



Re-Making *Fractal Engagement*: 6 Perspectives

Charles Campbell and Nicole Smythe-Johnson



Photo by Marvin Bartley.

On Monday April 21, 2014 [Charles Campbell](#) unveiled *Actor Boy: Fractal Engagement*, a commission of the *EN MAS': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean Project*. Campbell recruited the support of project assistant [Deborah Anzinger](#) and community leader [Kemar Black](#) (both artists in their own right) to develop a concept for a community parade that would complicate the boundary between spectator and participant. He invited two dozen arts practitioners and enthusiasts from Jamaica's proverbial "uptown"—a geographic and social

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category denoting Kingston's middle and upper classes—to participate in a procession “downtown”—those parts of the city “south of Crossroads,” plagued by poverty, garrison politics, and gang violence.

Campbell had just returned to Jamaica to take up a post as Chief Curator of the [National Gallery of Jamaica](#), itself located downtown on Kingston's once luxurious waterfront. After years of exhibiting in Jamaica and the region while living in Canada, he was now taking his engagement to a new level with a key role at the oldest and largest public art museum in the English-speaking Caribbean.



Photo by Marvin Bartley.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Campbell; the curators of *En Mas'*, independent curator [Claire Tancons](#) and art historian [Krista Thompson](#); Kemar Black, an artist from the Matthew's Lane community; and Natasha Levy, one of the invited participants in the procession. The interview took place on May 1, 2014, and was organized by [New Local Space \(NLS\)](#) as part of *IN*, a series of monthly online art discussions, which are broadcast via Google Hangouts and archived on [NLS' YouTube page](#).

NICOLE SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Tell me about *Fractal Engagement*. What were some of your preoccupations in developing this project?

CHARLES CAMPBELL: This project developed while I was researching another project for the National Gallery on muralists and street artists from downtown Kingston. I was going into a lot of inner city communities, and one thing maybe not all of the audience will know is that Kingston is a *very* divided city in terms of uptown and downtown. A lot of people move back and forth between those borders but still there are some pretty defined boundaries.



Photo by Marvin Bartley.

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So I was really interested in how the artists involved in the project transgressed the boundaries within their communities. Even within uptown and downtown there are gang and political boundaries and so on, and it was really interesting for me how the artists kind of had a pass to move across these.

That was the kernel that inspired the project, and I started thinking a lot about the uptown-downtown boundary and developed the project around ideas of changing the relationship between those two communities.

The project started out as a procession in the quite notorious community of Matthew's Lane in downtown Kingston. It continued through the market and into a building in Luke Lane to a burnt out space above a bar. There I did another element of the performance. That's it, in a nutshell.

The project was built around disorienting the audience and confusing the uptown-downtown boundary.



Photo by Marvin Bartley.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Kemar, I'd like to hear from you as well because you're a member of the Matthew's Lane community, and you were definitely a major link in developing this project. Can you tell us a little about the neighbourhood where the performance took place and how you met Charles and came to be involved in this way?

KEMAR BLACK: It boils down to what Charles was saying, he was researching a project for the National Gallery of Jamaica and me being one of the artists, I took him on a neighbourhood tour and explained certain things to him, and he just got a vision off of the walk that we made, and he came to me with the idea.

The neighbourhood...well everybody knows downtown Kingston. Jamaica is one of the murder capitals of the world and downtown Kingston is the reason. It's kind of an underworld in Jamaica, because everybody knows the whole...everybody knows what really goes on downtown. The crime rate and the poverty and the whatever, so most people really don't cross those lines because the whole Jamaica is kinda racist. Not saying black and white racist but more of a rich and poor, because a black man in Jamaica can have money and make himself a

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white man. But at the end of the day, that separation is kinda what Charles was looking at: how do you bridge the gap? He brought the two communities together. Through that, the downtown people and the uptown people got a chance to see that everybody is the same and everything is the same.



Photo by Marvin Bartley.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Charles I know that you paint and work in sculpture, in addition to performance. In fact, *Fractal Engagement* is a part of the broader *Actor Boy* series. How does your artistic process differ when you work on performance pieces?

CAMPBELL: Its very different, in my studio practice I spend a lot of time doing work that nobody ever sees. I'm quite particular about what actually goes in front of the public, and I believe in that process of making mistakes and trying things, but in my studio it's a private process. With performance, especially this performance, there were so many moving parts and elements that were kind of beyond my control, and so that attempt to control and find that perfect aesthetic form was impossible. I had to embrace the idea of letting go and allowing it to happen.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Yes, because there were a number of other performers as well...

CAMPBELL: Exactly, it wasn't just me performing, in fact my performance I think was one of the less significant things about the whole orchestrated event. It was the community participation that was much more important than what I did in that little space.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: And then Kemar, what do you think? You worked with Charles on developing this, you bought into this idea, do you think it was successful?

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Photo by Marvin Bartley.

BLACK: I think it was successful on more levels than one because for the community alone, the people dem who were involved, it just showed them a different way of viewing life. People only believe in a wha' dem see, and most of the time when we a push certain projects or we a try get the community involved, it hard to get people motivated off of just words. So now dem seeing a project like this and where it go, right now people feel lined up for the next project. It's more than successful, everybody is ready for the new world right now.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Natasha if you could chime in on this too. You've been hearing some of the organizers of the project talk about what their intentions were in organizing it.

NATASHA LEVY: I think perspective always gives you a different path to answer a question. I think before going into this, if you had asked me what my feeling was when I left. I would have said I left feeling disoriented and questioning what exactly was happening. Now that I'm hearing what Charles' intention was for the entire thing in terms of changing the relationship between the uptown-downtown boundaries, disorienting, having that sort of practical engagement, I actually think the space that I was left in proves that it was successful. If you understand what I mean...I think having received the invitation and read the words, I had a much stronger connection to the process after I had it and went back and re-read the invitation.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Natasha, could you summarize what was required of you as a participant, and tell us why you decided to participate?

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Photo by Marvin Bartley.

LEVY: Let me start with the last question first. One of the things I took on for 2014 was being more active in the art community here in Jamaica. So when the opportunity came for me to participate in this thing called a *Fractal Engagement*, I was like, “All right! I don’t know what it’s about but I’m happy I was invited.” So I jumped in with an open mind. That was why I decided to do it.

So the invitation says that you are invited to participate in this procession downtown, but I didn’t quite connect those words with what I was going to experience. So we get on the bus and we arrive downtown and we start walking down Matthew’s Lane, and we’re not really sure what’s going on, and nobody is really giving you any information but we’re all moving towards having this *Fractal Engagement*. And along comes a coconut man, and we’re not so sure what’s going on. Is this the welcome to the community? Are we stopping to drink a coconut? Should we stop to drink a coconut? Are we going to be late for our *Fractal Engagement*? These are all the questions going through my mind, and I’m very much in this curious, excited, apprehensive space. And Mr. Coconut Man starts to perform for us, so you have to stop and take in his performance while you’re drinking your coconut.

Okay, so I guess we’re moving now and we’re moving, and walking and walking, and I’m thinking, “All right, when is...where exactly is this *Fractal Engagement* going to take place?” And we turn the corner and start walking down another lane, and we’re taking in the sights and sounds and smells, and then I realize that we have a music man following us. And I’m like, “All right, this is a really welcoming community. We’re going to have music on our way to this *Fractal Engagement* thing.” This is interesting, but I’m still apprehensive. I’m a little nauseous because I had motion sickness coming down on the bus, and the sights and the smells are not really helping, but we’re moving along. And we come out of the lane, and the music man is still following us, and the coconut man is still there, and all of a sudden Mr. Bike Man appears, and he’s showing us his stunts, and I’m thinking, “Wow, okay great, but where’s Charles? Where’s this *Fractal Engagement* thing that we’re supposed to be going to?” And *nobody* is saying anything to you. *Nobody* is explaining. You were being nudged in a direction, and that was *it*. You were left on your own. And you could sense that people were in different spaces; some people are like, “All right, well I’m going to record every inch of this thing. I’m gonna take pictures until I

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cannot possibly take anymore pictures.” And some people are just kind of walking along, taking it in. And others have broken up into groups. I’m waiting for this *Fractal Engagement* thing, because that’s what I signed up for.

So we make it out to the market area and we’re ushered around the corner, down an alleyway, and finally there’s Charles! This *Fractal Engagement* is now going to begin! And how I know it’s going to begin is because he’s dressed in white, he’s wearing a mask, and he’s handing out masks to everybody. Up to this point I’ve moved through different spaces—curious, excited, apprehensive, a bit disconnected. Because I don’t often go downtown, this is not an area that I’m accustomed to. I’m curious about what’s going on here, but we stop for Mr. Dancer. And now I’m thinking, “Okay, there’s a lot of entertainment on the way. They’re really making us feel welcome on the way to this *Fractal Engagement*.” And so we politely watched the dancer. People are wearing their masks, and I’m hot and disoriented, but I’m excited because clearly it’s about to begin. And we go around a corner, down another lane, through a bar and up these stairs. And as I’m going up the stairs with the mask on my head I can’t really see a lot, but I’m thinking this is where I’ll have this *Fractal Engagement*.

And we get into the space, can’t really clearly see, and we’re told to stand in a specific place. And my spot was facing the wall with my back to the audience, to the piece. So, I’m facing the corner between the wall and the steps we came up. And I’m feeling very isolated because I don’t know what’s happening behind me, but clearly this *Fractal Engagement* is about to begin.

And so I’m standing there, and I’m standing there, and I’m standing there, and I’m standing there...and I’m standing there...and I’m standing there. And no one is saying anything, and I’m really trying to honour the process. I’m really trying to be there and be in the moment, and be with what it is, and be with what it is not. At some point, Charles comes over. He’s not speaking and he’s painting on the floor. And we’re standing there for a really long time, and no one is saying anything to you, and you are left to your own thoughts. And I manage to sneak a peak around, and people are moving, fidgeting, some on their phones, posting to Instagram, I’m sure. And I take a picture of the spot I’m standing in because that’s my experience. It’s isolated and disjointed and disconnected. And so the piece ends, and how I know that it’s over is I hear somebody murmur, “Thank you, we’re finished, it’s over now.” And I’m like, “That’s it? That’s the end of the piece? What was this all about?”

I will say that for me it did not end there. It ended a few days later. Because it took me quite a while to really process what I experienced and what it was all about. And I think I’m still processing, to be honest. But it was a wave of different emotions, and so if Charles’ intention was to really stir up those sorts of feelings around a community that you’re not normally a part of and to weave you into their world, I think it worked. For me, it might have been different if I knew upfront that the characters I came across were a part of the experience. I think I would

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have honored them with being more present, if you know what I mean. Because in my mind, this is just entertainment on the way to the experience.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Thank you, Natasha. You gave a really clear picture of what happened. I was also a part of the performance and I had some of the same thoughts as you, but I walked away thinking carefully about why I decided to allocate attention in the way that I did. Questioning myself about that, which sounds like the processing that you're also doing. There was another incident towards the end, when we were getting on the bus. I don't know if you and Kemar remember that, with the police? For me that certainly made the whole experience more poignant.

BLACK: Well, the whole downtown Kingston thing I was explaining earlier with the underworld, the police are always on edge because...I guess they live in fear of the system that downtown Kingston is known for, like the Zeeks regime, and the Early Bird regime and even the Shower mandem on di West, Dudus and whoever else is over there. Because where these communities are, nobody fears police. So police they have a certain energy that they push out towards the people, because our behavior in the communities is just full of rebels, just revolutionaries. The community and the police don't get along because of history. And when the police don't understand what's going on, it makes it worse. A lot of the police don't have a lot of education. So when the Jamaican Constabulary Force put a whole lot of gangsters in the police force and giving them licensed guns, it's like putting a time bomb on the street.



Photo by Marvin Bartley.

So they're seeing the crowd—I don't know if everybody that was involved in the performance noticed the police presence—but usually you won't have that much light-skinned and white people walking in a pack in downtown Kingston. Most of the police are very well-trained extortionists or beggars. That's what I call them, because they can't extort nobody, they can only beg you. And at the end of the day I think that's why they came out: they thought the bar was doing something, and they came to put police pressure on the bar. And one of them was actually going to back into me in the crowd, and so when I touched the car, he jumped out very aggressive.

So I tried to put a space between me, him, and the crowd. Because the police in Jamaica, I don't know how police are in the rest of the world, but in Jamaica they have assault rifles and

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they use them to police the street. Even if they run into a baby mother and a child they have an M16 or an AR15. So when I brought him across the street, and he asked me, “Who hit the car?” I explained to him, “I’m the one who hit the car, because you were gonna run into me and the people.” And he said, “I’m gonna smack the shit out of you.” And I said, “Listen officer, if you smack me, that will be the last person you smack, because you’re gonna kill me today, or you’re gonna die.” I done made an oath: I’m gonna live as a man and I’m gonna die as a man. So any time a man comes to me with certain kinda words, I’m gonna answer accordingly. So when I said that, and he looked across the street, I guess he realized the situation wasn’t in his best interest. Right now a whole lot of them are under investigation, and he just chose to keep his calm, which was a blessing. I guess the crowd kinda saved my life because police, I don’t know if people understand Jamaican police...very dangerous people.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: Natasha were you aware of the situation?



Photo by Marvin Bartley.

LEVY: Yes I was. I saw the white vehicle reversing really quickly towards us, and I saw when he [Kemar] hit the car, and I saw when the policeman jumped out and grabbed him and pulled him across the street, and then all of the voices of the people who were standing by the bus started calling out, “Let him go, Mr. Policeman!” “He hasn’t done anything wrong!” “He was trying to save us!” Etc. etc. And I was very aware that the outcome could have been very different, had the group of voices been very different. For me this was a pivotal point in that whole downtown experience, because I’m very clear that our nice-sounding, little, uptown voices—coming from the lawyers amongst us and all the nice corporate people amongst us—I’m very clear that in that moment that was what made the difference, and that, to me, just showed me how disconnected I am from...it was a real turning point for me, because this is stuff you see on the news, and experiencing it first hand was, I have no words. And then in the middle of all of this, there’s a market woman, and she’s giving commentary, she’s saying, “I’m glad you all are here to witness this, because this happens all the time, and if you were not here it would have turned out differently.”

And I think it was a really decisive moment in terms of making that connection, or shining a light on the divide between uptown and downtown. I thought to myself, if the procession was granted immunity to walk freely through the community, I felt at that moment it was reversed, and in some way we granted immunity in the situation.

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CAMPBELL: Obviously that was not planned, and it was interesting for me, hearing about that afterwards and thinking about it. Kemar mentioned the very heavy police presence that was there on the day. I had been very consciously constructing a safe space for this uptown crowd to come downtown and walk through the community and have a different experience than they would expect to. But I don't think I fully took into consideration the fact that the people taking as much, if not more, risk is the downtown community because they are inherently more at risk in Jamaica from police mistreatment. That's just one of the things I've been thinking about in my assessment of the project. It's been a shift for me, making me realize how many assumptions I go into these things with. Even as I'm trying to break that up in the construction of the events, I'm always being confronted with that in this project.

SMYTHE-JOHNSON: It's interesting hearing everybody talk about the project, particularly what you've said, Charles, about going from your studio practice where you have all of this control over the finer details. And Natasha, as well, with this sense that she didn't really know what was going on, she was just out there. For me, that was definitely what stuck with me: this sense that I had to just work with the situation that was presented to me, and be very nimble in that. I think the situation with the police and Kemar was one more episode of that. I remember walking through earlier, before that happened, and police officers were saying to us, "You don't want us to accompany you?" And we were saying, "No, we're fine."

Charles Campbell is a Jamaican born multidisciplinary artist, writer and curator. His work has been exhibited widely including at the Havana Biennial, the Brooklyn Museum, the Art Museum of the Americas, the Santo Domingo Biennial, the Cuenca Biennial, Alice Yard, the Biennale d'art contemporain de la Martinique, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Puerto Rico, the Houston Museum of African American Culture, the Contemporary Art Centre, New Orleans, Rideau Hall, Ottawa, the Art Gallery of Mississauga and Duke University. He has written for numerous publications including *Frieze Magazine* and *ARC Magazine*, a Caribbean arts journal. Campbell holds an MA in Fine Art from Goldsmith College and is the former Chief Curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica. He currently lives and works in Canada.

Nicole Smythe-Johnson is a writer and independent curator, living in Kingston, Jamaica. She has written for *ARC* magazine, *Caribbean Beat*, *Jamaica Journal*, and a number of international publications. She curated three exhibitions in 2014 (*Transforming Spaces*, *Float*, and *Trajectories*) and was a part of the 2014 *Jamaica Biennial* curatorial team.