Yúdice, 2003). In many Western industrialised nations the arts are variously represented as: 'an expanding sector of the economy, a major export earner and a stimulant to tourism, [. . .] a catalyst for urban renewal, a business asset for a region and a cost-effective means of employment', [promoting] 'social cohesion and community empowerment [. . .], able to reduce the prison population and improve health', [and as] 'agents of social stability and the renewal of civil society' (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p. 6).

The increased instrumentalisation of the arts is influenced by a neoliberal political environment in which the state's support for public programmes (including the arts) is

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[34] Cultural indicators typically record the range of cultural institutions, artists or cultural workers, associations and independent organisations, their financial expenditure and generated earnings (including as percentage of GNI), measures of reach and accessibility, level of state support, and cover production, distribution, education, sales, participation and preservation.

[35] In 2011, cultural statistics and indicators are just beginning to be gathered for the Pacific as part of an initiative funded by the European Union to strengthen and promote the cultural sectors of many Pacific Island nations (PINA, 2011).

reduced, and the arts are required to demonstrate their productivity. Instrumentalisation is accentuated by the post-industrial shift to the so-called knowledge economy or creative economy[36] in which manufacturing capital is replaced by human capital, and immaterial and symbolic goods have greater significance in the global economy. It is also associated with the rise of evidence-based policy-making (ibid, p. 135) and what McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras and Brooks describe as an 'output-oriented, quantitative approach to public sector management' (2004, p. 2).

Belfiore points out that the instrumentalisation of the arts is an example of 'policy attachment' in which a weak sector 'with limited political clout' forms links with other policy sectors 'that appear more worthy, or that occupy a more central position in the political discourse of the time' in order to 'attract enough resources to achieve its policy objectives' (2006, p. 21). There is clear evidence of such policy attachment in the development context, in terms of attempting to prove the utility of the arts (and of culture more broadly) to mainstream development frameworks.

Yúdice argues that the current emphasis on the instrumentality of arts and culture is so extreme as to constitute an epistemic shift that empties out other possible values for cultural production (2003, p. 16).

> [T]he "bottom line" is that cultural institutions and funders are increasingly turning to the measurement of utility because there is no other accepted legitimation for social investment. In this context, the idea that the experience of *jouissance*, the unconcealment of truth, or deconstructive critique might be admissible criteria for investment in culture comes off as a conceit perhaps worthy of a Kafkaesque performance skit.

[36] In recent reports (2008, 2010) by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the organisation admits that the creative economy is 'a subjective concept' whose definition is 'still being shaped' (2008, p. 4), yet it attempts a definition, as follows: the creative economy is 'an evolving concept based on creative assets potentially generating economic growth and development', and having the capacity to foster 'income generation, job creation and export earnings while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development'. It links 'economic, cultural and social aspects' with 'technology, intellectual property and tourism objectives'. Behind the creative economy lie the creative industries, which are defined as a heterogeneous 'set of knowledge-based activities that produce tangible goods and intangible intellectual or artistic services with creative content, economic value and market objectives'. They range from traditional arts and crafts, publishing, music, and visual and performing arts to more technology-intensive and services-oriented groups of activities such as film, television and radio broadcasting, new media and design' (ibid). The term 'creative industries' is often used synonymously with the 'cultural industries' although, as Galloway and Dunlop (2007) point out, this is not uncontested.

However, as Yúdice himself (ibid, pp. 10-11) and Belfiore and Bennet (2008)[37] point out, the arts have a long history of instrumentalisation[38]. What is new, however, is the transposition of this paradigm into the postcolonial context of development (in service of a 'cultural turn' that aimed to be radically transgressive) and the emergence of transnational funding for the arts in conditions of highly unequal power imbalances.

Dedicated arts funding in development

The initiatives associated with the UN Decade for Culture and Development mention the arts, in passing, as manifestations of, and contributing to, broader cultural processes, but they did not isolate them or explore them in depth. This lacuna was noted by a handful of donors, individuals, and other lobbyists who subsequently began to focus on arts-centred projects, while at the same time drawing on those culture and development initiatives to support their work.

The lack of direct attention to artists in the World Commission's 1995 report *Our Creative Diversity,* for example, was noted by Dr Ingrid Eide, president of the Norwegian National Commission for UNESCO, and the arts were subsequently taken up by NORAD, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5). In conjunction with UNESCO, NORAD developed and funded a project called Artists in Development (AiD) which offered professional workshops in the South to groups of artists and artisans in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The project had multiple objectives, as is often the case with arts funding in development: it set out to strengthen cultural diversity by supporting local artists – countering 'asymmetries in the cultural processes of globalisation' while, at the same time, improving technical capabilities to help them become 'income-generating', and 'interface with the international market' (UNESCO, 2003). While these aims are not *necessarily* complementary, positioning them together illustrates the conception of art's agency in development: locally-specific arts practices contribute to both cultural diversity and market-oriented development practices, through selling their 'difference'. There is an evident tension in the attempt to legitimise the arts through linking their agency to economic growth (a mainstream

[37] See Belfiore and Bennet (2008) for a Western intellectual history of the social uses and impacts of the arts.
[38] Historical examples of instrumentalisation include Plato's concept of (restricted) access to the arts for moral uplift, the Renaissance ideal of the arts as formative and educational, and Hitler's highly and unintentionally ironic argument that the arts play a civilising role in society.

development agenda) as well as to diversity and difference (and implicitly, therefore, to challenging mainstream development).

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the establishment of a number of pilot projects like this and, more importantly, the establishment of dedicated 'culture funds'[39] in some bilateral aid agencies (especially in the Nordic nations) and development NGOs (especially in the Netherlands). Culture funds now support artists across all disciplines in projects that range from one-off events, festivals, exhibitions and workshops to publications, rural museums, training in cinematography. The approach taken may focus on anything from professional development, to community participation, to establishing peer-to-peer networks or developing project management skills. The arrival of these organisations in Central America coincided with the signing of the region's final peace settlements in the mid-1990s after decades of civil war (see Booth & Walker, 1999 for a contemporary regional history). In this context, the arts were particularly valued for their potential to address social exclusion, internal divisions and assist with post-conflict reconstruction (Pérez-Ratton, personal communication, August 2006).

Arts and culture funds emerged first and most strongly in Western Europe, probably reflecting a stronger humanist[40] tradition. On the other hand, USAID, AusAID, and NZAID[41] continue to show little interest in funding the arts as part of official development programmes. In contrast, all three agencies have enthusiastically embraced the idea of sport as a vehicle for development.

Non-instrumental funding policies

The Netherlands and the Nordic nations were early and enthusiastic supporters of arts funding in development. Of particular significance to this thesis was the emergence of two pioneering culture funds in the Netherlands (located in independent NGOs rather than bilateral development agencies)[42] that have promoted clearly *non-instrumentalised*

[39] Although these funds are usually referred to as 'culture' funds, they are generally limited to support for the arts.
[40] Humanism focuses on exploring what it is to be human in the widest sense, and the arts are regarded as an important aspect of that exploration.
[41] The bilateral development agencies of the USA, Australia, and New Zealand respectively.
[42] Bilateral development agencies appear to have a more ambivalent relationship to non-instrumentalised policies. My understanding is that the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), for example, used to fund the arts through non-instrumentalised policies but in the early-2000s they began to tie their arts funding to their overall development aim of poverty reduction. In 2004 they

funding that focuses on the agency of arts practices themselves, rather than their contribution to extra-artistic fields. These funds suggest a space that embraces the political possibilities of art's liminal relationship to development rather than feeling compelled to try and legitimate art's value in terms of a mainstream development agenda. Hivos, the Dutch Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation, which is a major actor in this thesis, established its culture fund in 1995. Its byline is 'people unlimited'. The Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development[43] was established in 1996. At around the same time the Netherlands-based website The Power of Culture was also launched. It was funded by a number of European NGOs and cultural foundations, and by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, until recently, it was a central portal for information on and reflection on culture and development[44].

Both Hivos and the Prince Claus Fund have been significant contributors to the cultural sector in Central America over the last decade, and both have supported EspIRA/La ESPORA – Hivos for a number of years. Hivos, in particular, has been instrumental in encouraging other donors in the region (such as SDC) to consider supporting contemporary arts practices: SDC's support for EspIRA/La ESPORA was the first time it had supported contemporary art in the region (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 49). This is just one example of a growing number of collaborations between Hivos and other donors, suggesting that the organisation could be playing a significant leadership role in the region.

A non-instrumentalised funding policy values aspects of artistic practice such as quality, professionalism, experimentation and aesthetic considerations over and above a more narrowly defined social utility. It recognises that the arts offer other experiences, such as *jouissance* and deconstructive critique as suggested by Yúdice (2003, p. 16). The agency of arts practices is not based on the potential for the cultural industries or traditional crafts

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commissioned an evaluation to 'establish the actual role support to culture and media play in the poverty reduction effort and the role they should play' (Ljungman, Rønning, Singh, & Steen Pedersen, 2005, p. v).

[43] Along with Hivos, the Prince Claus Fund is one of the most dedicated and innovative supporters of the arts within development. It was established in 1996 to mark the 70th birthday of H.R.H. Prince Claus of the Netherlands in recognition for his contribution to development cooperation. It emerges from Prince Claus's belief that 'people's own ideas and ideals are the driving force of development' and '[p]eople's dignity and their power to direct their future form the basis for change and development' (Prince Claus Fund Mission Statement, n.d.). The Fund provides ongoing support for cultural organisations, individual artists and productions as well as operating a Cultural Emergency Response unit. Like Hivos, it is financed partly through the Dutch government and partly through the Dutch Lottery, as well as drawing on private donors.

[44] In June 2010 the pull-out of a major sponsor caused it to take a hiatus and its future is currently being reviewed by SICA, the Dutch Centre for International Cultural Activities.

to generate income, or on the effectiveness of a 'culturally-appropriate' artistic form to communicate development messages. Instead, the agency of an independent public space that can accommodate experimentation, uncertainty, debate, intellectual cultural analysis is asserted, as well as the value of affective experiences associated with, for example, beauty, pleasure, or awe.

As such, this position recognises the value of art's partial autonomy. Fraser describes artistic autonomy[45] as being characterised by 'the freedom of artworks from rationalization with respect to specific use or function', the 'separation of sites of consumption and production', the relative capacity of the art world to 'impose "its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products" and to exclude [external] norms and criteria', and 'the freedom of speech and conscience and the right to dissident opinion' (2005, p. 56). While art's autonomy is generally regarded as partial rather than absolute and continues to be a matter of debate[46], these characteristics suggest that art is able to contribute to the construction of an independent public space in which dominant practices and canons can be questioned, and new ideas and strategies put up for discussion. Patricia Belli has told me that she views EspIRA/La ESPORA as a civil society organisation. Non-instrumentalised donors clearly articulate the value of such an independent space. Indeed, although I will continue to refer to this policy platform as non-instrumentalised (to emphasise its difference from more conventional and directly instrumental approaches to arts funding), this term is somewhat disingenuous. For these donors the existence of an active and audacious cultural sector is seen as having a social value in itself[47].

Hivos argues that the support of artistic expression in itself will generate a positive effect on society based on the assumption that:

[45] The concept of art as a 'self-sufficient activity based on aesthetics' (Mosquera, 2002b, p. 269) comes largely from the West, and from the West at the end of the 18th century. See Wolff, 1993, pp. 11-12, pp. 18-19, and pp.44-45 for a discussion of the artist's separation from a connection with any 'clear social group or class' (p. 11) and from secure patronage, that coincided with the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe.

[46] See Stallabras (2004) for a rebuttal of contemporary art's apparent autonomy from the market, and see http://theautonomyproject.org/about for an example of the ongoing debate about the nature of artistic autonomy.

[47] This is not an approach, therefore, that can be called 'art for art's sake' (which cannot, strictly speaking, be said to exist unless an artwork is created and never shown to anyone) or autonomism or aestheticism, where the artwork is only valued for its aesthetic properties in a kind of social/moral vacuum (see Belfiore and Bennett, 2008, pp. 176-190).

> [. . .] arts and culture [. . .] clear the way for critical reflection and provide a space where members of society enjoy beauty and express their thoughts and feelings. Arts and culture also have the potential to construct bridges between communities. These needs are as basic as the material necessities of life, and can contribute to forming and directing society.
>
> (Hivos, 2002, p. 3)

The Prince Claus Fund argues that the understanding of other cultures (through artistic exchange) contributes to peace and is also *enriching* in other ways:

> New visions of beauty inspire us; other insights and ways of thinking strengthen our knowledge and expand our view of the world, [art can] enable[. . .] the discussion of subjects that would otherwise remain hidden, [p]ost-war and post-disaster situations benefit from cultural depiction, critical analyses and the representation of what actually happened. Culture provides people with a place in the world, an idea of who they are and a positive self-awareness: it imbues them with hope, respect and identity
>
> (Prince Claus Fund, 2007, Executive Summary, final paragraph)

These and other bilateral culture funds, many of them active since the mid-1990s, and created in response to the UN's Decade for Culture and Development, have been and continue to be highly significant for the cultural sectors of many poor countries[48]. Despite the small scale of the funds in many cases, and the fact that funding is almost always short term, the influence of external donors on cultural sectors can be said to equal if not outweigh that provided by the state in many places. This creates a danger that the state will then feel absolved of the responsibility to support the arts and culture, perceiving the sector to be well-financed by the international community (Pérez-Ratton, personal communication, August, 2006).

Supporters of the arts in the development context: actors and approaches

Bilateral actors

In 2011 the following countries were providing bilateral support to the arts through their development programmes: Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland[49]. Bilateral funds for

[48] See Fontes and Wilson-Grau, 2008, for example, for an independent evaluation of Hivos' work in Central America, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 8.

[49] This information is sourced from the Power of Culture website (www.powerofculture.nl/en/theme/policy), and from personal communication with Dr. Daniel Gad of

the arts are often administered through embassy representatives in recipient nations. Former colonial powers are usually particularly active in their former colonies, such as the Spanish embassies throughout Hispano-America. Beyond the administration of culture funds, embassies may also offer in kind support, such as providing temporary venues for arts activities, or sponsoring a visiting artist to teach classes. In addition to embassies, national cultural associations such as the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française, the Swedish Institute and the British Council all support the arts in the South, but with the additional mission of cultural exchange – that is, of disseminating their own cultural heritage as well[50].

Among bilateral donors who support the arts, there are variations in approach and focus. The French government's support, for example, is oriented towards film, cultural policy, and intellectual property. Britain (via the British Council) has a focus on the social dimensions of cultural projects (in line with UK national cultural policy). Some bilateral agencies support governments in the South to draft national cultural policy[51]. Others support independent arts networks that have, as part of their policy, an intention to influence state cultural policy[52].

Multilateral actors

UNESCO remains the most visible supporter of cultural diversity[53], and of arts and culture in the South. In Central America, where UNESCO has a regional office in San José, it advises on and develops cultural policy, gathers and publishes data on the cultural sector, supports the development of projects that enhance cultural diversity, certifies works of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and builds capacity in the

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the University of Hildesheim. The ways in which this funding is administered vary widely. Some countries have a targeted 'culture fund' as part of their bilateral development assistance programme. Denmark, for example, has a distinct Danish Centre for Culture and Development which is part of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In other countries (such as the Netherlands and Germany) funding for the arts within development is split between the Ministry for Development and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with no common approach between the ministries (Gad, personal communication, September 2009).

[50] When I visited San José, Costa Rica for example, the local Alliance Française was hosting a week of Dada and surrealist French Cinema.

[51] The Swedish development agency SIDA has recently been involved in such work in Vietnam (Embassy of Sweden in Hanoi, n.d.,paragraph 2).

[52] An example of this kind of practice is SIDA's work with the Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust (Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust, 2007, paragraph 1).

[53] On September 12, 2001 UNESCO's member states ratified the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and, in 2005, this was strengthened by the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. In 2009 UNESCO published a major world report on *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*, which attempts to develop a coherent framework through which the beneficial aspects of cultural diversity can be stimulated.

sector in order to stimulate its economic potential. UNESCO's cultural work is tied to an overriding development policy of poverty reduction (personal communication, Accatcha, August 2006): cultural tourism, for example, is promoted as a way of both stimulating economic growth and valuing marginalised cultural groups.

Although it does, on occasion, fund specific artists' projects UNESCO more frequently partners with local organisations and national governments to support these broader processes. However its links with local state institutions are not always harmonious. In Central America UNESCO feels hampered in its work by a lack of support (both political and financial) from local organisations and governments who expect UNESCO to finance all projects and who often fail to attend meetings or workshops that UNESCO has organised (personal communication, Accatcha, August 2006).

Other multilateral development programmes such as the UNDP and UNICEF also support arts projects but in a fairly minor way to date. In 2007, however, the UNDP, with the Spanish government, launched the MDG Achievement Fund[54], which includes a theme addressing 'culture and development'. Ninety-five million US dollars was ear-marked for country-specific projects that address cultural issues and two focus areas were defined: the social inclusion of minorities and marginalised groups, and the cultural sector as a site for economic growth[55]. The role of other multilateral actors such as the EU and UNCTAD has been discussed above.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

The range of NGOs involved in funding the arts in the development context is typically broad and idiosyncratic. As a consequence their quality and influence varies widely. They range from large-scale highly visible funders like the Dutch culture funds (Hivos, Arts Collaboratory, the Prince Claus Fund and the DOEN Foundation) through to organisations established by single individuals for personal motives. Some are principally *development* organisations with a cultural arm (Hivos is an example). Others, and these are

[54] This fund aims to accelerate progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.
[55] Three projects have been started in Central America (in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Honduras), focussing on social inclusion, promoting cultural diversity, local participation, capacity-building and developing cultural tourism (see www.mdgfund.org/content/cultureanddevelopment).

far fewer, work solely in culture and the arts (the Prince Claus Fund and Arts Collaboratory[56] are examples).

Hivos and the Prince Claus Fund were prominent in Central America during my fieldwork. Hivos, in particular, appeared to be everywhere, supporting art, poetry and cinema festivals as well as publications, the production of music CDs, and the ongoing work of arts organisations like EspIRA/La ESPORA[57]. It began to seem as if I couldn't open a book, pick up a locally produced CD, or go to an arts event without seeing the Hivos logo displayed as a sponsor. Hivos has a reputation for innovative work in areas of development cooperation that may be considered marginal. In general it works with civil society organisations in the South, rather than working through national governments.

The Prince Claus Fund exists solely to support the work of artists in the South. It currently focuses on two themes: 'zones of silence' (giving voice to 'people and activities that are hidden and silenced through exclusion, war and/or unjust local or national government'), and 'beauty in context' (stimulating the creation of beauty in places that have seen a lot of ugliness – through war, poor government or other misfortune)[58]. It is known for its Cultural Emergency Response unit that provides emergency relief for cultural heritage damaged through natural or man-made disasters[59].

These two organisations caught my attention because of the seriousness of their engagement with the cultural sector, and their clear articulation of the value of arts beyond their instrumental use. They prioritise artistic quality as a funding criterion, for example. Hivos also stood out for its attempt to provide longer term funding, although it also supports one-off events. Hivos typically funds its co-partners for up to 10 years, and it provides indefinite support to a small number of key strategic partners. These organisations also demonstrate innovations in policy, in monitoring and evaluation, and

[56] Arts Collaboratory was created in the Netherlands in 2007 by Hivos and the Dutch Lottery (or DOEN Foundation), and is supported by the Mondriaan Foundation. It focuses on supporting visual arts practices in the South.
[57] When I mentioned this to Hivos' Central American representative Susana Rochna, she said that their strong presence was because there were so few arts funders in the region. Hivos could take its pick of organisations to support, and it supported the best (personal communication, 2006). Hivos's significant presence is also due to its funding mechanisms which include a micro-enterprise scheme of small donations for one-off events, as well as longer-term funding for key arts organisations.
[58] Taken from www.princeclausfund.org/en/programmes/about.
[59] Following the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, for example, the Prince Claus Fund helped to protect and restore damaged archives (including marriage and birth certificate documentation) and significant library collections (Prince Claus Fund, 2011).

a genuine desire to understand the needs of their recipients through intensive feedback loops. As well as supporting artists they support the sector more broadly through South-South and South-North networks. The Prince Claus Fund has a dedicated focus area on Network Partnerships and Hivos has supported the establishment of arts networks in the African continent (the ARTerial network established in 2007) and in Asia (Culture Asia Conference 2008).

Other mainstream development NGOs such as Action Aid, Save the Children and the Tearfund use the arts from time to time to assist with their work in other sectors but their approach values culture *for* development, rather than the development of the cultural sector. They do not have dedicated culture funds and the approach taken appears to be largely instrumental (see Marsh and Gould, 2003).

In Nicaragua NGOs like these are joined by others, like the Casa de los Tres Mundos[60] that are still funded out of solidarity with the Sandinista revolutionary project and its democratising cultural policies[61]. The Casa de los Tres Mundos focuses on participatory classes for children in music, theatre, and fine art[62]. It is largely funded by the Austrian/German NGO *Pan y Arte* (Bread and Art) which exists primarily to support the Casa. In 2006, the Casa had no written policy but was run along 'humanist' principles (Kranz and Stadler, personal communication, 2006).

Well-known artists also, at times, establish NGOs to support the arts in the South. Swedish author Henning Mankell, for example, founded Maputo's Teatro Avenida in Mozambique and also supports the Memory Books project that helps HIV-positive parents produce books for their soon-to-be-orphaned children about their lives (see www.henningmankell.com). In Mexico, nationally-renowned visual artist Francisco

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[60] The Casa de los Tres Mundos provided me with accommodation, as a visiting researcher, over a period of four months in 2006.

[61] The Sandinista government, in power in Nicaragua during the 1980s, was widely admired for its cultural policies that involved local communities in poetry, painting and theatre workshops, thereby generating pride in local landscapes, voices and life stories and opposing the US-oriented aesthetic of the Somoza dynasty (Whisnant, 1995, Chapter 3). Art materials were subsidised by the State and international exchanges were encouraged. Artists from many countries visited Nicaragua in solidarity with the revolutionary government: among them Salman Rushdie, Julio Cortázar and Harold Pinter (see Craven, 1989, for a discussion of Sandinista cultural policy).

[62] Although the Casa was established to provide accessible arts classes to children from all backgrounds it has, pragmatically, adopted a variety of uses. The complex itself – beautifully renovated using traditional techniques – has become a symbol of the move to treasure Granada's colonial architecture, adding to the city's tourist appeal and to its bid to become declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The complex provides an elegant space that is used by a range of groups for various events, including concerts (from classical to hard rock), private functions (weddings and birthdays), evangelical congregations, high-profile government meetings and police training sessions.

Toledo has established a number of ventures around his native Oaxaca to support cultural patrimony and the arts: the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (IAGO), the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca (MACO) and, more recently, a very ambitious arts centre in an abandoned textile factory at San Agustin Etla.

Supporting the arts within development: consolidation and change over the past decade

In recent years advocates of culture have continued to lobby the development community to mainstream cultural considerations within existing practices. This signals the ongoing difficulty that development has with 'operationalising' the complexity of culture, and – most likely – an ongoing resistance to the more radical implications of taking culture seriously. There has, however, been something of a consolidation in the conception of the agency of culture (and artistic production) within much of the development community that recognises both its 'constitutive' and 'instrumental' aspects (UNESCO, 1998b, pp. 12). The EU terms this a 'twin-track' approach (Commission of the European Communities, 2007, p. 10). The Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AECID), for example, describes a concern within the international community to 'safeguard the specificities of the cultural life of countries as a value in and of itself and an indispensable prerequisite for the economic, social and political development of societies' (AECID, 2007, p. 9). Similarly, Norway's aid agency NORAD sees 'artists, cultural workers, media workers and academics' as having 'an important role in forming public opinion and as agents of change' (NORAD, 2005, Summary, Point 1, paragraph 9), but also recognises the more instrumental value of 'culture and sports' often having an 'impact outside their own sphere' (ibid, Summary, Point 1, paragraph 3). NORAD's policy supports the cultural sector itself while including several measures that target specific social areas such as peace and reconciliation, good governance and human rights.

There have also been some notable *changes* in practice and approach over the last decade. Significant new actors like the European Union and the Commonwealth Foundation have become involved, extending the reach of development arts funding, and there is a renewed emphasis on the economic potential of the cultural and creative industries which have weathered the recent global economic crisis better than other sectors. In 2008, the Commonwealth Foundation published a major report entitled *Putting Culture*

First: Commonwealth Perspectives on Culture and Development, which noted the Commonwealth community's previous neglect of the cultural sector and analysed the possibilities of the arts' and culture's contributions to development processes. These were outlined in terms very similar to those of UNESCO: their value to the economy, their capacity to uphold diversity; their role in the negotiation of identities and their contribution to critical public space within society. Interestingly, however, when I contacted NZAID to ask them whether this report would influence their thinking on funding the arts as part of development, they answered that it would not (NZAID, personal communication, October 2009)[63]. This demonstrates that, despite the positive rhetoric, the influence of the Foundation appears limited.

The European Union (EU) has also become far more active in the last five years in promoting culture and development.[64] In 2007 the EU drafted its first significant policy on culture and development, *A European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World,* which was inspired by UNESCO's work on cultural diversity. As well as strengthening intercultural dialogue within EU member states, it proposed increased cultural exchange with, and support for the cultural sector in, countries of the South. In 2009, the EU sponsored a major international colloquium on 'Culture and Creativity as Vectors for Development' that brought together artists, arts administrators and development professionals from Europe and from ACP countries (in Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific) [65] to discuss connections between culture and development, and to review EU policy in this area. This meeting was followed by another in 2010, sponsored by the Spanish Government, which was focussed on the relationship between culture and the Millennium Development Goals in the lead up to the MDG Summit in New York later that year.

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[63] NZAID has never been an advocate of (even instrumentalised) arts funding as part of development but the organisation had a major reshuffle under a new conservative government in 2009 which has made support for the arts seem even less likely. NZAID's semi-autonomous status was revoked and the organisation was subsumed again within the more partisan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Furthermore, its focus was reoriented towards 'development-as-economic-growth' rather than the more broadly conceived goal of 'poverty reduction' (Oxfam New Zealand, 2009, paragraph 10). It appears that, unless the arts are couched in terms of economic development via the creative or cultural industries, the new aid establishment in New Zealand is unlikely to support them.

[64] Between 1990 and 2007 the EU allocated €155 million to ACP countries in the field of culture in development. That increased to €200 million for the period 2007-2013 (European Union @ United Nations, 2010, 'Background' paragraph).

[65] EU support for culture and development is based on the Cotonou Agreement (2000, revised 2005) with ACP countries (Asia, Caribbean and Pacific). Article 27 of the Cotonou Agreement refers to the integration of the cultural dimension in all levels of development. The EU has a particular focus on protecting heritage and on developing the audio-visual industry.

In 2009 the EU granted €713,474 to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) for a project entitled 'Structuring the Cultural Sector in the Pacific for Improved Human Development' to strengthen the cultural sector in the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The 30-month project will focus on developing cultural policy, promoting Pacific cultural industries to the European Union and other ACP countries, mapping cultural heritage sites and exchanges between Pacific and Caribbean museums (SPC, 2010).

As well as the emergence of significant new donors, another recent change in the discourse on culture and development has been an increased emphasis on the economic potential of the creative industries. Although mentioned in earlier initiatives[66], there is growing promotion of the sector's economic potential as a driver for development. In 2008 the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) published its extensive *Creative Economy Report 2008* which analysed in depth the possibilities and challenges for nations in the South to grow their economies by tapping into creative and intellectual capital. It published a follow-up report in 2010. In these reports, UNCTAD argued that the creative economy, having been successful in stimulating economic growth in 'advanced economies', should now be considered 'a feasible option for developing countries' (UNCTAD, 2008, p. iii), allowing poor countries to 'leapfrog into emerging high-growth areas of the world economy'. The argument is made that the creative industries have tended to outperform other sectors of the economies of many countries in recent years. UNESCO points out, for example, that in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries during the 1990s the cultural industries grew at twice the annual rate of service industries and four times the annual rate of manufacturing (2010, p. 5). At the same time, it points out, the cultural sector receives only 1.7% of Official Development Assistance (ODA), although it represents 2-6% of GNP in many countries (ibid, p.15). Furthermore the creative economy has proved more resilient to the recent financial crisis: 'In 2008, despite the 12 per cent decline in global trade, world trade of creative goods and services continued its expansion, reaching $592 billion and reflecting an

[66] The economic potential of the cultural sector was signalled in the report *Our Creative Diversity* (1995), The Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (1998) and UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural, in which Article 14 argues for stimulating the cultural sectors of poorer countries through development cooperation. In 2002 UNESCO's Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity started to explore new ways to develop sustainable cultural industries in the South, promoting cultural diversity, economic development and job creation in areas like music, publishing, cinema, crafts and the performing arts.

annual growth rate of 14 per cent during the period 2002-2008' (UNCTAD, 2010, p. xx). Cultural tourism is also touted as an under-utilised tool for generating economic growth in the South. These reports argue that the creative economy contains multiple forms of agency: it can 'foster income generation, job creation and export earnings while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development' (UNCTAD, 2008, p. 4). As such it appears able to contribute to an ideal of 'equitable, sustainable and inclusive growth' (UNCTAD, 2010, p. xx)

Despite an increase in donor support, and the apparent enthusiasm for the possible economic contribution of the creative industries, advocates still appear to have to persuade the development community, however, of the importance of culture. In the last five years, lobbying efforts have intensified using 'policy attachment' – that is by articulating culture's importance to uncontested development frameworks and tools such the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Hivos, for example, initiated a discussion in 2005 around the idea of 'culture' being added as the ninth Millennium Development Goal (Hivos, 2005). This kind of effort was repeated in 2010 in the lead up to the MDG Summit in New York which held a Round Table on Culture and Development[67].

The Round Table did have some success in drawing attention to culture, which finally got a mention in the draft resolution from the Summit. Article 16 reads: 'We acknowledge the diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind. We emphasize the importance of culture for development and its contribution to the Millennium Development Goals' (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). The EU also decided to contribute one million Euros to an Expert Facility co-launched with UNESCO to support governance of the cultural sector so that 'governments of developing countries [can] take advantage of experts' knowledge in developing effective and sustainable cultural policies' (European Union @ United Nations, 2010, Summary paragraph). This assumes, of course, that the states in

[67] Immediately prior to that summit Spain had hosted a conference that argued, again, for culture to be brought into the MDGs, and that noted culture's potential contribution to social and economic development through the 'cultural and creative industries, cultural tourism, [and] cultural cooperation' and 'the fundamental role it plays in intangible decisive dimensions, such as individual and collective self-esteem and the dignity of peoples' (AECID & European Commission, 2010, Introduction, paragraph 2). At the same time UNESCO made an active push to get the importance of culture to these mainstream development targets recognised with the publication of a new explanatory brochure (UNESCO, 2010), and the organisation of a High-Level Round Table on Culture and Development at the New York Summit.

question have an active interest in promoting cultural diversity and the creative industries.

Somewhat more utopian demands have also been made to integrate culture into the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)[68] process. In Senegal a recent workshop was held on 'The Capacity of Cultural Actors in the Strategy of Poverty Reduction' in November 2009, and the 2009 *Brussels Declaration by Artists and Cultural Professionals and Entrepreneurs* called for connecting arts and culture with the PRSP process.

Finally, as some of the earliest dedicated arts funds have now been operating long enough to conduct significant evaluations of their practice (Hivos in 2008, the Prince Claus Fund in 2007, SDC in 2006), innovative evaluation techniques for this sector (that is notoriously difficult to evaluate) are now being developed by teams containing both professional artists and professional evaluators (see Fontes and Wilson-Grau, 2008; Fontes, 2010). These evaluations suggest the possibilities for more nuanced articulations of the relationship between artistic practice and development practice, and the clearer articulation of policy beyond direct instrumentalisation, to which this thesis also contributes.

These changes over the last decade show that art's agency in relationship to development continues to be the subject of considerable hope, but also tension over how to conceptualise and how to operationalize that agency. On one hand, strongly instrumental articulations appear to have considerable purchase, especially in the renewed emphasis on the creative economy. However, that very articulation contains divergent hopes for the arts and culture to be able to contribute to a broader range of social goods than simply economic growth. This signals a broader tension between those who seek the transgressive potential of development's cultural turn to rethink development, and those who merely see culture as a tool to facilitate mainstream practices. In a sense the arts remain very marginal in development thinking as the

[68] In order to be eligible for debt relief from the World Bank and the IMF highly indebted poor countries must submit a national planning framework called a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Although in theory PRSPs are more locally owned and democratic than their predecessors (Structural Adjustment Programmes) they must be framed within the international financial institutions' terms of reference in order to be accepted and that means a focus on macro-economic policies and a reduction in social spending. The cultural sector is highly unlikely to be included in a PRSP unless a strong economic case can be made. In 2004, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) surveyed 16 PRSPs (in countries with which it had an established cooperation relationship) and found that 'nearly half of the sixteen PRSPs studied make no reference to culture or only mention culture as a constraint vis à vis poverty reduction efforts'. PRSPs that did value culture as a contributor to development, also mentioned 'its potential inhibiting character in development processes' (Ljungman, et al., 2005, p. 30).

necessity of recent lobbying efforts demonstrate. At the same time, new funds are being established and new donors are emerging which have the potential to offer significant opportunities to artists in the South. While the Commonwealth governments of New Zealand and Australia, for example, appear completely uninterested in supporting arts practices, the EU is supporting the development of the cultural sector in the Pacific, and the Commonwealth Foundation is urging its members to consider more closely the values of culture in the context of development.

Divergent conceptions of the agency of art, diverse actors and the difficulties of implementation

> *In order to get their support, international cooperation agencies demand us to become self-sustainable and market our artwork as profitable products in a context which is oblivious to art in the first place, and where art is hardly a commodity… On the top of that, and at the same time, they remind us to be innovative, risky, socially sensitive, left-wing oriented, and stand for political issues which undermine the establishment.*
>
> (Nicaraguan artist cited in Fontes, 2008, paragraph 7)

The diversity of organisations supporting the arts in the development context, and the multiple hopes for the agency of art in relation to development – which is itself a contested term – means that arts policies are often difficult to implement. Combining the twin arms of a twin-track approach is not easy in practice, although there is evidence to suggest that multiple positive outcomes *can* occur[69]. More normally, as the quote above suggests, this situation places impossible demands on artists in the South. These complexities and contradictions are accentuated by the fact that many culture funds and culture programmes are administered by development staff on the ground who do not necessarily have arts expertise[70].

It is not surprising then, with such a diversity of approaches that a great deal of misunderstanding and ad hoc management takes place in practice in the implementation of an arts/development agenda. Tensions exist both within policy documents and within the administration of culture funds about funding rationale, including the extent

[69] Occasionally an arts project funded through development structures does indeed achieve both a very high level of artistic quality, that is internationally recognised, and contributes to a range of positive social and economic goals that affect diverse sectors of society. The late Andy Palacio's work with Stonetree Records in Belize is an example and will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

[70] Project selection usually depends on development workers in a donor organisation's in-country office: one artist complained to me about having to negotiate with an agronomist to receive arts funding.

and character of instrumentalisation. Minutes from the Vienna Group meeting prior to the 2009 Brussels Colloquium (Vienna Group, 2009) showed that there is still a distinct reluctance on the part of aid agencies to deal with the arts, except, on occasion as a tool. Furthermore the field appears to be poorly understood by many staff on the ground. The Norwegian Embassy in Guatemala was recently found, in an evaluation, to have no 'clear guidelines for its cultural cooperation' leading to conflict among staff: 'what some embassy staff have regarded as procedures not corresponding to the norms, others see as opportunities for innovating cooperation' (Zambrano & Buvollen, 2007, p. 7). A 2003 review of the culture and development work carried out by a range of UK aid agencies that do not have a specific arts focus, such as Save the Children and the Tearfund, found that there were 'no regularities of use of culture, skills base, project development, or management' within projects, 'limited explicit policy on culture and development' within these organisations and 'limited evidence of a rationale behind or strategic objective setting for cultural activities' (Marsh and Gould, 2003, p. 12). Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation were often not considered necessary, and when they were there was confusion as to appropriate methods (ibid). There was also evidence of 'screening out' of cultural activities from reporting (ibid).

Despite culture moving to the forefront of development discourse over the last 20 years, an increasing interest in the contribution of the arts to processes of development, the establishment of dedicated arts and culture funds, and constant calls for usable policy to come out of high-level meetings, the funding and implementation of a culture and development agenda (that includes the arts) requires closer critical engagement. Arizpe argues that, 'the research and policy experiences in culture and development, in spite of their richness over the last fifty years, have not been reflected in the reform of existing institutions dealing with this field – neither at the national or international levels, nor in the creation of new institutions better equipped to help governments and civil societies deal with the multiple phenomena related to culture and development' (2004, p. 183). Marsh and Gould (2003, p. 16) point out that ' [f]urther work is needed to develop and propagate the conceptual framework underpinning cultural approaches in development' and that '[f]urther research and analysis of existing projects would enable development agencies to better understand the role of culture [. . .] in addressing behaviour change and participation'. Similarly Jolly et al. conclude that culture and development remains an area 'where much more awareness and sensitivity is required' (2004, p. 218). More recently, Da Costa has reiterated calls for a strong critical

reappraisal of development's so-called 'cultural turn' and for more nuanced understandings of culture in relation to development, beyond 'glib celebrations' of culture's efficacy or 'decisive disregard' (2010, p. 502).

This thesis responds to such calls by critically exploring the work of a single arts organisation that has received the bulk of its funding from development agencies and NGOs. Through my close engagement with EspIRA/La ESPORA, I examine the complexities of art's relationship to development, the ways in which those complexities impact artists in the South, and also the desires – on the part of both artists and donors – for art to exercise agency in the development context. With this in mind I will now turn to the methodology behind my research, in particular the decision to focus this research on the workings of a single, strategically significant case study as a lens through which to examine these issues.

Chapter 3: Encountering EspIRA/La ESPORA: introductions and implications for methodology

Introduction

This chapter on methodology begins with a description of my first encounter with the arts organisation EspIRA/La ESPORA and its founder Patricia Belli. One of the claims to originality for this thesis stems from its grounded analysis of artists' practices and perspectives, which is missing in the development studies literature. Locating EspIRA/La ESPORA as the starting point for a discussion of methodology is also appropriate because my relationship with the organisation influenced some of my methodological decisions, such as the focus on a single, exceptional case.

Encountering EspIRA/La ESPORA

I first heard about EspIRA/La ESPORA while talking with the late David Craven (Distinguished Professor of Art History at the University of New Mexico) en route to Nicaragua in 2006 as a PhD student. I wanted to carry out research in Central America because I had lived there previously and had enjoyed the experience very much, and I had a good grasp of elementary Spanish. Nicaragua itself was chosen with a certain amount of serendipity but there were notable contributing factors. The country's history included a short (10-year) period of radically democratising cultural policies under the first Sandinista administration, and it was probable that those policies had left some interesting traces. Also, artistic practices were clearly valued in Nicaragua, particularly poetry. Renowned Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darío (1867-1916) has been 'venerated [by Nicaraguans] almost to the point of deification' (Whisnant, 1995, p. 314); the colonial city of Granada regularly hosts a major international poetry festival, and a common phrase in Nicaragua goes '*sos poeta hasta que se muestra lo contrario'* which translates as '[in Nicaragua], you are [considered] a poet until you prove yourself to be otherwise'.

I had decided to make the side-trip to talk with Craven, because of his work on the visual arts and cultural policy in Nicaragua (see Craven, 1989, 2002) and the extensive archival material on Nicaraguan arts and culture that he has lodged at the University of New Mexico's Zimmerman Library. Craven welcomed me warmly, invited me to sit in

on his classes, and introduced me to the archive's librarians. He also introduced me to a student of his (Brenna Drury) who was completing her Masters' research on three women artists, one of whom was Nicaraguan sculptor Patricia Belli. Belli was starting up an independent art school in Managua with funding from the international community. He gave me three photocopied pages about the school that was to be called La ESPORA.

La ESPORA is an acronym for 'La Escuela Superior de Arte' (The Higher School of Art) and it also translates as 'spore'. The school was being established by a non-profit artists' association called EspIRA, which stands for 'Espacio para la Investigación y Reflexión Artística' (Space for Artistic Research and Reflection). EspIRA had been founded in 2003, and brought together a sizable group of Nicaraguan, Central American and international artists to support the establishment of the arts school, La ESPORA[1]. Those original photocopied pages introduced La ESPORA in the following way:

> The Higher School of Art, La ESPORA, is emerging as a space of professional training for visual artists in Nicaragua.
>
> La ESPORA's proposition is to provide artists in training with the theoretical, critical and technical foundations necessary to exercise their creative freedom in a responsible manner, deeply connected both to their surroundings and their spiritual patrimony.
>
> With these tools: technique, criticism and theory, combined with excellent teaching, the school constructs a platform for imaginative and authentic creation that responds effectively to the tensions of our society.
>
> (La ESPORA, 2006, p.1)

It went on to talk about the 'cultural disorder' that many postcolonial countries find themselves in. The economically and politically marginal situation of a nation like Nicaragua – 'euphemistically called "developing"' (ibid) – means that questions of identity are frequently dominated by exotic representations articulated via and/or in response to centres of power outside the region. In response La ESPORA was proposing a strategy to generate awareness of, discussion about and construction of identity through its medium of visual art:

[1] Within this thesis I use the term La ESPORA when referring to the pedagogical activities associated with the school itself and the term EspIRA/La ESPORA when talking about the arts organisation more broadly. The following chapter, which details the variety of activities in which EspIRA eventually became involved, will make this distinction clearer.

> La ESPORA proposes to construct identity starting from the present: not as a static illustration but rather as a practice – a dynamic one – of our hybrid personality constituted as much by the pre-Columbian, as by the colonial and the post-industrial.
>
> We consider higher education to be a principal tool in this enterprise. To suit our difficult social landscape, education must be bold and committed, sensitive and intelligent, focussed on finding appropriate solutions to the conflicts of our circumstances and, above all, absolutely dedicated to stimulate artists in training to recognise the advantages of those circumstances.
>
> (ibid, p. 2)

A number of points raised in these pages were immediately appealing, connecting as they did with my own questions about the representation of Southern subjects through the development imaginary, the politics of international funding for artistic and cultural practices in an environment of highly unequal power relations, and the nature of the social action that art is assumed to perform to be considered worthy of development funding. La ESPORA appeared to actively use strategies to counter negative 'regimes of representation', although these were employed within the field of visual culture rather than within the field of development itself. Although the visual arts were La ESPORA's focus, with emphases on technique, criticism, theory, pedagogy, there was also a clear concern with the way in which art objects and practices intersected with social processes, including the imaginative construction of the present. I wondered what it meant to produce art 'in a responsible manner'. And how did this relate to other perspectives on the social functioning of art within development (as a communicative tool for development's messages, as a 'representative' cultural form protected in the interests of cultural diversity, as a resource for economic development, or as a means of promoting the social inclusion of marginalised groups)?

Furthermore I was intrigued by the fact that this was a school for contemporary art. From my reading, the development community seemed more interested in folkloric or indigenous arts practices as representative of 'local' cultures and of difference, and as tools for stimulating cultural tourism and economic development. In addition, contemporary art had been criticised by many in the West as decadent, post-critical and buying into the worst excesses of global capitalism (see Stallabras 2004, and Virilio, 2003). How then could a project based on contemporary art be seen to be contributing to processes of social renewal in one of Latin America's poorest nations, Nicaragua?

Finally I was intrigued by the idea that the school La ESPORA, in direct opposition to a development discourse characterised by lack and absence, was advocating Nicaragua and Central America as a place with distinct *advantages* in which to practice art. What was being performed here appeared to be in line with a 'politics of possibility' as described in Chapter 1.

Meeting Patricia Belli, founder of La ESPORA

With these thoughts beginning to form I called the school's director Patricia Belli on my arrival in Nicaragua in 2006 and arranged to visit her at her home in a lower-middle class *barrio* in Managua, which was also the base for La ESPORA at that time.

Getting around in Managua as a foreigner requires putting a lot of trust in one's taxi driver. This capital city of over a million inhabitants has no house numbers or street names. Addresses are given with reference to land marks, markets or hotels, occasionally even to buildings that no longer exist (usually due to earthquake damage), or in relation to the city's lake Lago Xolotlan/Managua. I was considerably disoriented when I finally arrived at Belli's single-storey concrete house, next to the corner store (La Pulperia Jénifer) in Barrio Campo Bruce. A young woman showed me in to a spare front room with a worn couch in one corner where I waited until Belli was free. The couch had a plastic eye-ball, gazing up, sewn in to one corner of the seat cushion generating an unsettling if humorous feeling that the couch was no longer 'just a couch', and also that I was being quietly observed.

In a few minutes Belli walked in wearing a loose dress for the heat and a bright orange scarf wrapped around her head. She apologised for keeping me, and led the way through to the concrete patio and some metal rocking chairs beneath a mango tree where I told her about my visit to Craven and explained my research to her. Belli, then talked with me about La ESPORA, which seemed to be a personal project of hers to foster critical thinking in artistic practice in the region, and to share with other students in Nicaragua some of the richness of her own experiences studying overseas[2] in opposition to the problematic education provided by the local art schools. La ESPORA also aimed to

[2] These experiences are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

counter some of the pressures that historical and socio-economic circumstances had generated in the region's visual production.

I didn't record our conversation that day – I felt it to be too invasive for an initial meeting – but I recall it as highly animated, marked by Belli's wit, intelligence and warmth. I was particularly struck by her infectious enthusiasm, audacity of vision, determination that that vision could be realised in Nicaragua, and her hospitality towards me as an outsider and second-language speaker from some far-off islands with no background in the visual arts. She appeared open to the idea of my research and interested in its possibilities in a spirit of peer-to-peer collaboration. As for art, that appeared to be something that anyone could participate in, talk about and form an opinion on – not at all the realm of specialised and guarded knowledge. For Belli, it was also closely connected with contemporary social reality.

Figure 1: Patricia Belli standing at her front door, the former headquarters of EspIRA/La ESPORA. The word CEDAVisual (seen in the background) refers to a small library of art books established under EspIRA/La ESPORA, primarily for students' use.

Our conversation centred around the politics of cultural self-representation, with Belli beginning to ground that understanding for me in relation to context of the visual arts in Nicaragua and in Central America more broadly. Belli also emphasised the fragility of the arts infrastructure in the region and the uncritical nature of much local arts practice and critique. She saw international cooperation as helpful, but the sporadic and quixotic nature of that funding brought its own challenges.

After an hour or so Belli suggested some readings that I might find useful on globalisation and art in Central America (by Gerardo Mosquera and Virginia Pérez-Ratton) and pointed me in the direction of the neighbourhood photocopy shop. Those readings gave me a sense of a wider artistic community within the region that Belli was part of and was acting within. This again inclined me towards focussing my research on La ESPORA because its concerns appeared to resonate with a broader community of artists and critics, allowing for at least some generalisation beyond the school itself.

Also, the fact that La ESPORA was self-consciously acting within broader processes at a range of scales (locally, regionally, globally) would, I felt, enable a particularly rich dialogue about my central preoccupations. I wanted to know how that multi-scalarity intersected with the focus on the local embedded in development's cultural turn. Did that multi-scalarity signal a refutation of the restricted location of the development subject? I also felt that being able to draw on such secondary written material would allow me to deepen my research at my own pace outside of, but alongside, the intricacies of Spanish-language interviews.

While I visited, even participated, in other arts projects (involving visual art, theatre and music)[3] during my months in Nicaragua in 2006, I remained primarily drawn to La ESPORA. Other projects were nowhere near so clearly defined or critically engaged – particularly with regard to the implications of their work at different scales, and their conceptualisation of practice and intervention. Most lacked any documentation or guiding policies, meaning that their underlying principles remained opaque. I was told that the Casa de los Tres Mundos, where I was staying, operated according to '*almas afines*' (the mutual understanding of soul mates) and that, as such, there was no need for any written policy. Some projects had been established with international funds and were struggling to continue on their own after those funds were withdrawn, or were struggling to gain some independence from foreign donors but had no idea where to start in terms of project management. Others were beset by internal political struggles into which I felt I would be inevitably drawn. All of these projects would have made interesting and illuminating fields of research, yet La ESPORA stood out markedly for its clarity of vision, its documented policy and practices, its self-reflexive approach, its political insight, its multi-scalar engagement, and its openness to my involvement as outside researcher. It seemed to be an exceptional case.

Ethnographic methodology

This research investigates the agency of art and artists funded through development, in relation to locally-articulated concerns and to the concerns of the development community. In particular it explores the points of view of artists themselves, a

[3] Notably Música en los Barrios and the multiple projects associated with the Casa de los Tres Mundos in Granada.

perspective almost wholly lacking in the development studies literature. In order to explore these questions in sufficient complexity I adopted a broadly ethnographic approach, as ethnographic research is generally 'actor-oriented' and 'attempts to convey reality from a subject's "point of view"' (Brockington & Sullivan 2003, p. 65).

Following the actor didn't, however, limit this research to a bounded locality. Brockington and Sullivan point out that all 'field "sites" now comprise unrelenting interpenetrations of local and global' (ibid, p. 67). Furthermore Scheyvens and Storey point out that the 'field' is not simply a geographical location, but rather a constructed social and political site (2003, p. 9). In the context of development, which is intrinsically inter-cultural, that site is likely to involve a multiplicity of stakeholders. Through my focus on EspIRA/La ESPORA then, I was drawn to consider their relationships with others arts organisations in the region and internationally, their relationships with international donors, and the cultural politics of the global art world.

Davies defines ethnography broadly as 'a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques but including engagement with the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time' (2008, p. 5). In 2006 I spent five months in Nicaragua where I adopted various qualitative and ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, and the keeping of a fieldwork diary in my engagements with EspIRA/La ESPORA. I sat in on workshops, exhibition openings and public lectures run by La ESPORA. I talked with staff and students informally and set up more structured interviews. During that time I also travelled to Costa Rica to interview the late Virginia Pérez-Ratton, director of the highly influential NGO TEOR/éTica, as well as staff at the regional offices of UNESCO and at Hivos. Everyone I talked to was made aware of my research and the uses to which their comments would be put[4].

Also in 2006, I spent three months as an independent research student in the department of Social Anthropology at La Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Iztapalapa (La UAM) in Mexico City. At La UAM I extended my bibliography, discussed my work in postgraduate classes, undertook a handful of significant interviews

[4] This usually took the form of a verbal consent rather than a written consent, which was in accordance with the University Ethics Approval granted by Massey University in 2005 for this research. This research project was assessed as 'low-risk'.

with academics and cultural commentators (including Nestor García Canclini) and deepened my understanding of cultural institutions and processes in Latin America.

In 2008 I returned to Nicaragua for a further and very intensive month of research, which purposely coincided with a workshop run by Argentinian artist Claudia Fontes, who had just co-authored a major evaluation of the arts and culture programme run by Hivos in Central America. Through the evaluation process Fontes had met Patricia Belli and had been inspired to return to run a workshop for La ESPORA. Fontes and I both had accommodation in the same complex and I had the opportunity to talk with her, in some depth, about my research and about her work for Hivos. In between visits to Nicaragua, and on my return home in 2008, I maintained regular email contact with EspIRA/ La ESPORA and worked collaboratively with Patricia Belli on a number of funding proposals.

Although my methods can be considered broadly ethnographic, my time conducting fieldwork was limited (both by events in my personal life and by the dictates of the doctoral timeframe). I did not approach, nor aim for, any kind of 'insider-status'. It was precisely my outsider-status that appeared to be of value to those I talked with. La ESPORA's students were interested in my comments during workshops because they represented a different view from 'outside'. Patricia Belli appreciated having someone unconnected with La ESPORA to talk to about the challenges of running the organisation.

The relationship that I developed with Patricia Belli can best be characterised as one of friendship and collaboration, no doubt enhanced by equivalences of class, gender, political orientation and education. As Eriksen has pointed out, fieldwork is, in many cases, 'as profoundly personal as it is professional' a point that may hinder one's objectivity as a researcher but that may, on the other hand, improve the quality of one's work through 'existential involvement' (2001, p. 28). As my focus became more directed towards La ESPORA I spent more and more time tagging along with Belli as she organised events, picked visiting art teachers up from the airport, took them out for beer, ran critical workshops and so on.

The ethnographic method, and any cross-cultural research undertaken in development studies, must acknowledge the perils of attempting to represent others and speak for others. Scheyvens and Storey (2003, pp. 2-3) describe the 'crisis of legitimacy' that has

faced 'geographers, social anthropologists, sociologists and others who carry out social research in Third World contexts'. Postcolonial critiques of ethnography have been particularly trenchant, highlighting the ethnographer's tendency to 'adopt an authoritative viewpoint over a "society"', describe its rules and norms in an 'ethnographic present', leading to a distorted depiction of 'timeless "still lives"'' (Brockington & Sullivan, 2003, p. 66).

Rather than seeing such critiques as paralysing, however, Scheyvens and Storey (2003, pp. 5-9) see them as constructive, generating greater reflexivity and accountability among researchers. Furthermore, they suggest that cross-cultural fieldwork still has significant value in countering Western ethnocentrism and parochialism, and in helping us to understand 'complex development issues' in an interdependent world (ibid, p. 6). Arguing that 'research between Western and Third World people is always exploitative' is, as Scheyvens and Storey point out, 'based on the assumption that Third World people have no power', yet power is 'rarely an either/or phenomenon' and 'researchers rarely hold all of the control in the research process' (ibid, p. 5). My experience in Nicaragua certainly attests to the agency (and power) of contemporary artists who refute the label 'subaltern' and strategically posit their own centrality (Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 297). During fieldwork, my reticence about barging in on organisations or having insufficient expertise to be able to contribute was usually met with bafflement. It took me some time to realise that most of the artists I encountered were actually quite pleased to have someone show an interest in their practices and struggles. In 2011, Patricia Belli remarked to me in an email that she had found my commitment to EspIRA/La ESPORA to be supportive and nurturing (personal communication, June, 2011).

I have certainly tried to be as true to my own experience of EspIRA/La ESPORA as possible in the writing of this thesis, and to understand the points of view put forward by associated artists. I quote fairly extensively from interviews and from archival material, and my ongoing correspondence with Patricia Belli (which has included her feedback on conference papers that I have written) has shown up my own assumptions and helped to clarify numerous points. In the end, though, I acknowledge that the analysis, or 'imposition of coherence' (Clifford, 1983, p.142), and the choice of political engagement are mine and a 'matter of strategic choice' (ibid).

My ability to accurately present the ideas of those I have talked with was both enhanced and impeded by the fact that all of the fieldwork was undertaken in Spanish, a language in which I am proficient but not fluent. Prior to embarking on the PhD I had a reasonable level of communicative Spanish. I spent my first month in Nicaragua at language school trying to raise my level of proficiency, while making my initial contacts with arts organisations. Davies points out that language fluency remains 'fundamentally insightful' in the ethnographic engagement and that its importance 'cannot really be over-emphasized' (2008, pp. 87-88). Without doubt being able to communicate in Spanish significantly broadened the scope of my research and deepened the nature of the relationships I formed. I was able to attend a wide range of events: parties, public seminars, critical workshops, art openings, and excursions, and understand what was going on and interact with students, staff and members of the public. I was able to read documents from arts organisations, donors and critics published in Spanish. I was able to interview staff and students in Spanish without the time-lag of working with an interpreter, and to engage in off-the-cuff conversations that were often as insightful as more structured interviews. I was also able to assist some arts organisations with funding applications and transcribing tasks that provided additional insight into development processes. There were times, however, when the limits of my language ability were frustrating and there were numerous occasions when I missed significant nuances or references. I also found the constant task of working in another language very tiring and this led me to pass up opportunities to participate in some events which no doubt would have been insightful.

I went to Nicaragua with the hope that the relationships I formed could be based on some kind of reciprocity that would allow me to give back to those who had generously given me their time. I was pleased to find that many groups could use some of my skills (writing documents, structuring information, translation) but I was surprised by what a valuable part of the research experience this turned out to be. It gave me access not only to information and people that I would not have had otherwise but it also allowed me to see more of the processes at work in the groups that I worked with as well as building genuine trust, solidarity and friendship[5].

[5] Between 2006 and 2011 I worked on a number of funding applications for EspIRA/La ESPORA both in Nicaragua and back in New Zealand via email. I also transcribed interviews that were undertaken at art openings, and organised the material thematically for a donor evaluation. I worked with another arts organisation, Música en los Barrios, to write a logical framework analysis for a donor agency, and I

Apart from interviews, conversations and the analysis of written material, daily life in Nicaragua was always insightful. One example is the challenge of accessing the public space in which visual art is presented. Towards the end of my visit in 2006, for example, I wanted to go to the opening of an exhibition by a video artist in Managua whom I had met but I was almost thwarted by the complex nature of the arrangements required. In order to get to this opening, which was at the Palacio Nacional[6], I had to stay the night in Managua because there was no transport back to Granada at night (the roads are apparently too dangerous). In Managua I had to take a taxi at night to the Palacio and I was told by friends that it was too dangerous to go alone and was warned not to carry anything superfluous and not to sit in the front seat of the taxi in case someone climbed in to the backseat and tried to strangle me. I ended up staying in a cheap hostel with a friend in a rather unsafe part of the city with guards armed with batons patrolling outside. The evening passed uneventfully but it was a shock to me to realise how difficult it was, especially as a single woman, to access that public space in which art can be discussed and enjoyed. The following week the exhibition was closed down by the Ministry of Culture for its political content in the run up to the general election, a further narrowing of the public space which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

The value of a single, and exceptional, case study

This thesis is, therefore, based primarily on an ethnographic engagement with one artist-led organisation, EspIRA/La ESPORA. Reference is made to other arts organisations in the region that work with EspIRA/La ESPORA and are motivated by similar concerns but the focus of this thesis is on an in-depth understanding of the workings of a single organisation. This could be interpreted as a weakness in method (particularly by those influenced by method in the natural sciences or by the demand for universals generated by the Platonic tradition) in terms of the limits of the capacity to make more general claims about the field based on one study. Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 75), however, points out that even in the natural sciences it is sometimes possible to generalise from a single case

translated some texts for a book to be published by TEOR/éTica (a Costa Rican NGO). I also edited documents for a fellow student and lobbyist for arts and development in Germany which were presented to the European Union in 2007 to try to influence their international cultural policy.

[6] Although this exhibition was held in national gallery, the artist himself, Ernesto Salmerón, typically organised showings of digital art at a little porn cinema (Cine Judy) on the outskirts of Managua in an effort to avoid the elitism of the galleries. At the one showing that I attended at Cine Judy, however, only about half a dozen young, self-selected and well-educated people showed up. Some of the challenges around expanding the critical public space in Nicaragua are discussed further in Chapter 5.

if that case is chosen well (the test for the law of gravity using a piece of lead and a feather is an example): 'the strategic choice of case may greatly add to the generalizability of a case study'. He also argues that 'formal generalization is only one of many ways by which people create and accumulate knowledge' (ibid, p. 76) and that the 'power of the good example' is underestimated as a source of knowledge.

EspIRA /La ESPORA is strategically significant as a site through which to explore the agency of art's liminal positioning in relation to development for the following reasons. EspIRA /La ESPORA is clearly arts-centred, rather than development-centred, and yet funded by development donors, thereby maintaining that important liminal tension. It also promoted a form of visual art (contemporary) that did not appear to be obviously socially expedient in development's terms and which did not reflect a restricted attachment to the 'local'. Furthermore, its connections to a wider regional network of artists' organisations with similar aims seemed to allow for some generalisation.

I also came to see EspIRA/La ESPORA as an unusual or 'extreme' case in Flyvbjerg's terms because of its diversity, the strength of its critical awareness, and its regional reach. It is very diverse (running at least four distinct teaching programmes, a weekly television programme, regional touring exhibitions, workshops with international artists and providing education, employment and professional development) and it is regionally significant (offering critical workshops in five Central American countries; having an annual month-long residency for young artists from throughout the region, and also touring the resulting exhibition throughout the region)[7]. All of its projects are informed by robust processes of collective reflection. Flyvbjerg argues that atypical cases have particular value as sites of research as they 'often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied [and in addition] it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur' (ibid, p. 78).

The methodology of this research, therefore, opts for depth (and the rich ambiguity of context and practice) over breadth, but the complex and extensive nature of this single organisation and its networks allows for some stretching of the material towards a larger

[7] In this sense it could be compared with a handful of other very significant arts organisations in the region such as Casa Comal's school for cinema and television production in Guatemala, TEOR/éTica's curatorial practice based in Costa Rica or Papaya Music's recording and production studio in Costa Rica.

field. The following three chapters are primarily ethnographic, describing the varied practices of EspIRA/La ESPORA, and their particular conceptions of art's agency in relation to the specifics of context. This ethnographic material goes on to form the basis, in Chapters 7 and 8, for a broader analysis of the tensions that exist in the relationships between arts organisations and donors, and in their contrasting conceptions of art's agency, in order to evaluate the possibilities for development's funding of the arts to provide an alternative imaginative space to development itself.

Chapter 4: EspIRA/La ESPORA

Introduction

In the previous chapter I noted what I felt were productive tensions for the purposes of this enquiry in EspIRA/La ESPORA when I first met Patricia Belli and read some of the organisation's documentation. The organisation seemed to combine a strongly arts-based articulation of the importance of critical pedagogy, theory and technical skills to art making (indicating a liminal relationship to mainstream development), with a deep sense of contextual grounding and social responsibility that could not, however, be reduced to instrumentalisation. Instead, art's relationship to society was viewed as imbricated and relational, with visual culture itself reproducing and intervening in broader social processes. The fact that EspIRA/La ESPORA was a school for *contemporary* art also problematized the restriction to the local embedded in development's cultural turn and prompted a consideration of agency unconnected to cultural difference. Furthermore the organisation consciously articulated the possibilities for dynamic artistic production being created in Nicaragua, despite the country's socio-economic difficulties and in opposition to a development discourse of lack and deficiency. EspIRA/La ESPORA seemed to both counter development's discursive reductionism, and problematize some of the ways in which 'culture' (and art's agency) had come to be framed within development.

The following three ethnographic chapters describe and explore EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices, keeping in mind these productive tensions. These chapters describe the diverse articulations of agency made by EspIRA/La ESPORA and other contemporary arts organisations in the region, and begin to examine the capacity of donors to support that agency.

EspIRA/La ESPORA is an evolving organisation and has diversified its practices considerably since its establishment in 2006. In this chapter I describe, as succinctly and clearly as possible, EspIRA/La ESPORA's emergence, its current range of practices, and its funding platform. This description will then form the basis for subsequent discussions. Chapter 5 then examines the conditions for making contemporary art in the region as a whole, emphasising the ways in which contemporary artists articulate the

reduction of spaces for the exercise of critical agency, and their own determined efforts to reconfigure those spaces. This analysis adds considerable depth to EspIRA/La ESPORA's claims for agency. Finally in this ethnographic section, Chapter 6 describes, in detail, one cycle of La ESPORA's activities in order to demonstrate the embodied agency of its practices, and the specific mechanisms through which agency is exercised.

Catalysts and antecedents: the emergence of EspIRA/La ESPORA

Vuelo Difícil

In 1999, Patricia Belli, principal founder of EspIRA/La ESPORA, found herself at the centre of a national controversy. Her experience of this controversy was one of the major catalysts behind her decision to establish an alternative critically-oriented contemporary art school in Central America.

At the Second Nicaraguan Biennial of Painting, Belli was awarded first prize for an artwork called 'Vuelo Difícil' (or Difficult Flight, see Figure 2). The work consisted of white fabric draped in the shape of a figure, painted in oils with small, angel-like wings and an exposed section of spine, and hung around the base with multiple family portraits in tiny frames, which seem to weigh the figure down, hampering its capacity for flight. The award was controversial because the work did not conform to dominant local pictorial codes, which equated 'painting' (the focus of the Biennial) with a flat, rectangular canvas. Critics complained that Belli's work was not 'Nicaraguan' because it was not a flat canvas. They claimed that it adopted 'European' styles (although oil painting on a flat canvas was not – ironically – viewed in the same way). Critics of the work discounted the decision of the Biennial's jury and the criticism became aggressive and personal. The national art school, where Belli had previously worked,[1] stopped classes in protest at the judging and some painters withdrew their work from the Biennial, mounting a parallel exhibition entitled 'Nos-otros' (meaning both 'us' and 'the others') in the Palacio de Cultura, the headquarters for the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture. The Director of the Institute himself wrote to the judging panel to complain

[1] Belli had taught at Nicaragua's National School of Fine Art (1987-88) but she disliked the rigidity of the programme and left after one year (personal communication, September, 2006).

about the awarding of the prize to an 'installation' rather than a 'painting' (cited in EspIRA, 2010, p. 40).

Figure 2: Image of *Vuelo Difícil*. Courtesy of Patricia Belli.

Other artists and critics wrote to the media in favour of Belli's award, voicing concern about the intensely conservative nature of the backlash against her work. Fellow artist David Ocón, for example, wrote the following:

> It's very simplistic to speak of 'our roots' or 'national values' through recourse to archaeological, ethnographic, folkloric or gastronomic aspects, identities are not stereotypes, or dogmas, to refer to these cultural aspects as mere formalisms brings [us] easily to comfortable, formulaic, and ultimately static and rigid positions [that] in the worst case produce exclusions, discrimination, chauvinism and even fascism.
>
> (Cited in EspIRA, 2010, p. 41)

This controversy certainly demonstrates the arts to be 'an arena of struggle'. It also demonstrates tensions in the field of visual arts in Central America, within which EspIRA/La ESPORA intervenes. It illustrates, for example, the way in which limits are placed around what constitutes visual art, and the perceived threat of exposure to alternative forms and diverse practices. A national canon is asserted as a means of protecting existing hierarchies, embedded within national cultural institutions such as the National Art School and the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture. The controversy also indicates a reactionary and personalised approach to cultural critique. Belli points out that no-one argued about the quality of her work, only about technical or personal aspects of it (personal communication, September 2006). Conservative critics 'affirm[ed] the canon and [technical] method as axes of artistic validation, ignoring critical thought, creative thought, research, experimentation, contemporary experience and the aesthetics of diversity' (La ESPORA, 2010, p. 40). While this debate reveals a group of dominant artists struggling to hold on to their power through recourse to a conservative, nationalist discourse, it also reveals a desire among many artists (like Ocón) for more open, critical discussion about artistic production, for greater diversification, and for a more robust debate about cultural practices and cultural identity to which EspIRA/La ESPORA responds.

The organisers of the region-wide Central American Biennial took note of this controversy in Nicaragua and, shortly afterwards, in 2000, opted to expand the field of visual arts considered at the regional Biennial, a change reflected in its new name, the Biennial of Visual Arts of the Isthmus of Central America (BAVIC). In October 2010, on the eve of Managua's hosting of the 7th BAVIC as it assumed the title of the region's 'Capital of Culture', Patricia Belli's controversial 1999 win was revisited in the press as a major turning point and 'necessary rupture' in Nicaraguan art history (Mulligan, 2010, paragraph 20).

SFAI

The intensity of the controversy had a personal impact on Belli. Just prior to the biennial, she had been awarded a Fulbright scholarship to undertake an MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI)[2]. She was grateful to be able to flee the controversy which raged on in her absence. At the interview for the Fulbright award Belli said that she had no intention of teaching on her return to Nicaragua. She was only interested in continuing her personal artistic practice (personal communication, September 2006).

The richness, however, of Belli's experiences at SFAI began to change her mind. The Masters programme was highly interdisciplinary; it involved rigorous critical seminars about students' studio work; staff members were all practising visual artists and their input was supplemented by that of a wide range of international visiting artists. These are all elements that Belli has subsequently incorporated into La ESPORA. She loved the Masters programme despite it being extremely demanding and believes her work matured considerably during that time. Belli also began to see 'what sort of arts education was possible' (personal communication, September, 2006). In contrast she reflected that the kind of education offered at existing art schools in Central America bordered on a kind of abuse – restricting horizons rather than opening them up. Art schools in the region typically teach in a restricted range of media (painting and drawing), reproduce hierarchical relationships between teacher and student, do not encourage research and investigation or the analysis of global art movements, and focus on technique over critical engagement[3]. In San Francisco Belli started to think for the first time about the possibility for creating a critically engaged, higher education school for contemporary art in Nicaragua, albeit constructed 'from civil society and without material resources' (EspIRA, 2010, p. 41).

[2] The SFAI is one of the oldest art schools in the United States and has many notable former faculty, including Ansel Adams, Kathy Acker, Okwui Enwezor, and Mark Rothko. It describes itself in the following terms: 'Founded in 1871, the San Francisco Art Institute is one of the U.S.'s oldest and most prestigious schools of higher education in contemporary art. It boasts an illustrious list of alumni in all of its areas of focus. But most important, it has consistently held fast to its core philosophy of creating programs where creativity and critical thinking are fostered in one of the most open, innovative, and interdisciplinary environments in higher education. At SFAI we focus on educating artists who will become the creative leaders of their generation' (see www.sfai.edu/Section.aspx?sectionID=2).
[3] Students' experiences of these schools will be discussed in the following chapter.

TAJo

Realising that with such limited resources Belli would have to start small, she began, on her return to Nicaragua in 2001, by advertising an evening of study and dialogue about art – 'open to anyone who had ever asked the question of why their work was different to someone else's' (personal communication, September , 2006). Gradually a small group began to form and, at the end of that first year, they held a collective exhibition of contemporary art that Belli described as 'not of a professional standard but rigorous, not grandiloquent, modest but solid' (personal communication, September, 2006).

After this first anniversary, the group began to consolidate and named itself TAJo, which stands for Taller de Arte Joven (Workshop of Young/Youth Art) and also translates as 'slash'. TAJo began to run critical workshops, regular exhibitions and to publish catalogues. In 2003 six of the 21 artists selected at the Nicaraguan Biennial were associated with TAJo and the judges took note of this group as indicative of a new generation of Nicaraguan artists (EspIRA, 2010, pp. 41-42). Also in 2003 artists from TAJo were invited to participate in 'Ciudad Multiple', a major international public art event that took place in Panama. At this time the Dutch development NGO Hivos became involved for the first time, funding the publication of TAJo's first catalogue.

Belli feels that TAJo was important in generating dialogue and community among emerging contemporary artists, which was extended through the group's interactions with other independent artists' initiatives emerging in the region around the same time[4]. Belli continued to show her work in Nicaragua and overseas, to win awards in the Central American and Caribbean Biennials, and to take up artists' residencies (in Trinidad and Tobago, and in Denmark). In early 2005, however, TAJo disbanded. Attendance at critical seminars had been reducing for some time, and Belli had noted a growing activist element which she felt to be out of sync with her original vision: 'increasingly, there was less criticism and [there were] more events. The original project was something quite different, so the healthiest option was to return to its origins. This happened, this is happening, with the workshops of La ESPORA' (Belli cited in Quintanilla, 2008, Paragraph 7). Despite the decline of TAJo, Belli sees TAJo as establishing the foundations for La ESPORA. The young artists in TAJo were, she says,

[4] Rosina Cazali's La Curanderia in Guatemala, Virginia Pérez-Raton's TEOR/éTica in Costa Rica, the ongoing work of Raúl Quintanilla in Nicaragua with the independent arts journal *Artefacto* and later *Estrago*.

'the first artists who demonstrated that one could make contemporary art of quality in Nicaragua, that one could research through art, argue, think, feel, be curious, without having studied abroad, being young men and women, living in the *barrios*, without privileges, that the privilege was the dialogue, the interaction' (ibid, paragraph 9).

Belli's experiences with TAJo also led her to consider the need for a more solid infrastructure that provided greater continuity to support critical, creative processes in emerging artists. She understood that 'necessity really was the mother of invention': that Nicaragua, with all its socio-economic difficulties, proved to be an extremely fertile ground for 'the cultivation of ingenuity, the critical spirit and sensibility' (La ESPORA, 2006, p.5). Considerable success had been achieved with a reasonably small input: within a year the young artists associated with TAJo had become a central departure point for contemporary art in Nicaragua. On the other hand, running short workshops did not promote a maturing of the artists' work. Nicaragua's socio-economic adversity might generate valuable creative resources, but it also denied the possibility of creating long-term structures to support these promising artistic processes. Belli realised that creating a tertiary-level school would take intensive commitment and collaboration (personal communication, September, 2006), and she gathered together a supportive group of artists, critics, gallery owners and art historians (from Central America, North America and Europe). Together, they established the non-profit organisation EspIRA (the Space for Artistic Research and Reflection) in 2003, as an umbrella organisation to support the establishment of La ESPORA. Between April and December 2005 Belli worked intensively to set up the new school, and in 2006, La ESPORA was launched as the first space for professional training of contemporary visual artists in Central America.

La ESPORA's activities

Tertiary education and the desire for institutionalisation

La ESPORA was founded with the intention of developing a five-year degree programme, catering to students from throughout Central America. In its six years of operation, however, it has not evolved into a tertiary-level institution, although in 2011 it has a full five-year academic curriculum ready to be implemented, and an increasingly

skilled and experienced student body. The funding environment of development supports short-term projects rather than institutionalisation. Donors do not, in general, support tertiary education – seeing it as the responsibility of state governments and implying long-term financial commitment. Belli herself, however, is emphatic about the agency of institutionalisation, arguing that: 'in this country, in this system, the most innovative or revolutionary thing that you can do is to institutionalise because institutions don't exist' (personal communication, August, 2008).

While unable to stabilise its practices in the form of an institution, La ESPORA has, over the past five years, established a set of core practices (critical workshops, month-long regional residencies, and travelling exhibitions) that it runs on an annual basis. Through these practices it encourages critical engagement with visual representation among emerging artists in the region, analysis of the politics of representation and the ideological implications of form and content. Its pedagogical method is intensely dialogic and based on horizontal relationships and exchange. It encourages research and investigation, and experimentation with diverse media. It also encourages students to create art starting from their personal interests, rather than unthinkingly reproducing the national canon. This starting point in personal interests builds self-esteem as students' own life-experience is valued, and it also brings with it an active and self-conscious engagement with context (conceived in the broadest sense). Together these components encourage what Belli has described as a 'responsible' approach to making art – expansive, and critically and ethically informed.

In addition, under the banner of EspIRA, a diverse range of additional projects have sprung up in response to the opportunities of the funding environment. The organisation has adopted what Medina calls 'a responsible opportunism' (Medina, 2000, p. 410). New projects are generated that can attract funding, but behind all of these projects is the same underlying drive to stimulate critical discourse about visual culture and representation in Central America.

Core practices: TACon, RAPACES, EX-IT

La ESPORA's core practices include critical workshops (TACon), artistic residencies (RAPACES), and touring exhibitions (EX-IT) that build students' technical and critical competencies while, at the same time, bringing young artists from throughout the region

together and working to educate multiple publics about creative processes and contemporary art. These practices were envisaged as laying the educational foundations for students wanting to enter the degree programme but they are also ends in themselves.

The first workshops (with students from Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador) took place in 2006, La ESPORA's first year of operation and a pilot year to test the effectiveness of its programmes and to convince donors to continue their financial support. The workshops have gradually expanded and consolidated into what is now known as TACon, and the workshops are now region-wide.

TACon: Talleres de Arte Contemporáneo (Workshops of Contemporary Art)

Figure 3: Advertisement for TACon (the word '*tacon*' also means 'high-heel' in Spanish)

Throughout the year La ESPORA runs critical workshops for emerging artists in Managua based around students' works in progress. The format of these workshops is based on Patricia Belli's experience at the San Francisco Arts Institute and involves peer-to-peer dialogue, critical questioning and collective reflection. In a presentation to Dutch donor Arts Collaboratory, Belli explained the method as follows:

> [. . .] someone shows an artwork: one by one, everyone else gives an opinion about the following: what the artist attempts to express, what means he (she) uses to do that, and how well he (she) succeeds. All three opinions are, of course, subjective interpretations; therefore a discussion arises about how every participant reached those conclusions. The most important tool of the discussion is to question how you know what you know: what are the elements that make you think, feel that? How do these elements do that? Through their conventionalized role in culture? And if so, what's the power mechanism behind this convention? Or do they affect you through a biological mechanism?
>
> Then the facilitator will question the political implications of the piece: what stereotypes are present in the ideas the piece supports? And then, after everyone has spoken, the author is allowed to tell his (her) story, addressing the same issues: intention, means, success, ideology, elements of surprise.

> Finally we discuss everything again, based on the new light the author has shed.
>
> Through this methodology, the encounter becomes exchange.
>
> (Belli, 2007b, Part A)

Critical workshops are attended by La ESPORA's core students in Managua[5], but other students from the region who have become involved in one way or another may also attend from time to time[6]. They are frequently facilitated by Belli but at times visiting artists also run them, sometimes on a particular theme. Argentinean artist Claudia Fontes ran a week-long workshop on perceptions of success and failure when I visited La ESPORA in June 2008.

The workshops are free of charge and open to young artists of any level – Belli sits beside students who may have only ever produced a handful of drawings and have no formal artistic education – and both present and discuss their work side-by-side. I found the discussion at these workshops to be both respectful and very robust. One student commented to me that at first this process was terrifying: 'like being psychoanalysed by the group [. . .] but that we are trying to be clearer about the connections between the object and the intention of the artist, so that the artist really knows what he/she is doing' (Santa Cruz, personal communication, August 2006). The method promotes a self-conscious critical awareness on the part of young artists regarding the mechanisms through which the work generates a particular effect or gains meaning, and the ideological implications of form and content.

In 2009 these workshops became structured into a six-month sequential programme of weekly workshops running from May through to September open to 20 students who had not previously been associated with La ESPORA. This development aimed to reach new students, and make attendance more regular so that knowledge and skill could be built systematically. Irregular attendance is common at La ESPORA as students negotiate other demands from work, study, and/or family. This is one reason why institutionalisation is desired: a formal course structure, with attendance requirements,

[5] During the pilot phase of La ESPORA, in 2006, some of these workshops were also held in smaller towns like León, Granada, Matagalpa and Estelí in attempts to broaden La ESPORA's reach and also attract students from these places to its courses.

[6] A young Guatemalan artist who had previously attended one of La ESPORA's regional workshops (RAPACES – see below) was present at critical workshops I attended in Managua in 2008.

leading to a nationally acknowledged qualification would encourage students to prioritise attendance. The TACon programme includes classes in art theory and history, critical workshops as described above, and classes focussed on 'materials and processes', 'marks and surfaces' and 'illusion-abstraction-concretion'[7] (EspIRA/La ESPORA, 2009a, paragraph 6). This programme is modelled on the detailed curriculum that La ESPORA has developed for its hoped-for degree programme.

There is still no cost for attendance of this structured programme but students have to commit to the entire course and to give 60 hours of labour spread out over the six months. It is envisaged that following this programme students will 'know with greater clarity what it is that they want to do, where they want to direct their creativity' and also 'apply for a place in the academic residency [RAPACES] with quality portfolios' (ibid, paragraph 14).

In 2010 TACon expanded further and the programme was offered throughout the region in association with co-partner organisations in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Panama[8]. One Nicaraguan student described her experience in the TACon programme as follows:

> I think that the most important thing [I have learned] is that I have wanted to make a commitment to sincerity [. . .] wanting to introduce the creative process fully into my life, without prejudices or aberrations, without foundations more than that itself: not to have foundations. Because I feel

[7] In 'materials and processes' students investigate 'different materials (whether from the art world or not) and ways of working with them, as well as their meaning and the ways in which they are perceived. For example a piece of plaster, a handful of dirt and a plastic toy, are all materials that say different things. Similarly, to tie, to staple and to support and are very different ways of joining materials, objects. So too are the use of machines or hands or rain.' This part of the course explores the links 'between the physical properties of materials and processes, their semantic value and their effects within visual language' (EspIRA/La ESPORA, 2009a, paragraph 7). 'Marks and surfaces' considers 'the marks or traces, the tools or actions used to mark, the surfaces such as paper or sand at the beach; the mark of a tattoo on skin, or on a wet clay pot. It also includes virtual marks made on the computer or mapped out in space'. This phase also includes 'mimetic representation and the gesture of marking. Density, thickness, speed, texture, are characteristics that refer to [the] semantics under investigation. Similarly, the materials involved and the areas used intervene in the interpretation of meaning or feeling' (ibid, paragraphs 8-9). In the section called 'illusion-abstraction-concretion', illusion refers to representative art: '[i]mitating reality through the narrative of figures is intrinsic to the artistic endeavour and yet has been severely questioned by artists for over a century'. In abstraction the narrative value is reduced: '[t]he eminently visual expression – non-verbal – is expressed through the choices of materials, colour, and design, among others' (ibid, paragraphs 10-11). Concretion relates to the immediacy of perception: 'it might relate to the experience of a tunnel, or a swim in the ocean, or of a roller coaster. In art, concretion refers to works that stimulate the viewer physically or psychosomatically: the work of art is felt, is sensed, is smelt. However, memory, images, narrative and abstraction can also be part of this "concrete language"' (ibid, paragraph 12).

[8] These co-partner organisations were: in Guatemala 'Ultravioleta', in Honduras 'Mujeres en las Artes' (MUA), in El Salvador 'Museo de Arte de El Salvador' (MARTE), in Costa Rica 'StudioAmon' and in Panama 'El Patio'.

> that sincerity or creativity (it's the same for me) arises from the need to unlearn learned vices and to get to know things or the world, including myself, trying to go on shedding the layers of prejudice, or at least playing with them in order to loosen them [. . .] for me it is not limited to a work of art that is to be presented, and all its particularities, but rather I have tried to bring the creative project to the discovery of all that I can, and then to the creation of new approaches, in the whole range [of things] that keep on arising from daily life and introspection.
>
> (cited in EspIRA, 2010, p. 52)

The workshops organised under TACon, therefore, comprise an increasingly sophisticated programme with a region-wide reach. All workshops are characterised by an underlying philosophy of horizontal exchange, collective reflection, and critical enquiry, which lend themselves to an expansive cultural politics of critical engagement and exchange.

RAPACES, Residencia Artística Para Artistas Centroamericanos Emergentes (Artists' Residency for Emerging Central American Artists)[9]

At the end of each year La ESPORA runs a 4-6 week residency for young visual artists from throughout Central America. Local and international teachers (from Brazil, Mexico, Panama, Argentina, Cuba, Japan, Denmark as well as Nicaragua) who are known for the quality of their art work as well as their flair for teaching, give workshops based around a central theme. In 2007, the theme for the residency was the place of painting in contemporary art; in 2008 the theme was art and power; in 2009 it was the influence of the social, geographic and temporal context on the creative process and in 2010 it focused on the use of signs in art. These themes reflect issues arising from the regional context for making contemporary visual art: in the first case the problematic place of painting – 'the language most damaged by the regional artistic situation' (Belli, 2008, p. 3); in the second case the discriminating effect of dominant image cultures; and in the third case the influence of context on creative practice. The residencies combine critical workshops similar to those run through TACon, with technical training and lectures/discussions on art history and theory.

[9] In 2009 an offshoot from RAPACES emerged called RAPP (Residencia Académica para Poetas Performáticos), which was an equivalent workshop offered in performance poetry as opposed to visual art. This was a joint effort between EspIRA/La ESPORA and Granada's well-known International Poetry Festival – a major week-long cultural (and touristic) event held annually with a carnival, hundreds of poetry recitals and music. RAPP grew out of the interests of two of EspIRA's workers who are also published poets – Darwin Andino and Eunice Shade.

Figure 4: Advertisement for the fifth annual RAPACES residency, 2010, with the theme of 'Signs and Icons'.

Around 20 students from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama and Nicaragua come together to attend this intensive programme, held in Managua (or in the northern city of León on one occasion)[10]. The non-Nicaraguans live together in a shared residence, rented for the purpose. Students apply for a place on the residency with a portfolio and essay. Places are mostly free (some, who are able to, pay a small contribution) and students are again required to contribute a set number of labour hours to the running of the residency, as well as to bear responsibility for hosting the post-residency exhibition in their own country (see EX-IT below). Half of all places are reserved for women, one-third are reserved for Nicaraguan students (one of these is allocated to a student from Nicaragua's isolated Caribbean Coast), another third for students from elsewhere in the region, and the final third distributed according to the quality of submissions.

The RAPACES residencies are, in essence, a short but very intensive extension of the TACon workshops aimed at students who have established a stronger platform in their own work. The learning experience is deepened through the different perspectives of international teaching staff and through the experience of intra-regional exchange. The residencies are also geared towards the production of finished work, although they also engage strongly with art history and theory.

Ex-It: Exposición Itinerante Centroamericana (Itinerant Central American exhibition)

Following each residency, work produced by participating students is shown in a travelling exhibition that spends a few weeks at each of the region's capital cities (and, in 2008, visited Bluefields on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast) over a period of six months. The exhibition is managed by the students themselves who organise, physically move, curate, and mount the exhibition, and then discuss their works in public forums at each venue. La ESPORA's website describes the value of this process:

[10] Belize is not included, mainly because of the language barrier (Belize is predominantly English-speaking).

> We believe in the importance of this activity because we are confronted with our public in those countries where we want to have an influence through artistic training. We are convinced that our pending task is to grow towards those countries with a solid institutionality, and this stage of formation must not ignore the contacts, the collaborations and the entire exchange of information that this annual exhibition allows.
>
> (La ESPORA, 2010, paragraph 1)

This touring exhibition extends the intra-regional exchange initiated in the residency and promotes institutional collaborations within the region. It also develops the professional skills of the students and places them in positions of responsibility, both in terms of curating and mounting the exhibitions and also in terms of talking about their own work and creative process with the public. The exhibition is the strongest attempt by La ESPORA to reach out to the public and to deepen the public's understanding of contemporary art practice and the importance of critical engagement in artistic production. In 2009 the exhibition was met with a particularly warm response in Managua, with the city's universities sending class-loads of students to see the exhibition and talk with the artists. In 2010 a decision was made to focus the exhibition on the critical educational approach itself rather than works, and documentation and footage were exhibited not just from La ESPORA's programmes but from the broader range of EspIRA's activities as outlined below.

Figure 5: Advertisement for the 2010 EX-IT exhibition opening in Managua.

EspIRA: diverse projects and off-shoots

Critical workshops, residencies and intra-regional exhibitions form La ESPORA's core activities, and it envisions the consolidation of those practices within the structure of a future university degree course. However, since its inception those involved in the organisation have developed their own skills and enthusiasms, and taken advantage of the opportunities afforded by the funding environment to create new projects under the

banner of EspIRA (the artists' association behind La ESPORA). This diversification is, in large part, a response to the tendency for development donors to support new initiatives or one-off projects rather than commit to long-term projects. Patricia Belli sees these diverse projects as compatible with the long-term goal of institutionalisation in that they could all exist within a university institution that included research and outreach as well as the core practice of teaching. However, this diversification also means that the energy (and agency) within the organisation is increasingly fragmented and its structure is increasingly difficult to manage. EspIRA itself has noted that it has been 'growing in a disorganised manner', responding to opportunities rather than well-defined strategies (EspIRA, 2010, p. 50). Subsequent donor complaints about disorganisation within EspIRA's administration (Belli, personal communication, June 2011) may be accurate, but also appear somewhat ironic.

The drive, then, to create a higher-level educational institution in La ESPORA, has created an additional generative professional space for multiple parallel art projects. These multiple projects, outlined below, provide students with opportunities for professional development and paid employment, and they demonstrate ways in which artistic practices can be integrated in different professional forums (teaching, curating, audio-visual production, event management, research collaborations). EspIRA has become a hub for intelligent, creative young people in Nicaragua: La ESPORA's core student body has been joined by people like Eunice Shade[11], a well-known young Nicaraguan poet and critic who has taken on a management and communications role within the organisation, and poet/artist/curator/critic Darwin Andino[12] who moved from Honduras to Nicaragua to work for La ESPORA and, in 2009, became its director[13].

EspIRA SERVICIOS, Agencia de servicios artísticos (Artistic Services Agency)

EspIRA SERVICIOS is one of a small number of income-generating projects established by EspIRA in efforts to reduce donor dependence. Development donors see their support as temporary and expect arts organisations to become financially

[11] See www.euniceshade.com.
[12] See http://sites.google.com/site/darwinandino.
[13] Patricia Belli remains a core figure within the organisation, but she wanted to reduce the organisation's dependency on her as well as give herself more space for her own creative work.

independent (an expectation not held for most arts organisations in the North). Donor dependency is also a concern for arts organisations themselves, who know only too well that donor support is usually short-term.

EspIRA SERVICIOS sells EspIRA/La ESPORA's professional artistic services[14] such as curating and mounting exhibitions. In 2008 EspIRA was hired by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to mount an exhibition of international photographs on the theme of globalisation called 'Tales: stories from a globalised world'[15]. EspIRA physically mounted the photographs on wooden stands, moved them in a hired truck to different cities, exhibited them in public plazas under marquees, and organised an exhibition opening in each city. In 2008 I travelled with Belli and EspIRA/La ESPORA students to León where they set up the exhibition in the central plaza. In line with EspIRA's commitment to critical engagement and to drawing out the connections between art and lived experience, it organised an associated essay competition for school children who were invited to choose a photograph they liked and write about its connection to some aspect of their lives. The funds EspIRA received for this work were wholly incommensurate with the labour involved, but they represented the first funds that EspIRA had earned to contribute to the running of other programmes. Subsequently EspIRA curated and mounted another exhibition called 'Tutti Frutti' on graphic design and popular culture, this time for the Spanish Embassy in Managua.

Figure 6: Advertisement for the launch of the exhibition 'Tales' in Masaya, 2008.

[14] Although EspIRA came up with the idea independently, Andrea Fraser (2005) uses the idea of 'artistic services' or service provision in the arts to draw attention to the immaterial, transitory and mediating actions that art can perform.
[15] See http://www.globalizingworld.net/nicaragua.

GRAFOS

Figure 7: Advertisement for GRAFOS, offering courses for a range of ages in artistic expression (using paint, clay, collage, and assemblage) as well as a short course in video.

Along with EspIRA Servicios, GRAFOS is another fundraising (but still critically engaged) project developed by EspIRA. It is a small art school that teaches art in a range of media to children, adolescents and adults of the middle and upper classes. Classes are taught by La ESPORA's core students who are given some teacher-training, and who gain employment and teaching experience. GRAFOS aims to 'promote observation, imagination and expressivity, with the goal of cultivating both the aesthetic sense and the intellectual capacities of its students' (Miranda, 2008a, paragraph 1). The classes encourage the acquisition of technical skills in a range of media but also the development of a critical perspective that – it is argued – enhances personal development.

> It is demonstrated that a quality artistic education helps children to develop their hand-eye coordination. In other respects, they become more open, more sure of themselves, with the capacity to resolve problems. Not to mention the stimulus of the imagination, which is a necessary human aspect for achieving emotional balance.
>
> (Belli cited in Miranda, 2008a, paragraph 5)

GRAFOS has been successful in that there has been a significant demand for the classes for children, and for classes in painting and these have provided employment for students and brought in a modest income. Other media, however, such as video and assemblage, have generated less public interest (EspIRA, 2010, p. 51).

The establishment of GRAFOS was a major impetus behind EspIRA/La ESOPRA moving its premises, in late 2008, from a couple of rooms in Patricia Belli's house, to a large, rented, house centrally located in Managua. Having this larger, independent space meant that the development of further projects became possible, as well as the consolidation of core practices. Students also used the base as a cultural centre, hosting film, music and art events on a regular basis.

La Casa Estrellada (The Star-studded House)

La Casa Estrellada is a television programme developed in 2009 by Belli's former partner, El Salvadoran artist Ricardo Huezo, and La ESPORA student Alejandro Flores. The programme makes connections between contemporary art and popular culture by examining them both from their origin in the creative process – the motivations, mechanisms and perceptions involved are often similar[16]. Through those connections it strives to make contemporary art accesible to a broader public and to make the public more aware of the creative processes in which they are already involved (see Fonseca, 2010). Two seasons (of weekly episodes) were aired on Nicaraguan television in 2010.

The half-hour programme is divided into three segments: one reports on manifestations of popular culture such as the way in which people choose to paint their houses or decorate their buses, or the history of the *piñata*[17]; another segment interviews emerging and established contemporary artists (including some of La ESPORA's students); and the third segment entitled 'A Mano' (meaning 'by hand') demonstratres how to make an object (such as a marionette, a box camera, or a lamp) out of cheap and freely available materials with a little ingenuity. The programme makes conscious connections between everyday urban aesthetic practices and the self-conscious creative processes of the contemporary artist.

Jóvenes Creativos (Creative Youth)

Jóvenes Creativos began, in 2009, as a pilot project sponsored primarily by UNICEF with the support of SDC. The pilot project gave art classes and workshops to 60 children from six public schools in Managua who showed a strong aptitude for visual art but had scarce financial resources. Students were provided with transport to and from EspIRA's premises in central Managua.

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[16] See Fonseca, 2010 for an interview about the programme with Ricardo Huezo. Trailers for different episodes are also posted on YouTube. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lY7SuxOmnaQ and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RONevi2nUY&feature=related and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgjsZg25IqY&feature=related.

[17] Piñatas are colourfully decorated papier-mâché containers filled with sweets or trinkets that are then broken apart as part of a celebration such as a birthday party. Although generally thought to have been brought to Mesoamerica from Spain in the 16th century, they have a complex history with similar ceremonies already present among Mayan communities prior to Spanish arrival in the region (Devlin, 2007).

Figure 8: Image of participants in the programme Jóvenes Creativos, taken from the unpublished catalogue.

The programme aimed to develop the natural talents of the children, while generating skills that would enable them to communicate their ideas and emotions more effectively. According to Belli, '[t]he exercises were designed and adapted to stimulate imagination, sensitivity and hand-eye coordination. Furthermore, practices were developed based on the study of images as generators of meaning. Based on this last proposition a series of artistic interpretations based on HIV was created' (Belli, 2009). The pilot project ended with a public exhibition of student work which was to have been accompanied by a catalogue including explanatory essays. The images on this page are taken from that catalogue. However UNICEF expressed alarm about the overtly sexual and stereotyping content of some of the students' work on HIV and refused to publish the catalogue, and subsequently dropped their support for the programme. This incident will be discussed in Chapter 7 as an example of differences in perspective between donors and artists, and of the difficulties of implementing a twin-track approach in funding art projects in which both artistic processes and distinct issues-focussed educational outcomes are envisaged.

Figure 9: Image from the front cover the unpublished catalogue.

Following UNICEF's withdrawal of support, EspIRA – convinced of the value of the programme – has continued to run it using its own scant resources. In addition to the original programme it has developed a further cycle of workshops in applied arts such as photography, printing, video, design and ceramics – which offer participants training in more directly employable skills. However, it emphasises that these skills are conceptualised as tools to support the imagination, rather than as ends in themselves (EspIRA, 2010, p. 57).

El Acto Invisible (The Invisible Act)

El Acto Invisible started out, in 2008, as a personal research project undertaken by Darwin Andino to investigate curatorial practices in Central America. Along with personal research, Andino curated a number of art shows[18] at galleries in Managua and at EspIRA's premises, and organised a two-day colloquium in Managua that focused critically on the role of the curator and his/her visibility or invisibility in the art world. The colloquium, which coincided with the Nicaraguan Biennial in November 2009, brought together 15 curators, critics and artists for the first regional discussion of curating as a practice in Central America (see MarcaAcme, 2009). It is envisaged that a similar event will be held every two years in conjunction with Nicaragua's Biennial.

Documentaries on cultural practices

Based on the success of La Casa Estrellada, and using the skills learned through its production, in 2010 EspIRA sourced funds to produce a series of short documentaries focussing on cultural subversions and stereotypes with a particular focus on gender and sexuality. The documentaries (still in production in 2011) look critically at aspects of Nicaraguan culture (particularly the reproduction of gender stereotyping through various cultural practices, but also including transvestism). They will be used essentially as a provocation for focussed discussions and critical reflection within community groups on gender roles and stereotyping (EspIRA, 2010, p. 58).

EspIRA/La ESPORA: Diverse projects with a common purpose

This range of projects established under the organisational structure of EspIRA, along with the core practices of La ESPORA, is clearly very diverse in terms of specific aims, skills generated, and different forms of public engagement. However they also share some common characteristics. They are all motivated by a desire to stimulate critical thinking in visual arts and cultural representation in Central America. These projects all value and promote aesthetic quality, but they also project an awareness of the fact that representations (including aesthetic decisions) are never neutral, that the artist always

[18] These were individual shows for some of La ESPORA's core students: Alejandro Flores, Jullissa Moncada, Emilia Mebreño, Fernando Alemán and Norlan Gutiérrez.

makes choices and that these choices are made in a particular context and have political agency. They operate in full recognition of the strongly partisan nature of art.

In light of this, similar strategies are consciously adopted across all of the projects: notably critical investigation and an ethic of horizontal interaction that counters existing hierarchies and exclusions, and provides space for collective reflection. These principles are employed whether the focus is on producing artworks (TACON and RAPACES), mounting and curating exhibitions (EX-IT and EspIRA Servicios), teaching art (TACON, RAPACES, and GRAFOS), producing television programmes (La Casa Estrellada, documentaries), or personal research (elements of El Acto Invisible). Furthermore, connections to context are constantly being made: students are encouraged to base their work on their own interests and experiences and to discuss it in reference to other art produced in Central America and elsewhere. They are also encouraged to think about the cultural politics behind the reception and privileging of various forms of art both locally, regionally and internationally. La Casa Estrellada and El Acto Invisible both directly engage with aspects of the cultural life in the region – popular and contemporary expressions, and curatorial practices respectively.

These iterative practices are deeply social in the sense that they are intensely communicative, at different scales and with diverse publics. They share a bridging impulse. Efforts are continuously made to communicate: with one's own inner process, with other artists, with other workers in the cultural field such as curators and the media, and with diverse publics throughout the region (across classes, and across gender and age disparities)[19].

Funding EspIRA/La ESPORA

In 2006/2007 I worked with Belli on a funding application to the Ford Foundation. The application became a three-way writing process involving myself, Belli and John Phillips of the London Print Studio[20]. Phillips recommended that we ask for money, not for core activities, but to fund a feasibility study that would allow EspIRA/La ESPORA to

[19] During the writing of this thesis I was often struck by the contrast in learning style between the essentially solitary task of writing a PhD and the intensely dialogic processes of EspIRA/La ESPORA. I could not help but think that the PhD process would be enhanced, and learning deepened, by those kinds of critical and constructive interactions.

[20] See www.londonprintstudio.org.uk. Phillips had, at the time, just completed his doctoral thesis on this successful and extensive community arts initiative that he founded in 1974.

explore broader funding and sustainability issues. The application was unsuccessful. When I talked with Belli in 2008 she said that she had abandoned the idea of a feasibility study because she already knew what it would say: that the project was impossible and there were no resources to fund it.

Belli has estimated that the minimum cost for running the university course (if they had a dedicated physical space in which to do it) would be around USD$100, 000. The costs of running the diverse range of programmes that EspIRA/La ESPORA is currently offering is around twice that figure (personal communication, June 2008).

During its six years of operation, EspIRA/La ESPORA has received its core funding from development donors – notably Hivos and its off-shoot Arts Collaboratory, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Other development donors, such as UNICEF and the Prince Claus Fund have supported the organisation for one-off projects or events. That support has been supplemented by in-kind support from Latin American embassies and the Spanish embassy. Minor support has come from private enterprise and La ESPORA has developed its own income-generating operations – GRAFOS and EspIRA SERVICIOS.

Hivos, one of the few donors to adopt a non-instrumentalised funding strategy, has been La ESPORA's primary funder to date, providing a varying but considerable level of support to allow it to run its core programmes: TACon, RAPACES, Ex-IT. In the mid-2000s Hivos revised its funding strategies in response to changes by the Dutch government in its support of development NGOs. Hivos had, until then, been one of a small number of favoured recipient organisations but its share of reliable funding diminished when the government decided to open up the funding pool to greater competition (Prinsen, personal communication, April 2008). Since that time Hivos has diversified its funding strategies and formed alliances with other organisations that enable it to continue supporting arts and culture in the South. In 2007, it established a new NGO called Arts Collaboratory in association with the DOEN Foundation (Dutch Lottery) and the Mondriaan Foundation (which supports visual arts, design and cultural heritage in and from the Netherlands and runs programmes of cultural exchange). Arts Collaboratory specifically supports the visual arts in the South. Its mission is 'to encourage artistic innovation of outstanding quality that is firmly embedded in society by contributing to a sustainable, open (inter)national visual arts sector, whereby artist-

led initiatives play a decisive role in the artistic direction of the programme' (Arts Collaboratory, 2010a, paragraph 7). Like Hivos, Arts Collaboratory has artistic quality as a central funding criteria and it supports independent, artist-led initiatives. It is particularly valuable because, unusually for donor organisations, it has a flexible funding structure that can support a range of endeavours from one-off events to embryonic initiatives, from professional organisational development to broadening audience outreach [21]. In 2008 Arts Collaboratory became La ESPORA's principal supporter (in cooperation with Hivos). However, its funding-span is limited to three years per organisation.

EspIRA/La ESPORA has also enjoyed the regular support of SDC since 2006. SDC has a policy of only supporting projects for two years and it supported EspIRA/La ESPORA with significant sums (over USD$10,000) in 2006 and 2007 (Belli, personal communication, 2008). Since then, however, it has continued to offer smaller sums to different associated projects such as Jóvenes Creativos. In 2008, it provided EspIRA SERVICIOS with its first job (showing the international photography exhibition 'Tales' throughout Nicaragua). EspIRA/La ESPORA enjoys cordial relations with the staff at the Swiss Embassy who administer SDC's cultural support, and this makes for flexible, ongoing, small-scale support.

Development donors actively encourage organisations like EspIRA/La ESPORA to diversify their funding base. Wary of dependency, they hope that arts organisations will become self-funding, or at least manage to secure other funds that will enable their programmes to continue. However, due to the scarcity of resources at both the local and international level, this appears to be an unreasonable expectation. This is particularly so for a tertiary-level educational initiative like La ESPORA. Dependency on donor organisations is an ongoing and unresolved tension and one that both donors and recipients are well aware of[22].

The presence of international donors may also encourage state cultural institutions to reduce their responsibility for arts funding. As a tertiary education provider, La ESPORA could, conceivably, enter the State educational system and receive some

[21] See http://www.artscollaboratory.org/about-arts-collaboratory.
[22] Susana Rochna, Hivos' representative in Central America told me that the exit process for arts organisations was very difficult as considerable dependency is inevitably built up over time (personal communication, August 2006).

funding from the Nicaraguan government. In the 1980s, the FSLN passed a law allocating 6% of the country's annual budget go to tertiary education. However, this 6% is constantly under threat and is fiercely defended by students and university staff, resulting in regular strikes and protests (see Sirias, 2009 for example). Belli argues that such disruptions occur so frequently that they make it very difficult to maintain a learning process and for this reason, as well as the bureaucracy involved with State system, it is not a desirable option.

Apart from dependency, there are other issues with donor funding that limit what it can provide for artists. Firstly, funding has to be applied for on a yearly or biannual basis, which makes it very difficult for an organisation like EspIRA/La ESPORA to manifest its long-term plans. Furthermore, the time required to actually find potential donors and apply for funds is very considerable. Miscommunication between different layers within donor organisations has also been problematic for La ESPORA. Patricia Belli, for example, was funded to travel to the Netherlands to speak about La ESPORA to Hivos staff in 2007. At that meeting Hivos was so impressed that it agreed to all of her funding requests for the following year (2008/2009). Based on those assurances Belli decided not to submit an application that she and I had been working on to UNESCO, a decision she later regretted (Belli, personal communication, June 2008). However, the Hivos funds are actually administered by its regional office in Costa Rica and when Belli put in her formal application there, she did not receive the same response. Instead, the Costa Rican office asked her to provide the same programmes but offered only half the funds, requesting La ESPORA to find the rest (Belli, personal communication, June 2008).

Development funding also appears unable to adequately remunerate individuals for the real input required to run programmes of a high standard. Belli pays herself a 'symbolic' wage although she works more than full-time for the project – at a cost to her own artistic practice and family life. It is rare for her to take a day off (including weekends). She points out that donors only want to see 20-30% of any budget go on salaries, and she therefore supplements her income by teaching art three afternoons a week as an elective to business students at a private Catholic university on the outskirts of Managua. Built in to all of La ESPORA's projects is, as mentioned, a large component of voluntary labour or in-kind support from the students themselves. While this works adequately for the residencies, the students based in Nicaragua bear a larger burden of

keeping the organisation running throughout the year. While this has positive aspects in terms of buy-in on the students' part and opportunities for professional development, it also means that at times students feel overwhelmed by the needs of the organisation (Santa Cruz, personal communication, June 2008).

While development cooperation makes up the bulk of EspIRA/La ESPORA's funding platform, it is supplemented by support from embassies and international cultural centres who fund one-off events and provide workshop or exhibition space free of charge. Belli says that this kind of support is reasonably easy to come by and enriches students' experience by providing diverse teaching perspectives and opportunities for cultural exchange. In 2006, while I was in Nicaragua, the Spanish Embassy in Managua provided rooms for EspIRA/La ESPORA's workshops and the Colombian Embassy sponsored Colombian art theorist Maria Iovino to run a workshop for EspIRA/La ESPORA and a series of public lectures. In 2009 the Brazilian Embassy supported a similar visit by conceptual artists Dias & Riedweg.

Other arts organisations within the region also support La ESPORA by providing venues for the touring exhibition EX-IT (such as the Fundación para el Museo del Hombre Hondureño in Honduras and MARTE, El Museo de Arte de El Salvador) and, more recently, in providing a base for the regional extension of the TACon workshops series (such as MUA in Honduras). Over time these connections can develop into supportive intra-regional networks. However, if those arts organisations are also relying on arts funds from development donors (as in the case of MUA), those relationships can becomes a little strained by competition for the same funds.

EspIRA/La ESPORA has sought support, with some success, from private enterprise. Between 2006 and 2008 it received regular support from the Nicaraguan telecommunications company ENITEL, and from a Nicaraguan paint company Pinturas Sur. EspIRA/La ESPORA continues to try to drum up this kind of support by sending out letters to banks and international businesses, and following up with telephone calls. They hope that private business may be interested in supporting them partly due to their 'hip' image, but mostly they receive 'no answer back at all or they show initial interest but then there's no answer, so it's a lot of effort with little result' (Belli, personal communication, June 2008).

Further contributions to running expenses arise as ideas occur to Belli or to others associated with EspIRA/La ESPORA. Administration and communications manager Eunice Shade, for example, had the idea of increasing administrative capacity by offering internships to tertiary students in 'Communications' who needed work experience. One such student was working for La ESPORA when I visited in 2008, writing articles on the organisation's activities for the media.

In addition to ongoing running costs, Belli would ideally like to see the university course located in a purpose-built facility that included studios/workshop spaces, a gallery, a conference room and small library. She feels that owning a building – having a physical space – is essential to the development of that project. Certainly renting the house in central Managua over the last three years has enabled EspIRA to undertake a broad range of projects and gain a higher profile. Virginia Pérez-Ratton, founder of TEOR/éTica in Costa Rica, told me in an interview in 2006 that one of the reasons TEOR/éTica was so successful was that it has been based in the (converted) house in central San José that Pérez-Ratton had inherited from her grandmother. For a time, Belli explored the possibilities of creating this physical infrastructure: she met with local government in Managua to ask for some land to be donated; she considered using an architecture student to design the building as part of a research project (and therefore for free), and she had gone as far as getting a promise of free cement for the building from the Holcim cement company. However, bringing all of these diverse efforts together, and attracting a major sponsor has not proved possible to date.

Private investors recently (in 2010) showed some interest in supporting the development of La ESPORA into a university course. The Gurdian family, Nicaraguan bankers who have a strong interest in the visual arts and who support the Nicaraguan and Central American Biennials, have contacts at one of Managua's private universities, and tentative negotiations have been initiated about siting La ESPORA (as a tertiary-level course) there. Their support for the project, however, remains hesitant and Patricia Belli also has reservations about siting La ESPORA in a private university with an underlying profit-motive. She is adamant about retaining independence and the critical and ethical principles that inform all of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices, and is concerned about the possibility of having to exclude students who could not pay, and conversely, of having to accept fee-paying students who are less critically engaged.

In response to the precarious nature of this funding platform La ESPORA continues to brainstorm further possibilities for income-generation. GRAFOS and EspIRA SERVICIOS, whose financial contributions are fairly modest, have already been discussed in this chapter. Belli has also floated the possibility of creating a network of friends who might give small, regular monthly donations[23]. A number of high-profile artists and intellectuals visited Nicaragua in solidarity with the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s (Salman Rushdie, Julio Cortázar and Harold Pinter are examples) and Belli hoped to draw on them to raise the profile of EspIRA/La ESPORA and initiate the network of friends. She and I worked on a letter to playwright Harold Pinter, the only one of those artists to whom she had an indirect link, asking for his support. It is understood that he received it with a favourable response but unfortunately he died soon afterwards with nothing formal having been arranged. The idea for the network remains but currently languishes under the pressures of so many other more immediate tasks.

Summary

This chapter has described both the core practices of La ESPORA (supported primarily by the non-instrumentalised donors Hivos and Arts Collaboratory) and the diverse associated projects that have emerged under the umbrella organisation EspIRA (that have taken advantage of the possibilities of short-term donor funding to initiate new projects). It has pointed out the tension between La ESPORA's articulation of Central America as a fantastic place to make art (with few material resources but with significant resources of intelligence and creativity) but also the limitations imposed by the existing socio-economic conditions in terms of establishing long-term infrastructure. In this environment donor support offers very real and significant opportunities but those opportunities are only short-term and leave organisations vulnerable and unable to establish long-term plans and structures. However, in the meantime, and in spite of highly precarious conditions, work gets done.

This chapter has also described Patricia Belli's original motivation for wanting to establish a centre for critically-engaged arts education in the region, and the tenacity with which she holds on to its underlying principles of horizontal dialogue and

[23] The idea came from Nicaraguan/American artist Rolando Castellón.

exchange, research and investigation, critical debate, and collective reflection as essential aspects of 'responsible' art-making. Critical thinking about cultural self-representation is viewed as a tool that not only produces better art, but that also contributes to an artistic production that responds more effectively to society. It is also seen as agentic in response to the conservatism, hierarchies and exclusions that exist in the region's visual arts academies and institutions.

In the following chapter I provide an extended analysis of the cultural context for making visual art in Central America that addresses, in more detail, those exclusions and hierarchies but that also locates EspIRA's practices among those of other critically-oriented artist-led initiatives in the region intent on reconfiguring that context. The chapter serves to deepen and complexify our understanding of EspIRA/La ESPORA's agency in terms of both resistance to particular practices, and in terms of broader desires for project-making and place-making articulated by a range of independent artist-led initiatives.

Chapter 5: The context of agency: making contemporary art in Central America

> *Independent projects like TEOR/éTica [or EspIRA/La ESPORA] consider [their] position always in relation to belonging to a specific context, in relation to the study of our own points of reference, but without renouncing or negating the international vocation of the practices and strategies of the circulation of contemporary art. Our primary interest resides in an understanding of the Self which permits a better understanding of the Other.*
>
> (TEOR/éTica, 2010, paragraph 3)

Introduction

Development's cultural turn urged a closer engagement with local contexts and local actors as an alternative to the macro-economic frameworks of dominant development practice and a development imaginary that appeared to homogenise development subjects, denying their specificity, complexity and agency. The cultural turn promoted the local as a privileged site of agency. However a number of critics, such as Nederveen Pieterse, have argued that this privileging of the local has resulted in the erection of cultural boundaries, and an overly celebratory approach that fails to consider sufficiently the striations of power that exist within local sites and that can also reduce the complexity of the development subject.

This thesis privileges the local in that its original contribution lies in its close examination of the practices of a specific group of artists funded through development and located in a particular time and place. The specificity of this enquiry is a means of complexifying and grounding claims for the agency of art in relationship to development, beyond the broadly sketched aspirations of donors and policy-makers. However, the local is not approached in a celebratory or reductionist way. This chapter situates EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices within the context for making visual art in Central America, but at the same time it reveals that context to be complex, multi-dimensional, multi-scalar and under constant reconfiguration by a range of actors.

Emphasising the complexity of the subject is not only taken up as a critical position. It also reflects the project of the artists associated with EspIRA/La ESPORA, who see

agency in complexifying and diversifying cultural self-representation away from celebratory local or nationalist constructions, and/or stereotypical characteristics. EspIRA/La ESPORA, and other independent artistic initiatives, actively deconstruct sedimented arts practices in the region that they see as reductionist, and, at the same time, reconstruct the context for making art in the region through new structures, networks and discourses that promote responsibility, plurality and critical discourse as conducive to art's critical agency. This chapter begins by examining some of these sedimented reductionist practices before discussing in more depth the reconstructive, context-reconfiguring practices of a range of critically engaged contemporary artists in the region, including EspIRA/La ESPORA.

Sites of reduction in the cultural sector in Central America: actors, processes, institutions

Weak infrastructure and state conservatism

The capacity for the cultural sector to exercise agency in the region is described, by many cultural actors, as limited by state neglect. This desire for the state to take a more active role in promoting the cultural sector is coupled, however, with concern about what kinds of policies these generally conservative state apparatuses might actually implement. While Central America has a vibrant cultural heritage, and an active cultural sphere, the institutions, policies, structures, collaborations, public forums, institutional funding and critical spaces of the cultural sector are neither extensive nor established. The cultural sector is described by many of those who work within it as 'pre-industrial' (Durán Salvatierra 2000, p. 36), 'unstable' and 'precarious' (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 78). It has never had a period of concerted investment[1] and does not appear to be a priority for any of the current Central American governments. Cultural activist Silvie Durán Salvatierra argues that cultural policy supposes 'thinking about the capacity of management, democratisation and cultural diversity, the circulation of products, finance, public policy and lobbying, education, promotion and commercialisation, the creation of publics and of local markets, repertoire and lines of artistic production, the Central American-ness of our professional artistic production, infrastructures etc.' but that in

[1] The possible exceptions are Costa Rica which has had modest state support for the cultural sector since the 1970s, and Nicaragua for 10 years under the first Sandinista administration (1979-1990). Both countries have notably stronger cultural sectors (Durán Salvatierra, 2004, section 4).

Central America these issues have never 'been broached in a systematic and coherent way' (2000, p. 34).

The vulnerability of the cultural sector, such critics argue, is increased by the fact that Central American countries share small populations, weak economies and emerging cultural industries (Durán Salvatierra, 2000, p. 36). The lack of public policy and political will to invest in culture is matched by precarious local production conditions in the face of hyper-sophisticated mass media, limited possibilities for the distribution and commercialisation of local cultural products, and small local markets (Durán Salvatierra 2000, pp. 36-37; Ortega, 2000, p. 385). Some cultural workers see themselves as a peripheral sector in a peripheral region.

In light of these conditions, the state's neglect of the cultural sector is acutely felt, although it is not a new phenomenon: 'The fact is that in Central America, the state has never fulfilled, either in the past or in the present, its supposed mission as [arts] promoter' (Ramírez, Pérez-Ratton, & Castellón, 2002, p. 12). State cultural institutions do exist, but many artists argue that their work lacks both continuity and professionalism (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 79). They were described to me by UNESCO and NGO staff as 'antiquated', 'terribly conservative', with 'no idea' and 'no political will whatsoever to make any changes'. Even Costa Rica, which has the most established state cultural infrastructure in the region, is described as suffering from 'large budget cuts, chronic bureaucratic problems and excessive politicisation in decision-making' (Pérez-Ratton, ibid)[2]. In interviews UNESCO staff vented their frustration at the lack of government interest in their work and at the 'huge waste of time and money' involved in 'starting over again' with each change in government. Compared with Costa Rica, Nicaragua's institutions were considered to be significantly worse, and were described to me as 'a farce', and 'impossible to work with'.

While UNESCO (as discussed previously) advocates cultural policies that promote cultural diversity, cultural tourism and transversal links between the arts and other sectors of society, they point out that there is little take-up by the Central American governments of this position. Virginia Accatcha, of UNESCO's San José office, told me

[2] Pérez-Ratton was the first director of Costa Rica's Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MADC) from 1994 to 1998 (http://www.madc.ac.cr). The MADC is a pivotal institution for contemporary art in the region. She resigned, however, due to political interference in the management of the museum (personal communication, August 2006; Herkenhoff, 2011, pp. 6-8).

that in Central America 'there are NO funds' apart from those of international development agencies. A project for capacity-building in community museums, for example, had recently stalled because UNESCO couldn't find a counterpart in the region to provide the USD$4000 required to print a set of manuals (personal communication, August 2006).

UNESCO's promotion of cultural policies has also seen little response from the region's governments. When I visited the San José office in 2006, UNESCO had just completed an advisory report for Honduras on cultural policy (Mejía, 2004). One had not been written for Nicaragua at that time. The Honduran report reveals a longstanding disinterest in the cultural sector and in promoting cultural diversity on behalf of the Honduran state, and a reluctance to consider culture as significant within development policy and practice[3]. Tellingly, the report cites a previous 1977 UNESCO-backed report entitled '*Towards a cultural policy in Honduras*', indicating that UNESCO has been promoting the development of cultural policy in the region for 30 years to little effect. 'Personal interviews with artists and intellectuals of the country' argues the 2004 report, 'coincide in [saying] that different governments of the Republic have not had the vision to make cultural resources a factor in development' and 'antiquated' budgetary frameworks show that culture is regarded as a cost rather than a social investment (Mejía, 2004, pp. 47-49). The report signals that neoliberal policies of structural adjustment (implemented in the 1980s and 1990s) have also had a negative influence, contributing to reduced state spending and leaving a 'stagnant' economic landscape. While the neoliberal economic model promotes public-private partnerships in theory, the Honduran report points out that there are no government-backed incentives for business to invest in culture (ibid, p. 52). The state's lack of interest in pursuing a cultural agenda no doubt also reflects a wariness about the political implications of more decentralised and participatory decision-making processes. The report argues that promoting diversity entails the 'recognition that communities are also entitled to rights that stretch from language to self-determination' (ibid, p. 13).

[3] The report explains that there is a lack of recognition of cultural diversity in the Honduran constitution (Mejía, 2004, p.13); no state support for the cultural industries (ibid, p. 38); the National Council for Culture and the Arts, supposedly established in 1990s, has had no tangible outcomes (ibid, p.25); the cultural sector currently receives 0.01% of GDP; Honduras' PRSP makes almost no mention of culture and culture is seen as an add-on rather than as the basis for the Plan (ibid, p. 33); policies outlined in a National Plan for Culture 2002-2006 have not been validated by the government nor received financial backing (ibid, p. 49).

Although the lack of state leadership in cultural policy is a widespread grievance among cultural workers, there is also considerable wariness about the sort of policies that conservative governments might choose to implement. Virginia Pérez-Ratton asks: 'Who would design these policies? The very thought curdles my blood. Our governments have been characterised by a desire to perpetuate the aspects of identity which is in their interests to make known abroad and by the acceptance of proposals which have no aesthetic or conceptual relevance in the present world' (Pérez-Ratton, 2002, p. 32). Pérez-Ratton is referring, in part, to the dominance in the regional pictorial imaginary of decorative oil painting (landscapes, female nudes, tropical fruit). Contemporary artists take issue with this tourist-oriented 'post-card identity [that] has little to do with the daily social, political and economic reality of the region' (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 76), but which 'more conservative cultural tendencies [. . .] want to sell abroad as an export symbol' (Ramírez et al., 2002, p. 13).

The region's governments tend to value the arts as celebratory symbols of national identity, as a means of moving beyond past conflicts, and 'selling' the region (to tourists and investors) as picturesque and cultured. I witnessed this kind of state discourse in February 2006 at Nicaragua's International Poetry Festival. The event is a major tourist draw-card and brings local and international poets to Granada, for a week of readings, discussions and lectures[4]. The diversity of poets attending (from many different countries) and the open nature of the readings – free to attend and held on the streets of Granada as well as in its surrounding rural villages – demonstrated the democratic and plural nature of the event. The discourse of local and national officials speaking at the event was strongly celebratory: officials declared poetry to be 'above politics' and some of the poets seated on the dais appeared to squirm at this comment as poetry has, on many occasions, been very political in Nicaraguan history. The event was declared to be a symbol of 'a new Nicaragua [. . .] of love, poetry and culture'. There are strong reasons to value a peaceful, unifying national discourse in a post-conflict society, and the public articulation of Nicaraguan identity in terms not associated with war, natural disasters and underdevelopment. However such a discourse must also be open to critique: the celebration of the arts as non-confrontational markers of the national can mask other layers of discrimination and domination within the national project.

[4] See http://www.festivalpoesianicaragua.com/english/.

The Sandinista government has assumed a similarly celebratory but more politicised cultural politics since coming to power late in 2006. The 'Government of Reconciliation and Unity' uncritically promotes all local manifestations of culture as a defence against imperialist domination. State discourse is focussed on 'retrieving' (past heritage), 'defending' (local practices) and 'promoting' (art as expression of national identity). Point 4 of the Sandinista's cultural policy published in 2007, for example, declares the state's intention to 'take up again, validate, defend and replace [our] multiple and diverse national identity and culture, converting it into a symbol of pride, sovereignty, dignity, and legitimate resistance against all forms of imperialism, and neo-colonialism, in the contemporary world' (Murillo, 2007). Cultural boundaries are firmly erected and local artistic practices are celebrated uncritically as patriotic, masking conflicts and exclusions within the local context.

A lack of critical discourse

Another site of reduction that places limits on critical agency is argued to be the generalised lack of critical discourse around cultural expression and identity in the region. The media is criticised, for example, for showing no interest in any but the 'officially recognised artists [who] don't take a stand against anything' (Pérez-Ratton, 2002, p. 32) or in work that might be considered inflammatory or sensationalist[5]. Furthermore arts criticism is said to be frequently reduced to 'praise of the friend and insults for the enemy' (Samos, 2000, p. 319)[6].

In Nicaragua there are no established curators, and no galleries that engage critically with the work they show. Gallery catalogues, for example, usually take the form of photocopied pages stapled together by the gallery owner, listing the works for sale (EspIRA, 2010, pp. 62-3) rather than producing and including critical essays. The

[5] Nicaraguan artist Raúl Quintanilla told me that 'you shouldn't underestimate the stupidity of journalism here – you have to bear this very much in mind.' Quintanilla organised a massive group exhibition in 2008 to protest the recent criminalisation of therapeutic abortion and told me that the media only showed interest when they heard there might be a protest march against the exhibition (personal communication, June, 2008).

[6] As an example Pérez-Ratton described to me an incident in which she was trying to publish a book on the region's art and had a problem with a counterpart in El Salvador who didn't like the way she was talking about (critiquing) a particular (locally glorified) artist and wanted to forbid the publication. Pérez-Ratton had to fly to San Salvador to sort out the issue at her own expense. Similarly, but more seriously, Guatemalan critic and curator Rosina Cazali received death threats for not including certain artists in one of her first shows (Cazali in Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 173).

national art schools also contribute to this situation by offering a technical education divorced from critical content, a point I take up below.

EspIRA/La ESPORA argues that the public space for dialogue and collective reflection in the region is minimal (ibid, p. 2). Television, instead, is one of the public spaces most visited, but EspIRA/La ESPORA argues that it tends to reproduce stereotypes rather than engage in critical thought or promote diversity. The few cultural programmes that do exist tend to frame artistic practice as sentimental rather than intelligent or thought-provoking, and to focus on art objects as simply decorative or technically skilful (ibid).

These concerns about a lack of critical public dialogue about the arts and practices of cultural self-representation are echoed by contemporary artists throughout the region (EspIRA, 2010, p. 61). Adrienne Samos writes that in Panamá, despite the end of the dictatorship and the withdrawal of the USA, in the art scene:

> [. . .] there are no alternative spaces (99 percent of the time, 99 percent of the art rooms display decorative painting); professionals and teaching staff with a knowledge of, or a leaning towards, today's art are few and far between (the Contemporary Art Museum does not even have a curator); and the backing provided by the state and the private sector is practically non-existent.
>
> (Samos, 2002, p. 99)

Similarly the cultural sector in El Salvador is described as 'tremendously conformist' with 'no permanent critical bases or professional training institutions in the field of the arts' (Molina & Janowski, 2002, pp. 121-122). Critically engaged artists, like those associated with La ESPORA, situate their own practices in response to this uncritical space that, they argue, fails to recognise the present 'as something active, something that entails great responsibility' (Cazali, 2002, p. 74), and something to be constructed.

Arts education in Central America

> *It's like a formula – when the students come here [to La ESPORA] for the first time, now we know what it is they bring, it's clear, they bring usually abstract works that are derivations of the body or perhaps of a landscape, painted in a range of greens and reds and THAT'S IT! And this is something that is directly linked to the market and directly linked to the lack of schools, the lack of critical spirit, the lack of knowledge..*
>
> (Patricia Belli, personal communication, June 2008)

As a higher education organisation La ESPORA responds specifically to what Guatemalan curator Rosina Cazali describes as 'the lack of an up-to-date academy' which has led to 'a lack of understanding of the creative dynamic itself, and [. . .] of a self-critical application of the results' (2002, p. 83). Art is rarely taught in secondary schools and students usually arrive at tertiary institutions with fairly rudimentary skills. National art schools that offer degree programmes do exist in the region, but they are increasingly criticised for the complacency of the art produced, their entrenchment of hierarchical relations between teachers and students, and a lack of critical engagement with the act of art-making. The pedagogical approach is primarily technical rather than critical, and artwork produced in the schools tends to conform to the demands of the market.

Nicaragua's national art school, originally known as the Escuela de Bellas Artes, was opened in 1948 under the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza[7]. The school was technically competent, but it had no theoretical base and it promoted a 'bucolic and tropical "Nicaraguanness" [. . .] useful to portray abroad but far removed from the ignominious reality of the dictatorship' (Quintanilla, 2002, p. 88). Although the school has seen significant changes since that time, it continues to teach primarily technical skills in a fairly limited range of media – focussing, for example, on perspective and composition in drawing and painting[8]. It does not, however, engage critically with the question of what it means to make art, or the politics of representation. Neither does it make connections with the personal interests and concerns of students. Instead it promotes the reproduction of formulaic work, as Belli suggests in the quote above, which satisfies the market but which is implicated in a marginalising politics. According to Pérez-Ratton students come out of Central American art schools with technical skills but 'without learning how to be an artist – without knowing if you've got anything to say, the conceptual training, the elaboration of ideas' (personal communication, August 2006).

Andrea Mármol is a Guatemalan artist in her early 20s who was awarded a scholarship to attend a RAPACES residency at La ESPORA in 2007. We met at a La ESPORA workshop in 2008 that she had returned to Nicaragua for. She described her experiences at Guatemala's national art school, and contrasted it to her experiences at La ESPORA:

[7] See Whisnant, 1995 for a discussion of cultural politics during the Somoza era.
[8] See www.inc.gob.ni/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=117&Itemid=112 for an overview of the school and its curriculum.

I am a self-taught [artist]. I started in art with the intention of going to an institution to study but it's very difficult in Guatemala because there's only one school of art – in Guatemala City. My family didn't support art – they didn't have a good impression of art – it's not a real job, it's not a profession [. . .] So I began to paint on my own, always with painting and drawing – and from 16 years 17 years old I began to paint and I began with exhibitions – in hotels, restaurants, cafés little places like that. Then I started getting involved in festivals of art that were exclusively based around painting but that were outside those hotels and cafés, and I decided to study art history in the university but it was a little frustrating because – well, there were no teachers really capable of teaching those classes (and they were in the capital, one and a half hours from my house [in Antigua], travelling there and back each day), so [. . .] it's a little difficult for someone like me who doesn't live centrally. And I was going to take the classes but the teachers [. . .] art didn't really matter to them, that is, they had the profession and the degree only because the university required it of them and because the university wanted to offer this course but really, to them, they didn't care. So I finished that year of study and among other things went back to my social work [. . .]. Then I decided to study graphic design but in the first semester the scholarships to go to Nicaragua were offered [La ESPORA residency 2007] and I handed in my folio with a small selection of works because really I didn't have that many and the essay and everything that we had to hand in. And, well, it turned out as you can see. And now I feel super happy because it had always been an effort for me – from when I was 16 to when I was 19 it was always a struggle to keep going, because I had no support from other places.

And afterwards, when we finished the workshops and I went back to Guatemala, well it was a bit difficult – I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to start painting again but from a different mentality, so it was like [I started] from nothing. I had those intense two months [at La ESPORA] and then I returned to Guatemala, and alone. So I spent a couple of months thinking, getting organised, remembering my medium which is Guatemalan – I was not there [in Nicaragua] anymore [. . .] Also, in Guatemala, this year was the first year that they were going to open up the [national] art course as a degree. For the last time I decided to try again to go to the university and when I arrived it was really sad to arrive and see that the teachers were again, you know, the same. We had classes from 7 am to 2 pm. So I had to travel leaving every morning starting at 4 am and getting back to my house at 6 or 7 at night in order to be at the school and again those teachers they really didn't do any research or investigation, they didn't investigate how to give us classes, to offer knowledge, to share [. . .]. There's also a kind of egotism in this system, the role of the teacher and student is very fixed. I couldn't stand this. There's no dialogue – the students arrive, they sit down for 5 hours in front of the teacher, they do their painting or drawing and then they leave. It was really sad for me because I had come from something so good.

(personal communication, June 2008)

Other students at La ESPORA have spent time at Nicaragua's national art school (now La Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas Rodrigo Peñalba) and confirmed similar experiences:

> Yes, it was like Andrea's experience. We'd get there at 8 in the morning, and it was closed. So we'd wait 'til a teacher got there at 9:30 [. . .]. I felt it was a waste of time [. . .]. The teacher would arrive and he'd take a look and suggest a few things and then suddenly he'd take over himself and paint a large section of your work.
>
> (Tania Santa Cruz, personal communication, June 2008)

> [At] the national art school [. . .] you are copying works, and working with a model and learning technique. There is no dialogue – the only dialogue you have is with the piece in front of you that you are working on. Sometimes the teachers didn't come. I felt limited there. Sometimes they'd come and help you do your work. Here [at La ESPORA] they demand more of you. They don't say 'oh yes that's fine'. At the [national art] school you do something bad and they say 'it's fine' and I really hate that.
>
> (Jullissa Moncada, personal communication, June 2008)

Darwin Andino, a Honduran student who has moved to Nicaragua to work for La ESPORA attended the national art school in Tegucigalpa where he described the academy as 'really degenerate, without any requirements, not even the most basic that are found in the artistic tradition – it was like a badly made copy of a 200-year-old practice' (personal communication, June 2008).

Figure 10: Students from Nicaragua's national art school display a typical array of images: female nudes, landscapes, abstracts. Image taken from *La Prensa* newspaper, July 17, 2006.

Patricia Belli is concerned about what goes on in the national academies for a number of reasons. She believes their teaching practices reproduce hierarchical relations, inhibit a creative process that starts from the students' own personal interests, and limit the students' possibilities for expression thereby

damaging self-esteem. Furthermore, she believes that not teaching students about all the global art movements that have occurred since the Second World War borders on a kind of abuse by severely restricting students' knowledge and experience. In addition, the repetitive reproduction of certain kinds of images that cater to the market (notably nudes, abstracts, and landscapes, see Figure 9 above) is not only politically complacent but also implicated in processes of marginalisation. These will be discussed in the following section but here Belli explains some of her other concerns with the art schools:

> When I was a child I heard about capitalism for example and I had an image of people on top of the world manipulating, creating the system rather than it being anything to do with complicity etc. And that's a really infantile idea – but this happens a bit in the schools [. . .] there are those in charge of stopping the students thinking and this is to do with the market. The teachers also feel afraid of the possibility of students surpassing them. Look, I don't like saying this because it sounds like mythology, but it wasn't until I myself was within that system that I confirmed that it was like that. And also because of what the students tell me of their own experiences – it's a truly higher level of mediocrity. It's amazing.
>
> But really they're afraid of the young ones. Everyone has their own relative position and this is their life [. . .] but the idea that another form of creation can threaten their little feudalism is very dangerous [. . .]. It's a big problem – it's really cruel, because it uses tools to squash the possible self-esteem of the students, they put them down all the time. Someone who enters has hope, etc. but someone who leaves is arrogant and malicious, with lots of ego formed around what it has cost them to get there. It doesn't cost you in terms of the creative process or your work being good or not it but in human costs and in terms of relations with media and the absolute hierarchy of the teachers.
>
> There's no process of investigation on the part of the teachers as to what might be the interests of their students because the students cannot have their own interests because art isn't that – art is not individual, it is prescribed – there's a 'way' to do art. I also have to fight against this. I see things that make me realise what I think art should be because they're not what I expect and you have to be constantly vigilant about this – you have to go back and look again. [. . .] It's because of this that I started the whole project because I realised the thing was – there weren't the possibilities of imagining anything else.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

The commercial imperative

The work that comes out of the national art schools tends to be limited in terms of media (predominantly painting) and also subject matter, as illustrated above. This repetition of visual forms indicates both a complacent politics (art is not viewed as territory for thought or critical enquiry) and a desire to satisfy a conservative market. The kinds of images pictured above are common in galleries and cafés, and sell to the elite and to international tourists. However, Patricia Belli and other artists and critics in the region, like Pérez-Ratton (2011), argue that such images reproduce dominant stereotypes and thereby contribute to marginalisation. The verdant landscapes reinforce the colonial view of the American continent as cornucopia, and suggest an uninhabited, abundant landscape, open for occupation. The plethora of naked women, often headless or drawn in biological detail, reinscribes the dominance of the male gaze and frames women as the passive objects of that gaze in a region marked by *machismo* and grave levels of violence against women[9]. Patricia Belli argues that these images don't simply reflect social inequalities, they actively reproduce them. Furthermore this kind of work contributes to a tropical imaginary[10] of a bucolic, exportable Nicaragua, that is disconnected from either contemporary society or the personal concerns of artists (except, of course, their desire to sell) and therefore lacks critical agency.

The form and content of such work also reflects what Acuña Ortega describes as Central America's 'difficult encounters with modernity' which resulted in 'the "alienated" appropriation of European and US cultural models' (2002, p.24)[11], in this case easel painting (landscapes, nudes) which privilege an idealised beauty and a nostalgia for the elegant life of the colonial centres. In contrast, work that considers local life, the popular imaginary or religious practices has not been regarded as 'true' art, a situation that, argues Pérez-Ratton, delayed the emergence of any kind of syncretism

[9] See Pérez-Landa, 2001 and Amnesty International, 2009. This situation is most acute in Guatemala, which, since 2000, has seen such a rapid rise in the number of women murdered that the term 'feminicide' has been coined to refer not only to 'the murder of women by men because they are women' but also 'state responsibility for these murders whether through the commission of the actual killing, toleration of the perpetrators' acts of violence, or failure to ensure the safety of its female citizens' (Sanford, 2008). In 2001 303 women were murdered in Guatemala and that number rose to 603 in 2006 (UNDP, 2007, p. 30).

[10] 'Tropicalism' is the Latin American equivalent of Said's 'Orientalism', the 'system of ideological fictions [. . .] which the dominant (Anglo and European) cultures trope Latin American and U.S. Latino/a identities and cultures' (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman 1997, p.1).

[11] See also Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, and García Romano, 2000, p. 336.

(2000a, p. 77). Where indigenous images are invoked they are often simply copied, again to satisfy a commercial imperative.

Some arts-oriented development NGOs support this kind of work and appear unaware of, or unconcerned by, its broader cultural politics. The Casa de los Tres Mundos, where I lived during my fieldwork in 2006, is a large multi-faceted arts and culture organisation funded by Austrian and German partners. The organisation runs an artists' studio used by five local painters (all male) who work on 'the advancement and the development of contemporary easel painting'[12], sell their works via the Casa and give classes to teenagers. Their work (almost always acrylic or oil painting) is frequently abstract but is thematically linked to 'the forms of feminine bodies, the life cycle, eroticism and nature' (Adán Gonzales); 'nature with all its colors' (Jamir Mejía); 'forms of the feminine body, eroticism and curves' (Guillermo Barraza), and employs the 'power and sensuality of tropical colours and lights' (Juan Elí Rodríguez). One of the Casa's employees also indicated to me that the artists were part of an underground network that operated through local hotels, promoting their work to tourists (Kranz, personal communication, July 2006).

The Casa hosts exhibitions on the walls surrounding its central courtyard and I had the opportunity, over a number of months, to see a range of exhibitions, many of which complied with these commercial pressures[13] and contributed to this dominant and marginalising imaginary: constant derivations of the female form, tropical landscapes and, on one occasion, rainbow-coloured prints of Mayan glyphs. Patricia Belli is surprised that the managers of this high-profile arts/development project cannot see the implications of actively promoting this kind of work[14].

Belli and fellow artist Raúl Quintanilla argue that the dominance of such painting is related to market pressures and questions of class, as well as being a consequence of war – 'the isolation that it created and the provincialism which was reinforced through all those years' (Belli personal communication, 2008). 'The bourgeoisie', argues Belli, 'the bourgeoisie from here [and] it's a super conservative bourgeoisie, they are the market

[12] All quotes in this paragraph are taken from the following website: www.c3mundos.org/artist-studio.
[13] The commercial imperative was made clear when the mother of one of the resident German volunteers wanted to buy a painting but realised it had already been sold. The artist, pragmatically, immediately painted her another, exactly the same, but she rejected this one because it was a 'copy'.
[14] The Casa also runs other participatory visual arts workshops, which I did not have the opportunity to attend, but which may not have mirrored these marginalising practices. The artists' studio and the public exhibitions were the most visible of the Casa's work in the field of visual arts.

and this market has direct consequences because we don't have any other possibility to survive – either sell or to give up being an artist.'

Quintanilla agrees:

> All the little galleries, their interest is to sell to survive, they are the ones who promote the market and the artists [. . .] Recently a woman came to see me who is writing a book about Central American art. She gave me a long list [of artists] – OK, some good people like Patricia Belli and some of the students – but then came five or six names of people who don't do a THING and I asked who gave her the list and she said yes, Doña Juanita [owner of Galeria Códice in Managua] helped her. And I said I couldn't help her because I'm not going to talk about those people . . . (like I'm doing now!) So if you ask in whose interest [is this system maintained], I would say the gallery owners.
>
> No galleries specifically promote contemporary art. Galeria Añil would have a show of contemporary art one day but something terrible the next – same with Juanita – she's open to everyone – she has no idea and no line of her own . . . It's the problem of Nicaraguan pragmatism – everyone here is pragmatic. Daniel Ortega has become the most pragmatic man in the world – he's allied himself with the Church[15], he's allied himself with the bankers, and the bankers have allied themselves with Ortega – it's the same system that is seen almost everywhere, there are no principles, nor ideas, far less ideals.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

The major complaint made by established artists, critics and curators like Belli, Pérez-Ratton, Quintanilla and Cazali, is that these dominant artistic expressions, their reproduction through the national art schools, and their promotion through institutions and galleries are politically complacent and unreflexive. They not only lack critical agency, but are also implicated in processes of marginalisation. While these critically-informed artists see agency in art's possibility to help 'redefine' Nicaragua (in terms similar to State authorities and to development donors), they argue that this must be

[15] Daniel Ortega was a member of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional) that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. He was president of Nicaragua from 1985 until the Frente's defeat at the polls in 1990. In 2007 he was elected president of Nicaragua again (under the banner of the FSLN) but he and the party have been accused of compromising many of their former principles and many former Sandinista members have distanced themselves from him. Here Quintanilla is referring in part to the criminalization of therapeutic abortion (in circumstances where the woman's health or life may be in danger) that all political parties but one supported in a pre-election flurry in October 2006. Doctors now face up to 8 years in jail for carrying out an abortion in these, or in any other circumstances. In the year following its inception, the law reportedly resulted in the deaths of at least 82 women (Khaleeli, 2007). Quintanilla organised the collective art exhibition entitled 'Cien' (meaning one hundred), of a hundred local and international artists, in opposition to the law change.

based on a critical engagement and an ethically responsible attitude towards cultural production, and not on an uncritical adherence to national canons.

Critical interventions in the visual arts

These concerns are raised specifically with regard to the context for making visual art in the 1990s and 2000s. There have, of course, been critical interventions in modern Nicaraguan art history, some of them directly oppositional. The militant avant-garde group Praxis that emerged in the 1960s, some of whose members trained at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, fused 'a desire for formal experimentation in art with a concerted political examination of [dictatorship] society' (Craven, 2002, p. 127). They presented 'the dark, cruel side of Nicaraguan reality, which had remained hidden until then' (Quintanilla Armijo, 2002, p. 89). The *primitivista* movement coming out of the archipelago of Solentiname (that encouraged rural workers to produce art that reflected their everyday experiences and was informed by liberation theology)[16] was originally 'genuine and defiant' (ibid, p. 89). It validated the local in opposition to the US-oriented aesthetic of Somoza, it integrated a militant liberation theology that became a major mobilising force during the Sandinista revolution (see Berryman, 1984), and it was radically democratising in terms of giving anyone the opportunity to be an artist (see Craven, 1989, 2002 for a discussion).

However Praxis was ultimately unable to maintain its oppositional stance, with many of its artists falling back into primarily decorative work, and the *primitivista* movement unfortunately became 'commercialised to outrageous extremes when it was labelled as "peasant revolutionary art"" (Quintanilla, 2002, p. 89) and subsumed by a paternalist Western gaze that associated it with the idea of 'the noble savage' (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 78). Today the *primitivista* style is endlessly replicated to satisfy the tourist market.

[16] The *primitivista* movement emerged from the archipelago of Solentiname in Southern Nicaragua in the late 1960s under the guidance of renowned Nicaraguan poet and priest Father Ernesto Cardenal. Cardenal (inspired by his mentor Thomas Merton) established a spiritual community there based on principles of liberation theology. The gospel was re-read from the perspective of the islanders living in contemporary Nicaragua under a dictatorship – Christ was seen as liberator (see Cardenal, 2010). Cardenal also encouraged artistic and literary production by organising workshops in painting and poetry where rural labourers were taught by professional artists and encouraged to produce work that reflected their life and what they saw around them. *Primitivista* painting is characterised by idealised rural scenes, community life and landscapes in a detailed and brightly colourful naïf style.

The initial Sandinista government (1979-1990) also challenged the hierarchies and political complacency of the cultural field, and generated greater reflection and dialogue. The government articulated a complex, integrative, multi-scalar cultural discourse that both valorised local production – countering the idea that 'national culture is inferior, of lower quality and less import than international culture' (Ortega, 2000, p. 383) – and promoted international dialogue and exchange. Father Ernesto Cardenal was appointed Minister of Culture and sought, in this role, 'an integration of popular culture and high culture, of indigenous culture and international culture' (Craven, 2002, p. 135). A variety of public forums generated 'a central space for the discussion, comparison and airing of ideas', and helped Nicaraguan artists to regain 'awareness of [themselves] and of the social significance of [their] activity' (Quintanilla, 2002, p. 90). The visual arts community and the national art school began to diversify their practices during the 1980s. International teachers came and exchanged ideas, experiences and practices, and Nicaraguan artists had the opportunity to travel and exhibit their work overseas. This level of exchange 'oxygenated' the environment (Quintanilla, personal communication, June 2008). In this decade, talk emerged of a 'relay generation' in the artistic community, charged with the task of re-evaluating its past and considering its future[17]. However debates also erupted, at this time, over the demand for art and artists to be overtly political in support of the Sandinista regime. Orlando Sobalvarro, head of the Union of Plastic Artists, at the time, argued strongly against art occupying a proselytising role, and in defence of free expression (Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 12).

The critical, exploratory and diversifying impulses behind some of these policies resonate with the practices of EspIRA/La ESPORA. Collective reflection, increased spaces for dialogue, the promotion of diverse practices, an openness to exchange, and critically engaged strategies of self-affirmation are all aspects of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practice.

However, with the loss of the Sandinista administration at the 1990 elections following a crippling civil war, much of the state cultural infrastructure which had recently been

[17] During this period the first of the regional visual arts competitions was held, and the influence of foreign judges and their more objective assessment further stimulated critical discourse. In Nicaragua a new gallery of contemporary art, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Julio Cortázar was opened with one of the best collections of Latin American art on the continent thanks to thousands of internationally donated works (Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 10). Raúl Quintanilla was its Director in 1988 and 1989 (ibid). The museum is now closed, the building in disrepair, and it is unclear where much of this remarkable collection of Latin American art is now stored and in what condition (Belli, personal communication, June 2008; Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 12).

established was dismantled[18]. For this reason the 1990s in Nicaragua have been described as the decade of 'the shipwreck of culture' (Scruggs, 2004, p. 264). The dialogue between the avant-garde and popular culture was 'suspended' (Quintanilla, 1993) and an 'institutional vacuum prevailed' (Quintanilla, 2002, p. 92). In the visual arts, many painters once again embraced more complacent and commercially-oriented positions with 'disastrous' pictorial results: '[l]ots of tropical fruit, exotic flowers, folkloric masks and, needless to say, lots of nude young women to satisfy the onanism of our generals and bankers' (Quintanilla, 2002, p. 92). The staff who had been in solidarity with the Sandinista administration abandoned the national art school, leaving behind, according to Quintanilla, 'those who had the least to say, who hadn't had any exhibitions, who hadn't had the chance to travel' (personal communication, June 2008).

The renewed conservatism of the 1990s (to which La ESPORA directly responds) is evident in a piece written by the then Director of Nicaragua's Institute of Culture, in which he describes the key elements of Nicaraguan culture as the national flag, the national anthem and a small number of religious festivals (Martínez, 2000, p. 353). Similarly the La Prensa newspaper reported in 1991 that the Miss Nicaragua Beauty Pageant was 'the most important cultural event of the year' and 'only possible in a real democracy' (Quintanilla, 1993, p. 31). It was at the end of the 1990s that Belli was publically vilified for her success in the Nicaraguan biennial with a painting that was not a flat canvas.

Exceptions to this conservatism in the field of the visual arts included the independent arts magazine *Artefacto* (later *Estrago*) under the direction of Raúl Quintanilla that disseminated 'the latest art forms and thought of contemporary Central America' (Ramírez et al., 2002, p. 30), and, somewhat later, the group of artists formed around Patricia Belli known as TAJo. Also at this time, of great significance for the entire region, was the establishment in Costa Rica of the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo (MADC) in 1994, headed by Virginia Pérez-Ratton until her resignation in 1998. The MADC actively brought together and promoted diverse contemporary arts practices from throughout the region that transgressed the nationalist canons, and that stimulated critical and theoretical debate in the visual arts.

[18] The national recording studio ENIGRAC was closed, as was the national film institute INCINE, the School of Monumental Public Art and most community cultural centres. The Ministry of Culture was amalgamated into the Ministry of Education and a number of exceptional public murals 'mistaken for political graffiti' (Quintanilla, 2002, p. 91) were white-washed under cover of darkness by order of city councillors.

The demand for the exotic

Another reductionist influence on visual arts production in Central America described by contemporary artists is the external demand for the exotic. Works that conform to stereotypical representations of the region tend to receive greater international acclaim and there is concern that this leads to self-censorship on the part of artists. This pressure is felt to be particularly acute because, until fairly recently (the 1990s), Central American contemporary art was almost completely unknown in international circuits and there has been a great desire to gain visibility (Herkenhoff, 2011, pp. 3-4).

However, the terms of that visibility and inclusion may contribute to a different kind of marginalisation: recognition may be granted to 'the voice of the other' alongside 'a continuing control of the conditions of its reception' (Fisher, 2003, p. 267). What this means for artists from Central America, and from the South more generally, is that they tend to be recognised by the 'global' art establishment only in so far as their work demonstrates 'unredeemable cultural difference' (Cubitt, 2002, p. 4). This dilemma has provoked what Gerardo Mosquera has termed 'the "self-other-isation" of the peripheries' (2002b, p. 20).

With regard to Central America, the desire of dominant art circuits for difference takes various forms. It can take the form of an over-emphasis on pre-Columbian art forms as representations of authenticity. Or it can take the form of associating cultural production with 'magical realism' (in which elements of the fantastic or the supernatural intervene in apparently rational narratives or images) [19]. The 'boom' in Latin American literature of the 1960s and 1970s (with the phenomenal popularity, in particular, of Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez) led to an association of all Latin American culture with magical realism. Gerardo Mosquera takes up this point with regard to the visual arts in his 1996 volume '*Beyond the Fantastic*', arguing against this reduction and in favour of a 'liberation of identity' (p. 13) for Latin American artists.

Further demands for 'otherness' haunt the region's negotiations with the wider art establishment, and, ironically enough, these stem in part from efforts to counter the commercial imperative and decorative tendency (discussed above) by producing art that reflects the pain of post-war society. Artists from the region who examine themes of

[19]See Bowers, 2004 for an analysis of the term and its uses, both of which continue to be the subject of scholarly debate.

violence, poverty, natural disasters or revolution tend to gain greater international recognition. The first show of contemporary Central American art was held in the UK in late 1994/early 1995 under the title 'Tierra de Tempestades' (Land of Tempests), for example. It showed art only from Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua and was described as 'bring[ing] together nine artists from the three countries who share political commitment and first-hand experience of civil war and social repression' (Greitschus, 1995, p. 79). More recently Central American artists recognised at the Venice Biennale have been those whose work is overtly political: in 2005 Guatemalan artist Regina Galindo was awarded the Golden Lion for artists under 30 with a series of works including 'Himenoplastia'[20], '¿Quien Puede Borrar Las Huellas?'[21], and a performance in which she whipped herself 279 times, for each of the women murdered in Guatemala so far that year (Goldman, 2006). In 2007, Nicaraguan artist Ernesto Salmerón gained a place at the Biennale with his multi-media work entitled 'Auras of War: Interventions in the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Public Space 1996 – 2007' that examined the fractured legacy of the Sandinista revolution in contemporary Nicaraguan society and its continued aura[22]. The work was purchased by London's Tate Gallery in 2008. Such successes are celebrated by fellow artists in the region along with a deep wariness about the terms on which artists from the region gain international recognition.

What is at issue here is not the quality of these individual works, but the fact that it continues to be works that conform to a narrow, highly politicised and violent imaginary of the region that are recognised. This limits the way in which the region is imagined, obscures its complex realities, maintains its distance from the metropolitan centres and reinscribes locality and difference. It also puts pressure on artists to provide particular

[20] 'Himenoplastia' is a close-up and at times brutal video of the artist undergoing dangerous (she suffered a haemorrhage in the car on the way home and had to be rushed to hospital) clandestine surgery to restore her hymen and therefore her social status as virgin. It is a clear comment on the double standards of a patriarchal society and the physical brutality carried out on women in its name. This surgery is undertaken by young women trying to 'restore' their virginity for their wedding night, or forced on adolescent victims of sex trafficking who fetch a higher price as virgins (Goldman, 2006, paragraphs 16-21).

[21] Translated as 'Who can erase the traces?', this video documents a performance in which Galindo walked barefoot through Guatemala City carrying a bowl of human blood in which she dipped her feet occasionally. This act left a trail of bloody footprints from the Constitutional Court building to the old National Palace as a protest against former military dictator Ríos Montt's renewed bid for president (made possible by the corrupt Constitutional Court overturning a previous ruling that barred past presidents who gained power by military coup running for office) (Goldman, 2006, paragraph 1).

[22] This work was part of a larger exhibition of Salmerón's work that was censored in Nicaragua when it was shown at the Palacio Nacional, in Managua, in September 2006. Some pieces in the exhibition were very politically provocative and the exhibition was closed by the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture the day after it opened, in the lead-up to the general election. This action is an example of the conservatism that contemporary artists complain about within the region's existing cultural institutions.

kinds of work in order to break into global circuits. This situation, according to García Canclini, appears to apply to much of Latin America:

> '[e]ven when our people migrate extensively and a large part of our art work and literature is dedicated to thinking about the multicultural, Latin America continues to be interesting only as a continent of a violent nature, or an anarchism irreducible to modern nationality, as earth fertilised by an art conceived as tribal or national dreaming and not as thinking about the global and the complex'.
>
> (1998, pp. 373-4)

The frame of development: local incidence and 'issues'

The arrival of development donors in the cultural sector in Central America in the 1990s saw an increase in the available resources for artists but it also saw further demands for the region's art to manifest explicit difference. This difference can be seen in the positive support of indigenous practices as discussed with regard to UNESCO in Chapter 2[23] but it can also be manifested through instrumentalisation – demanding that artists be politically engaged, or make art that specifically addresses local 'issues' or 'problems'. These demands can undermine individual artistic processes and also reinforce an imaginary of 'underdevelopment' and deficiency.

Silvie Durán has argued that although NGO assistance is welcome, the tying of arts funding to issues of social hardship or the fallout from natural disasters means that 'we live condemned to be at war or inundated by floodwaters in order that cultural production [is seen as] having resonance, which results, ultimately, in the following perversion: if you are an artist, you need I don't know how many deaths to be recognised in Holland' (2004, section 5, paragraph 6). This situation suggests a somewhat circular logic within development: arts funding is, in many ways, an attempt to recognise and support the complexity of the development subject beyond stereotypes of lack and deficiency, yet in order to get funding, artists must constantly define themselves *within* the terms of 'underdevelopment', and thereby reinscribe the dominance of development discourse.

[23] Clearly this is not problematic in itself, but it may become problematic if it means that other art forms are not granted support or if it is attached to a demand for 'authenticity'. This is discussed further in Chapter 8.

In a similar vein, Nicaraguan film-makers Jaugey and Pineda argue that without NGO funding Nicaraguan cinema would probably have disappeared in the last fifteen years, but that NGOs have demanded 'a certain type of focus' (Jaugey and Pineda, 2000, p. 377). They want to see productions with an essentially 'social character'. This has the flow-on effect, in the film-makers' opinion, of reinforcing negative stereotypes of Nicaragua (as a place of poverty and all its ensuing problems) and maintaining a form of exoticism that diversifying cinematic production would help to break. Another example is the sponsorship by a group of development organisations (including Action Aid and the FAO), beginning in 2007, of a special annual prize at the Central American film festival (ICARO) for the documentary that 'best deals with the issue of hunger and malnutrition in Central America'. The same prize is granted every year.

On the other hand, funding for fiction films and features is much harder to come by. In 2009, Nicaragua released its first feature-length fictional film in 21 years. Called 'La Yuma', it tells the story of a strong-willed and rebellious girl from the gang-troubled *barrios* of Managua who dreams of becoming a boxer[24]. As its director Florence Jaugey points out, it is not a film about boxing but a film about the contemporary reality of young people living in Managua. Boxing is a mechanism through which the protagonist externalises her tension and energy. Although the social circumstances of the protagonist are hard, the film is also infused with vitality, ingenuity and humour as means of overcoming those circumstances.

In interviews[25] Jaugey has pointed out that it took 10 years to get together the modest budget needed for the production: 10 years to source the funds and 32 days to shoot the film. All funds were sourced externally except for a small amount coming from private enterprise within Nicaragua, and the support of CINERGIA[26] (a Costa Rican based fund that supports audiovisual production in the region and whose backers include Hivos and the Spanish development agency AECID). The film has been hugely popular in Nicaragua and it gives a far more nuanced take on life in urban Nicaragua than is usually on offer. Jaugey sees the film as particularly important because it is so rare for

[24] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqM-253doTU&feature=related for a trailer of the film with English subtitles.
[25] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbXoIw8pm_k&feature=related and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cq_tqywyuYA&feature=related.
[26] CINERGIA stands for Fondo de fomento al audiovisual de Centroamérica y el Caribe (which translates as the Fund for Development of Audiovisual Production in Central America and the Caribbean).

contemporary Nicaraguan reality to be portrayed in film and television, and this, she argues, has a negative impact on self-esteem and conceptions of identity.

Patricia Belli has also pointed out that the demand from development donors for artistic production that is either political or has direct social incidence (in other words that is instrumentalised) is both restrictive (limiting agency) and reductionist: 'The stereotype is on us: leave aesthetics to the *superficial* artists of the first world and let artists of the third world think and act on their political issues' (Belli, 2007b). The problem, as she argues elsewhere, with 'the predisposition to commercial object as much as the predisposition to sociological object' is that it 'stimulates vices and modes that pervert true pluralism' (La ESPORA, 2006, p. 4).

Belli and other artists articulate this range of critiques (the complacency of much visual art production in the region, the lack of critical public spaces, the conservatism of the region's art academies, the commercial imperative, the external demand for the exotic, and instrumentalisation on the part of donors) not to generate a negative imaginary of Central America, but to lay claim to the agency of a critically engaged arts practice. The practices critiqued are argued to reduce Central American subjectivity to stereotypes, to be largely disconnected from active, relational engagement with contemporary society, to reinforce social distance, discrimination and marginalisation. They are also argued to stem from particular historical circumstances associated with colonialism, neo-colonialism, the parochialism of dictatorship society, and the region's precarious economic situation, rather than reflecting anything intrinsic in Central America society. The ways in which independent contemporary artists' initiatives define their own agency in relation to these circumstances is the subject of the following section.

Independent artist-led organisations: connection, investigation, articulation, projection

The reducing or limiting practices described above are articulated by a range of independent artist-led initiatives partly in order to define their own agency. Agency is articulated, as Sherry Ortner (2006, Chapter 6) has pointed out, in terms of resistance (against other fields of force), and in terms of constructive projects. The agency that these groups claim for contemporary art is that of an active, self-conscious, responsible,

critical practice that critiques practices of marginalisation, provides a space for reflection, and generates diverse and complex imaginings of place and identity.

Given the limited capacities and conservative tendencies of existing cultural infrastructure, claiming this agency entails artists doing far more than simply creating works. It necessitates constructing the necessary material and theoretical infrastructure through establishing, and articulating critical positions, for educational facilities, curatorial practices, documentation and dissemination, and international exchange. Independent initiatives (financially backed by international organisations) are intensely active, showing a determination to construct and to produce, 'to not remain in the rhetoric of self-victimization' (Cazali in Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 57)[27].

These intensely constructive practices have, of course, emerged in a particular time and place – post-war Central America, in which the challenge of rebuilding divided and devastated nations, most of them heavily indebted, has been taking place amid the austerity measures of structural adjustment (Almeida and Walker, 2006). Ana Patricia Rodríguez points out that the peace plans and accords in Central America – while framed by the ideals of democracy, progress and liberty – were also impelled by desires for market expansion and neoliberal reform (2009, pp. 201-2). Peacetime in the region has not proved to be particularly peaceful: it has seen 'deeper levels of poverty, illiteracy and hunger', 'drug trafficking and criminal activity'[28], 'induced migration' and 'higher levels and new forms of violence' (ibid).

This complex post-war period has been described as both a challenge, and an opportunity for an urgently needed exploration of identity in the region and the regeneration of cultural forms (see Cuevas Molina, 1993 and Rodríguez, 2009, p. 195-222). Cultural commentators have described the region as being 'under construction' (Oyamburu, 2000, p. 7), 'reconstructed' (Rodríguez, 2002), in 'an era of transition' (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 75). Rosina Cazali, an independent art critic from Guatemala and the founder of curatorial project La Curandería explains that the post-war period:

[27] This sense of energy and of action in what is an unsupportive and at times strongly hostile environment is evident in other genres as well as the visual arts. Young writers also emerged in Central America at the end of the 1990s who 'deny hope but, paradoxically, publish and create very energetically and are looking for new ways of expressing themselves, from performance to the new creation of editorials by means of publications of a rudimentary character' (Toledo, 2000, p. 367).
[28] Bruneau, Dammert, & Skinner (2011) provide an in-depth analysis of the recent rise in organised crime and gang activity in Central America.

> [. . .] entails facing ourselves, recounting the disturbing moral consequences that we inherited from a long period of war, and discovering that all we have left is a devastated and plundered human scene, with a series of cities and towns that have grown as a response to precarious conditions, without any order or coherent intentions. This scene is joined by the erosion of authority and of credibility in the institutions, and a serious increase in violence. The only thing that is clear to us is we have to reconstruct everything.
>
> (Cazali, 2000, p. 330)

The challenge has been not only to create structures but also simply to get to know one another after the isolation imposed by colonial divisions, dictatorships, and civil war: to investigate the diversity of existing practices, to bring artists together, to begin to document what was already happening. The desires for connectivity articulated in the region's peace accords and the influx of international donors eager to support cultural regeneration seemed, Pérez-Ratton writes, 'to open concrete possibilities for the reconstruction of regional communication at diverse levels' (2011, p. 2). At a symbolic level, Virginia Pérez-Ratton described the opacity or instability of concepts of identity in the region as an opportunity for redefinition: 'in some ways [the] uncertainty about [. . .] what Central America is or is not, and the difficulty of being able to decipher it, opens possibilities to invent [for ourselves] a concept of the region that erases geographic certainty and is constructed by itself as it wishes' (ibid, p. 29).

The last 15 years in Central America have, therefore, seen the 'constant appearance, disappearance and renovation of numerous autonomous groups in the region' (Belli, 2007a, point 3, paragraph 2). It is artists themselves, their 'autonomous projects with scant resources', who have actively pursued cultural exploration and transformation, and who are having the greatest impact (Ramírez et al., 2002, p. 13; see also Durán Salvatierra, 2000, p. 29).

The Central American states, as mentioned, have shown little desire to promote this process of cultural exploration and reconstruction. This project has instead been taken up by independent initiatives, and financed primarily by international funds (Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 3). International agencies had a very active presence in the region in the post-war period (and in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in October 1998[29]), as the

[29] Hurricane Mitch passed slowly over Central America in October 1998, causing massive flooding and landslides in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Thousands were killed and millions displaced. Infrastructural damage was massive with hundreds of schools and health clinics destroyed and nearly 70%

region struggled to cope with large numbers of refugees, displaced people, polarised communities and massive infrastructural damage. As this period also coincided with the tail-end of the UN's Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997) and the emergence of dedicated culture funds, artists' organisations in the region were among the first to receive money from the international community. Some development organisations (such as UNESCO and SDC[30]) focussed on the arts as contributing to peace-building through communication. Others, however, such as Hivos, coincided more directly with the agenda of the independent artists' organisations discussed above who advocated an exploratory, interrogative and regenerative practice.

Critically-oriented artist-led initiatives

Raúl Quintanilla points out that artists in Central America have had to become 'wizards of self-management [. . .] curators, producers, chauffeurs, packers, lecturers, public polemicists, catalogue designers, art critics and so on' (2002, p. 93). Yet, the necessity of independence is also understood by these artist-led initiatives to present an opportunity to expand their critical agency through providing a range of artistic services and constructing new structures and networks which are informed by a similar ethic of responsibility, horizontal relationships, and critical enquiry.

Initiatives like EspIRA/La ESPORA[31] should be seen in terms of a global rise over the last 15-20 years in artist-led projects which aim to carve out new and active public spaces, and redefine relationships between artists and publics. They purposely distance themselves from traditional structures which are seen as conservative, increasingly commercialised, and/or implicated in neoliberal politics. As mentioned, the neoliberal political climate has seen an increasingly instrumental turn in arts funding (Mirza, 2006,

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of Nicaragua's roads affected. Furthermore, in Nicaragua, the flooding and landslides were said to have relocated hundreds of landmines left over from the Contra insurgency in the 1980s (see IADB, 2000).

[30] SDC's 'Fondo de Cultura - Principios de la intervención' advocates 'turning to culture as a generative medium of opportunities for social insertion and the prevention of social conflicts' (SDC, 2006, paragraph 1).

[31] Others include independent NGOs such as TEOR/éTica (Costa Rica); artist collectives like La Cuarteria (Honduras) and the video-art project E.V.I.L. (Nicaragua); critics' and curators' projects such as La Curandería (Guatemala); and independent art magazines like *Estrago* (Nicaragua), *Artmedia* (Costa Rica) and *Talingo* (Panamá). The interest of these artist-led projects in an expressly critical approach is evident in some of their names: 'TEOR/éTica', for example, implies theory, ethics and aesthetics and 'EspIRA', as already mentions, stands for 'Espacio para la Investigación y Reflexión Artística' or 'Space for Artistic Research and Reflection'.

Yúdice, 2003), a reduction in state support of the arts[32], and the consequent restructuring of art institutes along increasingly corporate lines, including the questionable ethics of attracting private investment in exchange for influence over the content of art shows and the increasing integration of money-making entertainment facilities within a traditional gallery space[33]. Many artists have begun to see institutional reform as impossible, with the only solution being for artists to organise themselves (Davies, Dillemuth and Jakobsen, 2006, p. 177). In the case of EspIRA/La ESPORA, this means creating its own institution.

Pérez González points out that artist-run initiatives generally articulate a 'stronger role for the artist in determining culture', with artists functioning as 'instigators or primary cultural agents whose mission is to promote a more dynamic role of the artist within the art system as well as within their respective communities' (2008, p. 10). Artist-run projects tend to be both entrepreneurial and idealistic, and value 'autonomy, self-determination and self-organization' although, as Pérez González points out, they are rarely self-sufficient (ibid). Further common practices include a strong engagement with theoretical critique (ibid, p. 13), a rejection of the commercial imperative (ibid, p. 15) an embrace of experimentation (ibid, p. 16), and a focus on dialogue and exchange (ibid, pp.16-19). Artist-led initiatives generally demonstrate a desire to construct horizontal relationships and a sense of collective endeavour in opposition to the traditional hierarchies of the art establishment (ibid).

Very little has been written on artist-led initiatives in the South[34]. Pérez González's Master's thesis, from which I have quoted above, is one exception. Another is a slim

[32] See Ivey, 2008, for example, on the dramatic reduction of National Endowment for the Arts funding in the USA in the late 1990s.

[33] Andrea Fraser offers multiple examples of what she calls a virtual 'stampede toward the corporatisation of museums if not of the non-profit visual arts sector as a whole' in the North (Fraser, 2006, p. 88). For the Central American context see Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 158.

[34] Artist-led projects in the North and in the South may share similar concerns but it seems that they approach those concerns using quite different strategies. While fluidity and transience may be desired features of many initiatives in the industrialised West (16 Beaver Group, 2006, p. 184; Foster, 2006, p. 192), these are inevitable symptoms of the cultural context in Central America, therefore solidity and longevity are desired and valued. Where a slacker mentality of conscious inaction might be a strategy in the West to resist the capitalist demand to produce (TRAMA, 2001), in Central America the opposite strategy appears: intensive action in order to avoid the pull towards inertia. Similarly where de-professionalising may be one objective of artist-led organisations in the West (16 Beaver Group, 2006, p. 184), professionalising critical artistic practice in Central America is desired in order to dignify contemporary practice within the region, dignify the region's artistic practice on the world stage, and to respond to the educational/occupational needs of young people (in the case of La ESPORA) who face a very difficult socio-economic environment.

book called *Shifting Maps* (RAIN Network, 2004)[35], which describes the practices and concerns of a group of contemporary artist-led initiatives in the South that show significant overlap with the aspirations of EspIRA/La ESPORA. For example, common practices among those organisations include a focus on collaborative processes, a desire to create structures and institutions, and a movement 'away from the premises of artistic modernity in many respects, but in continuity with a crucial element of the modernist project in so far as they bind art practice to forms of social emancipation' (Ladagga, 2004, p. 16). As Laddaga makes clear,

> [. . .] the artistic initiatives that are here presented, in their most innovative aspect, cannot be reduced to criticism or celebration, nor to either the defence or the dissolution of artistic autonomy. Neither modernism, we might say, nor vanguard. The first is obvious, but what about the second? Something that should be borne in mind is the tendency of these initiatives to concentrate on designing alternative institutions rather than developing practices of de-institutionalisation.
>
> (ibid, p.18)

It seems that artist-led initiatives, in Central America and globally, tend to be highly dynamic and constructive: entrepreneurial in their constant creation of new spaces, new networks, new practices and new ways of interacting with publics, yet critically and ethically self-reflexive about the form of these new practices. Although their work is not necessarily oriented towards addressing particular social issues, they appear to be deeply socially engaged. They reject art as a site for commodification and draw attention, instead, to its critical potential in the construction of society (in diverse ways).

Strategies of exploration, education, self-centring and projection

In Central America, in the visual arts, artist-led initiatives have adopted a range of strategies to promote a critically agentic and responsible artistic practice. These strategies include establishing relationships and networks between diverse actors in the region, documenting existing practices, establishing multiple forums of debate, generating critical writing on the visual arts, and assuming some control over the ways in

[35] In 2000 the Rijksacademie in the Netherlands (with assistance from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affair that overseas development cooperation) began a programme of cultural exchange with a number of independent artist-led initiatives. *Shifting Maps - Artists' Platforms and Strategies for Cultural Diversity* is the book that resulted from these experiences. It sketches some of the exchanges that took place and profiles the work of these diverse artists' initiatives.

which Central American art is curated internationally. Patricia Belli's work with TAJo and later EspIRA/La ESPORA clearly contributes to these processes (through critical practices, intra-regional exchanges, publications, and public forums). The pioneering figure in this process of articulating a critical regional practice has been the late Virginia Pérez-Ratton, Costa Rican artist, curator and critic, whose work I draw on below to describe the political platform and map the core strategies of contemporary artists in the region. In 2002 she was recognised by the Prince Claus Fund as a 're-inventor' of Central America:

> [S]he succeeded in bringing together the different artistic territories from that fragmented and isolated region, and constructed a profile for it. With enormous tenacity, she introduced the artistic scene of the countries of Central America to [Central Americans] themselves and to the rest of the world. She is much more than the director of TEOR/éTica; more than a sought-after independent curator and art critic: she is an 'activist of art' that crosses borders.
>
> (cited in Herkenhoff, 2011, pp. 15-16)

As inaugural director of the Costa Rica's Museum for Contemporary Art and Design (MADC) from 1994-1998, Pérez-Ratton's first major project was to investigate and document currently existing artistic practices in the region. Among such practices she sought common situations and strategies from which to articulate a theoretical position for the practice of contemporary art in the region that 'assumed [the region's] multiplicity' (Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 6). Hivos supported this investigation by financing, in 1997, the establishment of a website[36] for the MADC that brought together this information about contemporary artists working in the region (ibid, p. 22).

This work was particularly notable for its commitment to 'unity and cooperation between the Central American nations, between the old rivalries that existed right up until the wars' (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 7). The existence of long-standing division and distrust in Central America was intensified by the region's civil wars from the 1970s to the 1990s (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 75). These conflicts compounded a 'postcolonial inheritance' that left a 'lack of horizontal interaction' (Mosquera, 2002b, p. 21) both between nations and within 'fragmented national spaces' (Durán Salvatierra, 2000, p. 34). Fragmentation was enhanced by diasporic dispersal. However, in those early investigations, Pérez-Ratton encountered great enthusiasm among artists for interaction

[36] See www.madc.cr/joomla151/index.php/arte-centroamericano-topmenu-77.

and community: 'a profound desire for communication, for the resumption of lost ties, for the reparation of identities as well as the necessity of working collaboratively' (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 12). Rodríguez points out that this desire among cultural workers in the post-war period to generate 'transisthmian cultural linkages' (2009, p. 196), was shared by artists of diverse genres (not only in the visual arts).

Bringing artists from the region together, documenting their practices, and generating public debate about cultural self-representation and the ways in which the isthmus imagines itself – as more than a geographic location, but as a 'space with memory' (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 23) – were all key strategies of Pérez-Ratton's aimed at countering the lack of circulation within the region (ibid, p. 20). While working at the MADC, and later as director of her own NGO TEOR/éTica, Pérez-Ratton organised numerous collective exhibitions and colloquiums[37], and documented these through a range of publications which included theoretical engagements with the practice and politics of visual art production in Central America (ibid, p. 4)[38].

Within these multiple projects, the production of knowledge through South-South networks has been particularly important. As Pérez-Ratton writes, 'the understanding of each other, when speaking about Latin American art, or about the particularities of given practices and articulating discourses is only possible if we know each other and if this knowledge is established directly, instead of being a side product of encounters that take place in the centres as intermediaries. It is necessary to create these meeting points within a South that not only restates itself but also its relations with the North' (Pérez-Ratton, 2005).[39]

EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices are clearly allied with such interventions. Residencies bring emerging art students from different parts of the region together, generating knowledge and networks. The EX-IT exhibition extends the possibilities for collaboration and exchange as it travels throughout the region. Current practices are

[37] Key examples are the region-wide symposium 'Temas Centrales', held in 2000 and discussed below, and the symposium '¿Que Centroamérica? – una región a debate' held in 2006.
[38] Pérez-Ratton has published key texts on art and culture in the region, such as *Temas Centrales*, and instigated many others, such as the publication of a Central American edition of the Spanish art magazine *Atlántica* (2002). She has contributed to international journals and catalogues, and edited and published books on highly significant but largely unrecognised artists such as Nicaraguan artist Rolando Castellón.
[39] These new lines of solidarity and exchange that do not pass through the metropolitan nodes of power, contribute to a wider postcolonial project of 'pluralizing culture, internationalising it in the real sense of the word, legitimising it in its own terms, constructing new epistemes, revealing alternative actions.' (Mosquera, 2002b, p.21).

documented through the publication of catalogues. Debate is encouraged through workshop processes, in symposia, public lectures, and articles written for the media.

This important process of internal investigation, connection and validation, taken up by Pérez-Ratton and other artists' initiatives has been matched by a concerted effort to change the terms of recognition for Central American art in the international art scene. Bearing in mind that in the internationalised art world the curator has morphed from 'behind the scenes aesthetic arbiter to central player in the broader stage of global cultural politics' (Mari Carmen Ramírez cited in Brenson, 2005, p. 56), Pérez-Ratton's curatorial practice was partly aimed at answering back to the exoticising demands of the international art world. She didn't want the region's art to be disqualified from international circuits through a lack of knowledge about it, nor to be recognised only for its stereotypical nationalist characteristics (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 20).

In response to the 1995 exhibition 'Tierra de Tempestades', curated by Joanne Bernstein and held in Britain that framed artists from Central America in terms of their war-torn history and experiences of socio-economic hardship rather than the quality and range of their work, Pérez-Ratton curated an exhibition of contemporary Central American art in Costa Rica entitled 'MESóTICA-the non-representative America' later the same year. MESóTICA (and its subsequent incarnations in 1996 and 1997) were hugely significant as the first exhibitions of Central American contemporary art curated from *within* the region. They contributed to 'configuring a first regional imaginary' for the visual arts (Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 24), and the interest they generated when touring Europe resulted in the subsequent inclusion of a number of Central American artists in a series of international biennales (ibid) [40].

In her international curatorial work Pérez-Ratton has always assumed a position of centrality, constructing Central America as an agentic centre rather than a dependent periphery. In 2000 she organised a significant regional symposium, strategically entitled *Temas Centrales* (Central Themes). It was the 'First Regional Symposium on Contemporary Central American Artistic Practices and Curatorial Possibilities' and was financially supported by Hivos, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Gate Foundation. The symposium, and the publication it generated (Pérez-Ratton, 2000b), were

[40] Pérez-Ratton has coordinated the Central American presence at biennales in São Paulo in 1998, the Cuenca, Havana and Venice Biennales, and the Auckland Triennial in 2007.

concerned with bringing Central American art to the centre of its own attention and investigation:

> And why Central Themes? Central for whom and for where? Weren't we supposed to be the periphery? Beyond the progressive erasure of the concepts of centre and periphery, it is about time that Central America is not presented as a peripheral area, not only vis-à-vis the international arena, but particularly towards itself. We must assume our right to a complete membership in the international artistic community, and act responsibly, respecting our own context and conditions; understanding them and working from within a context that makes us different, yet equal, which defines us specifically, but that in no way should conduce us to perceive ourselves as subaltern. And, later on, we must never forget where we come from.
>
> (Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 297)

This bold assertion of the region's centrality and equality has subsequently become 'a reference point for artistic activism in the region' (Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 26). It was the platform from which Pérez-Raton negotiated Central America's presence at international art events – an assumption that events like the Venice Biennale needed the presence of Central American art rather than Central American art needing to be at Venice. This position does not start from 'the guilt of the colonising nations of Europe or the United States nor with the victimisation of the countries of the region, but rather [it starts from] a system of endogenous and exogenous responsibilities' (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 25). In other words, it immediately assumes equality rather than reinscribing dominance and marginality.

This articulation of the region's centrality is paralleled by Patricia Belli's assertion that the region is a great place to make art. Such overtly positive articulations of place directly counter the negative imaginary of development, and reduce both the social distance and the assumption of subservience in relations between North and South. Both Belli and Pérez-Ratton 'socially re-potentialise adversity' (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 15). This is precisely the kind of positive re-imagining desired by postdevelopment scholars.

In the work of EspIRA/La ESPORA, self-validation is embodied in the school's strategy of encouraging students to explore their motivations to work with particular subject matter or media, and to produce art starting from their own experiences and interests rather than responding to external expectations, commercial pressures or fads. This stimulates a sincere engagement with context, conceived in its broadest sense and

including social, psychological, spiritual, biological or political aspects. Students are not required to examine their local social reality in an overtly political way but, through an enquiry into their interests, context is brought into action.

It is important to realise that, while Pérez-Ratton has been hugely significant in articulating platforms and frameworks for contemporary practice in the region, her work has been informed by constant contributions from multiple artists' initiatives, including EspIRA/La ESPORA. Writing shortly before her death, Pérez-Ratton pointed out that it is easy to assume coherence after the fact, but that these political positionings are actually the result of multiple, dispersed efforts, in dialogue, over time (2011, p. 6). Cumulatively, however, these efforts have resulted in real changes for the context of making contemporary art in Central America. Locally, there is an increasingly strong sense of community among contemporary artists and critics, strengthened by networks and collaborations. Belli sees this critical, but mutually supportive, community as giving students a reason to stay in the region. Speaking specifically about Nicaragua, Belli says:

> [Now] you have friends. Twenty years ago of course I had friends but there wasn't the level of dialogue that I hoped for. The dialogue was much more, well . . . it was jovial and friendly but it wasn't a challenge and I understand what it means to have a dialogue that is a challenge – it's something so stimulating. So that exists now and it's small – what there is in La ESPORA, and I imagine, places like *Patadeperro* [small cultural and entertainment magazine in Managua] where there are various people who are interested in culture[. . .] or MarcaAcme[41], places that bring young people together, the restless ones who are really interested in knowledge. These circles didn't exist before.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Intra-regional linkages also now support, in a practical sense, the development of infrastructure in the independent sector through the exchange of knowledge and resources. La ESPORA has exhibited at TEOR/éTica, for example, and Raúl Quintanilla from *Estrago* teaches art history at some of La ESPORA's workshops. 'Internal understanding, support and responsibility' are described by Pérez-Ratton as extremely important given the ongoing vulnerability of emerging cultural structures and practices (2005a, pp. 221-222). Development donors, such as Hivos, Arts Collaboratory and UNESCO, have, to an extent, supported intra-regional collaborations. Arts

[41] Founded in 2004, MarcaAcme is an artist-led website that acts as a cultural portal for Nicaragua and Central America, posting news, interviews and criticism as well as providing a space for the presentation and discussion of those artists (of whatever media) who do not fit into the mainstream cultural supplements (see www.marcaacme.com).

Collaboratory has initiated a Latin American network of artists of which EspIRA/La ESPORA is a member[42]. Hivos has supported region-wide events undertaken by TEOR/éTica and by EspIRA/La ESPORA, and UNESCO has developed various region-wide plans and strategies that bring cultural workers from the region together from time to time, such as the regional symposiums on cultural indicators (see Castellanos, 2005).

Other significant recent changes in the regional context for the production of visual arts include the increasing presence of Central American artists in global art circuits (although still with the reservations discussed earlier about the terms of their inclusion); and the production of large international art shows in Central America, notably in Costa Rica[43]. Pérez-Ratton also perceived a significant change in self-perception among artists in Central America: '[i]n reality, the most important [thing] has been the change in self-perception, and that Central Americans are positioning themselves, to themselves, as members of a global society, and not of a Third World banana [republic]. A fruitful dialogue has been achieved with international artists with whom [we have] worked, and [have] sought to establish affinities in terms of concepts like identities, belonging or not belonging, context, circulation and legitimation. It has been a question of attitude, of the construction of identity and self-esteem' (2011, p. 35).

The contemporary, the influence of women artists and the politics of plurality

It is by no means incidental that these deeply reflective, interrogative and diversifying processes have been taking place through the medium of contemporary art[44]. Argentinian artist Claudia Fontes argues that what contemporary art contributes in

[42] See http://www.artscollaboratory.org/latin-american-network.
[43] In 2006/7 Pérez-Ratton organised 'Estrecho Dudoso', a massive international art show held in multiple venues throughout San José between December 2006 and February 2007 with the participation of over 70 local and international artists, and the support of Hivos, the Ford Foundation, the Getty Foundation, the Costa Rican Ministry for Culture, Youth and Sport, and a range of embassies, foundations and private enterprise. One of La ESPORA's students commented to me that this was the first time they had been able to see significant international works that they can usually only experience as Internet images or through photographs in books. This massive event has also demonstrated the capacity for the region to organise and manage significant logistics and budgets in the cultural sector.
[44] I use the term contemporary art here to talk about the diverse movement in global visual arts that followed the Second World War (although I recognise that the global art world is still dominated by Europe and North American traditions). Contemporary art will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

social terms is its strongly critical approach, influenced by the conceptual art[45] movement. 'Conceptual art', she says, 'brought another level of awareness, of responsibility, to artists – I mean responsibility in terms of the way in which you are taking decisions even if you are not taking them – you can't avoid being scrutinised as to what you are doing or the position you are taking [. . .] even if you decide to paint, that is a conceptual decision' (personal communication, June 2008). The great value of La ESPORA, she thinks, is that it provides 'a platform for reflection on the creative process'.

To Patricia Belli, the 'contemporary' signifies a self-reflexive perspective which demands sincerity in the work and a process of investigation in the creation of the work to explore and test that sincerity:

> We don't believe in things that just emerge without consideration – things can emerge like this but you have to take a step back and look at it [. . .] the contemporary is a gaze, it's a way of assuming the problematic – to problematise, not simplify, and to try to understand that problem from diverse perspectives.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Critical thinking, for Belli, works as a kind of reflex in contemporary practice:

> [By critical thinking] I'm talking about a mechanism of questioning in which you don't take things for granted, or submit to preconceived notions or stereotypes, but rather you go through a process of investigation and it's a thing that I promote a lot because it's the way I've learned to proceed after many errors and setbacks. It functions in my creative process like a constant filter asking 'where does that come from'? And I've realised through this many things, including some that go against what is politically correct [. . .]
>
> I'm not only talking about questioning the conservative stereotype but also the avant-garde stereotype and it's something that seems to me is done rarely [. . . .] What I'm referring to is more a critical spirit – perhaps more than thought – because it's a mixture of thought and intuition, and this is one of the things that I try and inculcate in the young [students]. This is one of the things that has had more success in the sense that they incorporate it in their creative processes.
>
> (ibid)

[45] Conceptual art refers to art in which the idea or concept is more significant than material or aesthetic concerns. As Joseph Kosuth explained in his explication of conceptual art 'Art after Philosophy', 'all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually' (1969).

Belli points out that it is this critical spirit that is the key element of contemporary practice, rather than the use of new media such as performance or installation, but that this distinction is not well understood in Central America:

> What happens here in Nicaragua is that a large proportion of those who call themselves contemporary artists aren't. They use video, installations etc. to do a super conservative work. Equally there are people who work in traditional forms but they are doing much more contemporary work but who don't consider themselves as contemporary and furthermore have a prejudice against contemporary work.
>
> (ibid)

Plurality of form, critical questioning, and diverse, individual perspectives bear agency, partly because they go 'against the anointed nationalist and/or messianic vocation of the "artist"' (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 79). The contemporary artist does not act as a spokesperson for society, and critics do not seek to uncover a 'Central American' style of art (ibid, p. 77). Rather artists are working from 'individual, critical viewpoints' (Pérez-Ratton in Ramírez et al., 2002, p. 8) that take account of multiple and divergent realities. This is a more individualised form of diversity (and agency) than that advocated by UNESCO for the region, which primarily supports greater recognition of marginalised ethnic groups. Contemporary artists are wary of reifying an essentialised ethnic Other, and recognise multiple and complex layers of domination and discrimination (Belli, 2006)[46]. They advocate instead 'an attitude of permanent interrogation against established attitudes' (Pérez-Ratton, 2002, p. 82).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the increase in this plural and critical contemporary practice, and indeed in the emergence of artists' organisations associated with such a practice, has been marked by the 'novel self-assertive production' of women in contemporary art, who began to gain greater visibility in the 1990s (Cazali, 2000, p. 331; Torres, 2004a, 2004b; Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 81). Traditionally associated with the decorative arts (Blandino in Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 44), women acquired a new prominence in the region's art scene in the post-war period through 'proposals that were very distant from the traditional and supposedly appropriate art for women' (Cazali, 2000, p. 332)

[46] UNESCO is aware of the tension between a discourse of cultural diversity and the possibilities of other forms of marginalisation. I have already recounted the experience of one UNESCO staff member who was shocked by the level of discrimination against the local women that she encountered while filming a religious parade in rural Costa Rica (anonymous personal communication, August 2006). However the focus of the project, and of much of UNESCO's work in the region, was on valuing marginalised ethnic groups rather than dealing with other forms of marginalisation.

producing some of the most innovate contemporary art (Torres, 2004a, 2004b). Patricia Belli is reluctant to actually call this is 'movement' but speculates that:

> [. . .] the masculine project ran out of steam. Praxis etc, all the movements in Central America that existed through the time of the dictatorships were men's projects and they had a very specific format: denouncement, social themes – in many ways an inherited format from the vanguard movements in Europe and the USA. So when women began to work, we didn't start from this place, this path – I can talk about my own process . . .
>
> When I began to work with fabric for example it came from a very intimate, subjective compulsion, and it was to do with these massive packets of used clothing, these mountains of clothing that began to come to Nicaragua – so yes it has to do with context but also with assuming the possibility of the private in art which had not happened previously – in my case at the beginning of the 1990s, but this began to happen in the 70s and 80s in contemporary art [. . .] When we actually got together at MESóTICA in the 1990s (it's terrible that we didn't get together before that!) we realised we were working in similar ways. For example, I was working with spines, and María Dolores Castellanos was working with spines in Guatemala. I was working with fabric and Priscilla Monge in Costa Rica was working with fabric. So we were working with similar materials and the materials were absolutely determinate in the essence of the work – we were working with processes of curing, wounds and the body. And this was a new way of doing art in Central America.
>
> So yes, I definitely think we developed into a kind of vanguard and also because women were doing the most interesting work. In MESóTICA, clearly the things I saw that interested me were works by women, not only because they had a relation to my work but because they were different, more stimulating. There is an intimate feminist [thing] here – not theoretical, in my case, I don't come from theory but yes, this was a time of rebirth in Central American art and it was totally led by women through a body of work that related directly to gender. It wasn't a movement, but a wave (it wasn't theorised) – it was personal which makes it political because work prior to that wasn't personal.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Women have also been instrumental in the establishment of independent artists' organisations, such as TEOR/éTica (Costa Rica), EspIRA/La ESPORA (Nicaragua), La Curandería (Guatemala), Fundación San Juancito (Honduras). Patricia Belli thinks that this is 'totally a question of gender', although it may not be emancipatory:

> I don't think it is to do with a heroic movement like a kind of martyr thing. In some sense there is nothing admirable about this – it has to do with our historic roles. When I cook, Ricardo [Belli's partner at the time] says 'keep

> on with your traditional role!' [. . .] I can't talk for other people like Adrienne Samos[47] or Virginia Pérez-Ratton or Regina Aguilar[48] but it's difficult not to think this – that men don't feel this responsibility, this necessity to get involved in a project – it's like continuing the role of the mother really – ugh! How horrible!
>
> (ibid)

This more individualised, personal approach to making art may be perceived to be less agentic than a practice that aims to represent a collective vision, particularly by development donors whose focus is broad social change. However, opening a 'broader thematic repertoire' (Cazali, 2000, p. 332) carries a particular agency precisely related to a refusal to speak for the group. Diversifying artistic production creates space for other forms of representation and the representation of other experiences, that respond in diverse ways to contemporary social realities. The demand to be seen in more complex terms confronts the existing terms of recognition for Central American artists in the wider art world. Advocating diversity, complexity and sincerity is not an apolitical stance.

Furthermore, simply because works start from a personal perspective and experience, doesn't mean that they cannot connect with others through the universality of their themes. An example is Patricia Belli's work in her exhibition 'El Circo' (held in 2000 at TEOR/éTica) in which various vaguely human forms were suspended by and connected to one another via a system of strings and pulleys. These objects functioned as 'symbols of manipulation and representation of the experiences of domination and resistance in diverse fields – politics, gender, class, ethnicity etc.' (Belli in Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 193).

In addition, questions of form may become highly politicized, as Patricia Belli's award in the Nicaraguan Biennial in 1999 made clear. Works without an overt political message may become politicized through their inclusion or exclusion from the region's artistic circuits. Pérez-Ratton cites the example of three sculptures commissioned from

[47] Critic and curator Adrienne Samos studied in Europe and the USA before returning to Panamá and establishing the cultural supplement Talingo. She is also director of the independent arts organisation Arpa, established to research and promote the arts and culture in Panamá.

[48] Regina Aguilar is a Honduran sculptor and glass artist (trained in Europe and the USA) who returned to live in Honduras, setting up a very successful arts/craft workshop in the former mining town of San Juancito (Aguilar, 2002, p. 128) which provides employment and educational opportunities to adults and children in this economically depressed remote mountain town. Decorative goods (notebooks, furniture, lamps, glassworks, jewellery) made in the workshops are sold in a shop 'In Vitro' in the capital city Tegucigalpa, and internationally online (www.invitro.org).

Honduran artist Regina Aguilar to honour José Cecilio del Valle, a significant figure in Central American independence. The bronze sculptures happened to portray the national hero naked, and were officially removed within three months of being unveiled. Pérez-Ratton explained that here, a supposedly apolitical work was 'disappeared' by the same community that commissioned it (Blandino in Pérez-Ratton, 2000b, p. 44). These examples demonstrate political interventions 'from a more subtle perspective that is not the placard-bearing or poster-painting one brought to protests or strikes' (ibid).

This does not preclude artists from engaging in more overt political interventions. A number of La ESPORA's students, for example, were involved in the political campaign leading up to the 2006 general election in support of the MRS party[49]. As another example 100 artists (including some mentioned in this thesis) used their status and cultural capital to participate in a joint exhibition in May 2008 against the banning of therapeutic abortion in Nicaragua (and marking the 100 women who are alleged to have died since the bill's inception late in 2006)[50].

Writing in 2005, Pérez-Ratton noted that cultural production in the region appeared to have been:

> liberated from the burden of being either a revolutionary statement, or the voice and conscience of the people, of having to conform to the aesthetics of war or the aesthetics of "tropicality" and exoticism. Political discourse is strong, maybe more now than ever, because it is now envisioned within a larger scope than the adherence to a narrow ideology. This discourse stems more from an individual voice and position than a collective one, subtler and less direct than before, but in some cases very powerful.
>
> (2005a, p. 216)

Summary

This chapter has situated the practices of EspIRA/La ESPORA in a particular context that, at the same time, is being reconfigured by those practices. It has shown the organisation to be one of a collection of independent artist-led initiatives in the region

[49] The Partido Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (now the Alianza MRS following a merger with other minor left-wing parties and citizen's action groups) is a political party established in 1995 by former Sandinistas wanting to distance themselves from Daniel Ortega and the current form of the FSLN. The MRS includes a number of prominent artists and intellectuals (notably Nicaragua's best-known novelist and former Sandinista Vice-President Sergio Ramírez and much-loved popular singer and composer Carlos Mejía Godoy) and runs on a platform of social justice and democracy.

[50] In 2010 a similar group participated in an exhibition to protest against child prostitution in Nicaragua.

intent on generating a responsible, critically grounded, diverse contemporary arts practice. These organisations share with artist-led initiatives elsewhere an entrepreneurial drive to develop infrastructure, to reinvigorate their relationship with their publics, to take ownership of the means of education, production, dissemination, and cultural debate in order to maximise critical agency.

The agency of these actions on the part of artist-led initiatives in Central America is defined partly in response to current reductionist practices in local and international communities. Because of this, the vocation of these initiatives is directed both internally and externally: they seek to reconfigure the ways in which the region perceives itself and how it is perceived by others, away from limited representations and stereotypes and towards more complex and plural perspectives – towards a 'liberation of identity' (Mosquera, 1996, p. 13). The critical analysis of marginalising practices has prompted contemporary artists to assert their own centrality, to discuss and define alternative strategies of legitimation, to document and value their own practices, and to promote the positive possibilities of Central America as a region in which to make art and from which to engage in global cultural dialogue and exchange.

Limited development funding supports these processes in the light of weak cultural infrastructure and conservative or indifferent state institutions. Yet donors also, at times, re-inscribe stereotypical representations through demanding an emphasis on development issues or problems in artistic production, and restricting agency to a narrow conception of the local.

These various practices all contribute to a positive yet critically aware process of place-making, to re-inventing the South in the manner suggested by postdevelopment scholars as a place of creativity, agency and possibility yet maintaining postcolonialism's 'unrelenting vigilance to essentializing gestures' (Kapoor, 2008, p. xv) in the process. In the following chapter I turn to a closer examination of one cycle of EspIRA/La ESPORA practices, in order to elaborate the specific mechanisms through which it supports the multiple agentic processes described in this chapter.

Chapter 6: ¡PECA!

As the previous chapter makes clear, the agency articulated by artist-led initiatives in Central America extends far beyond the production of art objects as transparent representations of the experience of the postcolonial/development subject[1]. Agency is oriented towards improving the conditions for the production, dissemination and reception of critically-informed, diverse, contemporary practices, in the belief that the processes generated perform positive, critical social interventions across multiple sites and at multiple scales. In this chapter I locate the specific mechanisms through which EspIRA/La ESPORA manifests associated forms of agency, through a description of one cycle in its core practices: the residency for emerging Central American artists (RAPACES) and the subsequent itinerant exhibition (EX-IT) that took place in 2007/2008.

Introducing ¡PECA!

When I arrived in Managua on a June evening in 2008, Patricia Belli picked me up from the airport with Ricardo Huezo and her son Sebastián. Driving towards the centre of the city and my accommodation we were passed by a bus, the back of which was covered with a bold, puckish graphic splashed with bright pink lettering - an advertisement for the touring exhibition ¡PECA!, which was finally coming to Managua (see figure 10). As I fumbled to extract my camera from my luggage the bus disappeared into the night.

Figure 11: Advertisement for ¡PECA! in Managua

¡PECA! stands for 'Pintura Emergente de Centroamérica' (Emerging Painting from Central America) [2] and was the name given to the regional residency and subsequent touring exhibition run by

[1] These are the articulations of agency for the arts within development as suggested by McEwan, 2009 and Lewis et al., 2008.
[2] 'Peca' is also short for 'pecado' or 'sin' in Spanish.

La ESPORA in 2007/2008[3]. The residency, held in a disused bread shop in Barrio Campo Bruce, close to Belli's house (which was, at the time, the headquarters for EspIRA/La ESPORA), brought together 21 young artists from throughout the region for eight weeks. A house was rented to accommodate the students who had travelled from other countries. Under the guidance of six artists and critics (Dora Longo Bahia from Brazil, Adrián Arguedas from Costa Rica, Raúl Quintanilla and Patricia Belli from Nicaragua, Moisés Barrios from Guatemala, and Ida Ferdinand from Denmark) the students participated in a sequence of workshops (covering technique, theory, art history, critical practice). These workshops were all oriented towards an examination of painting as 'the [artistic] language most damaged by the regional situation' (Belli, 2008, p. 3) and of the possibilities of its rejuvenation.

Following the residency, completed works were exhibited in a touring exhibition (EX-IT) that opened throughout the region, in San Salvador, in Guatemala City, in Tegucigalpa, in San José, in Panama City, in Managua and in Bluefields (on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua) over a period of six months. The students themselves curated, physically moved, mounted and opened each exhibition, presenting their work to diverse publics.

As with most of EspIRa/La ESPORA's projects, all residency places were free[4] although students were expected to make a contribution of labour hours, to help with the logistics of running the workshops and with organising and staging the exhibition in each capital city as it toured the region. This meant that students were chosen for the residency based on their artistic potential (as demonstrated in a portfolio and essay), rather than their ability to pay. Places were also distributed based on a 50-50 gender balance and a regional balance: at least one student from each country was selected and one student from Nicaragua's isolated Caribbean coast. This fundamental element of intra-regional exchange greatly increased the learning, according to Patricia Belli, who pointed out that what the students gained from the teachers was very significant, but

[3] This was the second official 'phase' of La ESPORA's work and followed on from its initial pilot year in 2006. This was the first year that the format of a multi-week residency followed by a 6-month touring exhibition was undertaken. This format has since remained the same with only minor changes in terms of location, sequence of workshops, visiting artists and so on.
[4] Students generally come from the lower-middle class and most would not have been able to fund the actual costs of the residency.

that getting to know one other and share experiences was at least as important (cited in Quintanilla, 2008, paragraph 5) [5].

I did not attend the residency workshops for logistical reasons, although I have attended other La ESPORA workshops and seminars which has given me an understanding of their process, but I did attend the opening of the ¡PECA! exhibition held in Bluefields in 2008. This chapter draws on my experience at Bluefields, as well as interviews with staff and students, and secondary material.

Funding

The funding for the ¡PECA! residency and exhibitions came primarily from EspIRA/La ESPORA's core funders: Hivos, the newly formed Arts Collaboratory, and the DOEN Foundation, with minor support from SDC (the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation). The Bluefields exhibition discussed below was an add-on to the original programme, and was financed by a personal donation from the Swiss parents of a Bluefields volunteer. The exhibition received support from other regional arts organisations, such as the Fundación Museo del Hombre Hondureño in Honduras and TEOR/éTica in Costa Rica, through their hosting of it.

A focus on painting: interrogating dominant regional pictorial strategies

Belli chose to focus this initial residency on painting (on an artistic language, rather than the broader themes of subsequent residencies) because of what she had observed in the work that students had brought to La ESPORA based on their previous training at the existing national art academies: technical competence (in painting and drawing) but the reproduction of a limited, conservative and generally decorative stock of images linked to a marginalising politics.

In her project description for this cycle, Belli also pointed out that the seduction of anachronistic models for artistic practice is linked to Nicaragua's socio-economic status:

[5] This shared residence intensified the aspect of cultural exchange associated with the project, and the reach of the workshops, as discussion around ideas raised in the workshops often lasted deep into the night (Belli cited in Quintanilla, 2008).

> One of the principal obstacles in our artistic formation is the image that we have of ourselves, as citizens of developing countries, with respect to the world and to history in general, and as artists in developing countries with respect to the history of universal art. Very often we cultivate an inferiority complex that is manifested in the systematic imitation of aesthetics that are far removed from our moment and place.
>
> (EspIRA/La ESPORA, 2007, p. 3)

In Central America, the legitimacy of painting has not been challenged as it has in many places in the 20th century. It has maintained its dominant status and this, as Belli points out, has inhibited the possibilities for more diversified artistic production:

> Painting never [went through the loss and revaluation] that it has elsewhere – we never 'lost' painting because it was never questioned. We don't start from all the 'isms' that have existed in art globally since the Second World War (which is basically when the dictatorships took over) – rather we start from something much more endogenous – of continuing to produce the same thing. That's what I see at least.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

There was a powerfully subversive agency invoked in focussing on one of the most conservative and prolific aspects of visual production in the region for the first regional contemporary arts residency. This focus demanded a critical analysis of dominant pictorial strategies, addressing stereotypes and assumptions that students shared about painting and its place within the region's visual imaginary. The residency, therefore, acted as a clearing ground from which to elaborate new practices. It also addressed claims to painting's apparent 'naturalness' often made in the media, and pointed out, instead, its contingent position. In the course of these discussions, other terms like 'contemporary', 'conceptual' and 'traditional' (themselves subject to assumptions and misunderstandings) were also critically examined.

Belli explained to me that equating oil painting with the 'traditional' in Central America should more accurately be seen as a euphemism to describe what is really 'commercial' in the sense of not having any critical engagement and 'no parameters other than formal, and I mean formalism in terms of formal elements like colour and form. There is no thought, nor even emotion (just emotions that are predictable and prefabricated.) Furthermore this formalism is totally *conventional* which is different to "traditional"" (personal communication, June 2008). Reifying oil painting as 'traditional' in Nicaragua is not only historically inaccurate, but it obscures an awareness of the commercial

pressures, conventions and politics to which such painting conforms. It reinforces hierarchies in the cultural field, and reifies a single practice at the expense of a plurality of approaches.

It is easy, but dangerous in Belli's mind, for students who grow up with painting as such a dominant national form to imagine that alternative forms are 'something imported and therefore you lose your identity' (personal communication, June 2008). One of the criticisms levelled at Belli following her award in the 1999 Nicaraguan Biennial was that her assemblage was not 'Nicaraguan' because it was not a flat, rectangular canvas. With a sense of the absurd, but also of exasperation, she said: 'it was in all the newspapers and reporters came to interview me and I think it was Raúl [Quintanilla] who ended up saying "in that case we've invented oil painting" [*laughs*]' (personal communication, June 2008).

The ¡PECA! residency provided an opportunity to discuss and clarify these ideas, not in order to reject painting and uncritically reify a different artistic language (which would be a reactionary approach contrary to the spirit of critical engagement) but rather to explore the *contemporary* possibilities of painting. Participants were challenged to investigate 'the possibilities of painting in relation to our context, not from an illustrative or complacent position, rather from an attitude of creators who assume their hybrid heritage[6] and propose alternatives to the traditional visual imaginary' (Belli, 2008, p. 13).

As with other artists' initiatives, La ESPORA works to establish the conditions for its practices to fulfil their agentic potential. In this sense, it strives to educate the public about contemporary art and create a less reactionary environment that is more hospitable to diverse and critically engaged artistic practices. It does so in part through writing explanatory texts and sending them to the media for publication[7]. Although this strategy may be criticised for its lack of critical distance, it still offers greater critical engagement than that of untrained and uninterested cultural journalists. In the case of

[6] Central America is characterised by 'complex miscegenation' (Ramírez et al., 2002, p. 6), a point I return to in Chapter 8.

[7] The media in this case consists of one of the two national daily newspapers (the conservative *La PRENSA*, and the leftist *El Nuevo Diario*) or independent cultural webzines like Marca Acme. On my last visit to Managua, in 2008, La ESPORA interviewed me for a short piece in Marca Acme and the interview generated an online poll about the influence of international organisations on regional cultural production (see http://marcaacme.com/v3/noticia.php?id=1215).

¡PECA!, fellow artist and workshop presenter Raúl Quintanilla interviewed Patricia Belli for the daily newspaper *El Nuevo Diario* which gave her the opportunity to explain that the paintings presented in the ¡PECA! exhibition are contemporary 'because they are produced by current, critical, sensitive, questioning, and not naive artists'. She also made it clear that the problematic being addressed was not with painting as a technique but rather with 'the academy and its consequences', and that the workshops enabled students to actually 'strengthen [the techniques they had learned in the academies] so that [they] can administer them in an intelligent manner. That with those tools, they look for what it is that they want to say, question, investigate or do in an honest manner. The honesty and the sophistication of the proposals were what we sought, not a contemporary look, rather a contemporaneity that starts from experience' (Belli cited in Quintanilla, 2008, paragraph 6).

Contemporary painting that 'starts from experience'

In the previous chapter I pointed out the drive among contemporary artists in the region towards making art that starts from personal interests and experiences as a means of promoting sincerity in art-making. Sincerity, or honesty, is seen to embody agency in that it counters the external and internal pressures towards self-censorship discussed in the previous chapter, counters the formulaic and market-oriented production of the region's academies, and promotes a more active engagement with contemporary society. Furthermore it contributes to the development of self-esteem, through valuing the artists' own experience as central to the creative process. It is agentic therefore, in terms of resistance and in terms of construction, and it also parallels claims from alternative and post-development approaches for the agency of locally-grounded, endogenous practices.

The difference between painting that conforms to the dominant pictorial imaginary fostered by the academy and that infused with 'a contemporaneity that starts from experience' can be illustrated through the work of La ESPORA student Jullissa Moncada. When I first met Moncada in 2006 she was completing her fifth year at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas Rodrigo Peñalba, and was attending her first workshops at La ESPORA. At one workshop that I attended she presented one of her works for discussion: a large abstract painting (smudges and lines covering the canvas)

in soft blues and greens that, from my perspective, seemed to be largely empty of power and meaning. When I returned to Nicaragua in 2008 Moncada (who had just attended the ¡PECA! residency) was still painting large canvases but these were startlingly different: scaled up abstract-expressionist representations of the slabs of meat and eyes and gristle that you commonly see in Nicaraguan markets. I found the paintings immediately arresting, bold and strangely beautiful.

Figure 12: Moncada's work in the ¡PECA! exhibition, 'Pedazo de Carne'.

In the intervening two years, Moncada had attended almost all of La ESPORA's courses, seminars and workshops. She had become one of the school's core students and she taught in GRAFOS. She commented to me that La ESPORA has changed, quite dramatically, the way she thinks and feels about her artistic practice. At the very first La ESPORA workshop she attended in 2006 she 'learnt a huge amount about art history and artists and works that I had never heard of' (personal communication, June 2008). In contrast to the art history taught at the national art school at La ESPORA it was 'super open and wonderful, and it really absorbed me' (ibid). She also learnt 'the idea of investigating, of using your head' in the creative process, and left the workshop 'full of the desire to work' (ibid). In critical workshops students are required to research another artist who has produced work that connects in some way to their own. Through this process Moncada became fascinated by expressionist painters Oskar Kokoschka and Francis Bacon: 'so this is part of the process, you look things up on the Internet, you don't just stay closed up here just looking at the things that exist here, all of that is so great for me' (ibid). Although there is an endogenous aspect to producing art starting from one's own interests and experiences, it is imbricated with an understanding of the productivity of engaging with others – of the productivity of dialogue with people and practices in other locations.

Moncada particularly appreciates the way in which La ESPORA stimulates artists to connect with their own interests and context:

> We get to talk about things that exist in our world, like sexuality, and I wanted to give expression to some of those concerns. Now if I have a concern, and I want to express it, I look at it and I work with it. In one way or another I work through it and I enter into a process until I discover what it is I am really looking for. You get excited about an idea and you find a ton of things [within it]: you try one thing and then another and finally you end up with something you've found [through the process] that you wanted – and I love this.
>
> The paintings about meat started for me with bad smells, things that disgust me, horrible things and I wanted to show these things that bother me. I began presenting these kinds of images and through the ¡PECA! painting workshops I realised that the bad smells got me thinking about meat and how it decomposes. I took some photos [of slabs of meat, eyes, tongue, viscera] and I found certain things and liked them. Besides the repulsion for each horrible thing I found something beautiful or pretty and I loved that [. . .] In some photos for example I found a little humour, something funny, although the grotesque is always there – I have this photo which is like the mouth eating an eye – and I [then] started composing my paintings more artificially.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Belli likes these paintings very much because they work on a number of different levels: they are sincere, they relate to context/personal interest, they are subversive and unconventional (personal communication, June 2008). In the ¡PECA! catalogue she described them as 'succulent abstractions' that 'reference the body and its decadence', and added that by 'applying herself to some of the things [Moncada] finds unsettling in her context they also generate meaning out of the purely formal bounds of the canvas' (Belli, 2008, p. 10). Although some people unconnected with the school have found it odd that she has decided to paint carcasses, Moncada has responded by affirming the value of her own experience and process. She says: 'that's what's of interest to me at the moment. Patricia helps us to trust our own process. I'm in a process of investigation and exploration and I'm not going to leave that' (personal communication, June 2008)[8].

[8] Moncada since had two individual exhibitions: one at Galeria Códice, curated by Andino as part of *El Acto Invisible*, and another in Wuppertal, Germany, through its sister-city arrangement with Moncada's hometown of Matagalpa.

The residency

The residency was run as a mixture of lectures, critical seminars[9] and practical workshops based around the student's own works in progress. It attempted to give equal weight to the conceptual, formal and intuitive aspects of the artistic process (Belli, 2008, p. 13). Dora Longo Bahía discussed with students the work of well-known artists who had all valued painting but from diverse and challenging perspectives (either through the materials used or through their place in history). Adrián Arguedas' seminars stimulated students to reflect more deeply on the question of why one would choose to paint. Raúl Quintanilla lectured on the history of painting. Moisés Barrios raised questions of representation and gender in painting, and introduced students to the technique of photorealism[10]. Patricia Belli directed the critical seminars based on students' own works in progress, although other teachers also participated in this process, and Ida Ferdinand worked with the students in the final days to help them to refine their ideas and their works towards completion (EspIRA/La ESPORA, 2008, pp. 75-77).

The residency was characterised by cultural exchange, frank and challenging dialogue, and critical discourse, all of which generated an overall process of collective reflection, in direct contrast to the non-dialogic and uncritical experience provided by the region's academies. Importantly, that collective reflection involved a parallel process of cultural exchange among the students from throughout the region and the international teachers. Cultural exchange was multiplied and extended through the experience of the touring exhibition: students met up with one another again; students integrated with various publics at the openings in all six countries; and La ESPORA connected with other organisations who hosted the exhibitions such as TEOR/éTica in Costa Rica, Fundación para el Museo del Hombre Hondureño, and the Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University (BICU) on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast. Over time (the RAPACES and EX-IT cycles had their fourth year of operation in 2010/2011) these South-South connections have deepened and extended. Nicaraguan student Fernando Alemán talked to me about the value of the regional interaction for him:

[9] The method for these workshops has been described in Chapter 4.
[10] Photorealism is a method of painting whereby photographs are taken as the basis from which a painting is then made. That painting, in turn, looks highly realistic, and resembles a photograph.

> It was very interesting for me. Sometimes we Central Americans are isolated even though we share the same reality but we don't realise. I remember in the workshops when we were chatting with the other guys [from throughout the region] and we all suddenly realised we were talking about the same thing. This was a really enriching experience – beautiful. We also had the opportunity to generate dialogue about works that other people had done who were emerging as artists [within the region] that were quite complex, so often we'd start from this piece by Salmerón or Habacuc[11] and we began to position ourselves in relation to the complexity of those pieces.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Honduran student Darwin Andino particularly valued the 'contributions from distinct points of view', and the teachers' perspectives which he described as 'more universal, not like what happens in the local schools' (cited in EsPIRA/La ESPORA, 2009b, paragraph 5).

The diversity of the group was also considered to be an important mechanism for learning: workshop discussions encompassed 'the local and the international, the generational, the political [and] questions of race and gender', and ranged between 'the most conceptual propositions concerning the role of the Central American artists in the global panorama [. . .] and the most intimate expressions of psychological foundations' (Belli, 2008, p. 3). For some students unused to this method of concentrated analysis, the workshops were very challenging. Andrea Mármol, from Guatemala, told me:

> I wasn't used to painting even being seen in these ways. I thought it was just about painting and expressing yourself but I realised it goes a lot further than that and that it can have a far stronger message. And, well, I think I spent those two months pretty confused with all of this – I didn't really know how to assimilate all that information – all at once, you see. But I really took advantage of it – I never skipped any of the classes, and I was very disciplined in the classes but it was a struggle, it really was.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

She added, however, that the experience had given her 'a wider variety of tools with which to work' and an understanding that 'you will always have your personal criteria

[11] Salmerón is an established Nicaraguan contemporary artist who recently gained considerable international attention with his multi-media work Auras de Guerra, selected for the Venice Biennale 2007 and purchased by London's Tate Gallery in 2008 (discussed in the previous chapter). Salmerón has since gone on to work in China, Japan, Austria and England. Habacuc is an established Costa Rican artist who caused an international storm of controversy when he tied up a starving street dog in Managua's Galeria Códice as part of an exhibition in 2007 from which the dog allegedly died. Subsequent investigations by a number of animal rights organisations failed to verify what exactly happened, but the furore was extraordinary. It even reached New Zealand (see http://www.varsity.co.nz/content/view/1860/5/ and http://www.safe.org.nz/Newsletters/Newsletter49/index.html). However, art in Central America gained 'visibility', again, for its association with violence and poverty.

but research can really help you to reflect and expand your knowledge about what you're doing, and what you're saying and that's really important' (personal communication, June 2008).

For one student the intensity of the dialogue and analysis was too much. Pilar Moreno (Panama) became increasingly frustrated by the theoretical and critical discussion, particularly as she perceived it to be in tension with the daily street-life of the *barrio* outside. In response, she removed herself in part from the workshops and set up a little studio alongside where she offered paintings for free to passersby in the neighbourhood. Moreno described her experience as follows in the ¡PECA! catalogue:

> I've been here more than a month. I am more and more eager, all the time, to be painting. I listen to talk and theory for hours . . . the efficacy, the concept, the intention . . . It all sounds so far away from the things that matter to me when I paint. I don't know what I'm doing here. I decide to paint up a sign and put it in the street for people in the barrio. Ever since we arrived they have been hovering around the workshop. They peek in and ask questions with a mixture of timidity and curiosity. They like seeing the paintings. I'm going to propose that they tell me what they want to see in a painting. I'll try to interpret it and paint it for them. Maybe their creativity will help me to rescue something of my own, to bring back the desire to paint.
>
> Starting from tomorrow: Paintings made here. No cost.
>
> (EspIRA/la ESPORA, 2007, p. 54)

The work that Moreno ended up showing in the ¡PECA! exhibition consisted of the sandwich board sign that she had placed in the street and a scrapbook that documented the extensive process she became involved in: photographs of the paintings that she made for people in the neighbourhood – painted on various objects that were brought to her like backpacks, bicycles, and vases – were set opposite short texts about the painting and the person who requested it (see figure 12).

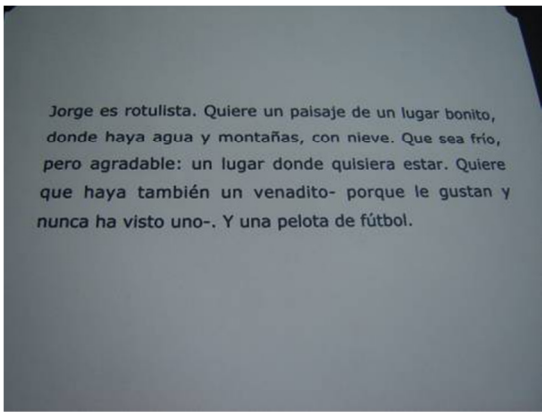

Figure 13: One of the pages from Moreno's scrapbook, showing a painting she had made for a man in the neighbourhood called Jorge. The text translates as follows: *Jorge is a signwriter. He wants a landscape of a lovely place, where there is water and there are mountains, with snow. Cold, but pleasant: a place where he would like to be. He also wants a little deer – because he likes them and he's never seen one. And a soccer ball.*

Moreno's concerns were taken seriously by the residency's teaching staff and those concerns became the basis for the work produced, despite their transgressive nature. Through the process of producing the work Moreno was also able to transform those concerns into a constructive experience. Furthermore, her rebellious stance was not seen as a 'failure' (as it might be by a development donor), but rather as an opportunity to deepen learning, as Belli noted in the catalogue:

> It's important to emphasise the disagreements and agreements that Moreno's process signified for the workshops. Fervently anti-conceptualist, she ended up arriving at a solution in which the idea and the experience were more important than the product. This gave rise to an interesting discussion about the generalisations with which contemporary art (that erroneously is overly associated with conceptualism) as much as conceptual art (which erroneously is overly associated with logic, reason and a lack of intuition) are faced. In the workshops those prejudices were revised, together with those that proclaim painting as a merely emotive exercise, or the prejudice that spills over into intuition, as being associated with simplicity.
>
> (Belli, 2008, pp.12-13).

Debating gender: art 'brings context with it'

Throughout the residency, the issue of gender in visual representation emerged repeatedly. This point provides both a useful example of the way in which talking about

art 'brings context with it' – with consequences for agency, and the ways in which donor demands can, on occasion, deepen the learning for artists.

As a topic of discussion, gender naturally came about through analysis of the regional pictorial imaginary which, as previously noted, is dominated by a 'plethora of naked women, headless female torsos, slender bodies as a symbol of beauty, landscapes that compare a fertile and exuberant natural world with the female body etc.' (Belli, 2008, p. 13). A desire to examine the representation of women in the region's visual art was a motivating factor behind the decision to focus on painting in the residency. As Belli explained in her project plan: 'the vision of identity, the awareness of gender, of place and of history, will be constant in the dialogue amongst participants, facilitated by the instructors, so that their creative process is seen to be liberated from the damaging stereotypes that normally permeate local production' (EspIRA/La ESPORA, 2007, p. 1).

Students I spoke to appreciated the way in which the workshops made connections between artistic practice and the broader context in which they live. Tania Santa Cruz commented: 'It was really great to come here and find that I was not only working in art but also developing myself as a person too. Working not just as an artist producing something for the sake of producing it but also as a person conscious in your life and [. . .] this is what I really like because [the two aspects] are not separate' (personal communication, June 2008).

Fernando Alemán also commented to me that his criteria for making art have changed dramatically through his involvement with La ESPORA: 'For example this thing that we, as painters, paint naked women. It's like a terrible cliché and I didn't realise these things – that you need to have a reason, a proposition, to paint a woman, naked or not. So I think this experience [with La ESPORA] has made me, in this sense, a better person' (personal communication, June 2008).

As well as illustrating the political value of this engagement with gender and representation, these comments also suggest that students' participation in the residency had a personal, almost therapeutic aspect, which came about through self-reflection combined with social and political analysis. This is an example of the way in which the agency of the art experience can be both personal and more broadly social at the same time.

The question of gender was also engaged with at an organisational level, initially to satisfy donor demands[12], with places at the workshop split 50-50 between genders. Teaching staff also shared a 50-50 gender balance giving students access to role models of both genders. This gender split, 'in the best 'NGO-style'' (Belli cited in Quintanilla, 2008, paragraph 3), was initially considered by Belli to be 'terribly boring', but it is now 'a position to which [EspIRA/La ESPORA] totally adheres' (ibid). Belli has discovered that the work initially presented by young women tends to be 'less risky, more complacent' than that of their male counterparts, but that through the workshop process those young women 'overcome their limitations with great vigour and reach the same quality as the young men' (ibid):

> That's to say, the quality of the work is seen to be clearly affected by their education as women and in the workshops we question that, they facilitate the construction of criteria, to be empowered. The same things happen with the guys, but at a different scale, normally they already have a clearer sense of direction. This is a subtle thing I'm talking about, it's not that obvious, but our experience has made us notice it.
>
> (ibid)

This imbalance is visible in the La ESPORA catalogue where all five student articles are written by male students (EspIRA/La ESPORA, 2008). Belli says that Hivos' focus on gender has helped her 'in that it obliged me to extrapolate my own ideas about [how gender inequality affects artistic expression in the region] and I think it has contributed to the project' (personal communication, June 2008). This example demonstrates the possibility that donor demands (emanating from their location within 'development') can deepen the critical engagements of artists if there is sufficient resonance with existing endogenous concerns.

Collective reflection

It is clear that the pedagogical strategies used in the residency – horizontal dialogue, critical analysis of the politics of representation, the exploration of personal interests and motivations, and cultural exchange – embody various forms of agency. They stimulate South-South interactions and networks; they historicise and relativize

[12] Hivos was the major donor of the residency and exhibition, and the organisation has a strong focus on gender (Hivos, 2002, p. 12).

dominant arts practices; they stimulate a greater consciousness of students' creative processes and help students to develop their own criteria; they provide a positive process through which students can work through aspects of their daily lives in a transformative manner. More broadly, they contribute to the development of a more diversified, and re-territorialising arts practice – re-territorialising in the sense that those processes bring context with them and transform that context at the same time.

However, other forms of agency, embedded in EspIRA/La ESPORA's pedagogical process, came to light through Fontes and Wilson-Grau's 2008 evaluation of Hivos' Central American arts and culture programme. Hivos is notable among development agencies for prioritising artistic quality[13] over social or economic expediency in its funding criteria, in the belief that 'by supporting artistic expression for its own sake you will generate a positive developmental effect on society' (Wilson-Grau & Chambille, 2008, p. 1). Fontes particularly remembered Patricia Belli talking in one of the focus groups about the relationship between quality in the artwork, self-esteem and collective reflection.

> There is a pattern. I think this is the thing Patricia said. You demand quality, which means you support groups who reflect on their own practice. When people/students reflect and reflect collectively, they immediately start building up a sense of identity, as a group but also as individuals who see they have things in common. It develops self-esteem. They feel more assertive and can afford to start looking at the Other and then [. . .] they build networks of cooperation and you develop cultural infrastructure, and there is more space created for individual artistic expression and you get a richer society. And there are more tools to deal with the problems of censorship etc., not only by the state but also within oneself etc. [. . .]
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Fontes believes that this collective process also generates diversity:

> [This] process that is going on here [in La ESPORA] is the reaffirmation of identity and self-esteem and it's collective, not individual, and [the students] have a strong reference that allows them to show their flaws and to contact

[13] Obviously there are problems with defining artistic quality, particularly in a foreign context. Fontes told me that Hivos wanted her to define it as part of the evaluation process: 'I said "you've got to be kidding – philosophers since Aristotle have argued over this"' (personal communication, June 2008). Nevertheless, the evaluation ended up describing artistic quality as follows: 'Bearing in mind that "art is an activity that consists in the production of relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects" (Bourriaud, 2006, p. 107) and that the quality of a work depends on the trajectory that this describes in its cultural landscape (Bourriaud, 2007, p. 46)", for the purposes of this evaluation we define quality of artistic and cultural expression as the appearance to a greater or lesser extent, of a collection of values that benefit that aesthetic relationship with its context' (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 16).

> the Other, to start seeing the Other, and once you have curiosity in the Other, something that is different to you, then you start respecting that person, learning from that person, I mean diversity starts taking place.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Fontes also argued that this pedagogical process of critical, collective reflection generates resilience, based on the trust that is established between individuals (evident in students' comments in this Chapter, and in Chapter 4). Whether or not development donors support it, the momentum, commitment and aspiration catalysed by this educational process suggests that it will continue, in some form or other:

> I think there are two main things, or values. I don't know how to say this but if you stimulate those two things you will own the world – which is desire and trust between people. If you have someone who only has desire you have the diva but if you have that and something that makes connections between the desires of people – which is what La ESPORA does [. . .] and the stimulation of trust, these are the two main things that makes any network resilient. Then it doesn't matter if you get the funds or if you don't get them, if you have political shit. . . It does matter, because things happen sooner or later, but it only matters in that sense. So you know even if La ESPORA doesn't get all the support of Hivos or whatever – I think they have a capital there that is much stronger than having money. I think they have a clarity. I think Patricia mainly has this clarity, but also it's quite contagious and she is [. . .] very capable of infecting people, like Ricardo, all of them. And the fact that she exposes her own flaws, no problem, as she did during the workshop [yesterday] saying what had gone wrong with her [art] – I think they are learning a lot from that. It's a privilege.
>
> (Fontes, personal communication, June 2008)

Belli herself adds that the interactions that characterise La ESPORA's workshops are something she hasn't felt anywhere else that she has lived or worked: 'We all love living in Nicaragua – this is a fact – that is something I haven't felt in other countries to the same intensity. Like the same people in the USA . . . I don't feel that they're so, well, they love living there for other reasons but not because of the circles that are created, not for relationships that are created' (personal communication, June 2008). In Nicaragua, she says:

> We have a system that we like in terms of the sense of humour, the way in which we confront adversity joined with a level of dialogue that is stimulating. This is something that's so important for human beings [. . .] I've been in many places where there are critical workshops and so on – there's always a level of show-off or a lack of frankness [. . .] When I say

> that [. . .] we are working to offer something that we can offer at the global level[14], well, on the one hand it's something that maybe we shouldn't say because it sounds pretty crazy. But it's real in real terms, because I think, yes, this is something we can do, not as an 'exotic' place but as a place that has these two characteristics [sense of humour in the face of adversity; rich and frank dialogue] which, when combined can be very potent and this is what people miss when they go away.
>
> (ibid)

These comments from Fontes and Belli suggest that critically informed collective reflection on cultural processes provides a powerful site for agency, again operating at both an intimate level and at a broader social level. The process contributes to self-esteem; to the affirmation of both personal and collective senses of identity; to generating trust, community, and diversity; and to organisational resilience in the cultural sector.

The exhibition: professionalism and projection

At 4am on the morning after I arrived in Managua, I taxied back to the airport again, to fly to Bluefields on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast for the opening of the ¡PECA! exhibition. Belli had always wanted to foster a connection with the Caribbean coast as part of broader moves towards generating dialogue and intra-regional exchange. Within the region, the Caribbean coast remains particularly isolated, and culturally and politically distinct. Bluefields is Nicaragua's principal port on the Caribbean coast but there is no road access between it and the far more populous West or Pacific Coast. One must either fly from Managua to Bluefields or drive a rough five hours then take a *panga* (motorised skiff) for another two and a half hours down the snaking Rio Escondido. Culturally and politically the Caribbean coast is equally remote from the Pacific. Named after a 17th century Dutch pirate, and colonised initially by the English, Bluefields is marked by the much stronger presence of indigenous groups (Miskito, Mayagna/Sumu and Rama) as well as the descendents of African slaves (Creole and Garifuna[15]). English and Miskito are the dominant languages.

[14] Belli has proposed to donors that the critical workshop processes of La ESPORA, adapted to different contexts, be considered as a model for arts education more generally in the South

[15] The Garifuna are descendents of shipwrecked African slaves who intermarried with indigenous Caribbean Arawak and Carib and later migrated to the Atlantic Coast of Central America. They now live chiefly on the Caribbean coasts of Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Figure 14: Map of Central America, showing all the capital cities through which the EX-IT exhibition toured, and showing Bluefields on the Caribbean coast.

Map retrieved from http://printable-maps.blogspot.com/search/label/ /Central%20America%20Maps.

The Caribbean coast has long sought political independence and Bluefields is now capital of one of the coast's two semi-autonomous regions: the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur (RAAS). The local economy (neglected by central government) is supplemented by cocaine which literally floats ashore in bails as drug traffickers en route from Colombia to Mexico hastily dump their goods overboard when pursued by US Coast Guard patrols. Consequently drug addiction has also become a serious problem in the town (Franklin, 2008). There is a distinctive gangster rap aesthetic in Bluefields not evident on the streets of Managua: young men throng the streets wearing baseball shoes, long Nike singlets, large sunglasses and heavy gold chains.

Patricia Belli had contacted a community organisation in Bluefields to ask if they knew anyone who might be interested in attending the residency, and they directed her to Michael Hammond, a young man with a growing reputation as a community leader who worked for a drug and AIDS education organisation, *Campaña Costeña Contra el SIDA*. Hammond had painted murals with the young people who were the subject of its programmes. The ¡PECA! residency that he attended in 2007 was the first artistic education he had ever had (Hammond, personal communication, June 2008).

Hammond is proudly Garifuna. His painting in the ¡PECA! exhibition was a diptych of Garifuna musicians: one panel painted in monochrome black and white depicting a historic group of singers and drummers, and the second panel painted in colour, depicting a contemporary drumming group. On the evening following the exhibition opening his mother made a huge pot of traditional Caribbean Rondón[16] soup for all of

[16] Patois for 'run down' referring to the various central ingredients (seafood, meat, vegetables) that one has been able to 'run down' and put in the soup.

the students who had travelled over from Managua to mount and open the exhibition. Hammond wore his hair in a geometric pattern of short plaits, toted a little backpack printed with a couple of marijuana leaves and the face of a rapper, and drank beer from 11am on without appearing to get drunk.

Figure 15: Students work collaboratively to mount works in the BICU's foyer. At left, Tania Santa Cruz tapes a notice to the front door. Above (left to right) Jullissa Moncada, Fernando Alemán, Darwin Andino, Norlan Gutiérrez and Alejandro Flores mount works and nail together a structure to extend the exhibition space.

It was Hammond's suggestion that the exhibition also go to Bluefields and he worked hard to get it off the ground. He was assisted by his girlfriend Lindsay, a young Swiss-Canadian woman working as a volunteer intern for the same AIDS education organisation. Lindsay's parents provided the USD$200 needed to fund the opening in Bluefields as the exhibition had not been budgeted for in the initial projections sent to donors. This is an example of how plans change as a project progresses and how core development funding is often supplemented with other funds from diverse sources.

A handful of La ESPORA students made the long journey with all the art works via bus and boat to Bluefields. It was the first time that any of them had visited the Atlantic coast, showing that intra-regional exchange can take place within nations as well as between them. The exhibition was held in the foyer of the BICU (Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University) and the students unpacked and mounted all of the works. Darwin Andino was charged with curating. The works appeared to be weathering their travels

well, although a couple later incurred water damage from rain leaking through the roof of the foyer[17].

Figure 16: Entrance to the BICU, looking out from the foyer.

The works themselves were largely painted canvases in oils and acrylics, but also included painted objects, photographs which had been intervened with paint, and other mixed media. They engaged with a range of ideas including the contrast between the realities for local artists and their aspirations for universalism[18]; questions of hierarchy in art[19]; psychological states and the psychology of observation[20]; manipulation and the play of power[21]; disquieting aspects of everyday life;[22] and cultural identity in the case of Hammond's painting referencing the Garifuna musical tradition.

Figure 17: Jullissa Moncada and Michael Hammond in the exhibition space as BICU students start to filter in and look at the works.

While the management of the multiple exhibitions generated practical skills for the students involved, the exhibition process also extended cultural exchange and intra-regional dialogue. Belli noted that with the six-month long exhibition process: 'There's a

[17] The rainy season was just beginning on the coast and later the following day Tropical Storm Alma made landfall in Nicaragua. In Bluefields the rain was torrential and all flights out were cancelled. The café of the little *hotelito* where the students and I were staying was packed with locals, glued to the television to keep up-to-date with the course of the storm which threatened to develop into a hurricane. In 1988 Bluefields was almost completely levelled by Hurricane Joan.

[18] Javier Calvo (Costa Rica) produced painted replicas of Taschen's well-known book 'Art Now' for example.

[19] Fabrizio Arrieta (Costa Rica) painted the Latin phrase *memento mori* (meaning 'remember your mortality') in graffiti across a replica of Rafael's 'Triumph of Galatea', for example.

[20] Diana Barquero (Costa Rica) painted close-up portraits of hopeless, exhausted faces in which the viewer felt as if they have intruded into a scene of private desolation.

[21] Norlan Gutiérrez (Nicaragua) used photographs of images that appeared threatening (a monstrous face found in a tree trunk for example) and painted tiny vulnerable figures into the scene.

[22] Jullissa Moncada (Nicaragua) painted huge canvases of decomposing meat and Emilia Membreño depicted hazardous situations such as falling and losing one's balance as metaphors for daily life.

great thing happening there in terms of reproduction to a point. [The students] invest a lot in making it work because it's their own exhibition, they're really committed to the project and it's been beautiful – there's been a really warm and effective reception in every country' (personal communication, June 2008).

The necessity of assuming responsibility for EspIRA/La ESPORA's functioning, on top of the demands of one's individual arts practice, is seen by students both as an opportunity and a source of tension. Andino points out that students are quickly forced to develop professionalism, and they gain a wide range of skills. They must learn how to organise themselves with a team of co-workers, develop technical skills, manage the logistics of a conference including setting up technical equipment and using software programmes. They also assume the responsibility of presenting their own creative process in public, in a professional way, to diverse audiences. Andino says that in EspIRA/La ESPORA 'professionalism is a constant thing [. . .] starting from necessity you go on, not just solving problems, but really growing in order to have the tools for later' (personal communication, June 2008). The demands of project work do, however, threaten to overwhelm the space available for personal artistic production. Andino commented to me that he often begins his own artwork at 8pm due to the demands of project administration and logistics: 'This is what Patricia does as well, the majority of the people here' (personal communication, June 2008)[23].

Project work is a particularly heavy burden for the Managua-based students who bear year-round responsibility for maintaining the running of workshops, seminars, exhibitions as well as fundraising activities like those associated with EspIRA Servicios. Tania Santa Cruz points out that their intense involvement in all aspects of running the project is 'a great method to generate commitment within oneself, responsibility' and 'gives you many things not written in a curriculum: being conscientious and responsible – knowing that in order to get something achieved at this time, we need to be ready at this time [. . .] and if you're going to present a project you have to do it and it demands a lot'. But, she adds, this also brings with it sometimes 'the difficulty of

[23] In May 2010 Patricia Belli emailed me at the end of her tether with the bureaucracy involved in project work and the endless forms requiring endless indicators. She said she wanted to run away from it all and retire to her studio and spend time with her family. Despite these demands, Andino commented that the energy in EspIRA/La ESPORA was much more productive than he had experienced in Honduras: 'I see the people in Honduras and the slowness of the process that I was living there where you almost don't produce works, whereas here almost every day I'm doing something that is renovated through the process of reflection' (personal communication, June 2008).

separating oneself' (personal communication, June 2008), of having a life apart from the organisation.

The exhibition opening in Bluefields was something of a community event. It is rare that an organisation from the Pacific Coast extends an arm to the Caribbean coast, even more so that an event passing through the region's capital cities should also make its way to Bluefields. The opening was held in a large hall, formally laid out with chairs in rows and a long table on a raised dais at the front covered in a white pleated cloth with bright bunches of plastic flowers. One of the students complained to me that this formal setting was so 'not La ESPORA' in style, but it clearly demonstrated respect on the part of the host community.

The hall filled quickly to capacity: students and young friends of Michael mixed with university officials, nuns, the deputy mayor, and other community leaders. Each person had to register their name on entering and was given an exhibition catalogue – another strategy of dissemination and exchange. La ESPORA students took their places on the dais and were introduced by the Rector of the University. Darwin Andino spoke first about EspIRA/La EPORA and then individual students talked about their own works and artistic process. When Michael Hammond got up to speak about his work and the importance of the *tambor* (drums) to Garifuna culture, he was met with a gospel-like wave of clapping and praise.

Dialogue with the public

The students were extremely articulate in discussing their work. They talked confidently, without notes, about their own creative process in complex but clear terms. This is an aspect of arts practice that is consciously fostered at La ESPORA. In workshops students are constantly expected to talk about their work and the work of others; they write texts to accompany their works in the exhibition and for the catalogue; and they are encouraged to present their works and their artistic practice to the public at exhibition openings. Patricia Belli defends this practice against those who argue that artists shouldn't speak 'because it's not through the artists' verbal articulation that we express ourselves' (personal communication, June 2008). She agrees that this position has some validity, but adds that 'we have to learn to articulate and, more than that – because contemporary art can be somewhat cryptic – we need to learn to establish

bridges with the spectator and to position oneself in front of the spectator in relation to the work. The confidence that it can give you to be able to talk about your work can strengthen your sense of self' (ibid).

Figure 18: Images from the brindis. Far left: Alejandro Flores is asked for his autograph; at left a local Garifuna woman is photographed in front of Michael Hammond's diptych; and below, community members talk in front of works by Jullissa Moncada and Diana Barquero Pérez.

After the presentations by the ¡PECA! participants and a short discussion we filed downstairs to the foyer of the BICU to the '*brindis*' (soda and fried finger food). The atmosphere was very convivial with a great deal of animated talk. Students signed autographs for Bluefields teenagers and locals had their photographs taken with their favourite works.

During the *brindis* Darwin Andino walked about with a microphone, recording interviews with attendees about their thoughts on the exhibition and on contemporary art in general[24]. Andino has a particular interest in catalysing public interest in, and understanding of, contemporary art, as is evident in his curatorial project *El Acto Invisible* (described in Chapter 4). 'The public', he says, 'has never been educated for art and therefore it's necessary to do something extra apart from the work, so we're always having public discussions and presentations and running exhibitions and talking to people afterwards' (personal communication, June 2008). Andino moved to Nicaragua from Honduras to work for La ESPORA because, he says, 'it's the project that offers

[24] I later transcribed these and other interviews for La ESPORA so that they could be included as part of an evaluation for donors.

the best answer to the question of the promotion of art (in this panorama where the art schools are basically ridiculous)' and the project has also helped him to 'understand the people who come to exhibitions as well as the people who are creating' (personal communication, June 2008).

Contemporary art in the region is often met with resistance or simply silence. Virginia Pérez-Ratton suggested that this is due to a range of factors; a lack of education about contemporary art, the lack of quality criticism, and the frequently subversive nature of that art (personal communication, August 2006). In a review of recent Guatemalan contemporary art (1980-2003), for example, artists frequently questioned the marginalisation of women, as well as taking issue with neo-colonialism, militarism, urban violence, abuses of power, alienation, and the traditional hierarchies of art (Torres, 2004a, 2004b). However such work rarely gains much public recognition unless it has some aspect that can be sensationalised. Patricia Belli stresses that this resistance is largely due to contemporary art's non-illustrative form that demands an active engagement on the part of the viewer. Works, she believes, that touched on even subversive themes would be more acceptable if they were presented in an illustrative (or representational) form (personal communication, June 2008).

Like other artist-led initiatives, intent on galvanising a more meaningful relationship between art and the communities for whom it is made, EspIRA/La ESPORA is committed to addressing this problematic and has a strong focus on dissemination and public education. This is reflected in the long period of exhibition touring, information plates placed beside works in the exhibition, the publication of a catalogue that reproduces those plates and includes critical essays, the publication of interviews and explanatory texts in the media, and the exhibition opening where students talk to the public about their works and the critical creative process.

Following the *brindis,* I hitched a ride back into town with one of Michael Hammond's brothers (draped in bling) in a shiny wagon with tinted windows. He told me that he wanted Michael to leave Bluefields and to leave Nicaragua, as there was no future for him there. When I mentioned this to Patricia Belli back in Managua she rolled her eyes and sighed: 'this is such a vice, the idea that things can't be created here – the myth of migration to the North, they're not only doing it out of necessity but also from mythology'. Countering this trend, Belli celebrates Andino as La ESPORA's first

immigrant to Nicaragua. One of Belli's motivations is to combat the mythology of 'the North' – and, by extension, the mythology associated with 'underdevelopment' – by providing a high quality educational experience connected with contemporary movements in the global art world but at the same time embedded in the local context.

Ripple effects

Media

There is almost no critical response to an exhibition like ¡PECA! within the region. As Belli points out: 'articles came out in the newspapers of the different countries, but at the level of a notice or a comment, but nothing that stirs anything up, that questions it or really positions it.' (cited in Quintanilla, 2008, paragraph 6). In Nicaragua, Raúl Quintanilla interviewed Patricia Belli for what is the most in-depth article written on the residency and exhibition. In the article he described the exhibition as evidence of a new generation of Central American artists emerging, who demonstrate 'a sense of place and reaffirmation' and 'the possibilit[ies] of south-south dialogue'. He underlined the exhibition's historical importance: 'Central America as a zone of silence is listening now to the sound of an egg that is breaking open' (Quintanilla, 2008, paragraph 1).

Institutional interactions

In Managua[25] the exhibition generated considerable interest, although its opening was somewhat improvised. Problems with state bureaucracy at the Palacio Nacional where it was due to open (the opening date was changed twice) resulted in Belli withdrawing the exhibition and hosting it instead at her own house (also the base for La ESPORA). One attendee, who went to the *pulperia* [corner store] next door to buy a beer returned and commented: 'How surreal! – they're not talking about tomatoes at the store, they're talking about art!' (Belli cited in Agüero, 2008, paragraph 14). On another day the entire design school at UPOLI (Polytechnic University of Nicaragua) came to see the exhibition. Connections were also established with other universities and design schools in the region through the touring process (a university in San Salvador, for example, contacted La ESPORA to establish some sort of working relationship).

[25] The exhibition was left at Bluefields for eight days after which two students returned to collect and move the works back to Managua.

Collective impulse

Some of the students from other countries who attended the ¡PECA! residency returned to their own countries (in particular Andrea Mármol in Guatemala and Jaime Izaguirre in El Salvador) inspired to create their own groups based around similar critical workshops. Belli was enthusiastic about this impulse towards collectivity as a platform for the creative process but was wary about what might happen in these incipient groups 'if the tools are not sufficiently sharpened' (personal communication, June 2008). By 2010 this incipient process had formalised into the region-wide series of workshops run by La ESPORA called TACoN (described in Chapter 4), held in different capital cities over six months with some presentations and discussions streamed through the Internet.

Agency and tensions

This chapter has demonstrated a wide range of agentic practices embedded in the ¡PECA! residency and exhibition – EspIRA/La ESPORA's core activities. These practices resonate with those of other artist-led initiatives who seek to create the conditions for amplifying the critical agency of their artistic production. Taking responsibility for the critical education of artists but also for curating, critiquing, presenting, and discussing works are strategies that aim to expand the agentic possibilities of art to speak and intervene critically in a particular context. Those strategies also upskill students, establish intra-institutional networks and build organisational capacity.

The analysis of painting in the ¡PECA! residency also resonates directly with the concerns of other regional contemporary artists' organisations like TEOR/éTica who are concerned at the marginalising politics of this dominant regional form, and its reproduction through the national academies. The analysis of dominant regional practices as contingent, coupled with a valuing of research and exchange, works to diversify artistic production. The parallel processes of investigating personal motivations, raising awareness of the politics of representation, and encouraging students to develop their own criteria also counter tendencies towards self-censorship and promote a more sincere artistic production that encourages a transformative engagement with context, and increases self-esteem. Together, this set of practices

demonstrates the integrity, quality, and reach of independent artist-led initiatives like EspIRA/La ESPORA. They also indicate that these initiatives generate community and organisational resilience, strengthen voice and stimulate diversity.

It is clear that students value their experiences with EspIRA/La ESPORA not only for the significant range of professional skills that they develop, but also for the relationships they establish, and the personal process of self-reflection in relation to their own environment. That self-reflection is amplified through cultural exchange and through the diverse points of view of the international staff. While the organisation is clearly involved in shifting, to some degree, the character of the cultural landscape in the region (particularly in terms of diversifying it and generating critical discourse), it also has real impacts on specific individuals. Jullissa Moncada described EspIRA/La ESPORA as her 'sanctuary' and 'the most important thing in my life' (personal communication, June 2008).

Furthermore, while students do not expect to be able to make their living from making and selling artworks, Patricia Belli hopes that students' experiences at EspIRA/la ESPORA and the range of professional skills that they acquire, demonstrates an ability to 'creat[e] work for yourself [as an artist] through your ingenuity and your creativity completely' (personal communication, June 2008)[26]. Jullissa Moncada pointed out that after five years at the national art school her options were to 'return home to [rural] Matagalpa and work in the house with my mother' and 'this wasn't my dream'. Currently she has employment through La ESPORA and is surrounded by an environment that supports her artistic process.

However, within this very dynamic and multi-faceted range of practices there are evident tensions associated with the framing of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices within a development paradigm (both conceptually and materially). The tension between project work and fund-raising, and artistic production, is clear. While this does not result purely from the development context (project development is itself a site of agency), the precarious funding platform and the short-term nature of most donor interventions

[26] For Belli, as for visiting artist Claudia Fontes, artistic professionalism consists not of being able to work purely as an artist but rather of continuing your artistic practice in spite of all the other demands of life: earning a living, parenting and so on. Neither Fontes nor Belli earn a living through making and selling artworks, despite both being artists of national and international repute, yet both use their professional artistic skills to earn a wage (through teaching in the case of Belli, and through arts and development consultancies in the case of Fontes).

adds to the time-consuming burden of fund-raising. Furthermore the organisational capacities and networks that are established through these processes could be consolidated through institutionalisation, which is not currently supported by the donor community. It is also clear that the agency of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices are generated as much through processes and relationships, as through the objects and events by which donors measure outcomes. Social transformation also appears to connected to personal/subjective transformation. It is also seems likely that valuing 'quality' in arts practice may generate social outcomes connected with self-esteem and the affirmation of identity. While donors are likely to want to support such forms of agency, they may be obscured by development processes that demand the measurability of broad social incidence. The following chapter takes these tensions as a starting point to explore the dissonances and productive tensions between how the agency of art is conceived by development donors more broadly and the multiple forms of agency evident in the practices of EspIRA/La ESPORA.

Chapter 7: Donors and artists: distinct frameworks for agency

Introduction

This chapter marks a departure from the ethnographic engagement with EspIRA/La ESPORA and the start of a broader discussion (Chapters 7 and 8) that aims to extend our understanding of the possibilities for artists funded by development to exercise particular resistant and constructive modes of agency. This thesis examines the somewhat paradoxical contention that arts practices in the South, funded through development, can contribute to alternative cultural imaginings that can counter the dominance of the development imaginary (and its connotations of lack, crisis, and passivity). Both Achille Mbembe and the artists associated with EspIRA/La ESPORA claim that artistic practice, and the critical discussion that surrounds that practice, do embody such a mode of agency, tied to art's liminal relationship to development. It is partly through art and the public discussion around culture that subjects imagine and re-imagine themselves, and are imagined by others. In the context of development, critically engaged and diversified artistic expression bears agency in that it complexifies understandings of subjects in the South, beyond development's framing, counters stereotypes and reductionisms, and intervenes in complex and global debates over the politics of representation.

This kind of imaginative transformation matters for many reasons, as detailed in Chapter 1. Representations, and the discursive constructions of which they are a part, have real impacts on how development itself is conceived and practised, on the terms of engagement between actors in the North and South. Furthermore, subjectivity – 'the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire and fear that animate acting subjects' (Ortner, 2006, p. 107) – is partly constructed through our imagination, and development discourse influences the ways in which the subjects of development imagine themselves and their futures. It matters to development because, as Ortner argues, social transformation must be more than the transformation of structures if it is to be powerful – it must also be cultural and subjective transformation (2006, p. 18).

Whether or not donor-funded arts practices can support this expansive and transformative mode of agency, however, depends on the way in which art is conceived, framed and supported by donors and on the relationships they build with artists in the South. With this in mind, this chapter maps distinctions between the ways in which donors frame art's agency and the approach to art's agency articulated by EspIRA/La ESPORA. The relationship between these different approaches is complex: in some instances, they appear to be completely divorced, if not in direct opposition, whereas elsewhere the relationship is less dichotomised, with donors and artists articulating similar conceptions of agency. Even in these latter cases, however, tensions and reductionisms arise through processes of implementation and evaluation. This discussion builds on that of Chapter 2 in the sense that it raises again the evident tension between instrumentality and more radical articulations of agency in development's engagement with the arts.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the relationship between agency, power and subjectivity, which provides theoretical tools for the following analysis. It then describes key characteristics of art's agency as articulated by mainstream donors, an approach I define as 'instrumental/empirical'. I then isolate Hivos, as an example of an alternative donor position, and describe its attempts to modify that mainstream donor approach to avoid the reductionisms that seem to accompany it. Despite important differences, I point out that Hivos still appears to be captured by an 'instrumental/empirical' framework at times. I then contrast these donor approaches to art's agency with that of EspIRA/La ESPORA, and map critical points of divergence. The chapter concludes by highlighting some particularly productive tensions that surface from this analysis, which form the subject of Chapter 8.

Agency, power and the complex development subject

> *[The subject is always] existentially complex, a being who feels and thinks and reflects, who makes and seeks meaning.*
>
> (Ortner, 2006, p. 110)

Sewell (1992, p. 20) defines agency as a capacity 'for desiring, for forming intentions, for acting creatively', although the form that agency takes will 'vary enormously and [be] culturally and historically determined'. Ortner supports Sewell's 'hard' conception of

agency that emphasises intentionality as differentiating 'agentive acts that intervene in the world with something in mind (or heart)' from 'routine practices that proceed with little reflection and planning' (2006, p. 136)[1]. Such a 'hard' conception of agency is appropriate for the concerns of this thesis which deals primarily with highly self-conscious forms of agency: intentions have to be clearly articulated in artists' applications for funding, and donors have to articulate the agency that they 'intend' art to have in policy documents.

Agency itself is politically significant because of its transformative potential – its potential to generate change: 'there is a dynamic, powerful and sometimes transformative relationship between the practices of real people and the structures of society, culture, history' (Ortner, 2006, p. 133). Development is fundamentally concerned with transformation and change, and its practices are strongly intentional. Yet it is also a field of negotiation between multiple stakeholders embodying different levels and forms of power. As Sewell points out, the intentions people are able to form, and the 'creative transpositions' (1992, p. 20) they are able to undertake, vary greatly both within and between societies, which means that agency is always tied to questions of power. Different conceptions of art's agency, articulated by differentially empowered actors, will therefore influence the transformative potential of art's agency in the development context.

While agency is tied to power, it is also tied to subjectivity. Ortner points out that agency 'is not some natural or originary will [but] takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts and meanings' (Ortner 2006, p. 110) and it is for this reason that a complex understanding of the subject has such political significance. As Ortner argues, the 'complexity and reflexivity [of subjects] constitute grounds for questioning and criticizing the world in which we find ourselves' (ibid, p.127). Mechanisms that reduce the complexity of subjects (usually employed in a field of unequal power relations) such as stereotyping, or functionalist and/or reductionist representations, reduce, to an extent, the capacity of subjects to desire, intend and act as agents.

[1] Ortner also recognises that intentionality is complex, involving a range of states both cognitive and emotional, and both conscious and unconscious, and that intentions and outcomes often do not match up (2006, pp. 134-136).

Many critics of development, as discussed in Chapter 1, argue that the framing of development discourse reduces the complexity of development subjects. Critical and alternative approaches to development (including, broadly speaking, postcolonial and post-development positions)[2] respond, in part, to this problematic by articulating the heterogeneity and complexity of subjects in the South. So too, do those development donors, like Hivos, who fund the arts with a policy that recognises the sensory and emotional aspects of the arts experience, as opposed to simply expecting the arts to deliver information.

EspIRA/La ESPORA also articulates agency as being grounded in a more complex understanding of, and projection of, subjectivity. It sees critical self-reflection and critical collective reflection as part of the practice of art and also as a form of political engagement. A complex understanding of the Self is seen as a basis for a complex understanding of the Other. Generating more plural and critical understandings of identity, place, representational practices (through which subjects are partially constructed), and the personal motivations and intentions of artists are core practices, all directed towards a more critical engagement with visual culture and its politics. That critical engagement includes a response to the reductionist representations of Central American subjects that arise both in the development discourse and in global art circuits, and which tend to be reproduced in the local context. The impulse towards complexity and pluralism also has a strongly constructive aspect to it, directed towards regenerating the imagination of place and identity, while embracing heterogeneity.

The dual nature of La ESPORA's intentions, both *resistant* (to dominant and reductionist signifying practices) and *constructive* (of infrastructure, networks, knowledge, skills, self-esteem, critical public debate and more emancipatory signifying practices) are characterised as two modes of agency by Sherry Ortner (2006, pp. 139-153). Although I introduced this distinction in Chapter 1, and have used it to characterise some of the practices described in the previous chapters, it is worth reviewing in a little more depth here as it will inform this chapter. Ortner describes agency as having two principal

[2] Postcolonial scholars tend to promote heterogeneity and the particularity of subjective experience (Kapoor, 2008). Some postdevelopment researchers are now avoiding an over-emphasis on deconstruction that locates subjects primarily in terms of their political position or political identity (both usually subordinate). While this, in itself, is not an unimportant task, Ortner points out that the subjects' structures of thought, feeling and reflection always make them 'more than the occupants of particular positions and the holders of particular identities' (2006, p.115). For postdevelopment scholars such as Gibson and McKinnon, engaging with the specificity of subjective experience gives greater visibility to other spaces of agency (see McKinnon, et al., 2008 and McKinnon, 2008).

modes: one relating to the intentional construction of projects, and the other relating to resistance to power, although the two modes co-exist and intertwine. The constructive agency of *projects* describes people seeking 'to accomplish valued things within a framework of their own terms, their own categories of value' (ibid, p. 145). In the case of EspIRA/La ESPORA this refers to the establishment of high-quality, critically-engaged tertiary-level training in contemporary art in Central America and the expansion of critical discourse around visual arts, cultural self-representation, identity and place. The agency of *resistance* describes actions 'within relations of social inequality, asymmetry and force' (ibid, p.139). For EspIRA/La ESPORA this means the analysis of and response to various marginalising practices, and the resistance to internal and external pressures towards self-censorship. Although each agentic mode does not exist without the other, the point of making the distinction is that the first is 'defined by local logics of the good and the desirable and how to pursue them' and the second is 'defined to a great extent by the terms of the dominant party' (ibid, p. 145). The 'most fundamental dimension of the idea of agency' can be argued to lie in the constructive agency of projects (ibid, p. 144), while recognising that this form of agency 'is about people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including very centrally their own structures of inequality' (ibid, p. 147).

With these points in mind (the relationship between agency and power, subjectivity as the matrix through which agency emerges, and the dual modes of agency as both resistant and constructive) I turn now to an analysis of the differences between conceptions of art's agency as articulated by donors and by the artists associated with EspIRA/La ESPORA. This analysis allows us to see the mechanisms through which inequalities of power are reinscribed, as well as to see nodes and strategies through which those inequalities are being challenged. It reveals practices that reduce subjectivity (and therefore the matrix through which agency can emerge) as well as practices that complexify it. And it reveals the interplay between resistant and constructive forms of agency, between those forms that resist development's framing and those that construct alternative cultural imaginings.

Donor practices: characteristics of an instrumental and empirical approach

> *You ask co-partners to create indicators then to see how close they get [. . .]. This is the wrong measure for art. What should be considered a sign of success is if something happens that was not in the indicators. Then you know some good art's happened.*
>
> (Claudia Fontes personal communication, June, 2008)

Although development donors are by no means a homogeneous group, almost all donors who support the arts display some evidence of an instrumental and empirical approach to art's agency[3]. Agency is often conceived in instrumental terms – in art's productivity, for example, in achieving extra-artistic outcomes (economic growth, social inclusion, education and so on). Pre-determined outcomes, certainty and broad social incidence are usually required. Value tends to be assessed in measurable units while processes, equally tangible but less easily measurable using quantitative metrics, are often ignored. The linking of art to a development agenda also means that art's agency is assumed to be limited to a specific 'locality', and one that is principally defined by its problems and deficiencies.

Instrumentalisation

There appear to be two broad approaches to instrumentalisation in arts funding among development donors: strong instrumentalisation and a 'twin-track' approach that values social utility as well as art 'itself'. The 'non-instrumentalised' approach of Hivos, Arts Collaboratory and the Prince Claus Fund will be discussed in a subsequent section.

Strong instrumentalisation

In a strongly instrumental approach, the agency of the arts is seen to lie in their ability, as effective and culturally appropriate vehicles, to deliver services in extra-artistic areas such as health or community education. An example is development agencies' overwhelming tendency to fund the production of documentaries based on social 'issues' rather than to fund film production more broadly in the South[4]. This is clearly

[3] It may well be the case (and this is an area that requires further research), that some donors are aware of the restrictions of these practices, and undertake various forms of 'creative accounting' within the constraints of their own needs to demonstrate good governance and accountability.
[4] For further discussion of the experience of filmmakers in Nicaragua, see Jaugey and Pineda, 2000.

not the form of agency with which this thesis is primarily concerned, as it is does not appear as a site from which to resist development's framing or to construct alternative cultural imaginings.

While bearing in mind Da Costa's warning 'not to assume that the expedient invocation and use of 'culture' invariably helps accomplish neoliberal governmentality' (2010, p. 516)[5], there are obvious concerns with a predominantly and strongly instrumental approach to arts funding by development donors. In limiting the agency of the arts to action *within* existing mainstream development discourse, it is likely to reinforce the reductionisms that exist in that discourse through focussing artistic engagement on issues, problems and deficiencies. Instrumentalisation tends to reproduce what 'is' rather than allowing for an agentic surge into what 'might be'. Moreover, constantly linking art to the 'issues' of development simplifies, rather than complexifies, the subjectivity of actors in the South. It also contributes to maintaining the social distance that development practices often construct between the North and the South through permitting artists in the North to address universal and aesthetic questions, but demanding that Southern artists focus on issues and local specificity. Furthermore art, here, is simply seen as functional – it is not viewed as a site for critical agency. Indeed, as Claudia Fontes points out, a strongly instrumental approach has the potential to strip arts practices of their critical possibilities: 'The biggest risk of all isn't failing to achieve social transformation, but, even worse, ending up with a whole generation of very cynical artists, who couldn't care less about social welfare, teenagers at risk, or the isolation of rural populations, but have learnt how to fill in forms complying with a social interest angle in order to get the only funds available' (Fontes, 2008, paragraph 9).

The 'twin-track' approach

Much of the development community (including UNESCO and most bilateral donors) tries to avoid such reductionisms, and to have the best of both worlds, by adopting a 'twin-track approach' in their support of the arts. Here agency is still ascribed to instrumental effectiveness but the arts are also valued 'in themselves' and as a site for

[5] Culture, Da Costa points out, can be framed as '*exogenous* difference' thereby feeding marketization (2010, p. 504, emphasis in original). While she notes that the marketization of difference may be valued for 'enabl[ing] market production and inclusion', she points out that it may also, and at the same time, be valued for 'enabl[ing] social reproduction and reconceptualisations of social life and economy' (ibid, p. 516).

cultural reflection and creative expression. This is, no doubt, an accurate description of the spaces of engagement of the arts anywhere, and it recognises development subjects as complex and creative subjects.

However, in implementing such an approach, tensions between the twin conceptions of agency become evident, and often lead to confusion for both donors and artists. In Chapter 2 I mentioned some of the confusion with which arts funding is often met by development officials on the ground who have to administer funds and manage evaluation procedures. This may mean that an arts budget is used to fund projects in which art is a vehicle for an essentially extra-artistic process, rather than seen as the core process itself, or it may result in a divided and rather simplistic view in which arts-related values (such as emotional engagement) are regarded as personal, whereas more strongly instrumental values are regarded as social. For artists it also implies that they are expected to meet contradictory demands: to be financially productive as well as 'innovative, risky, socially sensitive, left-wing oriented, and stand[ing] for political issues which undermine the establishment' (Nicaraguan artist cited in Fontes, 2008, paragraph 8). In the development context, the difficulties of substantiating the claims to social transformation made for the arts (Belfiore, 2008, p.5), coupled with art's liminal location in relation to the core concerns of development and the desire to articulate its productivity within that context, means that instrumental values are usually given a higher profile in policy documents and evaluation procedures. In the development context the value of the arts relates to their ability to create broad social change: if they are seen as having impacts beyond the arts sector, in areas such as health, education or economic growth, then they are more highly valued (McCarthy et al., 2004, p. xi)[6].

It is possible, of course, for an artistic process to have a *direct* and *broad* social impact and also to be a work of exceptional artistry. The collaboration between the late Andy Palacio and Ivan Durán of Stonetree Records in Belize is an example, discussed in detail in Hivos's 2008 evaluation. Their combined efforts with the multi-generational Garifuna Collective on the internationally acclaimed albums 'Wátina' and 'Umalali'[7] are credited

[6] Also see the discussion of 'policy attachment' in Chapter 2.

[7] Wátina was awarded the WOMEX (World Music Awards) Award for 2007; it was voted by European World Music Charts best album of 2007; it was included in the Guardian newspaper's top 1000 albums to listen to you before you die; it was acclaimed in Rolling Stone magazine, El Pais, the Los Angeles Times, the Wall Street Journal, among others. Andy Palacio was named a UNESCO Artist of Peace (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, Anexo 8, pp. 9-11). This material has been sourced from Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, but much of it can be corroborated in the many press reports on Stonetree Records' website: see http://www.stonetreerecords.com/music/international_press.php.

with rejuvenating Garifuna language, music and culture[8], revitalising the tourism industry in Belize[9], validating the experience of Garifuna women[10] and generating self-esteem and cultural identification among Garifuna youth. All of these could be considered desirable development objectives. However, the social transformation in this case came about primarily because of the artistic integrity of the musicians and producers, and the outstanding artistic quality of the productions that garnered such wide-spread international recognition. Producer Ivan Durán worked meticulously for more than ten years on these projects, travelling to numerous small villages, recording traditional Garifuna rhythms in homes, churches and halls, and auditioning musicians and singers. His efforts were supported by Hivos, even though they, at times, expressed frustration at how long the process was taking (Fontes, personal communication, June 2008). However, multiple processes of social transformation came about through a commitment to artistic integrity. This is, of course, as exceptional case, and such 'twin-track' successes are difficult, if not impossible, to predict in advance.

Measurable units, pre-determined outcomes, and the need for certainty

Whatever their official approach to instrumentalisation, almost all donors display, through their funding mechanisms, the prioritisation of quantifiable objects and events over artistic processes, a need for certainty, and a desire for direct and measurable social incidence at a broad scale. All of these aspects have been perceived as problematic by EspIRA/La ESPORA in some way, and all indicate the way in which the need to prove

[8] Garifuna is an endangered language with roots in Arawak, Carib, French and possibly West African languages. It is not taught in schools and is in danger of disappearing through economic migration and other factors, such as discrimination. Traditional Garifuna songs often contain cultural knowledge about daily tasks and relationships. These albums sought out traditional instruments in place of drum machines and synthesisers which were commonly part of popular Garifuna music (*punta* rock) which tended to be based around dance-floor rhythms. The popularity of Palacio and Durán's work has meant that many *punta* rock bands began to experiment more with traditional instruments (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, Anexo 8, pp. 5-7).

[9] The Belize government, who had not previously supported Stonetree Records in any way, lauded Palacio and Durán as heroes following the international success of the albums and subsequently invested in bringing a large cohort of journalists to Belize's music week to piggy-back on their successes and their contribution to cultural tourism (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, Anexo 8, pp. 7-8).

[10] The inclusion of two women in the Garifuna Collective was the first time that Garifuna women had established professional profiles as musicians. Durán was so impressed by their voices and also so struck by their relative invisibility in the music world that he developed an album to showcase their talents. 'Umalali' (meaning 'voice' in Garifuna) validated women's language (there are significant linguistic differences between genders in Garifuna) and helped to project Garifuna women's values (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, Anexo 8, p. 5).

art's productivity in terms of 'development', influences the way agency is imagined and, therefore, supported.

In the first instance, project proposals put forward by artists are always required to include measurable indicators that must be met in order to demonstrate a project's 'success' and hence the continuation of funding. While asking artists to invent their own indicators does suggest a willingness on the part of donors to accommodate the perspectives of artists, these indicators must still meet requirements (usually quantitative) for measurability. Furthermore, as Claudia Fontes has suggested, achieving indicators may not be the best measure of art's success. Transformation is more likely to have occurred if something emerges that was not pre-determined. Bryson has described the essentially unpredictable relationship between the art object and society, which, he argues is marked by 'mobility, volatility, the volatile encounter of the signifying practice with the political and economic practice surrounding it' (1983, p. 9). Likewise, O'Connor (2010, p. 28) points out that art involves 'processes of innovation, of reinvention, of counter factual imagination that come precisely from the disjunction between what the artist wants to produce and what the public wants to receive', suggesting that art's ability to fulfil a predetermined function is not where its power lies. In this sense, art's transformative capacities are logically tied to an element of unpredictability.

Most proposals that artists submit to donors are a derivation of a logical framework analysis (the most common tool within development project work) and require detailed indicators which may be both qualitative and quantitative but which must all be objectively measurable[11]. Darwin Andino, current Director of EspIRA, says that donors are unwilling to see a result in a catalogue publication or in an interview, preferring to 'see it in a number'. 'It would be easy' he says, 'to give them this information [catalogues, transcribed interviews] but it seems like they're not interested in it' (personal communication, June 2008).

The prioritisation of quantitative measures contributes to an empirical approach that appears to value objects and numbers over processes. Some aspects of an arts project are indeed easily quantifiable and can be proposed with relative certainty: the number of

[11] Complaints about the restrictive and reductionist nature of log-frame analyses in the development context have a long history. See, for example, Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005; Dale, 2003; and Hersoug, 1996.

students to attend a course, the number of tutors, the number of hours students will spend in classes, the themes, the places their work will be displayed, and so on. These factors give little information, however, about the processes involved – their quality and their significance. Andino argues that such indicators are completely out of step with what actually happens:

> For those of us asking for the money the social impact is completely different. It's not how many advertisements are going to be hung in order to know that there is culture in Managua, because, you know, these advertisements are considered the ultimate. It's the level of quality. I mean, for example, we do things like have meetings, critical workshops, that are an investment in time and everything and if there's money we do them and if there's no money we do them. [But the organisations] don't risk funding if there are no measurable parameters, indicators of results and all that, when the question of human relations always has to do with spontaneity: you can plan a ton of things and be trained in every way possible to be able to give answers to the problems that arise but everything is to do with who is that person, what is their name, and how is that person going to change what I have planned to do with them. [. . .] It's a head-breaker putting together all of these forms which is what I've been doing just now.
>
> (personal communication, June 2008)

Such complaints (echoed in my interviews with Patricia Belli and Virginia Pérez-Ratton) do not imply that these artists believe they should simply be given money without any attempt to articulate what they are doing, or evaluate the quality of its processes. Belli argues to the contrary, that it is part of an artist's responsibility, when seeking funding, to be able to articulate what it is artists are doing and why it matters. Moreover, articulating their own processes and the value of those processes to students and to publics, as well as to donors, is a crucial aspect of EspIRA/La ESPORA's drive to construct of a critical context for art.

The use of quantitative indicators, however, appears to reduce the possible articulations of agency to those aspects of practice measurable in quantitative metrics, reducing the complexity of the art experience and obscuring more powerful and widespread processes. The artist, as subject, seems to be conceived as functional rather than creative, transformative or emergent. Andino makes the point that if you take the agency of the individual seriously, then they must be permitted to transform the process, as Pilar Moreno did during the ¡PECA! residency, when she partially removed herself from the dialogue-based workshops and set up her own studio alongside to paint pictures for passersby.

Broad social impact

No doubt part of the drive behind quantitative measures such as how many posters have been hung in Managua, or how many women attended an exhibition opening (an example given me by Virginia Pérez-Ratton of an indicator that was – absurdly to her mind – supposed to demonstrate the impact of a particular exhibition on gender relations) is the need, within development, for projects to demonstrate a broad social impact. Development's primary concern is to effect broad social change. The social impact of artistic practices, however, is highly complex, often indirect, usually long-term, often unpredictable, and unlikely to be accurately assessed using quantitative indicators.

Furthermore, the experience of art may be perceived to be personal, rather than broadly social. Individuals are attracted to the arts, and return to the arts, not for their instrumental impact, but for the delight, wonder, intellectual and emotional stimulation that can accompany a deeply engaging artistic experience. However, this personal/social distinction needs some clarification as there may well be *social* agency in supporting *individual* experience of the arts, and in supporting key individuals in the arts sector. McCarthy et al. have mapped a range of benefits (from engagement with the arts) along a continuum from private to public and, importantly, suggested links between them. They suggest that some personal benefits (such as 'greater individual receptivity to new perspectives and tolerance for others') have clear spillover effects into the public realm in terms of tolerance and empathy (2004, p. 69).

Moreover, my fieldwork experience has shown that individuals (such as Patricia Belli with EspIRA/La ESPORA, Virginia Pérez-Ratton with TEOR/éTica, and Claudia Fontes with RAIN and TRAMA) may become critical social innovators, whose drive and enthusiasm leads them to have an impact on a great many people. It is impossible to know what the experience of La ESPORA will do for the hundreds of individual students (from throughout the region) who have attended its programmes, but, in some cases, it has clearly developed leadership skills, professional organisational capacities, cultural analysis and critical thinking, and it is highly possible that those experiences could trigger other forms of social engagement. After a talk by Claudia Fontes in Managua in 2008 in which Fontes had described TRAMA, the Latin American-wide arts project she had run for six years, one of the newest and least experienced students at La ESPORA approached her, brimming with enthusiasm, asking for advice on raising

large-scale funds for a social project. While still at high school, the student had started a small project with other classmates, visiting the mental asylums in the city to carry out art projects with the inmates. She was inspired by Fontes to expand the project and turn it into something on a larger scale. Fontes described this incident to me as an example of the ways in which specific, small-scale encounters (in this case a student meeting an inspiring individual who had initiated a large-scale arts project) can become catalysts for individuals to become social innovators[12]. Although art experiences can produce these kinds of individual transformative outcomes, such processes are impossible to predict and therefore to include in donor frameworks.

Local efficacy

Another common aspect to the approach of donors is that project outcomes are seen as agentic only in relation to the specificities of the *local* context (measured, for example, in the number of posters in Managua, the number of women at exhibition openings, or in the film community's capacity to document malnutrition in Central America)[13]. It may seem obvious to point out that development donors desire social change effects to take place in target societies but, as I have already indicated, there are problems with an over-emphasised attachment to the local (and the local conceived principally as underdeveloped). These will be discussed in some detail in the following chapter, but they include a reinforcement of difference and social distance between South and North, the reinscription of stereotypes associated with problems or deficiencies perceived to exist only in the local scene, and a refusal to recognise the rights and capacities of Southern artists to comment on universal subjects such as love, loss, beauty, alienation or belonging by demanding their work address local particularities. The demand for a purely local efficacy sits in contrast to the multi-scalar vocation of organisations like TEOR/éTica and EspIRA/La ESPORA.

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[12] Fontes pointed out that many social innovators have become motivated (or 'called to action') through one particular incident in their lives. She pointed me to the book '*Getting To Maybe – How the World is Changed*' (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton, 2007), which provides numerous examples of intimate encounters that moved individuals to take broader social action, such as Muhamad Yunus's meeting with stool-maker Sufiya Begum in Jobra village in Bangladesh, that galvanised him to found the Grameen Bank.

[13] I am referring here to the annual prize awarded by a group of international development organisations at the Central American film festival (ICARO) to the documentary that 'best deals with the issue of hunger and malnutrition in Central America'.

Short-term timeframe

Donor funding for arts organisations is almost always short-term (usually for up to three years), and often for one-off events or festivals. Hivos is an exception, supporting arts organisations for up to 10 years, although even this funding can only be considered medium-term, at best. The development community sees its interventions as offering temporary resourcing that will enable arts organisations to consolidate their structures and to develop economic self-sufficiency. However, given the lack of local infrastructure, the fairly limited enthusiasm of private enterprise, and the determination of many arts organisations to remain independent as a condition for criticality and horizontal forms of exchange, the goal of becoming self-sustaining is unlikely to be met. As Pérez Gonzales has pointed out, this is a difficulty for many artist-led initiatives, who value 'autonomy, self-determination and self-organization' but who are rarely self-sufficient (2008, p. 10). Some donors, like Hivos, purposely support the independent sector for its contribution to a critical public space, and yet still expect arts organisations to be economically viable. This demonstrates the rather contradictory demands made on artists already noted in Chapter 2.

Short-term support also indicates a desire for a democratic engagement on the part of donors, who want to be able to spread their support between multiple organisations. While short-term funding does indeed provide opportunities to support new sites of agency, it does not support the consolidation and stabilisation of processes and projects over the longer-term, or the construction of physical infrastructure. Instead, it generates a fragmented landscape of multiple small-scale projects, with artists driven to constantly come up with new ideas to attract funding, as EspIRA's experience shows. Darwin Andino argues that the temporary nature of this funding platform costs in terms of 'what could be a permanent, local, strategy [. . .] It's as if – luckily there are these funds – but they don't establish anything long-term' (personal communication, June 2008). In this situation, long-term planning in order to stabilise processes that support agency (as in La ESPORA's design of its 5-year curriculum) appears utopian.

The difficulties of imagining and planning for future developments within the cultural sector are described by Guatemalan publisher Eduardo Prado: 'I don't think the future will bring us anything . . . I can't plan ahead . . . Hopefully I can plan from today to the end of the year' (cited in Acevedo Leal, 2000, p. 365). The funding of multiple arts

projects in a short-term time frame replicates and reinscribes what Mbembe articulates as a key feature of development's framing of the South in terms of a 'never-ending present, a serial accumulation of "instants" that never achieve the density and weight of human, historical time' (2009, final section). Of course this begs the question of whether or not development support can and should be considered a long-term strategy for the cultural sector in the South. This question merits further research, and lies beyond the scope of this thesis, but I think it is important to understand that short-term funding supports certain forms of agency, while denying others.

The typically short-term nature of the project cycle also has other implications. It means that longer-term impacts are rarely either identified or valued, despite evidence that sustained involvement in the arts over a long period of time is far more likely to generate significant change in individuals and communities (McCarthy et al., 2004, p. 34) and despite donors expressed desires to support long-lasting change. More directly, it implies an enormous amount of work for artists and arts organisations in just applying for funds and satisfying the requirements of monitoring and evaluation, which considerably reduces the time that could be spent in creative endeavour. Moreover, each donor organisation has a slightly different approach and artists must become familiar with the needs and nuances of each one (even those with whom they are ultimately unsuccessful). Pérez-Ratton estimated that fundraising (for TEOR/éTica) took up 40% of her time (personal communication, August 2006) and Darwin Andino suggested, only half-jokingly, that this huge investment in time should budgeted for in the project proposals that are sent to donors (personal communication, June 2008).

Hierarchical relationships

All of these processes suggest a hierarchical donor/client relationship between artists in the South and funding bodies located in the North. Requirements and mechanisms are imposed on recipients without recipients being able to impose similar conditions on donors. Some donors show little desire to engage in reciprocal learning (as the case with UNICEF, discussed below, demonstrates)[14]. Even those, like Hivos, that do, appear to

[14] Claudia Fontes recounted an interesting interaction she had had with staff at the Rijksakademie when she had demanded to know what it was that the Dutch organisation got out of its funding of artists from the South. She said the academy's staff were outraged at being asked such a question but she forced the issue, wanting the organisation to recognise what it received as part of the exchange agreement to make the terms of the funding clear (personal communication, June 2008).

draw the line at including artists in the bodies that make funding decisions, although this may be a requirement imposed on them by their shareholders.

An illustration: Jóvenes Creativos, EspIRA and UNICEF

In 2009, EspIRA developed a project called Jóvenes Creativos, with funding, in its pilot year, from UNICEF, with support from the Swiss Development Agency (SDC). The discrepancies between the way that UNICEF (as principal donor) and EspIRA viewed and managed the project, are illustrative of some of the tensions and contradictions in donor's approaches to arts funding that I have discussed above. In particular, this example shows the ways in which donors appear to reduce the conception of agency by valuing empirical outputs over processes; appear to be dismayed by the unpredictable nature of the creative process; and expect a particular and restricted set of outcomes even if these are not clearly articulated. It also demonstrates some of the confusion that occurs in trying to implement a 'twin-track' approach that desires a particular educational outcome, yet sees this as external to the artistic process itself.

Jóvenes Creativos was a significant attempt, by EspIRA, at outreach, offering classes to children who had artistic talent but had no financial resources to develop that talent. In its first (pilot) year, the project selected 60 students (aged 6-18 and with a 50-50 gender balance) from six public schools, and bussed them in to central Managua to attend regular art classes (divided into age-specific groups) over a period of eight months. The classes were designed to 'work [with] the imagination, with sensibility and with hand-eye coordination' (Belli, 2009, 'Presentación' section). There was a further emphasis on studying images as 'generators of meaning' (ibid) and this was associated with a series of artistic interpretations based on the theme of HIV/Aids. Apart from this themed exercise, social values were attributed by EspIRA to the creative process itself in the sense that: '[a]rtistic creation depends on capacities like empathy, creative thinking, problem-solving, critical thinking and the assertive communication of emotions and feelings' (ibid).

Following the classes, a public exhibition was held in Managua of the children's work, and a catalogue was to be published that critically discussed the educational process and the artwork produced. The classes were taught by students trained through La

ESPORA, and the catalogue was produced collectively by members of EspIRA/La ESPORA with texts by Patricia Belli and Darwin Andino.

However, two days before the exhibition opening, UNICEF withdrew its support for the publication of the catalogue, and the exhibition opened without it. UNICEF's reasoning was that it regarded the content of some of the children's work as inappropriate: some of it was sexualised, some of it portrayed stereotypical *machista*[15] images, and some of it contained images associated with death (skulls and coffins). Such images (coming from children/youth) were seen as contravening UNICEF's values, and were clearly unexpected by the donor.

While offering to make minor changes to the catalogue to appease UNICEF so long as the students and their work were still adequately represented, EspIRA viewed the same images in a very different way – as evidence of a process (involving the acquisition of multiple skills and the development of a practice) that was still incipient, but nevertheless, worthwhile. While it also viewed the images as reflecting and reproducing examples of simplistic and stereotypical thinking – particularly around gender, it saw this not as evidence that the workshops had failed, but rather as further evidence that the workshops were needed and should continue.

Many of the 'problematic' images were made in interpretive workshops that followed the education module on HIV. That educational module had been poorly attended, probably reflecting parental concerns regarding its subject-matter, which may have contributed to the simplistic nature of some of the subsequent interpretations. The unpublished catalogue addresses this point:

> One can see in these works a system of symbols of the tragedy [HIV] and, in some, women are stigmatised as those responsible for the transmission [of the virus]. The real complexity and delicacy of the theme was a significant obstacle to understanding, and the results show that the participants opted for simplification and the use of conventional symbols still based in prejudices [. . .] However, in those [same] workshops some of the most interesting works in the whole cycle were produced: pieces that tackled the invisibility of the paradigms, the silence and duality of the human being as part of the problematic.
>
> (EspIRA, 2009, 'Talleres de VIH' section)

[15] Describing a male attitude of dominance over, and chauvinism towards, women.

EspIRA objected to an overly zealous 'cleansing' of the exhibition[16] and hence a rewriting of the project experience, pointing out that EspIRA endorses:

> [. . .] a work platform that does not promote ideal worlds, but rather appropriate, realistic [worlds], in which creativity is focussed on transformation, starting from a clear understanding of the environment and its dangers. Art forms bold and proactive people, stimulating them to develop their own thinking and if that thinking picks up concerns from their own experiences, positive or negative, then art is the best path for them.
>
> (Belli, email to UNICEF, forwarded to me, December 2009)

In other words, the fact that art disquiets at times, even the art of children, is not something to be feared but shows, instead, that art can be a positive way to approach some of the more disquieting aspects of life.

This example demonstrates contradictions in one donor's approach, and reveals the way in which conflict around different interpretations can arise despite both donors and artists desiring similar outcomes. In this case, the desired social outcome is seen (by donors) as separate from the artistic process (which isn't viewed in sufficient complexity) and is assessed through the resulting empirical object rather than through the process itself. In failing to publish the catalogue (which describes that process to the broader community, thereby extending critical agency), the donor effectively stops any possibility for the agency of the artistic process that lies behind the images to reach beyond the classes themselves. Moreover, the donor having the final decision regarding the publication of the catalogue demonstrates the relationship between power and agency: the more powerful actor is able to restrict the exercise of agency.

The donor clearly desired a particular outcome but the process of individual learning and transformation does not lend itself to certainty. That process is, as Andino says, more to do with 'who is that person, what is their name, and how is that person going to change what I have planned to do with them' (personal communication, June 2008). Obviously it is also somewhat naïve of UNICEF not to expect sexually-oriented work to emerge from a programme directed at teenagers that includes an educational

[16] It refused, for example, to remove some images associated with death, arguing in an email to UNICEF: '[w]e consider that death is part of life and we promote the idea that death – the subject of studies in philosophy, in science, in politics and in art – cannot be censored from the imaginary of our children and adolescents, without contributing to the construction of an artifice that stimulates passivity' (Belli, email to UNICEF, forwarded to me, December 2009).

component on HIV/Aids. The programme was asked to be political in the local context (in the sense that it provided education around a topical and sensitive subject) but that politics could only be expressed within a narrow frame, revealing the donors' desire for a simplified, idealised and locally-specific subject.

In only valuing the object, and refusing to see it as one part of a process of learning by complex subjects, the donor sees the programme as failing (UNICEF has not supported Jóvenes Creativos since then). EspIRA, on the other hand, sees the outcome in its ambivalent complexity as evidence that the learning process (of developing a more critical spirit, challenging stereotypical representations, discussing the politics of representation and refining one's means of communication) is, in fact, even more necessary. Since 2009, EspIRA has continued to run Jóvenes Creativos using its own scant resources to do so.

Summary of donor approach, and implications

In summary, then, I see a complex and contradictory approach on the part of donors towards the agency of arts practices and the funding mechanisms with which they support them. Most donors who fund the arts show a desire to support a more expansive and holistic conception of development and a more agentic conception of the South in line with the politics of possibility I described in Chapter 1. They articulate development subjects as complex and creative, and they see multiple possibilities for agency in arts practices.

However, despite donors' desires to support such processes, the location of such funding within a development framework, and its attendant procedures, seems to restrict the possibilities for agency to be exercised. The funding environment currently promotes multiple small-scale projects rather than the consolidation of long-term structures, and it provides temporary, precarious platforms, at best, from which to exercise agency. The time spent in sourcing funds impacts heavily on the time available for arts-focussed practices. A desire for broad social change threatens to obscure the significant work of key 'social change' individuals, and more subtle relationships between individual experience and social engagement. Processing arts projects through a matrix of measurable and pre-determined indicators suggests an empirical framing based around the value of objects and events, rather than people (as complex subjects) and

collective processes. The demand for certainty seems to reproduce what 'is' rather than allowing for transformation into what 'might be'. And the funding relationship, maintained via project applications and monitoring and evaluation procedures, seems to maintain the social distance between 'donors' and 'clients', rather than recognising the possibility of horizontal exchange.

Hivos: a variant donor approach

I turn now to the practices of those donors, like Hivos (EspIRA/La ESPORA's principal donor over the past five years) who attempt to maintain a distinct position to that described above. Hivos shares a clearly non-instrumentalised funding approach with a small number of other development donors, such as the Hivos spinoff Arts Collaboratory, and the independent Prince Claus Fund. These donors support the arts without instrumentalising them: they support the cultural sector as a critical public space, they support experimental forms that don't necessarily demonstrate broad social impact, and they prioritise artistic quality and innovation. They also tend to have longer time-frames for funding, and offer some support to horizontal exchange via South-South networks.

Their most significant difference from a mainstream and instrumentalised position, is their articulation of the agency of artistic quality, innovation, and experimentation. Hivos and the Prince Claus Fund both list quality (or exceptionality) and originality (or innovation) as funding criteria, and both value intellectual debate within the wider arts community (supporting critics, curators, publications, symposia and so on) [17]. The Prince Claus Fund is notable for its willingness to support experimental or informal structures and individuals. For Hivos, this commitment to quality exists in tension with a more 'development'-oriented approach in that while artistic quality is its first funding criterion, social engagement is its second. Hivos points out, however, that 'social engagement' is interpreted broadly and can encompass the kinds of strategies that EspIRA/La ESPORA advocates in its assertion of a responsible and critical artistic production (Hivos, 2002, pp. 11-12).

[17] See Hivos (2002); Fontes & Wilson-Grau (2008); Prince Claus Fund (2007).

Although these organisations prioritise artistic quality, they do so in the belief that a rich and dynamic arts sector has social value. Hivos sees cultural diversity, pluralism, free expression and critical reflection and debate as important components of democratic and more egalitarian societies (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 8; Hivos, 2009, p. 33). The Prince Claus Fund also argues for the arts' contribution to peaceful societies through expanding our knowledge of other cultures, through critical analysis and through the expression of, and critical engagement with, past violence and injustice. However, the Prince Claus Fund also, more than any other donor to my mind, articulates the *enrichment* (through knowledge, pleasure, inspiration, a sense of belonging) that the arts can provide. The Fund has, for example, a specific sub-theme on the analysis of beauty in different cultural contexts. In this sense, it strongly articulates a complex subjectivity defined by more than material needs.

Hivos is notable among donors for the effort it makes to address the problematic issue of short-term funding. It specifically aims to contribute to 'long-term changes that strengthen the capacity of an independent arts and culture sector' (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 3). To this end, it funds arts projects for up to ten years and provides indefinite support of key organisations (like TEOR/éTICA) that it selects as strategically significant. EspIRA/La ESPORA has not been awarded this 'key' status, although some cultural commentators have argued that it should have been. Hivos funds must still be applied for annually or bi-annually, however, which contributes to a sense of vulnerability, with arts organisations unsure from one year to the next whether they will receive funds, and at what scale. Arts Collaboratory and the Prince Claus Fund have shorter funding time-frames, usually up to three years for each arts organisation. The Prince Claus Fund has supported EspIRA/La ESPORA for one cycle of the EX-IT exhibition and Arts Collaboratory has worked in conjunction with Hivos to support EspIRA/La ESPORA over the last three years but has indicated that termination of its support is imminent.

Hivos is also notable for its commitment to supporting South-South networks as a form of infrastructure and as a means of sharing knowledge horizontally, without having to travel via the metropolitan centres. Hivos was a significant partner in the establishment of the ARTerial Network in 2007 that supports the cultural sector throughout the African continent and it has supported the establishment of a similar network in Asia through the CultureAsia 2008 Conference (Hivos, 2009, p. 34). At a smaller scale, Arts

Collaboratory has developed a website that allows its co-partners (of which EspIRA/La ESPORA is one) to share knowledge and experience through discussion forums. As an extension of this project it has initiated a small Latin American Network (see http://www.artscollaboratory.org/latin-american-network) connecting about a dozen arts organisations. One of the off-shoots of this network has been an exchange (in 2011) between students of La ESPORA and students of the Brazilian artists' initiative CEIA (Centre for Experimentation and Information in Brazilian Contemporary Art) in Belo Horizonte. Hivos and the Prince Claus Fund also try to make space for reciprocal learning through organising significant feedback forums for co-partners, and through evaluations such as that undertaken by Fontes and Wilson-Grau for Central America in 2008.

These practices on behalf of a small group of Dutch donors demonstrate a quite distinct conception of the agency of the arts, and one that is more in line with the possibilities described by Mbembe, and the forms of agency articulated by EspIRA/La ESPORA. They clearly see agency in artistic practices themselves and in the debate and discussion around art that goes on in the cultural sector. They value pleasure, experimentation, curiosity, audacity and intellectual debate. They value a public space in which dialogue, uncertainty, research, questioning and exploration are supported – a kind of space conducive to generating what Mbembe calls 'a qualitative practice of the imagination'. They allow (to an extent) for the possibility of transformation *as it happens* rather than having to determine the nature of that transformation beforehand. They see agency in art's unpredictable (and sometimes disruptive) relationship to society and in the 'poetic gesture' that, as Papastergiadis puts it, 'acts as a circuit-breaker in the closed system of signs, to which we are habituated' (2005a, p. 294). They disrupt functionalism, reductionism, and any framing that locates development subjects as lacking or deficient. They represent a complex understanding of subjectivity, and support alternative cultural imaginings.

Seeing their practices, however, from the point of view of the artists associated with EspIRA/La ESPORA, allows us to see the ways in which such emancipatory and critical forms of agency, desired by both donors and artists, continue to be reduced through mechanisms of implementation. The complaints about the reliance on predetermined, quantitative indicators, for example, are also made about Hivos. Its funding platform may be medium-term, but it is still temporary and unpredictable.

Relationships are still largely hierarchical rather than based on an ethic of horizontal exchange. These tensions can be drawn out more clearly through reviewing EspIRA/La ESPORA's approach to the agency of art and contrasting it to that of donors (while recognising that some donors, such as Hivos, occupy a mediating space between mainstream donor approaches and the articulations of these artists). As EspIRA/La ESPORA's strategies and practices have been detailed extensively in the previous three chapters, what follows here is a concise review, structured as a response to the position(s) of donors described above.

EspIRA/La ESPORA: a 'critical/ethical' approach to the agency of art

EspIRA/La ESPORA articulates the agency of art from a position that I characterise as 'critical/ethical', as opposed to 'instrumental/empirical'. It sees art as interrogative and relationally integrated with society, rather than instrumentally productive and detached from 'worthier' concerns[18]. Critical enquiry is a core aspect of artistic practice at EspIRA/La ESPORA and operates through multiple forums. Within this investigative, experimental and dialogic artistic process a lack of certainty – the inability to predict a particular outcome (which is so difficult for donors to accommodate) – is a logical necessity. If you predict an outcome then the practice becomes the attainment of that outcome, rather than a practice of questioning and exploration. Uncertainty, on the other hand, allows for transformation, learning and change.

Although the starting point for artistic production is located in the personal interests and experiences of the artist, this does not imply that the artistic process is personal and therefore not social. The idea of the artist as representative of a collective may have more appeal to donors who want to see broad-scale change, but art that starts from 'individual critical viewpoints' (Perez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 77) carries particular agency in Central America in resisting a modern, masculine conception of the artist as a spokesperson for society. Moreover, it generates a more plural production that counters stereotypes and is able to address multiple forms of discrimination rather than *only* those

[18] Here I am referring to the idea, raised in Chapter 2, that has been frequently articulated in the Western intellectual tradition (from Plato to Rousseau), that the arts are emotional, irrational, frivolous, and a distraction from 'nobler commitments' (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p. 61).

associated with ethnicity, say, or gender. It is also constructive in terms of bringing forward diverse viewpoints from within the region.

A more individualised arts production also validates students' personal experience and encourages them to develop their own criteria of legitimacy. This signifies a centring and self-validating process, a process that is undermined by donor demands for artists to produce work on particular themes that they think relevant.

A further point of difference between EspIRA/La ESPORA's approach and that of donors (and that of existing art schools in the region), is their commitment to horizontal relationships, based on dialogue, exchange and mutual learning. This is a key aspect of La ESPORA's practice and is crucially modelled, I believe, by Patricia Belli sitting alongside young artists who might only ever have produced a handful of drawings and talking frankly and critically about their work and about her own work on an equal footing. Intra-regional, peer-to-peer dialogue contributes significantly to defining the outcomes for students: as well as deepening learning, it generates trust, strengthens voice, and fosters self-esteem.

These intra-regional networks are an indicator of EspIRA/La ESPORA's multi-scalar approach. Multi-scalarity will be examined in some depth in the following chapter, but it needs to be raised here as a characteristic of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practice that stands in marked contrast to donors' articulations of the agency of art as being tied to the specificity of the local – and a 'local' that is defined by 'underdevelopment' and/or difference. EspIRA/La ESPORA's strategies are local, regional and global, and these scales are seen to be connected. Promoting an artistic practice that starts from personal experience interests, for example, serves the individual student (nurturing self-esteem and critical capacities), brings context(s) with it, develops a diversified regional arts production, and counters the stereotypes through which the international art circuits construct the region. Multi-scalarity is also an assertion of power – of the centrality of the 'development' subject and their right to contribute to thinking about 'the global and the complex' (Canclini, 1998, pp. 373-4). As such, it diminishes the social distance between the 'developers' usually located in the North, and the 'underdeveloped' in the South.

EspIRA/La ESPORA's approach is also long-term in contrast to the short- or medium-term approach of donors. The organisation's investment in the professional

development of young artists demonstrates that art is seen as a life-long engagement, and a professional practice.

A long-term time-frame is also evident in EspIRA/La ESPORA's insistence on the agency of institutionalisation as a means of stabilising its practices. It should be remembered that this appears to be a common desire among artists' initiatives in the South (Laddaga, 2004, p.18). In the case of La ESPORA, that desired institutionalisation takes the form of a 5-year tertiary-level visual arts course for students from throughout Central America, set in a purpose-built facility[19]. The desire to construct infrastructure is also an expression of belief in the importance of the arts sector as a whole: an institution would serve as a hub for education, research, dissemination and public debate. EspIRA's multifaceted projects and its forays into curating, audio-visual production, educating publics, documentation, symposia, all indicate a long-term engagement with the development of the cultural sector, as well as an understanding that the practices that surround the arts embody multiple possibilities for social engagement.

EspIRA/La ESPORA advocates art's agency partly in terms of a social impact, as donors do. However that impact is conceived by EspIRA/La ESPORA to be both direct and indirect, and to be crucially connected to the integrated relationship between art production and society. Its impact is direct in terms of the cultural sector, in particular the effects it has had on its students (those educated through La ESPORA's core practices, but also those educated through Jóvenes Creativos and GRAFOS). For a new generation of visual artists in the region, the organisation has become a touch-stone and a hub of innovation and critical discourse (Arévalo and Véliz, 2009; Ysla, 2010). In a similar way, TEORéTica has had direct social incidence in terms of changing the ways in which, and the channels through which, art from Central America is represented internationally.

Both organisations can also be said to have indirect social impacts in terms of their influence on the ways in which the region perceives itself, and through the expanded critical space for reflection on the creative process and its politics. These more subtle and long-term impacts are almost impossible to measure and evaluate, due to the difficulty of maintaining clear links between cause and effect (see McCarthy et al., 2004). Patricia Belli told me that although one can certainly invent 'indicators' for a project like

[19] Ideally this would include multiple workshop spaces, a gallery space designed for contemporary art, conference facilities, and a small library.

the television programme La Casa Estrellada, accurately assessing its impact must surely be a very difficult, if not impossible task (personal communication, June 2008).

Framing distinctions and locating positive tensions

This brief review of EspIRA/La ESPORA's approach to the agency of its own practices has highlighted some of the key differences between its perspective, and that of donors. The following table (figure 18) maps these differences, and shows Hivos to be a strategically significant actor in terms of its mediating location between these divergent conceptions of agency.

Agency of art:

Development community's perspective

'Instrumental/Empirical'

Social productivity:

- Instrumentalisation
  - Strong
  - Twin-track
  - 'Non-instrumentalised'
- Requires certainty
- Pre-determined outcomes
- Focus on objects/events over processes, relationships or infrastructure
- Direct social incidence
- Broad social incidence

Time-frame:

- Short-medium term
- Will not fund admin and/or physical equipment/buildings etc.
- Yearly project cycles and M&E
- Prefers to support diverse, new projects

Agenda:

- Cultural diversity
- Economic productivity (culture industries)
- Inclusion/peace-building
- Education for development
- Expansion of critical public space
- Desires for local/typical representations
- Art to have primarily local 'effects'
- Art to address local concerns/'issues'

Relationships

- Primarily donor/client
- Vertical
- Via project applications and M&E
- Some support for South/South networks

Hivos

Agency of art:

EspIRA/La ESPORA's perspective

'Critical/ethical'

Social productivity:

- Art as interrogative
- Art as self-reflexive
- Ethical impulse
  - Engagement with Other
  - Refutes self-censorship
  - Criticality
  - Honesty, sincerity
- Requires uncertainty
- Direct and indirect social incidence
- Process-focussed (dialogue/exchange)
- Understanding the self

Time-frame:

- Long-term
- Desires consolidation of infrastructure
- Long-term perspective of social intervention
- Professional development of individuals in cultural sector

Agenda:

- Develop an honest arts practice, grounded in personal interests that generates diversity
- Critical analysis of cultural self-representation
- Intra-regional dialogue and networks
- Contest imposed signification (external and internal)
- Expand spaces for critical arts practices
- Develop own criteria for validation
- Multi-scalar engagements
- Art can address local and universal

Relationships

- South/South and North/South
- Horizontal and vertical
- Collective, dialogic practices
- Networks

This contrasting exercise illustrates the multiple resistant and constructive possibilities of art's agency in the development context as well as the variety of practices and frames through which the complexity of the development subject is reduced and expanded by different actors. Subjectivity appears to be reduced in an 'instrumental/empirical' approach that requires certainty and pre-determined outcomes to occur within short time-frames, and to be relevant only to a 'local' context. Art's agency here is seen primarily in its usefulness as a tool, rather than existing within artistic practices in and of themselves. EspIRA/La ESPORA's approach, on the other hand, complexifies subjectivity and locates art's agency firmly within the art process itself. That process is, importantly, conceived of as complex, critical and multi-scalar, and existing in constant dialogue with society.

EspIRA/La ESPORA's approach also appears to articulate a clear awareness of the relationship between power and agency. Its constructive agency (the desire to develop critical space, infrastructure and diversified arts practices) is partly defined by its resistance to reductionisms, hierarchies, and other forms of marginalisation. Donors, on the other hand, frame art's agency as constructive but seem to largely ignore attendant questions of power. They don't appear to value the rights of artists in the South to equal participation in cultural debate about the global and the complex. Furthermore, the relationships established through project applications and monitoring and evaluation procedures seem to reinforce inequalities of power.

Mapping these contrasts, however, also suggests more productive tensions, where the lack of fit between the artists' perspective and the donor's perspective suggests a space for critical reflection and intervention, a space where art's critique can challenge development to adopt a more expansive and emancipatory politics, partly through the way in which it funds artists in the South. In the following chapter, I expand on three of these productive tensions that seem to offer critical leverage with which to deepen development's engagement with artists in the South from a more emancipatory perspective: criticality, multi-scalarity and aesthetics. EspIRA/La ESPORA's criticality shows up the shortfalls of the development community's instrumentalism but at the same time exposes a site of significant agency. EspIRA/La ESPORA's multi-scalarity and its assertion of the right of Southern artists to address 'universal' issues, opposes development's focus on local specificity but again opens up a range of agentic possibilities largely unconsidered by the development community. The weight

EspIRA/La ESPORA gives to aesthetic considerations shows up the limitations of instrumentalisation, the reduction of subjectivity, the blindness on the part of donors to promote the right of development's 'subjects' to participate as equals in processes and circuits of global art.

Chapter 8: Productive tensions: the agency of criticality, multi-scalarity, and aesthetics

Introduction

The previous chapter drew out tensions between divergent concepts of art's agency articulated by donors and artists, and described the impacts of those differences on the exercise of agency. That chapter concluded by pointing out three tensions which appear to be equally disruptive and productive in terms of the critical comment that they make on mainstream development practice, and also their constructive potential in contributing to alternative cultural imaginings for communities in the South. I have highlighted them precisely because they do not appear to be prioritised, or even visible, within much donor practice, and because their integration into mainstream funding practices has the potential to significantly expand the possibilities for art's agency in development.

The first of these productive sites is the highly self-conscious criticality that characterises all of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices, and which shows up instrumental approaches as unreflective and largely uninterested in questions of power in the relationship between development and art. In contrast, EspIRA/La ESPORA sees productivity in the act of reflecting on the creative process and the ways in which power is imbricated in that process. The second productive tension discussed in this chapter is the multi-scalar nature of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices which counters an anxious adherence (and hence reduction) to a simplified concept of the 'local'. The third tension is that provided by the aesthetic dimension of art practice, which is recognised by donors who prioritise artistic quality over social productivity. The aesthetic dimension disrupts functionalism and reductionism in framing development subjects and it also suggests an integrated approach aware of the relationship between questions of aesthetics and social incidence.

Without repeating material discussed elsewhere in the thesis, this chapter attempts to deepen our understanding of these disruptive sites of agency in particular ways. Criticality and multi-scalarity are discussed here as aspects of contemporary art, which may not be immediately obvious as a site of agency in the development context. This is

not to suggest that contemporary practice should be replicated everywhere as a 'solution' to the framing of development, the point is rather that the tension embodied in contemporary art's lack of fit with development has brought to light strong aspects of its agency. The agency of the aesthetic dimension of art is discussed with reference to Hivos' non-instrumentalised funding policy, and in particular the evaluation of that policy carried out in Central America in 2007/2008. This evaluation is unique in the development field and offers significant potential for deepening our understanding of the integrated rather than instrumental agency of arts practices. La ESPORA was a participant in this evaluation.

Criticality in contemporary practice

Problematising contemporary practice as a site for agency

The term 'contemporary' is used with an awareness that it can be both slippery (open to various interpretations) and politically problematic. 'Contemporary' art can obviously refer to any current artistic production – whatever is being made today. More commonly, and within this thesis, it is used to refer to an increasing diversity of artistic languages coupled with a self-conscious and self-reflexive attitude that emerged post the Second World War in the visual arts.

At first glance, contemporary art may not appear to be a profitable site for political agency, particularly in the postcolonial context of development. It is often accused of being inaccessible, if not incomprehensible, to the general public, and hence elitist. Viewing an exhibition can be an alienating and anxiety-provoking experience if one lacks the tools to understand what it is that contemporary art and artists are doing[1]. Its endless production of novel goods and apparent lack of moral restrictions have led to a range of critiques. Stallabras argues that there is a synchrony between contemporary art's freedom to swap signs 'as if every element of the culture was an exchangeable token, as tradable as a dollar' (2004, p. 7) and the neoliberal ideal of free trade. Armitage suggests that contemporary art's daring inclusion of almost any subject matter, no matter how abject, amounts to 'the murder of signs of artistic pity in the name of

[1] Some critics have argued that contemporary practice privileges 'the producer-text relationship at the expense of the consumer-text relationship' (Wolff, 1990, p. 96).

freedom of artistic representation' (Armitage in Virilio, 2003, p. 5)[2]. Moreover Smith describes a significant trajectory in contemporary art as 'the embrace by certain artists of the rewards and downsides of neoliberal economics, globalizing capital, and neoconservative politics' (2009, p. 7). Such critiques describe an artistic practice that is co-opted by the market, morally bankrupt, and irresponsible in its use of symbolic material. They hardly point to contemporary art as a platform for social development.

Furthermore, in the postcolonial context of development, an arts practice that derives from Western European cultural tradition may be seen as reinforcing the dominance of the centre at the expense of agency in the peripheries. Contemporary practices are consolidated in an 'international language set up by the Western mainstream' (Mosquera, 2010, p. 18). This 'international language' can (and does) exclude or undervalue 'significant poetics simply for not responding to the codes legitimated at an international scale' (ibid). It has also 'confiscated for itself the condition of being contemporary' (ibid), relegating to other forms a condition of pastness which may or may not be accurate.

Critical agency in Central America

My experiences with EspIRA/La ESPORA in Nicaragua, however, point to a different configuration of contemporary visual art, where it is valued primarily for its criticality and its diversification of artistic languages/media. The changes that took place in global contemporary art in the 20th century mean that it is no longer possible to 'make [artistic] gestures in a totally unself-conscious manner' (Robertson and McDaniel, 2010, p. 30). Artists at EspIRA/La ESPORA question their intentions and motivations in relation to the form and content of the work they create. They reflect on the political implications of their work in relation to local, regional, and international contexts. They research other arts practices, dialogue with other artists and with the public, investigate relevant trajectories in art history and theory, and approach aesthetic considerations from a critical position. These forms of critical awareness, in turn, challenge the assumptions of local conventions, generate the development of personal criteria, promote reflection and exchange, and support expression in a wide range of media. Students work hard to communicate to the public what it was that they are doing (through catalogues, public

[2] Here John Armitage is actually describing the perspective of Paul Virilio. This quote is taken from his introduction to Virilio's book *Art and Fear* (2003).

discussions, media releases, interviews), and the free play of signs is restrained due to an insistence on making art that starts from personal interests and experience.

Moreover, while the Western origins of contemporary arts practice certainly bring contradictions for artists in the non-West, it does not follow that only Western artists should practice contemporary art and that anyone else who does so is merely being imitative. Such a perspective denies the agency of artists from 'peripheral' places, reinforces essentialist differences, and can easily morph into what Mosquera calls the cliché of "'universal" art in the centres, derivative expressions in the peripheries, and the multiple, "authentic" realm of "otherness" in traditional culture' (2010, p. 17).

Terry Smith identifies three defining features of contemporary art that demonstrate the complex nature of its critical engagement: the immediate, the contemporaneous and the cotemporal (2009, pp. 2-4). The immediate refers to the deeply questioning nature of contemporary art which is 'extremely wide-ranging in its modes of asking and in the scope of its enquiries' despite its uncertainty about the ability to provide answers. As a result contemporary art often takes the form of '[p]rovocative testers, doubt-filled gestures, equivocal objects, tentative projections, diffident propositions, or hopeful anticipations' (ibid). Contemporary art does not offer certainties; rather it offers doubt, ambivalence, curiosity, possibility. The cotemporaneous describes the fascination for 'what is shared and what is distinct between self and other' which arises from contemporary art's 'coming into being at the same time as other beings, including other art' (ibid). The cotemporal refers to contemporary art's interest in 'the coexistence of distinct temporalities, of different ways of *being* in relation to time, experienced in the midst of a growing sense that many kinds of time are running out' (ibid)[3]. The same critical spirit that Patricia Belli describes includes and alludes to these central concerns. The proliferation of languages responds to, and is fed, not simply by a desire for variety or the new, but also by 'the emergence of, and contestation between, quite different ways of making art and communicating it to others (ibid, p. 6).

While there is nothing *inherently* radical in the diversified languages of contemporary art (Wolff, 1990, p. 65), just as there is nothing *inherently* conservative in traditional cultural practices (see Kapur, 2002), contemporary practice can, and often does, use a 'variety of formal and other techniques [. . .] informed by theoretical and critical consciousness' to

[3] For discussions of 'time' in contemporary art, see Chapter 5 of Smith, 2009 and Chapter 4 of Robertson and McDaniel, 2010.

interrogate representation (Wolff, 1990, p. 93) [4]. That interrogation is informed by theory: Robertson and McDaniel argue that theory has been increasingly important to the practice of contemporary art over the last 30 years, influenced particularly by 'postmodernism, semiotics, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism' (2010, p. 25). This interrogation is not performed through an illustrative form that proposes an alternative ideology but rather through play, appropriation, and parody that unsettle dominant forms but do not aim to replace them with others[5]. It is argued that these postmodern interventions achieve what a separatist politics could not – direct engagement with the dominant culture, 'with current images, forms, and ideas, subverting their intent and (re)appropriating their meanings, rather than abandoning them for alternative forms, which would leave them untouched and still dominant' (Wolff, 1990, p. 88). As such, contemporary practice has been particularly valued by women artists in the West intent on deconstructing dominant patriarchal traditions (see Chapter 6 in Wolff, 1990). It is not surprising, then, that the upsurge in contemporary art practice in Central America in the last 15 years has a strong association with the work of women artists, critics and curators[6]. Furthermore while contemporary form doesn't *necessarily* require a pedagogy based on dialogue, the polysemic quality of the work and the critical self-reflexive approach lend themselves to discussion, which is a central pedagogical tool within EspIRA/La ESPORA.

This thesis has demonstrated the considerable agency in the critical, interrogative nature of contemporary practice (as defined here) in response to multiple aspects of the Central American context. It remains to address the significance of that contemporary practice to the development context more broadly, and to the particular modes of agency with which this thesis is concerned. Clearly contemporary art's criticality – its 'attitude of permanent interrogation against established attitudes' (Pérez-Ratton, 2000a, p. 82) – carries an agency of resistance in terms of contesting and disrupting the reductionisms of mainstream development practices. It signals a highly self-conscious, active subject who refutes any attempts to reduce his/her agency to the performance of pre-determined functions, and who refutes any framing based on deficiency or passivity. It

[4] This excludes 'those other playful practices which fragment and disrupt narrative and tradition, and which refuse any grounding or closure in favour of a free play of signifiers' (Wolff, 1990, p. 93).
[5] A number of students' works in the ¡PECA! exhibition (such as those by Alejandro Flores, Javier Calvo, Oby 492 and Fabrizio Arrieta) exhibit this tendency, using playful parody, irony and/or re-appropriation of images to comment on the experience of making art in Central America in relation to dominant external structures (EspIRA/La ESPORA, 2008b).
[6] The importance of contemporary women artists in changing the Central American art scene over the last 20 years was discussed in Chapter 5.

reduces the social distance often constructed between North and South through development practices. It is also constructive in representing and bringing forward the points of view of multiple, diverse, subjects, and in acting as a site for broader cultural debate about place and identity. These debates are not 'ghettoised' (Pérez-Ratton, personal communication, August 2006) or restricted to the specifics of a single locality, but engage in the relationship between locality, and actors and places, at multiple scales. I turn now to the agency of this multi-scalarity.

Multi-scalar contemporary practice: problematising 'the local' and a politics of difference

> *[. . .] culture cannot be localised because it is not in itself a spatially bounded category. If it is territorialized, as in national culture or local culture, the boundaries are, ultimately, political frontiers that require political analysis.*
>
> (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 74)

> *What is unacceptable is to force a group to cure itself by faking emotions it no longer feels.*
>
> (Mosquera cited in Smiers, 2003, p. 117)

The multi-scalar nature of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices (which range from an intimate examination of personal motives on the part of the artist, through intra-regional residencies, and on to debating the terms of recognition of 'peripheral' artists in global art circuits) have been extensively documented in the previous chapters. The point of the current discussion is not to repeat them but rather to propose multi-scalarity as a departure point for examining one of the key areas in which I think donors tend to reduce the agency of artists, and that is in tying art's productivity to a simplified and at times romanticised idea of 'local' engagement. The international vocation of contemporary art offers particular agency here in that it problematizes such a politics of difference.

The demand for difference

One of the first points that Patricia Belli brought to my attention was that Central American artists struggle to counter the perception that artistic activity stopped in the region with the arrival of Cristobal Colón in 1492. Nicaraguan artist Raúl Quintanilla

plays on this perception by calling his pieces post-Columbian objects, as does Nicaragua/Costa Rican artist Rolando Castellón in his 'Post-Columbian Tripod Series'. At the same time Belli was ostracised by the Nicaraguan arts establishment (on winning the Biennial in 1999) for producing work that was not considered to be 'Nicaraguan', because it did not conform to the conservative coda of dominant local practice.

I encountered a similar perception from a colleague who, on hearing about my research, suggested that studying contemporary art in Central America amounted to a neo-colonialist enterprise and that I should be studying weaving and ceramics instead. In a less confrontational vein, whenever I present my work in a Development Studies context, I am invariably asked about the applicability of my research to handicrafts – suggesting that the development imaginary is more able to accommodate arts funding for 'traditional' arts (that appeal to a politics of difference) than for contemporary art (that problematises constructions of difference).

In broad terms these examples illustrate that, as Smiers points out, 'culture is an arena of struggle' (2003, p. 2) and a 'symbolic battleground' (Shohat and Stam, cited in Smiers, 2003, p. 2). More specifically, they demonstrate tensions around cultural production as an expression of the local. Tensions exist within the local scene as different groups vie for legitimacy as to what constitutes cultural production in a specific context, and they exist along a North/South axis in relation to the North's association with the 'universal', and its need for the South to be defined in terms of its particularity. EspIRA/La ESPORA's multi-scalarity and its contemporary practice challenge the idea that the agency of art in the development context is only found within arts practices that trade on difference or are seen as representations of a 'typical' bounded identity, or speak exclusively to the particularities of the local context.

There are two principal ways in which I see donors tying the agency of arts projects to articulations of the local. The first is through instrumentality – which has already been discussed – that is funding projects that are directed at a local issue or problem. A clear example is the development community's sponsoring of a prize at the Central American Film Festival for the 'Best Documentary about Hunger and Malnutrition in Central America'. This prize, awarded annually, not only reproduces the negative stereotypes associated with development but also limits the imagination (and agency) to the local

(and – importantly – the local conceived in terms of lack[7]). It is also seen in donors' support for documentaries about 'issues', over support for fictional or feature films.

There are echoes, in this kind of functionalism, with colonial approaches to arts education. Oguibe has pointed out that in the colonial era 'the possessor of aesthetic sensibility was [for Europe] a crucial signifier of a civilized station' (2004, p. 48) and colonial administrations actively encouraged a functionalist approach to art-making in the colonies, while discouraging the adoption of European techniques. In West Africa, for example, colonial administrators were very reluctant to support the teaching of art in schools[8]. When they finally did so, the curriculum was restricted to craft with a utilitarian function, or naïf watercolours depicting romantic scenes from rural life, against the wishes of modernist painters in the region such as Aina Onabolu. Administrators argued that simple rural scenes 'though naïve and lacking in technical finesse, were more authentic and representative of the natives that Onabolu's portraits, life drawings, and exercises in perspectival representation' (ibid, p. 54)[9]. Oguibe argues that such practices aimed to perpetuate a 'fiction of difference' and that they represented, for Europeans, 'the limits of African ability to portray African reality' (ibid, p. 56)[10]. In this sense, they 'inserted and institutionalised a corridor of slippage that granted the colonial only partial access to the possibility of transition and transformation, for it feared that if the native should become like the European or prove to be of like endowment, that would undermine the fallacies upon which she was deemed inferior and deserving of colonization' (ibid, pp. 47-48).

Drawing stronger parallels between the development community's approach to the support of arts and culture and colonial support of the arts would require further research but it is worth at least raising the suggestion of such parallels here, along with

[7] That same prize would be different if it were renamed the prize for 'Best Documentary on Innovations in Food Production', although it would still be restricted to the local.
[8] Nigerian painter Aina Onabolu lobbied the colonial administration for over 20 years to include art in the educational curriculum (Oguibe, 2004).
[9] Feminist critics point out that, in the West, women were similarly restricted to certain forms of participation in artistic and cultural life. Women painters in 19th century England, for example, were encouraged to stick to a limited subject matter of still life, or flowers, to exhibit as amateurs, and were forbidden access to life-drawing classes (Wolff, 1990). The same politics of difference is at play here.
[10] I am aware that colonial education was varied and may well have included some more emancipatory practices. Oguibe himself describes the advocacy of the colonial functionary G. A. Stevens and his impassioned plea for 'meaningful and non-discriminatory art courses in schools in the colonies' (2004, p.48). However there is a discernible thread within colonial arts education practices that did emphasise productive craft (that could be of service to the Empire) and the naïf treatment of local life. See Irbouh (2005), for example, for similar practices by French administrators in Morocco.

the possibility that an instrumentalised approach in the arts could signify a desire to allow 'only partial access to the possibility of transition and transformation'.

The second way in which donors may limit the agency of cultural production is to over-value cultural production that trades on cultural difference, and to undervalue the agency of art practices (such as contemporary art) that do not. While some donors (such as Hivos and the Prince Claus Fund) do recognise the agency of contemporary practice[11], this appears to be less theorised and recognised within the development community than the agency embodied in cultural difference (which is articulated through discourses on cultural diversity and cultural rights, for example)[12].

This tendency can be seen in the work of UNESCO, and other donor agencies in Central America, who strongly support ethnic diversity, pre-Hispanic patrimony and craft in their culture and development work. UNESCO is actively developing the Zona Ruta Maya, a tourist route based around Mayan cultural patrimony, the Red Centroamericana para la Gestión Local del Patrimonio Cultural (a regional network developing projects based on local patrimony) and the Central American section of the Slave Route Project (which validates the contribution of African slaves and their descendants to the region)[13]. The Spanish development agency (AECID) has recently developed a Masters programme, in coordination with Central American universities, in the Conservation and Management of [Cultural] Patrimony for Development.

Traditional[14] crafts and pre-colonial patrimony can easily be assimilated into the mainstream development context: crafts lend themselves to income-generating projects (the market thrives on difference) and patrimony can contribute to cultural tourism. They can, in other words, be accommodated within a development-as-economic-growth model.

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[11] The visibility of their practices may, as indicated previously, be encouraging other donors to consider supporting contemporary practice (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 49).
[12] See Smiers, 2003 and Stenou, 2007.
[13] No doubt this emphasis has been adopted, in part, as an institutional response to redress UNESCO's previous focus on the monumental and on high art, and to respond to the cultural diversity agenda (see Arizpe, 2004, p. 163).
[14] I use this term with the following reservations: that it does not refer to 'what is given or received as a disinterested civilizational legacy' but is instead always an invention (Kapur, 2002, p. 15). Geeta Kapur points out that what might be called 'traditional' arts practices are frequently used in the contemporary context with contemporary relevance – as 'tradition-in-use' (ibid, p. 22). However those same practices are frequently framed within international circuits and discourse as 'an anthropological phenomenon as it was conceived by Western modernists when they discovered primitive cultures' (ibid) – that is cultural products as fixed objects rather than as living processes.

Clearly such projects can and do contain considerable agency (both economic and political) for development subjects. Spivak has discussed (not without criticism) the possibilities of 'strategic essentialism' (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000, pp. 77-80) and Kapur (2002, p. 15) has pointed out that 'tradition [. . .] emerged in the decolonizing process as an oppositional category' and, as such, contains an agency of resistance. Da Costa also argues for a more subtle reading of such practices, as unlikely 'simply' to be co-opted but that may 'striv[e] for inclusion into dominant logics of incorporation at times, for certain purposes, [while] at other times [. . .] contest epistemically impoverished notions of state-defined and commodified "difference"' (2010, p. 518). Such cultural practices and projects also contribute, of course, to discursive constructions of place (in both emancipatory and reductionist senses).

In Central America, a politics of difference that promotes the cultural production and rights of marginalised ethnic groups is both highly important and highly political where racial hierarchies remain firmly in place (see López Martinez, 2001). Indeed, in Guatemala with its sizable Mayan population, mobilisation around indigenous cultural practices is still, at times, met with brutal repression[15]. However, the importance of this political task should not lead to an uncritical reification of the local and/or traditional, nor should it preclude the possibility of other forms of agency exerted through other forms of art. Da Costa argues for taking seriously cultural struggles both *from* and *against* difference (2010) and Geeta Kapur reminds us that 'in the [. . .] Third World context [. . .] contradictions are rife and you have to put up all the fights at once' (2002, p. 21)[16].

Problems with a simplistic approach to the local

In Chapter 3, I pointed out that development's 'cultural turn' was 'primarily concerned with local culture' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010, p. 67), and that this focus has been critiqued for a number of reasons. Nederveen Pieterse, for example, has argued that the cultural turn welcomed 'crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to strengthen the case

[15] A recent example is the abduction, torture and assassination of Lisandro Guarcax (aged 32) on August 25 2010. Guarcax was founder of the Sotz'il Cultural Centre in Sololá (an organisation supported by Hivos), which revives prehispanic (Maya Kakchiqel) music and dance traditions. Two other Mayan community leaders in the town were assassinated in 2009 (Gustavsen, 2010).

[16] A parallel here can be drawn with feminist art practices. Janet Wolff points out that agency for (Western) feminism in the visual arts exists in a range of practices. A deconstructive approach contests categories of gender and forms of representation, but equally there is agency in works that take up the notion of a 'coherent humanist subject "woman" ' (Katy Deepwell cited in Wolff, 1990, p. 96) or that celebrates traditional female craft such as needlepoint or quilting, even at the risk of invoking essentialism.

for erecting cultural boundaries' [and as such] it reflects a politics of nostalgia' (ibid, p. 70). Further critiques can also be made.

Nederveen Pieterse argues that the 'chauvinism of "great traditions"' with which mainstream development practice is argued to have been associated, should not be countered by 'adopt[ing] the inverse missionary position and the chauvinism of "little traditions"'(2010, p. 77). He points out that, '[l]ike national culture, local culture is a terrain of power with its own patterns of stratification, an uneven distribution of cultural knowledge and boundaries separating insiders and outsiders – hierarchical or exclusionary politics in fine print' (ibid, p. 69) [17]. This thesis has provided ample evidence to support this claim, from Patricia Belli's experiences as an artist who was ostracised for challenging local hierarchies to the students' experiences of the hierarchical and exclusionary practices of the national art schools, which promote the supposedly 'Nicaraguan' tradition of easel painting.

In addition, limiting the relevance of arts projects to the local context and to local concerns reflects a mode of thinking which has been widely criticised in development studies, wherein artificial distinctions are set up between 'developed' and 'developing' countries that construct and maintain a social distance. This construction masks intertwined histories, locates poverty in 'spatially bounded "worlds unto themselves" (Da Costa, 2010, p. 513), and limits the agency of actors to those 'worlds'. In a sense this is an extension of the modern or colonial gaze that objectified others while obscuring the viewer and the act of viewing.

Furthermore, an uncritical reification of the local (often conflated with the traditional) can mask the point at which difference becomes an expectation and a demand for an authentic Other whose difference from a Western self undergirds a marginalising politics. Mbembe argues that most donors (as well as many Africans) perceive African artistic forms not as aesthetic objects, but as 'ethnographic objects that are expressive of Africa's ontological cultural difference or "authenticity"'. This 'difference', he argues, is what development donors want to support, and 'if necessary, they will manufacture it'

[17] One UNESCO staff member told me off the record about a project they had to document on film a religious procession as part of their valorisation of intangible cultural heritage in Central America. She accompanied the film crew and was absolutely shocked by the level of discrimination that she witnessed against one of the women in the household of one of the chief protagonists. When they returned some weeks later to conclude filming, the woman had a broken arm but despite her injury, she continued to suffer abuse and discrimination within her home environment.

(Mbembe, 2009, first section, paragraph 8). The demand for authenticity may result in groups, as Mosquera points out, being asked 'to cure [themselves] by faking emotions [they] no longer feel' (cited in Smiers, 2003, p.117).

Artists from the South see parallels in the implementation of multicultural policies, which are also based on a demand for difference. These 'inclusive' policies tend to recognise 'the voice of the other' while at the same time continuing to 'control [. . .] the conditions of its reception' (Fisher, 2003, p. 267). A showing of 'Latin American art' for example, reinscribes the point of origin and prioritises it over other, more complex, considerations. Artists are required to 'declare their ethnic affiliation' (ibid, p. 266) or show their 'passports' (García Canclini, 1998) and, in the process, are relegated to secondary circuits, leaving mainstream circuits intact. Artist Luis Felipe Noé argues that the very concept of a 'Latin American art' is 'absurdly totalitarian' (cited in García Canclini, 1998, p. 376), and Pérez-Ratton has similarly argued against the idea of a Central American art. Fisher argues that such shows are 'mostly packaged and received according to Eurocentric preconceived expectations about the acceptable form and content of others' cultural productions' (2003, pp. 267-268)[18].

In contrast Patricia Belli and the artists associated with EspIRA/La ESPORA argue for the right of Central American artists to make art using whatever artistic languages they feel are appropriate and effective, to embrace influences that span pre-Colombian heritage and post-industrial contemporary society, and to be able to make art that addresses universal issues such as loss, belonging or alienation, as well as art that addresses specifically local concerns.

Those who insist on difference as the only site for agency are constructing cultural boundaries which are, as Pieterse points out, political ones, requiring explanation. Can a reluctance to both see and support contemporary artistic practices in the South be explained by a broader reluctance to imagine a shared contemporaneity?

Southern artists and contemporary practices: ambivalence and agency

> *Despite the myriad bloody and cataclysmic copulations that have taken place across cultures, especially in the twentieth century, and the numerous geographical faults that were bridged both*

[18] See also Araeen, 2004.

> *willingly and otherwise, the idea of a shared contemporaneity remains opaque at best in the imagination of the West.*
>
> (Oguibe, 2004, p. xiv)

The reluctance among the (mainstream) development community to value the practices of contemporary artists from the South is mirrored by an ambivalence towards those same artists in global art circuits – a situation that has been incisively critiqued for its neo-colonial politics. Here I review some of those critiques because they can equally be applied to development donors who fund the arts in a strongly instrumental fashion and/or tie the outcomes of arts projects to a simplistic conception of the local. This is one of the ways in which primarily postcolonial critiques can contribute to a more critically informed development studies.

Artists from the South face particular challenges in terms of how their production is received, situated – as they inevitably are – in a postcolonial cultural politics in which relations (between those artists and the cultural powerbrokers – curators, gallerists and critics – in the West) are far from equal[19]. 'Contemporary, non-traditional production from the South finds few outlets' according to Cuban critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera (2002b, p. 271), although the last decade has seen a little more movement in that direction (Mosquera, 2010, p. 20)[20]. The journal *Third Text* was founded precisely to engage with these issues[21]. Sean Cubitt points out that '[i]n addition to the challenge faced by all artists, to create work which does not finally take the shape of a commodity, Third World artists must confront the immensely difficult task of remaining true to themselves while refusing the imposed signification of tradition, typicality and authenticity' (2002, p. 5). I explained in Chapter 5 how signification is imposed, in part, through expectations about the content of art coming from Central America: art that deals with violence, the dictatorship era, insurgency, natural disasters or poverty tends to

[19] See Araeen,Cubitt & Sardar, 2002; Cubitt, 2002; Medina 2003; Mosquera and Fisher, 2004; Oguibe, 2003; Papastergiadis et al., 2005.

[20] Robertson and McDaniel also point out the increasing decentralization of the contemporary art world and an increasing 'cross-fertilization of ideas among global locations' (2010, p. 12). They add that 'artists in Africa, South America, Asia, and the Pacific have been gaining visibility on a world stage' (ibid, p.22) although there is still considerable distance to go to achieve a utopia of horizontal circuits. Central America, for example, is noticeably missing from that list of increasingly 'visible' regions.

[21] Founded in 1987, *Third Text* addresses the cultural politics of artists with Southern origins interacting with dominant global art circuits. It 'examines the theoretical and historical ground by which the West legitimises its position as the ultimate arbiter of what is significant within this field [of visual arts]' and 'provides a forum for the discussion and reappraisal of the theory and practice of art, art history and criticism, and the work of artists hitherto marginalised through racial, gender, religious and cultural differences' (retrieved from http://www.thirdtext.com/about-2/).

be recognised in global circuits. Within the development framework, this is paralleled by the demand for an artistic production that deals with issues or problems, or for a production that is tied to (and limited to) the local.

Part of the issue here is that postcolonial agency in cultural production has been largely associated with art that adheres to tradition or indigeneity as a marker of difference against the imposition of Eurocentric culture[22]. In contrast, adopting and transforming artistic practices derived from a European cultural heritage, as EspIRA/La ESPORA does, has been regarded as 'acquiescence, mimicry and fracture' (Oguibe, 2004, p. 50). However, Oguibe, Mosquera and other critics argue that this perspective is overly simplistic, inaccurate, and embedded in a politics of difference that reproduces marginalisation. Contemporary practice can support postcolonial agency by challenging essentialist notions of difference, highlighting the energy and assertiveness inherent in processes of transculturation, providing opportunities for both destabilising hegemonies and diversifying global practice – therein expanding 'the collective imagination of what is possible in art' (Robertson and McDaniel, 2010, p. 22).

Mosquera argues that, '[o]ne of the great Eurocentric prejudices in the critique and history of art is its undervaluing of this [contemporary and syncretic] production [from artists in the non-West] as "derivative" of the West' (2002b, p. 270)[23]. Reciprocal cultural exchange between artists in different parts of the world has a long history. 'Artists', writes Jean Fisher 'have always been magpies, alert to new visual strategies and aesthetic ideas, absorbing influence from whatever visual resources are available to them, and limited only to the horizon of knowledge, or the information flow, of the society in which they are living. [. . .] African artists were experimenting with western figuration and easel painting at the same time as Picasso was doodling with African sculptural forms' (2003, p. 268)[24].

Cultural theory from Latin America has long pointed out not only the intensely hybrid structure of Latin American societies but also the agency of appropriating European

[22] In some cases this has taken the form of a nationalist project emerging through the decolonization process. Artists' allegiances to such projects often waned with time as the project itself became 'reductive, open to manipulation'. Instead they channelled their work towards their 'personal imperatives as individual artists' (Smith, 2009, p. 167).
[23] See Mosquera, 2010 for an extensive discussion of this point.
[24] It is similarly fictive, Fisher argues, to see modernism as the exclusive domain of the West, rather than the 'mutual negotiation between pre-industrial and industrial life-worlds, both inside and outside western borders' (2003, p. 268). See Craven, 1996 on 'the Latin American origins of "alternative modernism"'.

artistic tendencies. The radically diverse nature of Latin American societies has almost become a cliché: the concepts of *mestizaje* (miscegenation), syncretism and hybridisation have been so productive that they run the risk of being 'stereotyped as epitomes for Latin American identity' (Mosquera, 2010, p. 15)[25]. The concepts of anthropophagy (coined by Brazilian Oswald de Andrade in 1928) and of transculturation (described by Cuban Fernando Ortiz in 1948) both point to the agency of appropriating and resignifying the cultural production of others. Anthropophagy is a metaphor to describe an aggressive swallowing of the dominant culture 'to one's own benefit' (ibid, p. 13), while transculturation points out the 'bilateral exchange implicit in any acculturation' (ibid, p. 14).

While these concepts need to be used with a critical awareness that counters an overly celebratory use, this does not preclude the agency of the processes they describe. Mosquera (2010, p. 14) argues that '[r]eceivers are usually interested in the productivity of the element seized toward their own ends, not the reproduction of its use in its original context'. These appropriations are often 'incorrect' and as such 'frequently constitute a process of originality, understood as a new creation of meaning' (ibid). Such resignification is transgressive as it 'questions canons and the authority of central paradigms' (ibid).

The global proliferation of contemporary practice, to which EspIRA/La ESPORA contributes, does indeed consolidate established structures but those structures are also transformed in the process: '[T]he active, diversified construction and re-invention of contemporary art and its international language by a multitude of subjects who operate from their different contexts, cultures, experiences, subjectivities and agendas[. . .] supposes not only an appropriation of that language, but its transformation from divergences in the convergence' (ibid, p.17). Gerardo Mosquera, instead, points out the agency in an 'inauthentic' practice:

> The struggle against Eurocentrism should not burden art with a myth of authenticity which, paradoxically, may add to the discrimination that Third World visual art suffers on the international circuits. . . . More plausible is to analyse how current art in a given country or region satisfies the aesthetic, cultural, social and communicative demands of the community from and for which it is made. Its response is mostly mixed, relational, appropriative

[25] See García Canclini, 1995, for the seminal text on hybridity and the experience of modernity in Latin America. See Ramírez, et al., 2002 for a discussion of *mestizaje* in Central America.

> – anyway, "inauthentic", and therefore more adequate to face today's reality.
>
> (2002b, pp. 269-270)

This does not imply abandoning traditions but it does mean 'vigorously adapting them' and making contemporary art from one's own 'values, sensitivities and interests' (ibid, p. 269). Mosquera's point about the value of mixed, appropriative and inauthentic responses (2010, p. 517) has a parallel in the way in which cultural struggles are viewed in the development context. Da Costa argues against seeing cultural struggles in terms of the "'romance of resistance'" and for a more nuanced perspective capable of seeing the 'ambivalent, impure and canny practices that [can] constitute the stuff of activism' (2010, p. 517).

EspIRA/La ESPORA would agree that a contemporary practice that resists the imposed signification of authenticity is an appropriate and effective creative response to the lived experience of the contemporary world. In its original statement, La ESPORA proposed 'to construct identity starting from the present: not as a static illustration but rather as a practice – a dynamic one – of our hybrid personality constituted as much by the pre-Colombian, as by the colonial and the post-industrial' and it aimed to 'construct[. .] a platform for imaginative and authentic creation that responds effectively to the tensions of [Nicaraguan] society' (La ESPORA, 2006, paragraph 3). Five years later, its website articulated a similar desire to respond effectively to the needs of both Nicaraguan and Central American society, which is 'in the process of formalizing[26] the idea of a responsible art that is integrated with life' (La ESPORA, 2010). Terry Smith argues that what is different about contemporary art is that its concerns and its questions are addressed (either explicitly or implicitly) 'not only by each work of art to itself and to its contemporaries but also, and definitively, as an interrogation into the ontology of the present, one that asks: What it is to exist in the conditions of contemporaneity?' (2009, p. 2)

Cuban critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera, from whom I have quoted at length here, articulated the agency of this platform almost 30 years ago. He was one of the founders of Havana's now-famous biennale. The first took place in 1984 with the distinct ideology of linking 'previously isolated peripheral art communities with each other and

[26] The Spanish verb 'formalizar' contains both the idea of formulating or drawing up, and the more concrete idea of regulating, making formal or (metaphorically) institutionalising.

to propel the results of this newly-forged consciousness back to the metropolitan centres' (Smith, 2009, p. 152) – to 'plug local and regional art into the growing international art circuit, yet to do so as far as possible in terms of local and regional values' (ibid, p. 154). The success of its venture catalysed other 'peripheral' cities to do the same. The growing visibility of non-Western voices in contemporary art culminated in the globally dispersed exhibition known as Documenta 11, which is regarded as marking 'the moment when the peripheries took over the center of the global art spectacle' (Smith, 2009, p. 156).While again this argument carries a warning not to be overly celebratory[27], the almost aggressive agency in this movement of writing back to (in a sense re-colonising) the metropolis must be emphasised. It is also important to realise, against the somewhat restrictive perspectives found in development support for the arts, that the following multi-scalar questions have been being asked for 30 years: 'What is it to make art in the socioeconomic peripheries after decolonization? How are works created that manifest this condition, comment on it from independent perspectives, and do so in ways that resonate with one's immediate audiences and with viewers in cultures elsewhere in the south and in the west?' (ibid, pp. 160-161).

A multi-scalar approach to place

This section has so far focussed on the agency of multi-scalarity in relation to a North-South political axis – principally the way in which contemporary, critical practices like those of EspIRA/La ESPORA intersect with, and intervene in, global art circuits dominated by institutions in the North and development frameworks. It remains to point out the equally significant agency of multi-scalarity that exists in intra-regional and South-South projects that are clearly so important to EspIRA/La ESPORA, and other arts initiatives in Central America.

Intra-regional institutional and peer-to-peer networks, established through horizontal exchange have a decentralising function, expanding the space for collective reflection on cultural production in the South without having to travel via the metropolitan centres to do so. Through horizontal critical dialogue, local spaces and strategies are validated while 'subverting the vertical relations of the past' (TEOR/éTica, 2010), and doing away

[27] In some ways Central American art remains marginalised even within the context of Latin American art, and therefore doubly so at the international level, although the work of Costa Rican curator Virginia Pérez-Ratton over the last two decades has changed that situation considerably.

with having to 'contest[. . .], convert[. . .] or convince [. . .] the metropolis to the ways of the periphery' (Papastergiadis, 2005b, p. 97). These intra-regional networks also create community and contribute to the consolidation of emergent critical cultural infrastructure, thereby countering the rather precarious nature of funding from international donors.

Both Patricia Belli and Virginia Pérez-Ratton[28] have defined their practices, partly, as the construction of place, in a region 'plagued with placelessness' (Pérez-Ratton, 2005a, p. 221). Certainly the practices of EspIRA/La ESPORA and TEOR/éTica involve cultural re-centring and self-assertion but this is not a *retreat* to the local as a refuge, nor a reactionary or nostalgic appeal to origins, nor is it burdened by the need to articulate a single coherent identity. It is critically engaged, embraces plurality, and promotes what Doreen Massey (1991) describes as 'a progressive sense of place' which is both outward-looking and inward-looking, local/global and complex.

These practices, clearly evident in EspIRA/La ESPORA, stand in contrast to development's emphasis on the specificity of the local. They embody an agency of resistance in problematizing that attachment to the local, showing up its complicity in the construction of cultural boundaries and a politics of difference. They also carry constructive agency in the sense that they promote a greater self-consciousness among artists of the possibilities and implications of their practices in relation to 'Others', and they promote the development of artistic practices that are able to respond effectively to the tensions and complexities of contemporary life. Having discussed the agency in critical, contemporary practices, and its multi-scalarity, I turn now to the modes of agency suggested by valuing art's aesthetic attributes.

The agency of non-instrumentalised funding: recognising the aesthetic dimension[29] and integrated processes

Non-instrumentalised funding carries particular agency for the arts in the development context in that it recognises the aesthetic dimension of arts practices. If these seems like

[28] Belli in a short documentary produced by La ESPORA about its practices in 2007, and see Pérez-Ratton, 2005a, pp. 213-222.
[29] By 'aesthetics' I mean the larger field of debate about form, artistic quality, the relevance or otherwise of beauty, the connection between aesthetics and taste, and the debate about post-modern 'anti-aesthetics' (see Foster, 1983).

a tautology (any definition of art would surely reference its formal, sensory, aesthetic elements), it is not. In an instrumental approach to the arts, the aesthetic dimension is reduced to social productivity and becomes largely invisible as a carrier of content and as a mediating field. This has the effect of flattening the subjectivity of artists, reducing their creative practices to functional tools, reducing criticality (evident also in the debate about form and aesthetic values), and constructs a social distance between artists of the South who are expected to be politically (and/or socially) productive, and artists from the North who maintain a monopoly on aesthetic sensibilities.

In contrast to this, donors who fund the arts using a non-instrumentalised policy that values artistic quality implicitly recognise aesthetic considerations. How they understand aesthetics and how they assess quality are significant questions that warrant further research[30], but the point I want to stress here is that in striving to value the aesthetic dimension within funding practices, a non-instrumentalised policy can act as a circuit-breaker within more typically functionalist approaches.

Evaluating outcomes of non-instrumentalised funding policies: the experience of Hivos in Central America

Recognising the aesthetic dimension as a central aspect of arts practice is a key attribute of non-instrumentalised funding policies like those of Hivos and the Prince Claus Fund that prioritise artistic quality as the highest funding criterion. These policies clearly recognise the complexity of the subject (including their emotional and sensory responses). However, such policies remain marginal within the development community, with most donors failing to recognise the value of such a policy to development's central considerations. In 2007/2008, however, two independent evaluators carried out an innovative evaluation for Hivos of the outcomes of its non-instrumentalised arts and culture policy in Central America (Fontes & Wilson-Grau,

[30] I am aware of the debate between aesthetics (often portrayed as socially disinterested and aligned with conservative tendencies) and the anti-aesthetic (which strives to deconstruct discourses of beauty and promotes a socially-oriented critical engagement with strategies of representation in art), and of recent attempts to calibrate these positions 'in a less polarized way' (Meyer and Ross, 2004). I am not promoting aesthetics here as 'disinterested pleasure and pure affect' (Alberro cited in Meyer and Ross, 2004, p. 21). I see aesthetic values and concepts of beauty as historically embedded and contingent, rather than universal, and often in service to particular social and political agendas. My point is that in the particular social and historical contexts that mark development, the recognition of sensory experience and visual affect carries agency in resisting instrumentalisation and a focus on 'issues' or 'problems', and in recognising the complexity of the development subject.

2008) [31]. The evaluation defines and verifies a wide range of outcomes and makes important links between them. These findings, and the links in particular, are perhaps the first measured and verified evidence of the social value of non-instrumentalised funding and, as such, offer important lessons for the development community. They also align with the core concerns of this thesis – the ways in which development-funded arts can contribute to an agency that is both constructive of an alternative cultural imagining, and resistant to the reductionisms of development's framing.

The evaluation is highly significant in that it falls between the two dominant camps of those who use evaluations to quantify the instrumental (health, educational, behavioural, economic and so on) benefits of the arts[32] in order to justify arts funding, and those who argue that the benefits of the arts are intangible and unable to be measured, and argue for arts funding based on something akin to faith[33]. The authors of the Hivos evaluation found no similar approaches used previously when they reviewed the literature on art project evaluations, and they indicate that the methodology used 'may be useful for other programmes in which predefining outcomes is not desirable, possible or simply not done' (Wilson-Grau and Chambille, 2008, p. 3)[34].

The Hivos evaluation assessed medium-term outcomes[35] among third party actors (individuals and groups affected by the artists funded by Hivos) using an outcome mapping[36] technique. It sought to provide 'evidence of results downstream from the

[31] All citations from this report come from a late-stage Spanish-language version of the report passed on to me by Fontes in June 2008. Translations are mine.
[32] For a discussion of these evaluation approaches, including a critique of their association with advocacy, and a range of methodological flaws, see McCarthy et al., 2004.
[33] I came across this approach in the Casa de los Tres Mundos, where I was told by Johannes Kranz that the Casa worked on humanist principles and that, from the institution's perspective, the idea of *measuring* the value of the arts was abject (personal communication, July 2006).
[34] Since then, Claudia Fontes has authored another evaluation, this time for the DOEN Foundation (Dutch Lottery) using a customised version of the 'Most Significant Change' technique to determine, as specifically as possible, the value of DOEN's policies to cultural actors in Kenya, Mali, Senegal and Uganda, and to map the possibilities for developing sustainable cultural sectors in the these countries (see Fontes, 2010). This method provides a further analytical tool in evaluating outcomes and values of non-instrumentalised funding practices.
[35] Although Hivos seeks to generate 'long-term changes in society that strengthen an independent arts and culture sector and open up space for critical reflection and dialogue about the dominant social, political and cultural perceptions and practices that stand in the way of the development of societies based on just and participatory principles' (Wilson-Grau & Chambille, 2008, p. 3), long-term impacts were beyond the scope of the evaluation and were considered too difficult to measure in terms of cause and effect relationships. The evaluation did argue, however, that the outcomes assessed were the link between artistic output and wider social impact and therefore might point towards those impacts over the long-term.
[36] Outcome mapping refers to a methodology that typically focuses on behavioural change by secondary beneficiaries. It was developed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada (see Earl, Carden, and Smutylo, 2002).

artistic expression yet upstream from impact' (ibid). Specifically, it assessed 'changes in the behaviours, relations, actions and activities of the social actors influenced by the artists that Hivos supports, and which have contributed to improvements in their societies' in terms of the four objectives of the Hivos arts and culture programme: '[i]mprovement of the quality of artistic and cultural expression', '[r]evalorisation of self-esteem and notions of identity of people', '[i]mprovement of the cultural infrastructure in the independent artistic sector and in civil society', '[i]ncrease in the independent space for artistic and cultural expression and cultural debate' (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 3). Below I discuss the outcomes of the evaluation in light of these objectives, focussing firstly on the question of artistic quality, secondly on the cultural structure as an independent space (this combines the second and third objectives as listed above), and thirdly on self-esteem and identity. Clearly, Hivos assumes that high quality artistic production, self-esteem, identity exploration, and an independent cultural sector have social value. Although mainstream development donors may support strengthening self-esteem or promoting freedom of expression, they may not see this factors as linked to the valuing of artistic quality or an independent cultural sector. This evaluation makes valuable connections between diverse processes and outcomes.

Outcomes of supporting artistic quality

The Prince Claus Fund, Hivos and Arts Collaboratory, all have artistic quality as their highest funding criterion, while being aware that judging quality in a postcolonial and cross-cultural context carries not insignificant hazards. The Hivos evaluation took on the rather daunting challenge of assessing whether or not artists supported by Hivos had contributed to an increase in artistic quality[37] in Central America.

In coordination with its co-partners in Central America, the evaluators developed four indicators to assess improvements in the quality of artistic practices in the region between 2002 and 2006. These were: the diversification of channels of legitimation that establish the parameters of quality in context; the increase in experimentation with new techniques and materials and the circulation of bibliographic material about

[37] Hivos recognises that conceptions of artistic quality are culturally constructed and will differ depending on context. Its 2008 evaluation defined quality as 'the appearance to a greater or lesser extent, of a coming together of values that benefit th[e] aesthetic relationship to its context. That coming together of values should be interpreted in a framework of aesthetic and political meanings particular to the distinct cultural contexts that the region presents, and anchored in the specific temporality of the years in which [we] are evaluating' (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p.16).

contemporary art and thought; the intensification and diversification of the production of meanings; and the deepening of the debate about ideas and values in relation to artistic practices and languages (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, pp. 31-35).

The evaluation found increasingly diversified channels of legitimation – both external and internal (from external prizes and awards to the local recognition of governments, private enterprise and diverse publics). The evaluators argued that this 'richness in the parameters of validation creates an environment more open to debate, to experimentation and to the questioning of stereotypes' (ibid, p. 37). EspIRA/La ESPORA, and other contemporary arts organisations like TEOR/éTica, certainly see agency in diversified channels of legitimation. Critically grounded criteria (established through dialogue) enable greater internalising of the artistic process, in resistance to external and internal pressures towards self-censorship. International recognition can stimulate dialogue and can generate local support (by private enterprise or the state), and the inclusion of Central American artists in global circuits can counter exoticist framing and stimulate possibilities for more horizontal forms of exchange.

The evaluators also found an increase in experimentation, both in terms of new techniques and materials, and in terms of generating 'new public, virtual and artistic spaces that provide artists with new challenges of interaction' (ibid, p. 36). That increased experimentation was linked to the increased circulation of and discussion of theoretical, art historical and critical literature, pointing to the value of an associated critical/theoretical field (as noted by Mbembe). Experimentation (linked to critical enquiry) was not simply targeted at formal or technical innovation, but was equally focused on forms of public engagement.

Prioritising artistic quality in funding policy was also found to have generated new meanings in cultural productions that were both more intense and more diverse for a wider group of beneficiaries, indicating strengthening contextual significance. New publics were increasingly involved in artistic activity and there was high motivation to share experiences with other artists throughout the region, despite 'a context in which it is particularly difficult to create [such] channels' (ibid, p. 37). Processes of collective reflection, in turn, gave greater 'validity to the meanings of the art produced' (ibid, p. 5), and proved particularly valuable in questioning sedimented stereotypes and the values associated with particular artistic practices. In Nicaragua, artists were found to be

exploring 'new contents that they recognise as their own and that escape a prejudiced perception of Nicaraguan art as being associated with the revolution, documentary cinema, *primitivista* painting or magic realism' (ibid, p. 35).

Finally, the evaluation found that quality had improved in terms of a deeper critical debate about ideas and values in relation to artistic languages and practices. The evaluators noted that such debate was strongly present in training facilities like that of La ESPORA (and in similar training facilities in film and theatre) but that critical reflection in the national media remained very limited throughout the region.

The support of artistic quality, then, did not result in a retreat to formal concerns associated with aesthetics as a socially disinterested space. Rather it was integrated with greater public outreach, the development of networks among artists, processes of collective reflection, the intensification of meanings in relation to context and diversified channels of recognition.

Valuing the cultural sector as an independent space

Valuing quality implies supporting the depth and breadth of the cultural sector – its contributing technical and critical competencies and structures. These include educational facilities, institutional curricula, public forums of discussion, critical discourse, documentation, networks and circuits, publishing houses, recording studios, independent galleries, festivals and events that adjudicate and celebrate cultural production, small-scale and experimental groups and projects. As McCarthy et al. point out 'the existence of works of art alone does not make for a vital arts culture: it is the interplay between artistic creation, aesthetic enjoyment, and public discourse about art that creates and maintains such a culture' (2004, p. 74)[38]. Similarly Mbembe argues that 'art cannot thrive in the absence of a strong critical theory tradition' (2009, final section), and Bourdieu argues strongly for the multiple 'autonomous universes' that constitute the cultural sector (2003, p. 73).

In Central America, as in many parts of the world, artists are taking on the responsibility for an increasing array of activities beyond simply the production of works. Artist-led initiatives that take responsibility for educating artists and publics, promoting and

[38] McCarthy et al. also point to the literature on arts education, which emphasises the importance of the discussion and analysis as well as production (2004, p. 73).

disseminating art, are attempting to create a more critical and agentic space for art, and more direct and horizontal relationships with its publics. EspIRA/La ESPORA intervenes beyond its core practice of educating students: it produces criticism, spaces for public debate, documentation, curating practices, and networks. The evaluation found multiple instances of horizontal cooperation – 'channels of distribution, foci for the articulation of strategies of incidence towards sectors of the government, spaces of reflection and debate, and platforms of visibility and of the reaffirmation of identity' – to be operating across all artistic disciplines, constituting, according to the evaluators, a significant 'social fabric' (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 5). In this sense, arts organisations like EspIRA/La ESPORA are constitutive of civil society, and contribute directly to the construction of an independent critical public space. However, while the cultural sector as a whole was found to have strengthened during the evaluation period across all eight relevant indicators[39], the situation for artists themselves was less clear. While they had access to greater financial resources, those resources were still precarious (ibid, p. 54) and, at the same time, artists were assuming more and more responsibilities external to artistic production itself, 'pressured [to do so] by their own sense of responsibility and social commitment, but also incited by governments and international development agencies to occupy places that the state has left vacant' (ibid, p. 64).

The great sense of social responsibility with which many artists are working constructively across multiple aspects of the cultural sector (as with EspIRA/La ESPORA) counters any claims that art projects (in Central America) are either isolated from the rest of society, or are out of touch with the political and socio-economic conditions with which the development community concerns itself. It also demonstrates that the energy for renovating the cultural imaginary in Central America (from a critical, pluralist perspective) is found in the independent sector[40], with the State typically concerning itself with more populist approaches to cultural support and development[41].

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[39] The indicators assessed were promotion, marketing and distribution; evidence of national policy that promotes cultural diversity; diversification of funds for the independent sector through sales, horizontal cooperation, state and private input; an increase in physical and virtual spaces; improved capacity for innovation through technical development; the promotion of historic registers of arts (including oral histories); increased strategies of horizontal cooperation; improved financial security of artists and arts organisations (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, pp. 43-54).

[40] The evaluators noted instrumentalisation in some NGOs who had subordinated artistic practice to other political ends and consequently abandoned reflection on the artistic practice itself which, they argue, goes against art's questioning nature.

[41] The state in Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega's government is more interested in politically-motivated appeals to popular culture, particularly its revolutionary incarnation, and to a folkloric aesthetic. Both are politically-motivated appeals to nostalgia for the Sandinista Revolution and its democratising cultural

Independence does not presuppose a disinterested or an indifferent attitude to society. Andrea Fraser argues that art's autonomy[42] is 'partial' (Fraser, 2005, p. 76) and that critical artistic practices should claim 'a less ideological form of autonomy, conditioned [. . .] by the conscious and critical determination, in each particular and immediate instance, of the uses to which artistic activity is put and the interests it serves' (ibid, p. 78). This take on autonomy is reflective of the position assumed by EspIRA/La ESPORA and by TEOR/éTica, and is strongly agentic in terms of the way in which it promotes a strong critical awareness of the politics of development's support for the arts. If donors themselves embraced a similar position (and embedded it in policy), becoming self-reflexively aware of the politics behind the uses to which art is put in their policies, this would increase the critical agency possible in donor supported arts.

The partial autonomy of the contemporary art world, does, however, mean that artists are indeed able to take on controversial subjects, question dominant practices, promote plural visions, and provoke debate. Some artists are overtly political, although not necessarily through their works[43]. The Hivos evaluation assessed whether or not the artists it supported had contributed to an increase in the independent space available for artistic expression and cultural debate. It found that artists had developed greater

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policies that prioritised local practices (see Craven, 1989 and 2002 for analyses of those policies). When I was in Nicaragua during 2006 in the build-up to the presidential election, the FSLN has erected massive billboards showing folk-dancers to sell their campaign. In 2008 when I returned after Ortega's successful election, Carlos Mejía Godoy had just written to the government to complain about their use of his popular ballads in their television spots and demanded that the government stop using his material (Córdoba and Potosme, 2008). Mejía Godoy is a much-loved popular musician (and former ethnomusicologist) who penned many of what became the revolution's anthems, as well as Nicaragua's unofficial national anthem ('Nicaragua, Nicaragüita'). He distanced himself from the FSLN when its leadership began to centralise under Ortega and, in 2006, ran as vice-president in the national elections under the MRS banner (Sandinista Renovation Movement).

[42] Artistic autonomy is characterised by 'the freedom of artworks from rationalization with respect to specific use or function'; the 'separation of sites of consumption and production'; the relative capacity of the art world to 'impose "its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products" and to exclude [external] norms and criteria', and 'the freedom of speech and conscience and the right to dissident opinion' (Fraser, 2005, p. 56). Anglo-American aesthetics over the last century has tended to emphasise art as 'separate from ordinary experience and that the appreciation of art should be disinterested, insulated from life, and its own reward' (McCarthy et al., 2004, p. 38). While the intent of the autonomous movement in art was to 'insulate art from demands that it be useful, the unintended consequence has been to make art seem remote, esoteric, and removed from life' (ibid). Yet the impossibility of art actually being 'removed from life' has been thoroughly critiqued from various positions including from sociology (see Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984; Wolff, 1993) and art theory (see Fraser, 2005; Möntman, 2006; and Welchman, 2006 on institutional critique for example), all of which detail the *a priori* relationship between artworks, artists, social structures and ideologies.

[43] Raúl Quintanilla's exhibitions (involving up to 100 artists including some associated with La ESPORA) against Nicaragua's criminalization of therapeutic abortion (in 2008), and against child prostitution (in 2011) are examples. Quintanilla's intention to run the latter exhibition in the tourist city of Granada during the International Poetry Festival (probably Nicaragua's most high-profile cultural event) also speaks of incisive provocation – and the state's decision to forbid (censor) that exhibition in Granada (Aleman, personal communication, 2011) is an example of the power of that provocation.

capacities to both identify and avoid self-censorship[44]; that independent arts organisations were, on occasion, influencing state cultural policy[45]; that the independent space was enlarging through interactions and networks between fellow artists, and through reaching more diversified publics; and that artists were, at times, involved in direct political activism (against homosexual discrimination, against decriminalisation of therapeutic abortion and for the rights of sex workers). It also noted a growing interest in art from Central America (across almost every artistic discipline) on the part of international arts circuits (Europe, North America and Asia) which was accompanied by a change in perspective from an interest based on 'cultural stereotypes, such as the idealism of the revolution, the violence of war, *primitivismo* in painting, "ethnic" foci, and in general the social and political problems' to one based on 'the creative content and the artistic quality of the works' (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 59). This gradual shift in perspective, evident in the international art world, is one that has the potential to be replicated by development donors who fund the arts. Those donors who adopt a non-instrumentalised policy are clearly the ones who show the greatest awareness about the power of changing the framing of artists in the South in this way.

Self-esteem and identity: making connections between funding policies, arts practices, and outcomes

One of the most interesting results from the evaluation concerned the question of how a non-instrumentalised policy contributed to raising self-esteem. These results are notable because they demonstrate the mechanisms through which different processes and outcomes are connected. In effect, they show that independent, high-quality arts production promotes processes of discussion and collective reflection on identity and on the creative process, and that these processes raise self-esteem. This is the kind of agency for art suggested by Mbembe: critical reflection surrounding artistic practices contributing to different forms of cultural imagining not connected to lack, deficiency and 'underdevelopment'.

To establish outcomes relating to the affirmation of self-esteem, the evaluators developed two indicators in coordination with co-partners. The first examined the

[44] Numerous examples are given that manifest this process by breaking both locally and externally imposed stereotypes and intraregional hostilities (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 57)
[45] The success of programmes run by Caja Lúdica, in Guatemala, has inspired the government to adopt an arts curriculum aimed at strengthening identity and self-esteem in national primary schools (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 42). However, the evaluators noted that in general the difficulties of working with state actors meant that horizontal association among artists themselves will always have significant value.

contribution to the process of revalorising and revitalising cultural practices of minority groups in a contemporary perspective[46] – particularly groups threatened with the influence of dominant cultural practices. Here the evaluators pointed out that young artists in particular have assumed 'the difficult task of being cultural translators, recuperating the knowledge trapped in previous generations, and resignifying its cultural legacy from a contemporary [position] to offer it to a globalised world, with which it intends to dialogue' (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 42). They also noted that it is often the resulting international recognition that then galvanises local interest and support (from governments or private enterprise). International recognition, then, promotes self-esteem and also appears to contribute, indirectly, to the consolidation of local infrastructure. EspIRA/La ESPORA's experience parallels this finding in terms of the highly active involvement of young and emerging artists, intent on dialoguing with global art practices.

The second outcome (more directly relevant to EspIRA/La ESPORA) was a strengthened capacity of artists to identify and respond to mechanisms of self-censorship, censorship and external conditions in general. Tellingly, the evaluation singled out Nicaragua as facing particular challenges in this regard because donor agencies often grant funds 'based on the prejudice of the international community about the political history of the country, or in the exoticist gaze about the local imaginary and its aesthetic parameters' (ibid, p. 41).

Self-esteem was also found, in the evaluation, to be linked to a funding policy that values quality. At the most obvious level, self-esteem is likely to increase if the quality of artistic production is recognised either externally or internally – through awards, or an increase in sales, or the inclusion of works in circuits of legitimation. It is important to note that this is a different quality of recognition than that of locality or typicality.

However, the evaluation was also able to pick up more subtle manifestations of increased self-esteem that related to being able to concentrate on one's artistic practice (ibid, p. 82). The evaluation concluded that the processes of reaffirmation and validation described by evaluation participants were 'effectively linked to the possibility

[46] These included Garifuna musicians, Mayan theatre groups in Guatemala, indigenous and Afro-Caribbean writers, as well as sub-culture groups such as calypso musicians in Costa Rica and the marimba players of Nicaragua. The evaluation notes that collective minority identities may be cultural, political or gender-related (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 17).

of an arts practice free of conditions' (ibid, p. 42) and arose from a particular synergy between the processes of collective reflection that characterised quality practices, and independence from instrumentalisation. This broad claim is based on detailed, verified data from multiple third-party actors from throughout the region, and is explained in the evaluation as follows:

> We note that the processes of artistic projection with the greatest strength are based in a firm commitment by the artists to quality in their art. This unconditioned search for artistic quality involves efforts of reflection about creative processes that, at the same time, reaffirm notions of self-esteem and identity of the artists involved. In this reaffirmation of self-esteem through questioning of the creative processes – that includes questions about the languages and practices used – where we see the germ of the most significant changes for the creation of independent space.
>
> (Fontes & Wilson-Grau, 2008, p. 64).

Collective practices, like those of EspIRA/La ESPORA, were again found to be particularly significant, contributing to the affirmation of collective identities 'when the actors affected [found] ways to share and exchange experiences at different levels [inter-generational, inter-gender and inter-cultural] in their communities of interest' (ibid, p. 42). The evaluators observed a close relationship between the act of reflecting on creative processes and processes of identity construction. Although Hivos regards the affirmation of self-esteem to be a long-term objective at the level of impact of their arts programme, this evaluation found it to be a medium-term outcome, taking place through the actual process of artistic creation and 'the recognition of the other through creative sharing/exchange' (ibid, p. 43).

Through making such connections, between ideas as seemingly art-specific as artistic quality, and social outcomes such as raising self-esteem, broadening cultural participation, and reversing marginalising stereotypes, the Hivos evaluation helps us to understand – in very specific terms – the mechanisms through which valuing the arts in non-instrumental terms might also contribute to the social change with which development is concerned. Crucially, this kind of funding supports an integrated and complex approach, in which both subjects and their arts practices are conceived as complex. Individual experience is related to broader social outcomes (the same processes of critical exploration that individual artists are concerned with is replicated at multiple scales, for example, and the self-esteem of the individual is enhanced through collective reflection which in turn generates self-esteem more broadly within the artistic

community). Taking on board aesthetic considerations does not lead to insularity – arts projects that reflected critically and collectively on aesthetic considerations were associated with an awareness of pressures towards self-censorship, developing internal strategies of legitimation and increasing self-esteem. This sensitivity to the integrated nature of artistic practice and experience allows for a broader, less restricted understanding of the various forms that agency in the arts can take in the development context.

Summary

This chapter has detailed three tensions within development's support of the arts which I think share a disruptive and constructive agency. Criticality counters the reductionism in instrumentalisation, encouraging us to examine, as Fraser suggests, 'in each particular and immediate instance, [. . .] the uses to which artistic activity [in the development context] is put and the interests it serves' (2005, p. 78). Multi-scalarity counters development's framing that ties the agency of the development subject to a particular location and its assumed problems. Aesthetic considerations and non-instrumentalised funding demonstrate a complex and integrated understanding of art practices and the Hivos evaluation demonstrates the mechanisms through which aspects of artistic practice that might not be considered to have obvious 'social value' are indeed connected to social processes. These insights should contribute to a more critical and horizontal relationship between donors and artists in the South, and have significant potential to amplify or expand the possibilities for art's agency to both critique development framing and construct alternative cultural imaginings. The following chapter draws together the power of these practices and the experiences of EspIRA/La ESPORA in relation to the central concerns of this thesis.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This thesis examines the rather paradoxical proposition that donor-funded arts practices can contribute to the construction of an alternative imaginative space to development – that is, to ways of imagining the South beyond the framework of 'development as both the problem and solution of the predicament of postcolonial subjects' (de Vries, 2007, p. 35). It has been argued that development is the dominant discursive construction through which the South is imagined and that this framing brings with it negative connotations of lack, deficiency, and passivity, as well as a temporal reduction to the present – to 'a serial accumulation of "instants" that never achieve the density and weight of human, historical time' (Mbembe, 2009, final section). Post-development researchers have contested this framing by highlighting the agency that exists in spaces and practices outside or alongside development. Such sites of liminality – "'in-between" space[s] in which cultural change may occur' (Aschroft et al., 2000, p. 130) – contain both resistant and constructive modes of agency: on the one hand they demonstrate the ultimate instability of the power of development discourse to 'fix' representations of the South in development's terms, and at the same time, they contribute to the construction of alternative and complex imaginaries.

Art appears to be one of these agentic sites of liminality in relation to development. While its communicative and creative characteristics are valued within a mainstream development framework, its inability to be reduced to a utilitarian function, its complexity, its reflexivity, and its aesthetic attributes ensure art an element of externality and critical independence from development. This thesis has explored the productivity of art's liminality in two central ways. Firstly, it has explored what art's agency might mean both to development and to a specific context for art-making. Secondly, it has considered the capacity of development donors to support those forms of agency specifically associated with art's liminal positioning.

In Chapter 1 I introduced these central questions. I described the moment when I first felt the frisson of this productive tension between art and development, watching performances by actors and musicians in rural El Sauce. I linked the agency I sensed in art's liminality to Ortner's two modes of agency as both resistant and constructive, and I proposed art's agency in contributing to a politics of possibility linked to critical

contributions from postdevelopment and postcolonial researchers. I suggested that art could critique the negative and reductionist connotations associated with the development imaginary, and contribute to alternative, complex, heterogeneous and more agentic cultural imaginings of the South. Chapter 1 also located this thesis geographically, in Nicaragua and Central America.

In Chapter 2 I described the emergence of arts funding as part of development's 'cultural turn' and discussed the various, and at times conflicting, hopes articulated for art and culture's agency. The contradictory nature of these articulations of art's agency stem from its ambivalent relationship to development, and they demonstrate a key underlying tension in development's cultural turn: its desire to be radically transgressive, diversifying and democratising and, at the same time, its desire to 'sell' culture's utility to powerful, mainstream development actors in order to, at the very least, open the door to a consideration of culture in mainstream practices. As a result, this chapter highlighted instrumentality as a key tension in donor funding of the arts, and pointed out the considerable confusion that often arises in implementing arts projects. This chapter also described the range of donors who fund the arts and pointed out a group who appear to accept and support the agency of art's liminality and who fund the arts using a non-instrumentalised policy.

I introduced Patricia Belli and the independent arts initiative EspIRA/La ESPORA in Chapter 3, and described my methodology as a critically reflexive ethnography, including the acquisition of language skills and a commitment to reciprocity in the research relationship. I explained my reason for focusing on EspIRA/La ESPORA as a single, strategically significant case study, pointing out that EspIRA/La ESPORA articulated a liminal position in relation to development – that is, its strong commitment to artistic integrity was matched by an equally strong discourse on the social responsibility of the artist. The organisation clearly desired social transformation, but art's agency in relation to such a transformation was seen to lie in the processes of art-making and in the critical cultural debate that surrounded art, rather than in an extra-artistic field. I also sensed agency in EspIRA/La ESPORA's critical awareness and critical processes, and in its understanding of contemporary art's multi-scalar vocation.

In Chapter 4 I described the founding of EspIRA/La ESPORA by Patricia Belli and the reasons behind her decision to focus on promoting critical thinking in arts education in

Central America. This discussion, and the processes described as core practices of La ESPORA (horizontal dialogue and exchange, research and investigation, critical debate, and collective reflection), immediately suggested possibilities for multiple and complex forms of agency, both in resistant and constructive modes. In terms of resistance, they countered marginalising practices in local institutions and in global art circuits, and countered tendencies towards self-censorship. At the same time they constructed a more diverse and 'responsible' artistic production that engaged critically with contemporary lived experience and they promoted the region as a great place to make art. This initial description of EspIRA/La ESPORA also raised tensions, however, between the temporary funding platforms provided by development and the aspirations of artists to stabilise processes within institutions over the long-term. The short-term nature of donor funding has, in the case of EspIRA/La ESPORA, resulted in the creation of multiple associated projects under the umbrella organisation EspIRA and while these projects certainly carry agency, they also indicate the short-term imagination on the part of donors that, as Mbembe noted, constructs the South in terms of a 'never-ending present' (2009, final section).

Chapter 5 deepened the analysis of the agency of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices by locating them in a particular context that they are also in the process of reconfiguring. The chapter began by describing a range of issues that contemporary artists in Central America posit as reproducing a marginalising politics, and in which they intentionally seek to intervene. This includes a lack of interest in cultural policies by state governments (except from a populist perspective), the conservative nature of existing cultural institutions that appear to restrict the possibilities for art to act as a critical vector in the region, the reductionist and hierarchical pedagogical systems in the national art academies that seem to restrict students from 'imagining anything else' (Belli, personal communication, June 2008), the commercial imperative to produce decorative and politically complacent work, an external demand for the exotic, and the 'predisposition to the *sociological object*' (La ESPORA, 2006, p. 4) imposed by development donors who fund artists to produce work based on development issues. Contemporary artists in the region lay claim, instead, to the agency of contemporary art as a reflexive, responsible, critical practice that critiques marginalising representational practices, provides a space for collective reflection, and generates diverse and complex imaginings of place and identity. Artists also manifest this agency through multiple strategies, taking responsibility for all aspects of education, production, curating,

dissemination, critique, documentation and discussion, and generating supportive networks within and beyond the region. This chapter also pointed out the strongly affirmative stance articulated by these artists who assume the right to engage in debate about the global and the complex, and who, in articulating the positive aspects of the region for making art, seek to 'socially re-potentialise adversity' (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 15) in the manner suggested as agentic by postdevelopment scholars.

In Chapter 6 I demonstrated the mechanisms through which EspIRA/La ESPORA exercises multiple forms of agency in relation to reconfiguring this context, through a close examination of one residency and the subsequent itinerant exhibition that La ESPORA ran in 2007/2008. The ¡PECA! cycle critically reappraised the role of painting – the most dominant and conservative arts practice in the region. Artistic output was linked, throughout the cycle, to the question of its political significance. Student comments demonstrated multiple forms of learning, from intimate personal reflection to professional development, again showing art's agency to be complex and multi-faceted. Strategies of collective reflection and public outreach underlined the deeply social nature of La ESPORA's engagements. This kind of close analysis leads to a broader and more complex understanding of the agency of arts practices in the development context.

Chapter 7 stepped back from the specifics of ethnography to return to the fundamental question of the agentic possibilities of the arts in the context of development. It drew up a framework through which donors conceive of art's agency, while also noting differences between donors, particularly in terms of their approach to instrumentalisation. This analysis showed that while many development donors want to avoid the reductionism and functionalism of a strongly instrumental approach to art's agency, and some see complex possibilities for the agency of art, there is an ongoing pull – evident in funding mechanisms – towards simplifying and therefore reducing the agency of arts practices. The chronically short-term nature of funding structures has a severe impact on the possibilities for art's agency, as does a reduction of art's productivity to issues or problems, and to a simplified and bounded conception of the local. These tensions appear to arise fundamentally from framing art's agency within development. Art's ability to contest development's framing is limited by the ways in which donors bring that framing with them into their relationships with artists. EspIRA/La ESPORA's critical and ethical approach, on the other hand, demonstrates

an integrated, complex and multi-scalar understanding of art's agency that can critically inform the development community's engagement with the arts.

The analysis in Chapter 7 highlighted three specific sites of agency seen in EspIRA/La ESPORA (criticality, multi-scalarity and aesthetic considerations) which appear to be undervalued, if not invisible, in the development context. Chapter 8 analysed the agentic potential of these fields in both resistant and constructive modes: their capacity to critique reductionist representations associated with development, and their contribution to critically-informed and progressive processes of place-making, cultural re-centring and re-imagining. Criticality and multi-scalarity are aspects of contemporary arts practice that refute an unthinking instrumentalism and a restrictive attachment to 'the local' that has the effect of maintaining social distance between the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped'. Aesthetic considerations resist functionalism and suggest a more complex and integrated understanding of art practices. Furthermore, Hivos's evaluation of the outcomes of its non-instrumentalised funding policy demonstrated the mechanisms through which aspects of artistic practice that might not be considered to have obvious 'social value' are indeed connected to social processes.

This thesis responds to a significant gap in the development studies literature, which has not addressed art's productivity in sufficiently complex terms, and which has not engaged with the perspectives of artists themselves. It demonstrates that a direct engagement with artists' conceptions of their own agency, which are inevitably coupled with an in-depth knowledge of their contexts, contributes to a more precise understanding of the multi-dimensional agency of arts practices funded through development. That agency does provide an alternative imaginative space to development, a space that actively contributes to the construction of alternative, complex social imaginaries that have a productive, liminal relationship to that of development.

Taking artistic processes in the South seriously, understanding the perspectives of artists, and exploring the complexity of the relationship between art and the context(s) within which it is produced and debated – all of which this thesis has undertaken – serves to critique development's framing of the South. It does so by highlighting the agency, creativity, criticality, and complexity of Southern subjects who assume the right to engage, as equals, with Others, in global debate about art, aesthetics, the politics of

representation and the complex relationship between art and context. It contests the social distance established through development practices of assigning artists in the South functional political or educational roles tied to the issues of a particular geographic locality, and allowing artists in the North the right to explore universal themes and aesthetics. Taking on the complexity of art reveals the functionalist and reductionist aspects of development's instrumental approach to culture. Understanding artistic processes as imbricated in longer-term cultural processes, which are also always political struggles for the right to signify, critiques the short-term frameworks (and hence, reductionism) inherent in development's project-approach to supporting the arts in the South.

This thesis has also shown the multiple ways in which artists and the broader field of cultural production and criticism contribute to the construction of place and identity, alongside, and potentially in dialogue with, the constructions of place and identity made by the development discourse. Analysing, researching, documenting and debating forms of cultural self-representation both within the region and within global art forums, are all practices that contribute to articulating place and identity. Generating personal interactions between artists within and across regions develops community and provides forums for collective reflection, both of which deepen that discussion and work towards the reconfiguration of social imaginaries. Such a constructive project of 'place-making' is consciously undertaken by contemporary artists in Central America who see the region's dominant visual imaginary as demonstrative of a complex colonial history plagued by frequent foreign incursions and an uncertain future. The imaginative construction of Central America beyond its 'geographic certainty' (Pérez-Ratton, 2011, p. 29) and as a 'space with memory' (Herkenhoff, 2011, p. 23), and the ways in which art in the region contributes to that imaginative construction, are topics debated by artists and cultural critics at forums organised by independent artists' initiatives. These kinds of questions are also debated at residencies run by La ESPORA and, as importantly, those residencies encourage emerging artists to consider the ways in which their own artistic practices relate emotionally, intellectually and politically to their lived experience in a particular place and time.

Place, however, is not constructed by artists as solely 'local', but rather in terms of Doreen Massey's (1991) understanding of a 'progressive sense of place', both outward-looking and inward-looking, local/global and complex. Neither does active place-

making imply that artistic processes are instrumentalised towards the construction of place or context, rather artistic practices are seen as inevitably constructive within processes of cultural representation that are imbricated in social change. Art, as Papastergiadis argues, is 'never outside or above the dynamic field of social change' (2005a, p. 300). However, the complexity of art's relationship to social change means that it cannot be incorporated into a pre-determined relationship of means and ends, rather its agency lies in exploration and negotiation, in its occupation of a mediating space between 'active political engagement and autonomous experimentation' (ibid, p. 291). Art's relationship to place-making involves 'question[ing] rather than exploit[ing] cultural codes (Foster, 1983, p. xii). Development donors find it difficult to support the unpredictability of a process based on *questioning*, while they appear to be more open to promoting the economic opportunities that may be available through *exploiting* cultural codes.

The close analysis of EspIRA/La ESPORA's practices has given some teeth to these claims about art's agency in relation to development lying in a complex and integrated understanding of artistic processes themselves, and a very clear recognition of the complexity of Southern subjects. For EspIRA/La ESPORA, the intimate process of transformation within the artist is related to the external projection of their work; the ideological aspects of art are accompanied by critical and aesthetic concerns; art practice is seen to embrace both the intellectual, the sensory and the intuitive; multiple forms of discrimination are subjected to critique but play, delight and pleasure are also recognised as important aspects of human subjectivity; local engagements are also global engagements albeit in different ways; a focus on artistic quality can raise self-esteem. The development subject, who is also an artist with an international vocation, cannot be framed as an idealised locally-bounded and impoverished subject of underdevelopment, rather development subjects who are also artists negotiate their location both within and outside of development framing, contesting and reconfiguring development at the same time.

Finally, the thesis examines the extent to which the funding practices of development donors support such contestatory, agentic, liminal and long-term cultural practices. Clearly artists in the South value the opportunities that international funding can provide to support, even in a temporary way, emerging platforms and practices. Unfortunately, many donor practices significantly reduce the complex possibilities of

artistic practices through instrumentalisation, through a reduction to the local, through a reduction to development issues, through project processes that require certainty, and through measuring the success of an art's project in its ability to meet pre-determined targets.

However, the funding practices of a small group of Dutch donors, who clearly articulate a non-instrumentalised funding platform, and who 'risk' supporting individuals, experimental groups, critical contemporary practices, medium-term funding, and are willing to learn from their engagements with artists in the South, suggest the possibilities for development donors to support the liminal productivity of art's relationship to development. These donors have an important role to play in articulating a more complex understanding of art's productivity in the development context, and therefore supporting longer term processes of cultural imagining beyond the dominance of development's discursive framing. They also perform a translating and mediating role between development's functionalism, and the complex engagements of art. However, even these donors have limits to the extent to which they are able to support artistic processes in the South. Their engagements are still short/medium term; they still expect artist-led initiatives in the South to be self-sustaining while being innovative and critical; their funding still encourages the emergence of multiple small-scale projects at the expense of establishing institutions and supporting the long-term professional development of individual artists, despite artists in the South clearly seeing agency in institutionalisation and despite donors' expressed desire to support long-term processes of change in the South. The experience of EspIRA/La ESPORA must surely be indicative of that of hundreds of other artists' initiatives in the South who have sought support for their practices from development organisations over the last 15 years. Bearing this in mind, I close the thesis with the following postscript.

Postscript

In 2009, EspIRA/La ESPORA employed an administrator who stole $14, 000 of their funds. The ensuing investigative process, which took considerable time, was required by donors for the sake of transparency. External audits showed up the administrative weakness of the organisation – of which Patricia Belli had been aware – which had by this time diversified into multiple, small but interconnected projects. In response, in

2011 Hivos and Arts Collaboratory withdrew their support from EspIRA/La ESPORA, leaving the organisation with no income. EspIRA/La ESPORA vacated the building it had been renting for the previous three years and held a yard-sale, selling off computers, tables and chairs that had been used for administration and for workshops, beds used during the RAPACES residencies, and other equipment. As I completed my first solid thesis draft, I received the following emails – spliced together here – from Patricia Belli:

> Well...update:
>
> We are back in my old house. In the back. But now we have a lot more stuff . . . even though we sold a ton of things at the yard sale . . . anyhow, we don't fit . . . things are stacked up and it is ugly, dangerous and not possible to work in there.
>
> No funding for any project. 95% chance of a tiny version of Jóvenes Creativos being financed by UNICEF[1], shortly.
>
> And the only chance for the longer term is a Swiss foundation that AVINA is creating to support projects like ours . . . you remember last time they answered there was no funding for Latin American organizations . . . well they are working on it through a whole new foundation . . . but they already said the building is out of the question?
>
> You know, I have to say this on Hivos' behalf: they made the decision to walk away from us based on our poor ability to keep money safe. Their money is not their money either, and they themselves must "entregar cuentas" [hand in their accounts] to their own donors. I truly believe their hands were tied.
>
> Where I do see the real problem is in the past . . . far back . . . when we began the relationship . . . I had no idea on how to administrate funds . . . I did not know what it meant . . . and they let me work like that . . . I also see the problem in my own governance, which is the garantor (is that a word?) of our good administration, they also did not spot the black holes in our performance . . . Also they trusted us because they needed to believe, so they could realize their goals through us . . . which they did, but at this cost . . . eventually . . .
>
> I am very tired and really eager to spend my time in the workshop with no employees to supervise . . .

[1] This version of Jóvenes Creativos did indeed take place in 2011. However, a different group of children to those with whom EspIRA had already established a relationship were selected, and through the Ministry of Education, with different criteria. Furthermore, UNICEF's support did not imply institutional learning on their part, merely that the organisation found itself with some additional funds that needed to be used that year (Belli, personal communication, September, 2011). Patricia Belli commented to me that, under the circumstances, her heart was no longer in the project (ibid).

I feel that I am ready to let go . . . except I don't want to let go in a low moment because (it's a matter of pride) it would be a cowardly end. The thing is, EspIRA did what it set out to do . . . there is certainly an art scene now and it has a good flavour to it. We changed the reality of Central American art . . . I don't want this to take my life with it . . .

Doing some digging we came to the conclusion that any possible candidate for CEO, with the same qualifications I have, would have to be paid in the vicinity of 2000 dollars a month . . . and we will not be able to raise that kind of money . . .

So we see no future . . .

What do think of all this?

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Appendix: Introduction to the historical and art historical context of Nicaragua

This appendix serves to provide readers who are unfamiliar with Nicaragua and Central America with some introductory comments to assist them in understanding the more detailed engagements of this thesis. It is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the region and its cultural politics, merely to point readers to key historical moments and some broadly sketched characteristics of artistic production[1].

Figure 20: Map of Nicaragua. **Retrieved from http://www.vidiani.com/?p=6182**

History and Geography

Nicaragua is the largest of the six small countries that make up the Central American isthmus that connects the northern and southern halves of the American continent. It is about the same size as New Zealand's North Island with a population of almost 6

[1] For an adequate history of the region, see Booth and Walker, 1999. For a more comprehensive and up-to-date history of Nicaragua, see Tijerino (2008), and for a deeper historical overview of the region, see the six-volume *Historia general de Centroamérica* (Torres Rivas, 1993).

million. The capital city, Managua, is centrally located in the Pacific lowlands and is home to about a quarter of the country's population.

Nicaragua is bordered by Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south, by the Pacific Ocean to the west and by the Caribbean Sea to the east. The climate is tropical and the geography is marked by two large freshwater lakes and numerous volcanoes – many still active – which form part of the Central American Volcanic Chain. The lowlands are generally hot and humid (although the Pacific coast – where the bulk of the population lives – is drier than the Caribbean coast) and the more mountainous central highlands are generally cooler.

In pre-Colombian times the country was populated by a number of different cultural groups – some connected with the South American or Andean cultures and others connected to the Mesoamerican cultures to the north. At the time of colonisation, the area was home to several cultural groups. Those on the Pacific Coast were related to the Aztec and Maya cultures and included the Chorotega and the Niquirano (from whom the name Nicaragua is derived). Those on the Caribbean coast were part of the distinct Chibcha language group.

Nicaragua was colonised in the 16th century by Spain, with devastating consequences for its indigenous peoples who were decimated by the spread of infectious diseases, enslaved to work on land allocated to Spanish settlers, or sold as slaves and shipped to other parts of Latin America (to Peru, for example, to work in the mines). Booth and Walker state that in Western Nicaragua 'a population of over one million natives was reduced to a few tens of thousands by the end of the conquest' (1999, p.21). The relative isolation of the Caribbean coast provided some protection from the devastating impact of colonisation for the indigenous peoples living there. Furthermore, those groups (which include ethnic Mayagna/Sumu, Rama and Miskito) actively resisted Spanish rule, forming alliances with other colonial powers (and with visiting pirates and buccaneers) as a form of resistance against Spanish domination. These alliances led to Britain declaring the Miskito Coast a British Protectorate late in the mid-17th century – a status it retained for around 200 years.

Spanish colonisation of Central America focussed on the development of externally-oriented economies focussed on exporting crops, timber, mineral wealth and cattle to the benefit of the elite landholders. Despite uneven patterns of acculturation, cultural

hispanization was strong with the dominant imposition of Catholicism, Spanish language and customs, the construction of cities around centralised plazas, cathedrals and public buildings, and new racially-configured patterns of class which saw Spanish-born immigrants granted the highest status and indigenous peoples the lowest (ibid, pp. 21-22). The impact of these processes remains clearly evident in the region. As Booth and Walker point out, with 'a premium placed on export and the maximisation of profits for the elites', it is unsurprising that much of Central America remains typified 'by wide social and economic disparities and by a socially irresponsible economic elite' (ibid, p. 23).

Formal independence from Spain was a relatively peaceful affair for Central America, which declared independence in 1821, following Mexico's lead. For a brief time the Central American states joined with Mexico but they soon decided to form their own federation, known as the United Provinces of Central America (or the Central American Republic). The federation, however, was plagued by political rivalries both within and between nations – rivalries that continue to inform Central American politics. In Nicaragua, these conflicts revolved around political rivalries between the liberal elite, based in the northern city of León, and the conservative elite, based in the city of Granada. These rivalries produced ongoing conflicts and degenerated, at times, into civil war.

These conflicts were exacerbated by the involvement of foreign forces (both military and political), eager to exert some form of political control over the country because of Nicaragua's strategic geographic location and the possibility of constructing a trans-isthmian canal across the country. Just inside Nicaragua's border with Costa Rica, the San Juan River forms a near sea-level passageway into Lake Nicaragua/Cocibolca (the second-largest lake in Latin America). From the western edge of the lake it is around 20 km across land to the Pacific Coast. The particularities of its geography make Nicaragua an obvious site for the construction of a trans-isthmian canal to rival that of Panama.

In 1855, the liberal faction in Nicaragua invited an American filibusterer called William Walker and his troops to join them in a struggle against the conservatives but Walker instead seized the presidency of Nicaragua in 1856, and the USA recognised Walker's intention to seek US statehood. Liberals and conservatives eventually joined forces to oust Walker the following year. The liberal faction was so discredited by this incident

that a 30-year period of conservative rule followed. In 1893, however, liberal politician José Santos Zelaya took advantage of infighting among conservatives to seize power and, the following year, Zelaya negotiated the handover of the Caribbean (Miskito) Coast from Britain to establish what are Nicaragua's present-day boundaries.

If this post-independence period was characterised by political rivalries, it was also characterised by the dominance of agricultural exports in Central American economies. Coffee production in particular increased, concentrating landownership even further in the hands of new economic elites. In Nicaragua, elites began to 'dispossess the peasant and Indian farmers in much of the northern highlands, using chicanery, self-serving legislation, and violence' which led formerly independent peasants to become dependent on the work offered on coffee plantations (ibid, pp. 35-36). Both liberal and conservative governments tended to be authoritarian and promoted reduced economic regulation to support the expansion of the export sector.

Intervention by the United States also increased in Nicaragua in the early half of the 20th century, as discussed in Chapter 1 of the thesis. This was largely due to the USA's desire to protect its interests in the Panama Canal, which was finally completed in 1914. In 1909, when President Zelaya began to negotiate a canal deal with Germany, the USA sent troops to Nicaragua to help foment a rebellion against him. Zelaya resigned and the new government 'granted the United States a canal-rights treaty that effectively guaranteed that Nicaragua would never have a canal' (ibid, p. 27). Between 1912 and 1933 the USA maintained an almost continuous military presence in Nicaragua and their 'occupation', and close relationship with national governments who 'generally followed the dictates of Washington, even when they clearly went contrary to Nicaraguan interests' (ibid, p. 36), triggered the peasant rebellion led by Augusto César Sandino between 1927 and 1933. The rebellion was couched in terms of an anti-imperial struggle and guerrilla raids were made on American-owned mines and against US Marines serving in Nicaragua. Despite some successes, US troops were never able to capture Sandino or quash the resistance movement and the USA withdrew from Nicaragua in January 1933.

Part of the US response to the uprising had been to support the development of Nicaragua's National Guard, a combined military and police force headed by Anastasio Somoza García. Somoza was a US-educated son a wealthy coffee plantation-owner, who

had a career in politics before joining the National Guard and rising swiftly through its ranks. In 1934, Sandino was invited to peace talks at which Somoza had him assassinated. Somoza seized control of the government in 1936 through fraudulent elections, and quickly centralised political control among his friends and supporters.

The ensuing Somoza dictatorship (continued by his two sons Luis and Anastasio after the elder Somoza's assassination by poet, Rigoberto López Pérez, in 1956), controlled Nicaragua for over 40 years until the popular FSLN uprising in the 1970s. During the dictatorship era the concentration of land and money among the elite intensified even further and was exacerbated by the new cultivation of cotton in the 1950s. More peasants were thrown off their land and the country's wealth became concentrated 'in the hands of three huge financial groups, each centred around a local bank with links to corresponding foreign banks' (ibid, p. 38). The Somoza family sat at the heart of one of these groups. The dictatorship was strongly supported by the USA and by the National Guard which was 'purposely isolated from the people and allowed to become thoroughly corrupt', running 'prostitution, gambling, and protection rackets' and taking 'bribes and extorted kickbacks for a variety of activities, both legal and illegal' (ibid, p. 37). The Somozas retained a cordial relationship with the United States – allowing the CIA to use Nicaragua as a staging ground for its invasions of Guatemala in 1954 and Cuba in 1961, for example. In exchange, the USA was generous with its aid 'despite ample evidence that the Somozas and their accomplices were stealing much of [it]' (ibid, pp.37-8), and military support. By the time of their overthrow the National Guard 'was the most heavily U.S.-trained military establishment in Latin America' (ibid, p.38).

There is an extensive literature on the Sandinista uprising – it is probably the most well-documented episode in Nicaraguan history – and I will give only a very brief outline here. The uprising took its name from Sandino's anti-imperial peasant rebellion and it was inspired by a diverse constellation of factors. Strong economic growth at the national level (associated with industrialisation and significant levels of foreign – mainly U.S. – investment) had failed to benefit the vast majority of the population. Severe social inequality was exacerbated by low wages (and the suppression of unions) and accompanied by high inflation (partly driven by the oil crisis of the early 1970s). A massive earthquake in December 1972 levelled Managua, displacing around two-thirds of the population and destroying most of the emergency services (including hospitals) needed to deal with the quake's after-effects. The quake severely exacerbated poor living

conditions as well as producing significant unemployment among the urban middle-class. When the Somoza family and the National Guard pocketed much of the foreign aid targeted for reconstruction and used it to further enrich themselves by giving rebuilding contracts to friends and supporters, public sentiment turned strongly against the dictatorship. The monopolies on business held by the Somoza family even created disaffection among competing elites. These multiple factors contributed to widespread civil unrest, and made possible alliances between classes and between urban and rural poor.

Political militancy surfaced at a range of sites and notably among grassroots Christian Base Communities. Informed by liberation theology, these groups promoted small-scale, self-help activism, and a critical engagement with the social injustices of the Somoza regime (see Berryman, 1984 for an extensive discussion of the 'religious roots of rebellion' in Central America). Guerrilla groups, active to varying extents in the early 1960s (of which one was the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional – FSLN) began to broaden their support, particularly among student groups. New oppositional political parties began to emerge, such as the Social Christian party.

A number of high-profile incidents in the 1970s served to galvanise the resistance movement, as civil unrest mounted and repression intensified in response. In 1974, for example, a resistant group associated with the FSLN successfully took senior politicians hostage in Managua and succeeded in winning a USD $2 million ransom and in getting a statement printed in the national newspaper. Somoza responded with widespread killings (including lay preachers involved in Christian Base Communities) and increasingly severe repression. In January 1978, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the popular editor of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa* was assassinated (probably by members of the National Guard), further galvanising resistance, particularly among the urban middle class. Later that year the FSLN succeeded in taking the entire Nicaraguan congress hostage until its demands for money and for the dissemination of its political massage were met. Various cities rose in revolt and were put down with difficulty and at the cost of thousands of lives. In early 1979 the USA withdrew its support for Somoza, and President Carter's attempts to remove Somoza diplomatically and install a moderate regime only further intensified anti-American feeling. Clashes continued throughout the first months of 1979, with the FSLN gradually gaining control of both rural and urban

areas. Somoza fled to Miami on July 17 with a vast fortune, leaving Nicaragua with over a billion dollars of debt. The FSLN rode triumphantly into Managua on July 19, 1979.

The FSLN originally formed a junta that included diverse political positions and included Violeta Chamorro, widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, military leaders of the resistance and urban intellectuals such as novelist Sergio Ramírez (who became vice-president) and poet/priest Ernesto Cardenal (who became Minister of Culture). It should also be noted that the FSLN itself had always been a 'frente' composed of various left-wing tendencies, rather than a single political party (Craven, 2002, p. 126). The junta's political platform included pro-poor land reform, the redistribution of land confiscated by the Somozas, the abolition of torture and the death penalty, equal rights for women, price freezes on basic commodities and a major literacy campaign. However the junta gradually disintegrated, with more conservative elements leaving the group and power becoming consolidated among the remaining Sandinistas who suffered further internal conflicts.

The FSLN also ran into conflict with communities living on the Caribbean/Atlantic Coast (known as Costeños), over their well-meaning attempts to bring about modernisation and change which failed to involve local participation in decision-making and which demonstrated ignorance – if not disregard – for the cultural diversity of the region. Opposition to the Sandinistas grew on the Atlantic Coast, for example, when they tried to instigate a literacy campaign in Spanish, rather than the indigenous languages used in the region. The Atlantic region is geographically isolated from the Pacific side, with no year-round road access. Its isolation has created a very different historical and social matrix and it is characterised by cultural diversity, including the indigenous Mayagna (Sumu), Rama and Miskitu groups, Garifuna, English-speaking creoles, and *mestizos*. Brunnegger explains that the Costeño's autonomous stance stems the region's distinctive history, as 'a Miskitu kingdom with British backing and economic ties, through a period shaped by various ecclesiastical and US commercial interests in the nineteenth century, to the present national system.' (2007, p.2). It was not surprising that the Sandinistas' rather centralised attempts at national integration were met with resistance. Relations further deteriorated when some Costeños joined the Contras in armed resistance against the Sandinista administration, and the administration responded by forcibly evicting large numbers of civilians from their homes in areas which were perceived to be harbouring Contra rebels. Sandinista policy

gradually changed however, to a position where it promoted self-rule or political autonomy for the region, while still retaining existing national borders. It entered into lengthy negotiations with Costeño political representatives and, in 1987, two separate autonomous regions were legally formed: the Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) and the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS).

The FSLN governed Nicaragua for 10 years but their ability to do so was severely hampered by the critical state of impoverishment that they inherited, the impacts of war, a fragile economic infrastructure, a crippling economic embargo placed on Nicaragua by the USA, and a US-funded counter-insurgency initiated by the Reagan government in the early 1980s. When US Congress failed to support the ongoing counter-insurgency in 1983, Reagan raised money to fund the 'Contras' by selling arms to Iran, leading to the notorious Iran-Contra scandal. This continued US intervention was part of a Cold War strategy based on fears that Nicaragua could become 'another Cuba'. The FSLN declared a national state of emergency in 1982 which lasted until 1988. In 1984, Nicaragua took a case against the USA to the International Court of Justice to protest the counter-insurgency and the mining of its harbours. When it won the case and the USA was ordered to pay significant reparations to Nicaragua, the USA refused to accept the decision and blocked the UN Security Council from enforcing the judgement.

In 1990 the Sandinistas lost the national elections. The economy was devastated and the populous was war-weary. Contra forces were still active, and a number of members of the FSLN were assassinated in the run-up to the election. The US continued to exert overt political pressure, advising Nicaraguans that its economic embargo against the country would continue unless Violeta Chamorro (who had become an opposition leader) won at the 1990 elections. She did.

The 1990s and the early part of the 2000s saw Nicaragua governed by a range of conservative parties who instigated various economic reforms in attempts to revive the economy and to gain aid and debt relief from the World Bank and the IMF. Nicaragua has had a massive debt burden: the result of theft by the Somoza family, the economic embargo, poor economic management by the Sandinistas, ongoing civil war, the earthquake damage, and extensive borrowing in the 1980s, largely from the Eastern bloc (see White and Dijkstra, 2003 on debt in Nicaragua).

In the mid-1990s, Nicaragua was the most highly indebted country per capita in the world (Watkins, 1995, p.181). Since then it has received debt relief through the HIPC (Highly-Indebted Poor Country) initiative and the MDRI (Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative). However, much of that debt relief has been used to pay off internal debts rather than to support poverty reduction programmes. While debt burdens did reduce, this tended to be 'at the expense of increasing income inequality and exacerbation of poverty' (McIlwaine &Willis, 2002, p. 9). These initiatives have also been tied to conditionalities, requiring Nicaragua to sell off state assets and privatise key utilities. Nicaragua remains one of the very poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere with annual GDP per capita of just over USD$1,000 according to UN data for 2009[2].

In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch passed slowly over Central America causing massive flooding and landslides in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Thousands were killed and millions displaced. Infrastructural damage was massive with hundreds of schools and health clinics destroyed and nearly 70% of Nicaragua's roads affected. Furthermore, in Nicaragua, the flooding and landslides were said to have relocated hundreds of landmines left over from the Contra insurgency in the 1980s (see IADB, 2000).

After 16 years of neoliberal reforms which appeared to have done little to deal constructively with poverty reduction, the national election, in 2006, returned Daniel Ortega and the FSLN to power. Fraud by former senior politicians had also left right-leaning parties divided and discredited. Ortega campaigned on pro-poor policies and played on popular anti-imperialist sentiment – which the US did nothing to allay when its ambassador made veiled threats (reported in the press during my visit in 2006) about once again destabilising the economy should Ortega be elected.

Since returning to power, Ortega's rule has generated numerous critiques, including his new-found Christian fundamentalism which led him to support the criminalisation of therapeutic abortion in 2006, his authoritarian approach, his determination to seek re-election after the Sandinista-controlled Supreme Court controversially overturned a ban on re-election, his public support for former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, the way in which grassroots citizen councils (often highly politicised) have a strong hand in managing Ortega's social programmes. However, the success of the Ortega government in addressing poverty, assisted partly through his alliances with Venezuela and Cuba

[2] Data retrieved from http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=NICARAGUA, June 22, 2012.

(Nicaragua has become a member of ALBA – the Bolivarian Alliance for our Peoples of our America) have brought it considerable popular support and Ortega won the 2011 election by a sizable majority. At the same time, Ortega has managed not to alienate the IMF and the World Bank, and has supported the business sector. I was told by friends in Nicaragua that what Ortega's government has achieved is generally considered positive although his methods leave a lot to be desired. Recently Ortega has revived the idea of building a trans-isthmian canal through Nicaragua, putting a draft bill before the National Assembly in June, 2012, for consideration. Potential backers (sought to supply up to 49% of the cost) include Japan, China, Russia, Venezuela, Brazil and South Korea, but scepticism remains about the viability of this massive proposal.

Visual arts

Nicaraguan and Central American art historians note the impact of a history fraught with political conflict on the region's visual arts in the 20th century. In the introduction to her book on modern Nicaraguan painting, Torres comments on the late arrival of a modernist turn in Nicaragua – a modernist turn implying a radical challenge to the status quo, an openness to experimentation with form, a drive to express the personal/emotional state of the artist over 'objective' representation, and a stronger engagement with contemporary society. She states that '[t]here was no artistic peak in Nicaragua before the 1950s, because there was no climate of peace' (1995, p. 1). Here, she is referring to ongoing battles between liberals and conservative early in the 20th century, US interventions in national politics, and the subsequent guerrilla uprising led by Sandino. Torres argues that the ructions that took place in the visual arts in Europe at the turn of the century (impelled by the radical social changes that accompanied the industrial revolution, and the new autonomy of the artist) did not filter through to Nicaragua which remained isolated from global movements due to its ongoing political conflicts.

In a similar vein, Kupfer (1996, p. 52) describes 'a state of provincialism' in Central American art generally at the start of the 20th century, partly due to the influence of a conservative elite. For the first forty years of the 20th century, Nicaraguan visual art was characterised by a sustained attachment to a realist style, in which artistic value was accorded to the artist's technical capacity to represent a knowable external world (albeit

an idealised one). The dominant artistic languages were drawing and oil painting. Kupfer describes Nicaraguan art of the time as 'limited to traditional academic painting', largely portraits, landscapes and still lives (1996, p.66).

Under the Somoza regime, Nicaragua did see considerable national economic growth (albeit without distribution) and Torres (1995) argues that this growth assisted with cultural and artistic development such as the emergence of an internal art market. The Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes and other cultural institutions were established during the 1940s, although these institutions principally served the elites and added a veneer of civility to the dictatorship without engaging in social or cultural critique.

A distinct break in Nicaraguan art history, however, is noted in the late 1940s with the return from Europe of Rodrigo Peñalba with a distinctly modernist stance. As head of the national art school Peñalba had a considerable influence on new generations of artists and promoted in them 'the freedom to experiment with content and technique' (Kupfer, 1996, p. 66). Part of this new movement among painters in Nicaragua was concerned with attempts to express a distinctly Nicaraguan cultural identity (ibid).

It was out of this milieu, that the self-consciously avant-garde group Praxis emerged, which operated in Managua between 1963 and 1972. Praxis members sought to 'critically assimilat[e] certain idioms of Western modernism' and, from there, to produce an '"alternative modernism" while also arriving at a distinctive new regional vocabulary in painting' (Craven, 2002, p. 127). Some of the work of Praxis artists was notable for assimilating elements of pre-Colombian art.

At first Praxis was more concerned with formal innovation than social engagement. However, as civil unrest grew in Nicaragua, they began to link their work more closely to the political struggle, adopting a 'double commitment' that fused 'a desire for formal experimentation with a concerted political examination of society' (Craven, 2002, p.127). The group also began to openly align itself with the FSLN (ibid). However, Praxis largely disbanded following the earthquake that devastated Managua in 1972, and Raúl Quintanilla (2002) notes that the group lost its critical edge, with many painters falling back into more decorative modes.

Praxis was one artistic group that was associated with taking a critical position during the civil unrest in Nicaragua in the 1960s and 1970s. Another critical group emerged

from a very different milieu – from a spiritual community, founded by poet and priest Father Ernesto Cardenal on the island of Solentiname at the southern end of Lake Nicaragua/Cocibolca. Inspired by Cardenal's mentor Thomas Merton, the community focussed on a dialogic rereading of the Gospels from a liberation theology perspective with an emphasis on social justice. This reading was applied to the experience of this community of rural labourers living under a dictatorship[3]. Accompanying this dialogic and self-reflexive process was an equally important focus on the rights of the rural poor to participate in creative expression. To this end, some of Nicaragua's most accomplished painters and poets were invited to Solentiname to give lessons to community members who were encouraged to depict aspects of their own lives. This process resulted (in the visual arts) in the development of what became known as '*primitivismo*', a naïf and colourful style of painting that frequently depicted an idealised rural life, or Christian images – such as the crucifixion –transformed into the local landscape[4].

These activities stimulated a critical consciousness in the community about justice and inequality, and generated, over time, empathy with the revolutionary movement. In 1976 Cardenal joined the FSLN and in 1977, during a more generalised Sandinista uprising, members of the Solentiname community joined in an assault on the local National Guard's garrison. In retaliation, Somoza ordered the destruction of the entire parish of Solentiname including all artworks and the library. The Church was turned into a barracks for Somoza's troops and the *primitivista* paintings came to be seen as a subversive symbol of resistance.

Both of these critical artistic practices (the Praxis group and the *primitivista* movement) were associated with a recuperation and representation of local experience and/or cultural identity. This position was widespread throughout the insurrection, as popular culture in Nicaragua came to be associated with the resistance in opposition to 'Somocista-kitsch' (Craven, 2002, p. 122) – the dictator's apparent desire to follow Miami style. An often-cited example concerns the elder Somoza's appropriation of a statue of Mussolini sitting astride a horse. At great expense, he had the head removed

[3] The dialogues were published as 'The Gospels According to Solentiname', now considered a classic work of liberation theology.
[4] A peasant mass, the *Misa Campesina*, was also composed at Solentiname, with help from musician Carlos Mejía Godoy. The mass, banned by the Catholic Church, describes Christ as an ordinary *campesino*, or peasant labourer, and employed a wide range of traditional Nicaraguan instruments and rhythms (see Scruggs, 1999, 2008).

and had a bust of himself attached instead. He then had it erected in front of the National Baseball Stadium – baseball being Nicaragua's national game. Cardenal, incidentally, wrote a satirical poem in response entitled 'Somoza desveliza la estatua de Somoza en el Estadio de Somoza' (Somoza unveils the statue of Somoza in Somoza stadium' which predicts the fall of both Somoza and the statue. See Craven, 1989 and 2002; Scruggs, 1999 and 2004; Whisnant, 1995 for extensive discussions on the cultural politics of the insurrection.

The importance of artistic practice to the Sandinista administration was evident not only in its own hierarchies (with novelist Sergio Ramírez as Vice-President, and poet Ernesto Cardenal as Minister of Culture), but also in the FSLN's remarkably bold and democratic cultural policy which it implemented almost immediately. David Craven (1989, 2002) has extensively documented Sandinista cultural policy, which was characterised by a strongly participatory ethic, general processes of democratisation, the promotion of dialogue between 'high' and 'popular' culture, an openness to international exchange coupled with the promotion of local and formerly devalued cultural practices, generous state subsidies for artists' materials, dialogic practices that focused on critically reflecting on, and expressing, one's lived experience in contemporary reality (see also Quintanilla, 2002). Numerous local culture houses or '*Casas de Cultura*' were established that held poetry and painting workshops like those initiated at Solentiname. These processes were accompanied by a 'historical programme' in which the Ministry promoted a 'critical reclamation of extant fragments of indigenous and resistant popular culture, as well as of "provincial" high art' – these 'vernacular forms' had been 'systematically devalued' through processes of colonialism, neo-colonialism and dictatorship (Craven, 2002, p. 122). Craven cites Cardenal as describing the approach of the Ministry of Culture as follows: '[w]e're not seeking a low level of culture for everyone but rather an elevated culture that is accessible to all . . . We seek an integration of popular culture and high culture, of indigenous culture and international culture' (2002, p.135). Sandinista cultural policy drew widespread acclaim and attracted many international authors and artists to Nicaragua in solidarity (see Salman Rushdie's memoir of his visit to Nicaragua entitled *The Jaguar Smile*, for example).

Sandinista cultural policy was not, however, without its critics and, at times, government directives were seen to be restrictive of artistic freedom. When the FSLN lost the general election in 1990, and a neoliberal political climate was ushered in, government

support for the arts dropped away and most of the institutions established by the Sandinista administration were dismantled. This has led to a fragmented cultural landscape, described to me by Raúl Quintanilla in 2006 as '*cada pájaro en su guanacaste*' (each bird in its own tree). Galleries tend to show commercial work, rather than taking a critical line, and the media remains largely uninterested in engaging critically with the creative arts.

The recent Ortega governments have tried to revive elements of the Sandinista cultural politics in the sense that they use folkloric traditions in their campaign materials, and their national cultural policy articulates a valuing of 'local' cultural production, as an oppositional category to 'imperial domination'. However, the approach appears to be a defensive valorisation of the local that lacks openness to critique and dialogue. The contemporary context for art-making in Nicaragua and Central America is elaborated in much greater detail in Chapter 5 of the thesis, including an important discussion of the role of women in contemporary art in the region, and – of course – the role of international donor organisations with which this thesis engages.