

*From the brochure Kibii Wi Koni Marcel Pinas The Event*

There is a credible life — a discreet politics — in imagined forms; in objects transformed into signs. Ideas of place can be conjured or conveyed not as replacements or stand-ins, but as the indicators of their own experiential moment. We are talking about the intent of the artist and also about the challenge, in postcolonial spaces, of intervening and dislodging his work from a longer history of conventional readings.

As a contemporary artist, Marcel Pinas is not weary of nor sees himself in conflict with tradition. So it becomes quite ironic when his work is read through a Modernist lens as a significant other. His idea of tradition is perpetually in the present tense, already adapting, always alive, always anticipating the next step.

Pinas is no iconoclast, though his bad-boy status is derived from his rethinking of the value of tradition in response to the oversimplification and undermining of his community by the “melting pot” ideology of national regimes.

Within Pinas’s programme, a practical gesture such as opening a locally owned restaurant, the building of a small stage for musicians to perform, the creating of a memorial sculpture on the site of the infamous Moiwana massacre or an international residency and sculpture park in this location have to be understood as part of his creative process, artistic vision and sense of purpose. Within his process, the installations and reconstructions, placed in various spaces in Europe or even in Paramaribo, become guided tours, not for cultural display or difference as entertainment, but as sense-based reconstructions of presence and memory.

One can say that he is blurring the traditional boundary between artist and curator. Each new configuration — each new life given to these altered objects — each arrangement — tells a story of survival which we all carry or internalize through engaging the work. We become collaborators through what we produce by experiencing the work.

The artist is always articulating visibility, on many fronts. Where, then, should the work reside, ideally? In Moengo? In an art space or a tropical institute? What does it conflate or dismantle? There is an irony to that question, as Pinas’s leadership and participation in the rebuilding of the community of Moengo is in itself a site-specific artwork. In negotiating with all these contexts/circumstances, it asks if other practices can also be able, or are willing, to cross the same territories as expansively.

Pinas’s work resides in the Americas somewhere between constructions of the Caribbean, South America, and also Latin America, and not exclusively in the peripheral vision of Dutch colonial memory or within its current arguments with immigration and multiculturalism.

In some way, his work provides another platform for a Dutch (and also Surinamese) engagement of the Americas, but not through ethnography or anthropological foraging. It’s a contemporary conversation. The vocabulary shifts the relationship or the register from within the nostalgic longings of Modernity with its ironic colonial gaze. We are witnessing, over time, a cultural intervention — a memory in the process of re-inventing itself — malleable in its retelling and in its reconstruction.

The strategies that Pinas uses to develop and position his work are the same as many contemporary artists regionally and internationally, where the shift has been from ethnic, national and cultural representation to more individualized investigations and vocabularies. Moengo can be understood as just another location in the larger Caribbean story shaped by our respective journeys. His work knits together places like Kingston, Georgetown, London, Amsterdam and New York — places where ideas of exile and belonging, visibility and reconstruction are ongoing.

In the fallout from nationhood, a complex dialogue about homelessness and belonging remains unresolved for the vast majority of Caribbean people wherever they reside. The boundary between personal, political and cultural expressions of nationhood and home are dissolving. None are logically definitive, all are products of the imagination. As we move from place to place responding to shifting social circumstances, this becomes apparent. The Caribbean may always have been more a conceptualized space than an actual or fixed place.

Pinas’s community and culture may no longer exist in its alleged original form, but the idea — the sense and space created by the work — lives in our mind’s eye, in our discourse and mutual processing of memory, but not to elicit pathos. Pinas’s practice, like that of many conceptual artists, transgresses the traditional boundaries between artist and curator, between local and global, between tradition and the contemporary, between politics and art.

It is often said that art is made by individuals and not by societies or cultures, so we are not talking here about Maroon art. We are talking about the interests of Marcel Pinas, and how they are currently reshaping our ideas about visual production. Not just in the Caribbean, but wherever the work is situated or discussed.

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