

Residency Report – ICOM UK Bursary (2025)

Towards Lakou Bô Kannal: Rethinking Exhibition-Making from Caribbean Cultures

Name: Alinta Sara

Location: Martinique and Dominica

Period: 18 June – 5 August 2025

This residency was undertaken with the support of an ICOM UK bursary.

1. Original Project Framework

The residency built on the project *Arts visuels et oralité dans le contexte foyalais*, initially conceived as a curatorial residency exploring the relationship between oral traditions and contemporary visual practices in Martinique. The project was grounded in the understanding that oral transmission remains central to Caribbean cultural identity, yet is often insufficiently addressed within conventional exhibition and museum frameworks.

Drawing on my curatorial practice and my work with Bokantaj, the residency was designed to engage with local cultural actors through dialogue, shared reflection, and participatory exchange, in collaboration with Studio Lumina and the cultural collective Tambou Bô Kannal (TBK). The aim was to explore how oral traditions, embodied knowledge, and collective memory might inform contemporary curatorial thinking and exhibition-making.

2. Evolution of the Residency Focus

As the residency unfolded, the focus evolved in response to the realities of the cultural contexts encountered. Rather than approaching oral traditions as material to be collected or archived, the residency shifted towards a reflection on transmission itself: how knowledge circulates, how practices are sustained, and how visibility can be negotiated without extraction or institutional displacement.

This evolution led to a broader curatorial question: how might exhibition-making be rethought from Caribbean cultural logics that privilege orality, performance, rhythm, and collective presence, rather than object-centred display? This shift represents a deepening of the original proposal, aligning more closely with ethical and community-led approaches to intangible heritage.

3. Residency Context and Working Approach

The main research period took place in Martinique between 18 June and 5 August 2025, following an adjustment to the initial timetable. The residency adopted a practice-led and relational approach, centred on sustained engagement, dialogue, and shared reflection rather than formalised data collection.

This approach intentionally moved away from ethnographic models, privileging co-presence, conversation, and curatorial inquiry as tools for understanding cultural transmission and its implications for museum practice.

4. Institutional and Cultural Encounters

The residency opened with a framing meeting at Studio Lumina, followed by visits to the Station Culturelle and the exhibition Temwanyaj. This exhibition played an important role in shaping early reflections on off-site and context-responsive exhibition formats, understood as extensions of existing practices rather than their relocation into museum settings.

These encounters helped establish a framework for thinking about exhibition-making as a situated and relational process.



Exhibition Temwanyaj

5. Collaboration with Tambou Bô Kannal (TBK)

From 27 June 2025 onwards, sustained engagement was developed with the TBK collective, which became a central reference point for the residency. Through repeated visits and ongoing dialogue with musicians, dancers, facilitators, and organisers, the residency focused on intergenerational transmission, the role of bélè and the Creole language, and community-led approaches to cultural continuity.

Attendance at the group's end-of-year review and final performance highlighted the importance of these practices for younger generations and reinforced the idea that transmission occurs through repetition, shared experience, and collective responsibility. Rather than documenting practices, the focus was on understanding what these modes of transmission imply for exhibition-making and heritage interpretation.



@David Lanista Photographie



TBK end of year performance

@David Lanista Photographie



6. Broader Artistic, Educational, and Institutional Context

Alongside this work, the residency involved sustained engagement with the contemporary artistic landscape in Martinique through studio visits and exchanges with artists including Gabou, Médélice, Henri Tauliaut, Bruno Creuzet, and David Gumbs. These encounters offered insight into how contemporary practices engage with history, memory, landscape, and cultural identity, often operating across and beyond institutional frameworks.

A visit to the Campus Caribéen des Arts (CCA) further contributed to reflections on the role of institutional art education within the local context, particularly regarding how orality, embodied knowledge, and informal transmission are recognised—or marginalised—within academic structures.

In July, I facilitated a Meet the Curator session conceived as an open platform for dialogue with artists and local participants. Discussions focused on heritage, transmission, and the tension between institutional recognition and lived cultural practice, reinforcing the idea that transmission is built through relationship and shared speech rather than authoritative narratives.

I also attended a public discussion at the CCA entitled “La question décoloniale dans la programmation des musées : vers un changement de paradigme ?”, which provided a critical forum to reflect on decolonial approaches to museum programming, curatorial authority, and institutional responsibility.

Visits to the Musée d'ethnographie and the Archives départementales de la Martinique provided a contrasting institutional perspective. While the visit to the Musée d'ethnographie was informative—particularly regarding Amerindian histories and Kalinago cultures—it also revealed a disconnect between museum narratives and the continuity of these cultures in contemporary Martinican practice. The museum space was largely empty, and the displays offered limited engagement with living cultural presence, raising questions about how museums can unintentionally frame cultures as belonging solely to the past.

A similar tension emerged at the Archives départementales, where enquiries about audio or visual recordings related to TBK revealed very limited material, despite the collective's recognised cultural importance and the recent passing of one of its founding members. Discussions also referenced the recent death of Ina Césaire and the loss of some of her recorded materials, underscoring the vulnerability of oral and performative heritage within existing archival frameworks.

These encounters highlighted a broader structural issue: the reliance of heritage institutions on communities to donate or deposit their archives, rather than developing sustained, collaborative relationships to support documentation and preservation while practices are still actively transmitted. The residency reinforced the need for museums and archives to adopt more proactive, partnership-based models of engagement, aligned with ICOM's emphasis on community participation, shared authority, and ethical responsibility towards living heritage.



Ethnography museum Martinique



Studio visit Medelice



Studio visit Gabou



Studio visit Henri
Tauliaut & Bruno
Creuzet



Meet the curator



Visit Caribbean Campus of arts

7. Development of the Lakou Bô Kannal Project

The residency in Martinique concluded with a final exchange with TBK focused on how cultural practices might be made visible while remaining embedded within their living context. From this discussion emerged the project Lakou Bô Kannal. The project proposes a series of workshops with younger members of TBK, centred on dialogue with elders of the collective. These exchanges would be translated into visual and spatial forms, leading to a co-produced exhibition situated within the lakou itself, conceived as a processual and relational form rather than a conventional display.



End of residency discussion with
TBK members

8. Caribbean Extension: Residency in Dominica (supported by Studio Lumina)

These reflections were extended through a three-day residency in Dominica, during which I facilitated the workshop Voices in the Landscape: The Virtual Museum. This workshop explored the idea of a museum grounded in orality, objects, imagination, and landscape, reinforcing the concept of the museum as a living and relational archive.



Video excerpt from Voices in the Landscape
workshop, Dominica – August 2025

Outcomes and Relevance to ICOM

The residency supported my professional development as a curator working across museums, archives, and community contexts. Key outcomes include the development of Lakou Bô Kannal as a transferable community-based exhibition model, refined approaches to working with intangible heritage, and critical insights into ethical, non-extractive exhibition practices.

These outcomes align closely with ICOM's priorities around community engagement, intangible heritage, and inclusive museum practice.

Conclusion

This residency proposes a shift in exhibition-making from product to process, and from representation to relationship. It positions heritage as a living practice sustained by communities and calls for museum models that are flexible, situated, and culturally responsive. Supported by the ICOM UK bursary, this residency contributes to ongoing international discussions on decolonising museum practice and rethinking the role of exhibitions in relation to living cultures.



Studio Lumina Martinique

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