

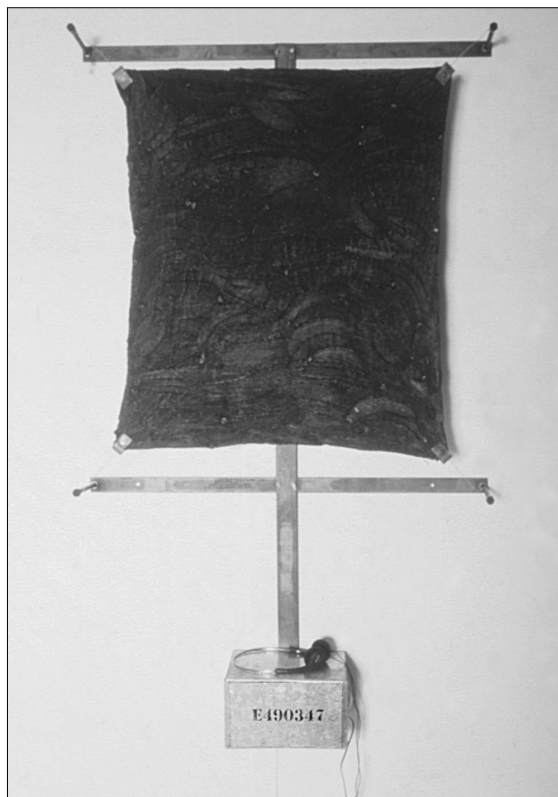


CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES IN PRACTICE

*Social sculpture and connective aesthetics:
Shelley Sacks's 'Exchange values'*

Ian Cook *et al.*





They're in your face. Banana skins. Dried. Cured. Blackened. Flattened. Sewn together in a panel. Stretched. Taut. On a frame. Right in your face. And it smells. It's rich. Gorgeous. You can't move too far away. Get too distanced. If you want to keep the headphones on. The ones that are attached to the little metal box below the panel and the frame. The one with the number on. E490347.

The wire is pretty short. And you're listening to someone talking. His name is Vitalis Emmanuel. He's a farmer. A banana farmer. From St Lucia in the Windward Islands. The islands that, along with Jamaica, Belize and Suriname, supply UK consumers with two-thirds of the 5 billion bananas they get through in a year.¹ There's a war going on. A banana war. It threatens his way of life. And you're intimately involved in that. Although you may not fully realize it.

E490347. That number is his number. It's printed on the box. The box that protects the bananas that he grows on their long journey to the shelves of your local supermarket or greengrocer. You might take one of his hands home. Peel the fruits of his labour. Eat them. Enjoy them. Nice. The smell from the skins could be taking you right there. But they're his skins, from his hand. Dried, cured, blackened, flattened, stitched, stretched and hung in front of you. Taken from a box of his bananas. They had been given out to people passing a Body Shop in Nottingham. On the condition that they ate them there and then. And

gave back the skins. In return they were given a card. On it was printed the number from the box. E490347 was one of them.

Back. In your face. He's talking. On a six-minute loop. He's asking you – yes YOU! – some questions. They're simple and profound. At the same time. He's raving. About money. And his skin. He demands to know, 'What is money?' He explains, 'I've been working for 50 years, and 30 years ago I used to get up at 6 in the morning and go to bed at 8 at night and earn that much money. And I could feed my children! Now I still work the exact same hours. I get up at 6 o'clock in the morning, and I, and I earn that much money. And I can't feed my children. So where are these guys? Where are these guys who are deciding what money is? This can't be my work – this money – 'cause I do the same work! The same banana. The same ground. So you tell me, *what is money?* I haven't been to school. I don't know what these guys are doing.' He's shouting now: '*Where are they? Tell me, who are these guys? How can they decide what money is? There must be people there, where you come from, who are deciding what money is!*'² Can you answer those questions? Would you ask them? Where you come from.

You take the headphones off. Disengage. Look around the rest of the room. You're in a gallery space. A white box type. It has to be. The skins are too delicate to be in any other space. They need TLC. Watching over by trained staff. As do the tapes on which Mr Emmanuel and 19 other St Lucian banana growers have had their voices recorded, edited and wired into this space. They, too,



can speak to you. Ask you questions. About the connections between their lives and your own. Through their headphones. Connected to the small metal boxes with their numbers on. Under the panels made from their skins. From their hands. Men's hands. Women's hands. Children's hands. Around the room. Twenty of them. You can try to imagine what their lives are like. As they tried to imagine what your life was like, when they were thinking about how to address you.

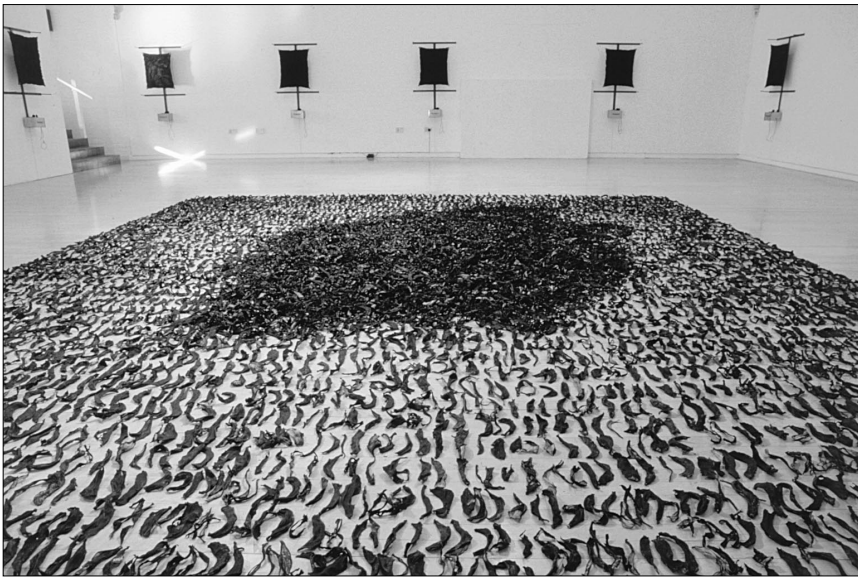
They're talking to other people in the room right now. A young woman stands five or six feet to your left. She's wired into another banana farmer. Questioning. 'Who *is* this "British Housewife"? We keep being told about the "British Housewife"! How does she know what a banana's supposed to be?' She's the person 'forcing' the grower to use more and more of those expensive agro-chemicals. That kill the worms in the soil. That make the fruits look nicer. Whatever that means. Isn't she? Across the room, another farmer is telling another visitor about the past. About British imperialism and its aftermath. About slavery. This person lives out the pleasure and the pain of growing bananas. 'We *love* bananas. And, because we're so powerless, the government wants us to go into tourism. We don't want to be slaves again. Cleaning people's shoes. We've done that now for 300 years.' But that's what many will be going back to. If they cannot sell their lovingly tended bananas to 'the British housewife'. Or her partner, her brother, her sister, her child. Whoever you are. They think that you should know this. Think about this. Of course, tourism brings in the 'top dollar'. But that's the dollar that stays at the top. Not like the banana dollar. That gets to poorer St Lucians. 'From the ground up.'

These farmers are talking to the people who eat what they grow. You! Probably. In that public space. They haven't had the chance to do that before. Most tourists who go to St Lucia don't want to know. Or it's not part of their itinerary, anyway. On their romantic stay on this 'paradise isle'. Many only come for a few hours. On the cruise ships. They get served some lovely bananas. But these ones are usually grown elsewhere. In Venezuela, for example. So-called 'dollar bananas'. They're cheaper to grow there. On large plantations. Economies of scale. That's it. Windward Island bananas aren't cheap, you know. On the 'open market'. Under 'free trade' conditions. The big US banana companies don't think that it's 'fair' that Windward and other ACP bananas are imported to the EU on preferential terms. From countries that used to be parts of some member states' empires. The US government has approached the World Trade Organization for an adjudication on this matter.

Things have moved on since Mr Emmanuel and the other farmers were asked to have their say in 1996. In April 1999 the WTO made the EU pay the US \$191 million in damages for this 'unfair' trading. The US drew up a list of European products on which it was going to impose a 100 per cent import tariff. On companies making cashmere clothes. Bath products. Cartons used to house cosmetic products. By Revlon. Elizabeth Arden. Calvin Klein. Plenty more. And only the cashmere companies were bailed out by the UK government. The rest were in trouble. They were losing contracts. And thousands of people were going to lose their jobs. In England. In Scotland. In plenty of other parts of Europe. In France,

handbag-makers were to be hit.³ This may have touched you. As a consumer. As a worker. Perhaps you are both. And more besides.

It is bound to touch Mr Emmanuel. He works hard to grow the bananas that you eat. He loves growing bananas. You may love eating the bananas that he grows. You've had a relationship based on bananas for longer than you know. And that's simple enough. But this 'banana war' isn't. It's not just about bananas. No way. Plenty more people, issues and ways of imagining the relationships between people are tied in, and the connections seem to be spreading by the day. 'Fair trade' rules were to be discussed at the WTO meeting in Seattle. In November 1999. Plenty more people, issues and ways of imagining the world got tangled up there. And that's an understatement. Those 20 panels made of skins. Those 20 headphones. The voices of those 20 banana farmers. Talking to you. That's the tip of an iceberg that's bigger than you could imagine. And what's on the floor in the centre of the gallery space suggests this. It is covered with dried, cured, and blackened banana skins. Set out in a rectangle. But no sewing. No numbers. No headphones. No idea whose hands they came from. They're loose. About 10 000 of them in all. Invisible lives. Mute fruit.



Things have moved on in the 'banana wars'. Since Mr Emmanuel had his views recorded. But that doesn't mean that the installation is out of date. It's a sculpture that's alive. And you're keeping it alive. You're part of its growth. The way that it's changing. This installation isn't the final product. There can't be one. Because it's all about perceptions. Picturings. Heightened awarenesses. Five sense and more besides. Embodied knowledges. Things that are hard to describe. But can be powerfully felt. Connectivity. Collectivity. Connective aesthetics. That's what's being sculpted here. They fold in and leak out. It's a social sculpture. Made out of dialogues and things. Visitors like you are finally meet-

ing people that they've known for a long time. In a way. Mr Emmanuel and others. People at the back of their minds. People who've done nice things for them. Out of view. Very often under harsh conditions. Abstract processes are made more intimate here. More personal. Riveting. Moving. Rich. Sweet. Warm. Energetic. Edgy. Engaging. Distant. But touching. There can be a terrible beauty. In pulled skins. Of people's lives. Of political economic processes. Usually they're prised apart. Kept apart. Necessarily so. But they're obviously one and the same thing. Here and now. 'The raw flesh of our disconnectedness made visible'?⁴ In your face. And does this sculpture possess (or produce) a kind of magic? Like the 'magic' that is the commodity fetish? The magic that disconnects? By attaching stories to things on sale? Stories that are absolutely nothing like the ones these farmers can tell you? The adventures of 'Bananaman'! Or the female version. Miss Chiquita. With fruit on her head! Singing!! Like Carmen Miranda!!! What's that all about!?

So what's this 'Exchange Values' installation doing, then? De-fetishizing the fruit? Re-fetishizing it? Something else? You tell me. Because – whatever it's doing – it's up to you. This is not a didactic piece. It's not polemical. It's not art with ideas hung on it. It's ideas and things which have grown together. Have been shaped by the countless people involved in its life. And it's not dead yet. There's some explanation about that in the gallery space. It's written on part of a wall. And in the catalogues you can help yourself to if you like. A story of how this installation was put together. This isn't about connective aesthetics. It *is* connective aesthetics. An emerging, expanded process. Drawing in and on all kinds of connections.⁵ It's not Shelley Sacks's creative work. Alone. It's the creative work of all of those who have been in touch with these skins. In an immediate sense, that's Shelley Sacks, the people who helped her to give out those bananas in Nottingham and to collect the skins, the people who helped to dry, cure and stitch those skins into panels, the 20 St Lucian banana growers, and all those people – politicians, business people, extension officers and others – who helped her to find them. Add to that the representative groups campaigning for changing relationships between producers and consumers. Of bananas and plenty of other things. Like Banana Link.⁶ Like those wanting to promote the growing of organic bananas in the Windward Islands. And plenty more. Including you, and me. It's all over the place. And it's not her creative work. It's their creative work. *Our* creative work. Collective. And connective. Creating a reflective space. A space of possibility. Where connections can be seen. Felt. Thought through. Perceptions that can make a difference. Maybe. Somehow.

It has worked for some. The coordinator of a farmers' sustainable development group in the Caribbean visited the installation when it was set up in the Brixton Art Gallery. In South London. In May 1998. He was on his way to Maastricht for an important meeting. He came to a forum at the gallery. And he said, 'One thing we've really learned from this project is that we are artists, 'cause we used to know what an artist meant. Then we thought artist meant in the kind of western idea: making pictures on walls. But now we know, again, "artist" means bigger than that. It means we can *shape our world!*' Through social sculpture.⁷

Notes

- ¹ See e.g. G. Myers, 'Banana plan threatens to crush Caribbean trade; Guardian, 26 Aug. 1996, p. 14; D. Dombey, 'Brussels finds bananas a slippery case', *Financial Times*, 16 Jan. 1998, p. 4, and the collection of articles pertaining to the 'banana wars' available as a 'Special report' at www.newsunlimited.co.uk.
- ² This article could be described as an 'imaginative engagement' with the catalogues accompanying the 'Exchange values' installations (at Nottingham Trent University's Bonington Gallery in Oct. 1996 and at Warwick University's Centre for the Study of Women & Gender in July 1999), with Shelley Sacks herself (at Oxford Brookes University's School of Art, Printing and Music in Feb. 2000) and with some of her written work. For reasons which will become apparent, this is not, and cannot be, a 'report on' the installation. It's an extension, an expansion, of it. All quotations in the text are taken from a tape-recorded conversation with Shelley Sacks, the full text of which is available at www.bham.ac.uk/geography/research/human/staff/shelley-sacks.html. Huge thanks go to Shelley – and also to Jo van Every, Phil Crang and Catherine Nash – for helping to get me into this installation, and to Shelley again for permission to publish the plates.
- ³ See the 'banana wars' articles at www.newsunlimited.co.uk entitled 'US claim banana war victory', 'Banana war victims make plea' and 'US claim banana war victory'.
- ⁴ This phrase has been taken from a performance by Shelley Sacks entitled 'Social sculpture: re-remembering, re-envisioning, renewing' at the Seminar on Art and Public Need at UWE Bristol, 21 Nov. 1996 (curated by Jaqui Swift), and published in the summer 1997 edn of *Drawing fire 1* (Journal of the National Association for Fine Art education) (1997).
- ⁵ The following extract from the installation catalogue gives a flavour of this story: 'Although central to this project there are obviously environmental, social, political concerns . . . [it is not simply] an informative, documentary show . . . the artwork is the sum total of imaginative work involved in all the discussion and exchanges throughout its development . . . and the ongoing imaginative reflections, discussions and exchanges that people (including the farmers) have been (and are) drawn into . . . on the role of imagination in re-envisioning our world, in re-thinking agriculture, progress, value, money, and our global socio-economic structures. . . . The work (in its ongoing form) tries to give us a sense that entering imaginatively into our world is part of an artistic process . . . that our ability to make changes depends on being able to picture what is going on in our lives and our world, and to re-envision alternatives. [It is a] living art . . . a large scale social sculpture that lifts the aesthetic out of the specialist world of art into a realm in which we all have the possibility to become artists: social sculptors, engaged in the shaping of our world': Shelley Sacks, 'A banana is not an easy thing', in Robert Ayers, ed., *Exchange values: images of invisible lives* (Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, 1996), pp. 4–8, quotation assembled from p. 8.
- ⁶ 'Banana Link is working with other organizations in Britain to move towards a more sustainable banana economy, and has close relationships with the Windward Island Farmers' Association and the Co-ordination of Banana Workers' Unions of Latin America. Banana Link's activities range from publishing a Banana Trade News Bulletin to organizing a float at the Notting Hill Carnival, from classroom workshops to meetings with companies': Alistair Smith, Banana Link coordinator, writing in the 1999 exhibition catalogue.
- ⁷ See www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/apm/social_sculpture/exchangevalues/index.html for more information about the 'Exchange values' installation and the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University.