

[Introduction]

Welcome to *Cultura Circular in Conversation*, a series of audio interviews exploring art, culture, ecology, and climate change, produced by Julie's Bicycle with the support of the British Council. We've reached our final interview. First, we present a brief introduction to the project by María García Holley and Graciela Melitsko-Thornton, followed by a conversation between Paola Moreira Blasi and Yociel Marrero Báez, one of the organisers of the *Festival Internacional de Medio Ambiente de Cine del Caribe*, held in Isla Verde, Cuba.

[María]

Welcome to *Cultura Circular in Conversation*. I'm María García Holley, Director of Arts and Culture for the British Council in the Americas and the Caribbean. *Cultura Circular* was born in a post-pandemic context, as festivals were striving to regain their vitality after the global pause, while also facing the pressing challenge of climate change.

In this podcast, we explore the experiences, challenges, and inspirations of those transforming the cultural sector. Join us on this journey.

[Graciela]

And I'm Graciela Melitsko-Thornton, speaking from Julie's Bicycle in London, a non-profit organisation working to mobilise the arts and culture sectors around the climate, nature, and justice crises.

Specifically, in *Cultura Circular*, our role focuses on designing training activities, mentorships, and network collaborations to support festivals in their environmental efforts. We invite you to listen to this episode. Thank you very much.

[Paola]

Hello, how are you? I'm Paola, and I'd like to welcome you to a new episode of *Cultura Circular in Conversation*. Today I'm joined by Yociel from Cuba, so let me extend a warm welcome to him as well. Hello, Yociel, how are you?

[Yociel]

Very well, very well. I'm truly grateful that you've invited us to have this conversation and to discuss the issues that matter to us.

[Paola]

It's a pleasure to have you with us—thank you so much for joining.

[Yociel]

Thank you. And thank you for the important work you're doing.

[Paola]

Yociel, tell us: from which city are you working, and what are the social and artistic pillars of the *Festival de Cine Isla Verde*?

[Yociel]

Exactly. The *Festival Internacional de Cine y Medio Ambiente del Caribe Isla Verde* is based in the city of Nueva Gerona, on the Isla de la Juventud, which in some old maps still appears as Isla de Pinos. Within the island itself, we also work in towns such as Mella, La Fe, and Cocodrilo, which is a wonderful coastal community—this is the core.

But if you look closely, the festival is named *Festival de Cine y Medio Ambiente del Caribe* from the outset, because we focus strongly on insularity and how all Caribbean islands share similar challenges, issues, and wonders. The aim is to encourage film production by presenting and making environmental topics visible—not only from the often-catastrophic lens (which does have its place, because problems do need to be shown), but also by highlighting not just the problems, but the solutions and the spirit behind solving them. That is the founding intention—the primary drive of the festival—and we've always said we are a work-in-progress, and we intend to remain that way forever.

Now, to answer more specifically, the five pillars or core themes the festival was built upon are: responsible tourism, organic agriculture, corporate social responsibility—or, more precisely, corporate socio-environmental responsibility. We prefer to explicitly include the term “environmental,” even though environmental aspects are technically included within the broader concept of corporate social responsibility. So we say *socio-environmental* responsibility and the development of responsible businesses, where from the very start—from the business plan itself—it's already embedded as part of the business core, rather than added later as a response to trends.

And, as I mentioned, responsible tourism, and education as the most genuine and secure way of transmitting knowledge. In every edition of the festival, we aim for each conceptual discussion or proposal to also lead to practical action. That's one of our pillars: to speak and to act. Even if it's something small, it should have impact—people should see us not only talking, but doing. And when they see us doing, they'll want to join too.

[Paola]

How would you say the festival's approach to sustainability has evolved? And in that regard, could you also tell us what the current projects you're developing are based on?

[Yociel]

Look, it's really interesting—and this definitely has a social research component—because we're learning by doing. At least in my case, regardless of how many academic titles I or any of us might hold, I never stop learning.

In the first edition of the festival, everything—accepted and welcomed by the community and the local context—was based on a design we created ourselves, through the exchanges we had with our partners and collaborators. But by the second festival, we said: “Let's not become just another big event,” one of those that comes into a community, brings everyone in, invites celebrities, experts and specialists (and we've always had strong participation from renowned environmental scientists at the festival).

But we realised we were at risk of focusing on the issues we cared about, rather than the ones that mattered most to the community—not just what interested them, but what they were actually *experiencing*, the challenges they were facing, and that the wider Caribbean, as an insular region, was also facing.

So, it has gradually and organically evolved into involving the community in designing the themes and activities of the festival. That evolution has been very positive—truly wonderful—and it's something we need to deepen further in the future. Meaning, we need to run a process within the festival to listen, to understand, to feel what topics truly matter to the people, what they're experiencing, what they're living through.

That's one of the key aspects. Another thing we've aimed for since the beginning—and while we've made progress, we're not yet where we want to be—is ensuring the festival doesn't become just a one-week event each year where everyone shows up, talks, acts, and then disappears.

For us, the real challenge—and this is how Jorge Perugorria and I envisioned it from the start—is for the festival to happen *all year round*. The festival week is just the moment to summarise, to reflect on what we've done and what we're going to do (in addition to film screenings and audiovisual presentations). But throughout the year, there must be training sessions, ongoing activities, and engagement with different social sectors.

The challenge is, first and foremost, financial and organisational—how do we have the capacity to do something every month, at least? That's our proposal: to *do something*, regularly. Whether it's workshops on how to write a project proposal—we've always believed that empowering communities means teaching them how to identify their problems and write projects around them—but most importantly: learning by doing.

[Paola]

You're certainly keeping very active with all of this! Tell me, Yociel, how do you respond to the environmental challenges faced by the local community in particular, and Cuba in general?

[Yociel]

The obstacles, the challenges... they're always about how we can organise ourselves better—not so much to be efficient, but to be effective. That's always the question: how not to become just another festival, another conference, another workshop, another symposium, another summit. Instead, we aim for a more natural, human-scale exchange between people, to truly try again at transformation—but not with grand ambitions like “we're going to change the world.” No—it's about changing the reality of that particular community. And that's the challenge going forward: to systematise the processes we've developed so far.

As I mentioned, the festival has always had the defining feature of being an event in ongoing construction—constantly evolving in its original aims and in how we do things.

We're always listening, and we work with a certain flexibility—not only the flexibility that comes from culture and artistic expression, but also the kind that nature itself teaches us in how it responds to every phenomenon and event in life. That's something we've tried to internalise. But the fundamental challenge remains: to stay organised and ensure that even the smallest thing we do is truly effective.

[Paola]

Yociel, I'm curious to know what kind of innovative proposals you're incorporating, and how the *Cultura Circular* programme has helped drive these ideas forward.

[Yociel]

Innovative proposals—well, I'd say almost all of them are, even if that sounds a bit bold. From the very beginning, when we sat down and said, “Right, let's do this,” the idea was there. We had Jorge Perugorría, a globally recognised cultural figure, a man with a heart as big as the moon. But then came the question: how do we actually make it happen?

So, not out of snobbery or a need to be original, but because we genuinely wanted to carve out our own path, we decided not to simply replicate existing methods. That wasn't the goal. It's just that, if we're going to forge a path, let's create our own method—learning by doing. Because if we had followed the usual route, like many other projects in our countries or in the Caribbean—first designing, then consulting, then five consultants, three advisers, seventeen reviewers—we'd still be sitting at the table, probably on page 137, having done nothing.

So one of the first innovative approaches was this flexibility, and the way we built a method for taking environmental action.

It's also very innovative to combine the festival's socio-environmental and socio-economic pillars, as we discussed earlier. For example, on one hand we aim to teach the importance of natural ecosystems, and on the other, the importance of markets—not the market as a monopolistic force, but as something that can support positive actions. We talk about the green economy as a foundation for conservation and sustainability, not just as an economic driver.

Too often, as environmentalists, we want to protect ecosystems so thoroughly that we overlook how to balance that with livelihoods, with the production of goods and services for local communities. In Cuba, we've seen this happen—ecosystems being kept in such a pristine state by law or by institutions, but then the question becomes: how do we integrate that with real life, with sustainable production?

That's where innovation lies—in finding a proportional connection between these themes, and in the reach the festival is having across different social sectors. It's not just children, as is often the case in circularity initiatives. This is why the *Cultura Circular* programme has been so vital—it aligns with these core principles.

It goes beyond reuse or recycling. It's about regeneration—how to restore ecosystems through conservation and community-based education in daily life.

The *Cultura Circular* programme connects deeply with all of this. Our engagement with the programme was one of the motivations to do what we're doing, both from a community perspective and more broadly. It's one of several programmes addressing these issues, but what sets it apart is the focus not just on waste or reuse, but on mindset—on shifting perspectives and rethinking how we do things.

Cultura Circular has, without question, been a source of guidance—not just poetic inspiration, but a real source. It offered concrete examples and alternatives. And because we've always embraced flexibility in our design approach, and welcomed the input of those with experience, the *Cultura Circular* programme helped set the tone—offering themes, methods, and momentum to keep us going. It's been hugely important.

[Paola]

Before we say goodbye, let's also talk about the communities you're currently working with. What's your particular approach to building those relationships, and what insights or reflections would you highlight from your experience with younger audiences?

[Yociel]

Great question! When it comes to communities, one of the things you come to realise—and which experience continues to confirm—is that each community is different, even those located close to one another.

For example, on Isla de la Juventud, there's a community called Cocodrilo, located right at the very tip of the island's coastline. The development of children there is completely different from that of children or even adults in Nueva Gerona. When we first arrived, some of us were shocked—children there played by catching birds, they had close interactions with animals, they fished, their games involved insects, even if that meant sacrificing them.

At first glance, this might be troubling to someone with a conservationist mindset. But we realised we couldn't come in as horrified ecologists, because that kind of interaction with nature

is rooted in local tradition. Once you start explaining things—for instance, about the marine life in the area, which has beautiful seabeds—the children gradually start changing how they perceive things. Even adults begin to shift how they relate to nature and how they pass down their traditions.

So the goal is not to erase the games they play with birds, but rather to introduce new ones—traditional games that also involve nature in a different way. We also teach them how to name plants and species using their scientific or standard names, since they already know them using local or vernacular terms. That opens up a new layer of understanding about ecosystems and their interconnections.

The key takeaway from our work with communities is that you have to work based on the specific characteristics of each place. We always conduct a preliminary assessment, but that's just the starting point. What matters most is that they've taught us a lot—about their traditions, their ways of preserving the natural world around them.

And the biggest challenge going forward is to keep working, keep transforming, and bring more people in—not only to share their own experiences, but also to open themselves up to learning from ours.

[Paola]

Yociel, thank you so much for this conversation. It was a real pleasure to hear about your experiences and learn more about the work you're doing.

[Yociel]

It's been a pleasure. I'm very grateful to the *Cultura Circular* programme, and to you for creating this podcast and always trying to do good. My mother doesn't like it when I say "we're the good ones" or "trying to do good," because there's a certain relativity in that—but Spanish is such a perfect language that yes, we are the good ones, and we should be allowed to do good things.

[Paola]

All the best, until next time.

[Yociel]

Until next time. Bye, thank you.