

**PS:** Welcome to our very first interview of our CCSCA Podcast. For our very first interview, we've invited Sasha Dees, a producer, curator and writer active globally in the arts. She's recently published *Entangled Species: Conversations on Contemporary Art in the Caribbean*, and she's in Taiwan for the next few weeks working with MOCA Taipei to produce *NEXUS*, a presentation of new media and video art by 5 individual artists and 1 art duo all from the Caribbean. We wanted to learn more about her ongoing research in the Caribbean art community and the importance of bringing Taiwan into dialogue with the Caribbean.

Sasha, could you start by telling us how you began researching the Caribbean?

**SD:** I'm from the Netherlands, which was a colonial power. The connection between Taiwan and the Caribbean is that in the 17th century, we colonized Formosa, as it was known at the time, and also different islands and Surinam, which is at the top of South America. At this time, there are lots of people from the Caribbean from former colonies living in the Netherlands, and there are six islands in the Caribbean that are still part of the Netherlands. So it's quite organic working together, because they would be friends, and I would work with my friends who just so happened to immigrate, or their parents or great grandparents, to the Netherlands. So that's basically the start of what my connection to the Caribbean was.

**GSY:** From reading your book, you started out living in New York, and you kind of cautioned to the wind, moved away?

**SD:** Yes, I commuted — that sounds more glamorous than it is. I didn't do it on a daily basis, but I lived both in Amsterdam and in New York, and I would go back and forth, and in between I would also travel to other countries as well.

In New York, I also met people from other Caribbean islands, like one of the artists that is in *NEXUS*, the exhibition is Christopher Cozier, and he had worked in Surinam, somebody had introduced us so I met him, for instance, in New York. He has a project space and residency space in Trinidad called Alice Yard, it was also part of the past documentA. They invited me there, saying I could pass by, do a project in Suriname, because you have to pass by Trinidad from New York. Over the years, more connections like that were made.

The publication happened because so many times, people asked me, "Art in the Caribbean? Who lives there? Who works there?" I wanted to really introduce people to all of the artists I actually knew living in the Caribbean and who make work there. The publication is the result of it, basically sharing my experiences for 20 years, and all of my connections, as you guys have seen, it has really contact information. You don't know where they are, so here are their names, their emails, websites, and explanations about their practices, and mapping out their infrastructure. So artists, for instance, now in Taiwan, can look up what project spaces are there, what residencies are there, they can contact them and maybe go there, and vice versa. So that's basically what I'm hoping.

**PS:** For context, how would you define the Caribbean?

**SD:** There's two ways of defining it. The insular Caribbean which is only the islands in the Caribbean Sea, and then there is the Greater Caribbean that includes all the coastal areas of middle and South America. That's basically how it's been talked about, that it's all related to the Caribbean Sea. And then in the Caribbean Sea, there are 33 countries, I've visited 16 of them. One was so small, and because of the hurricane, there were really no art activities at that moment, so I'm basically writing about 15 of the 33 countries. They're all very different because they're all their own countries, they all have different histories, they speak different languages, they have different political systems, so one island to the next is really as different as Taiwan is from Korea, or Japan, or China.

I realized even more so over there, how privileged Europeans and Americans are, we can just travel anywhere without a visa, and a lot of people don't even realize that, they just think it's for a few countries where you fly there, pay \$25, and get a stamp anyway. A lot of the Caribbean islands, and a lot of countries in the world actually, really need to apply a long time before they go, and you need to have a financial sponsor, show that you have a job in the country and a family, so they feel like you are returning. So it's very unequal in that way. In the Caribbean, sometimes, you are standing on one island, and you can basically see the other island, but you can actually not go

there because it's from a different territory. So I'm writing in the book about being in St. Martin, which is France, and wanting to go to Anguilla, which is England. And of course, I can just hop on the ferry, pay the \$20, and I'm on the other side. But if you have a passport from the Dominican Republic, or from Haiti, for instance, you cannot do that, you actually need to apply for this visa which takes months and might cost \$1000, to actually do this 20 minute, \$20 ferry ride to another island. That's very problematic, it makes people feel very isolated.

**PS:** Could you tell us about how you connected with the artists that are in the show at MoCA Taipei opening later next month?

**SD:** Some of them I knew already for a long time, like Sharelly Emanuelson from Curaçao, I knew from Holland, because Curaçao is part of the Dutch Kingdom. She studied in the Netherlands. Another artist from Curaçao, Tirzo Martha, that some Taiwanese actually might know because Nobuo [Takamori] had him in the show. He is a good friend of mine for years, he had introduced me to her saying she's new in Holland, maybe I can help her find her way and connect her, which I did. I've known her for almost fifteen years, actually. There's Christopher Cozier, who I met in New York, and I've been part of his residency. Maksaens Denis from Haiti — when I was doing research I made an exhibition in Croatia and I also brought seven artists from the Caribbean and connected them with seven artists from Croatia in the contemporary art museum Split. So I knew him already.

All these artists, when I did the research, I would arrive on the island and maybe have one connection, and they would connect me to all the other artists. Sofia [Gallisá Muriente] & Natalia [Lassalle-Morillo] from Puerto Rico, I met because of the research. Sofia was part of Beta-Local, which is a big project space and residency program in Puerto Rico. She was one of the three directors, and also an artist. Rodell Warner, I met through Christopher Cozier, also.

Nadia Huggins is from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and I didn't visit the island during the research, but I had met her because she was one of the two founders of ARC Magazine, which was, for several years, a magazine on artists in the Caribbean. She founded that together with Holly Bynoe, who's a curator now living in Barbados. So I know her, and followed her work, and I met her on another island one time. I thought the link with her was very apparent because when I did the research for Taiwan, I realized from the thirteen countries, four of the countries still recognizing Taiwan are actually in the Caribbean: St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Haiti. In St. Kitts and St. Lucia, I didn't really find a video artist I could present but I therefore, then, outside of the publication, decided to present Nadia's work. Taiwan is also heavily investing in St. Vincent, in fishery and agriculture, Nadia's work and the water photography and the videos, I thought was a nice link of presenting her.

**GSY:** You spent quite a bit of time in Haiti as well, has it been difficult for you to watch it's....

**SD:** Yes, I found Haiti was the most difficult. Certainly being from the Netherlands, almost an obnoxious rich country, if you compare it to Haiti, and also being a colonial power – to see there's ten million people, and the world has so much money, you wonder – why can't we solve this? Why do we allow for this to be like that?

It was very hard, actually. If Maksaens comes, maybe you guys can talk with him about it. I spent six weeks there, same like Taiwan, not enough to really grasp what's going on. But it was painful, really.

**GSY:** You had a really inspiring quote that, “despite the abject poverty, people were still finding ways to be creative.”

**SD:** That was the positive that I found. Even in the Netherlands, we say that art is very important, and that sometimes people question why. In Haiti I realized, this is really why. It's a language to talk about what's going on.

What I found is, if given a choice – I think that's the quote, right? If given a choice, if you could buy a little bit of rice and salt on it, or you can buy a little bit of rice and a pencil, that's the choice artists would make, because then they could find a piece of carton and make an artwork that actually inspires to have a dialogue about what's going on. That was very inspiring, actually.

You see that through the Caribbean, we have so much available to us to make art, and in the Caribbean everything needs to be imported. And of course, not all the islands have a lot of money. So they make art with everything they

can find. It's so creative, they invent all these things. We've sort of forgotten that. We feel almost as if you can't make art if all the materials and equipment isn't available.

There's another interesting story on Cuba, where Rene Rodriguez said to an artist who said, "but how can I make art? We have nothing!" He brought him into a room where there was all this old paper, gave him a pencil, and said, "Now, you can make art." I think that is really beautiful. That professor, Rene, is mentioned in the book *Formosa Exchange* from Huang Chong Kai, a Taiwanese writer, who writes about one day when all Taiwanese people wake up in Cuba. I thought that was a nice connection.

**PS:** I really love the title of your book, *Entangled Species*. "Entangled" is such a specific social and scientific phenomenon that occurs, and I'm just interested in the significance of that title and why you chose it.

**SD:** I think we are not aware enough about how we cannot live without one another. That's why I said species, because sometimes people ask me, "Why not entangled humans?" But we are part of such a larger ecosystem, we cannot even breathe without it, we would die. For me, that was very important, and in fragile economies and in countries like the Caribbean, you become even more aware of it. It's the same in Taiwan, you have earthquakes, hurricanes, typhoons – you're an island, and you're isolated, what will you do when you cannot have info? It becomes so apparent how entangled we really are. It was a very deliberate title.

**PS:** Just to wrap things up, what is the significance of bringing *NEXUS* to Taiwan and putting Caribbean artists in conversation with the local Taiwanese art scene?

**SD:** I think Taiwan and the Caribbean share certain similarities, and of course there's also lots of differences. I, in general, like to connect people, because I think, for me, having been able to travel this much, it has widened my frame of reference, my perspective, and I learned so many things I wouldn't have learned had I stayed in Holland. I think this would be an introduction, like you look at something you have an entrance point to, and it's sort of recognizable. But then it's different. It will start the dialogue, and maybe you can learn from each other, maybe you want to change something in your society, what were the mistakes you made, what were the failures, but what were the successes. Making connections is very important, period.

**GSY:** *NEXUS* will open from the 6th of May and run until the 16th of July. We'd like to thank you for coming to our podcast, and talk with us.

**SD:** Can I also promote the talk I'm doing with Nobuo, Sunday May 7th between 2-4, so it would be great for students to visit before and listen to our talk, and you can ask us lots of questions. I hope everybody comes.

**PS:** Thank you so much Sasha, it was really great to hear how much compassion you have for the artists from the Caribbean and for fostering these intercultural conversations, very inspiring!

**SD:** Thank you, and now, a new chapter! (laughs)