HAITI'S FIRST NATIONAL PAVILION AT THE VENICE BIENNALE: ANACHRONISM OR ILLUMINATING OPPORTUNITY?

Wendy Asquith

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Keywords: pavilion, Haiti, Venice Biennale, nationhood, ILLUMInations, postcolonialism.

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Abstract

A barrage of criticism has been levelled against the Venice Biennale's national pavilion structure in recent decades, chiefly accusing it of anachronism on account of its Western bias. Yet the tide has begun to turn, making much of this criticism sound a little worn-out. As this event increasingly attracts debuting 'non-Western' national exhibitors each year, its pavilion structure is being reassessed. Haiti was one such debutant at the 54th edition of La Biennale di Venezia held in 2011. This article explores in detail the debates raised by Haiti's national pavilion, particularly as they related to the central exhibition theme of ILLUMInations conceived by Bice Curiger, International Art Exhibition Director for 2011. It considers: how the national pavilion structure at the Venice Biennale was challenged, and how wider understanding of it was deepened through Haiti's recent participation; and what Venice's national pavilion structure can offer to a post-colonial nation such as Haiti.

il.lu.mi.nate (transitive verb)

- 1 a: to enlighten spiritually or intellectually
- b (1): to supply or brighten with light (2) : to make luminous or shining
- c: *archaic*: to set alight
- d: to subject to radiation
- 2 a: to make clear: elucidate
- b: to bring to the fore: highlight...

-- Merriam-Webster Dictionary

In 2011, at the 54th La Biennale di Venezia, Haiti was represented for the first time through a temporary, multiple-site national pavilion. National pavilions began to be incorporated as fixed or permanent features within this event's central landscape in 1907, less than ten years after the establishment of the Biennale. In recent decades these permanent pavilions, and the national pavilion structure more broadly, have received wide criticism for being anachronistic elements of an exhibitionary institution that otherwise considers itself a global forum for the celebration of contemporary art. Particularly vociferous among these reproaches

are accusations that the existing structure bears Eurocentric and neo-colonial tendencies, and presents a skewed view of the contemporary art world (see, for example, Baker, 2004, pp.20–25; Pastor Rocas, [2005] 2010, pp.50–65).

Despite such criticisms, however, and the prolific rise of alternative exhibition platforms (with and without national components) at the international and global level, the Venice Biennale continues to attract among its debut nations each year a steady stream of mostly non-western exhibitors. Taking as its focus the debuting participation of Haiti at the Venice Biennale, this article explores the Haitian pavilion itself in detail, as well as its relation to the central exhibition and theme of ILLUMInations selected by the 2011 International Art Exhibition Director, Bice Curiger. In doing so, this article considers both the issue of how Haiti's participation challenged the national pavilion structure at the Venice Biennale, and deepened our wider understanding of it; as well as the question of what Venice's national pavilion structure might offer to a post-colonial, 'third-world' nation like Haiti.

The Haitian National Pavilion of 2011

Haiti's national contribution to the 2011 Venice Biennale was an ephemeral dual site pavilion. It consisted of two parallel curatorial projects: *Death and Fertility*, which was housed in two conjoined shipping containers on the Riva dei Sette Martiri; and *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde (Haiti: Kingdom of this World)*, located on the third-floor galleries of Fondazione Querini Stampalia. At each of these sites, separate organising groups – consisting of a curator, commissioners and a scientific committee – pursued two distinct exhibitionary projects. *Death and Fertility* was a smaller, more thematically focused exhibition that explored how a particular community of artists has meditated on the extremes of life through a recurrent engagement in their work with the Gédé: 'a family of spirits, which in the Vodou religion, embody both death and fertility' (Geminiani, Gordon and Cosentino, 2011, p.21). *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde*, in contrast, was a touring exhibition (previously displayed in Paris and later in Miami, Martinique and Haiti) organised as a survey of 'contemporary creativity in Haiti', overlaid with a theme inspired by Alejo Carpentier's irresolute retelling of the nation's revolutionary history in his 1949 novel *The Kingdom of this World* ([1957] 2006). This more orthodox site of display along with the exhibition shown in two shipping containers were then tied together to form a national pavilion, bound by a level of joint funding, logistical organisation and an overarching discourse.

As a whole, the dual physicality and transience of the Haitian display subverted the traditional concept of the biennial pavilion as a singular national symbol – a pleasurable piece of historic architecture rooted in one position on the map of La Biennale di Venezia. Contrasting with the fixed, purpose-built pavilions concentrated at the Giardini, Haiti's exhibition sites were characteristic of the wave of more recent 'pop-up pavilions' that every second year come temporarily to occupy all manner of idiosyncratic spaces within the labyrinthine Venetian cityscape. The location of *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* – within the rooms of an ancestral *palazzo* that has been converted into a cultural foundation – was fairly typical of the spaces that have come to be used in recent years to host the 'pop-ups' of debuting nations or those that sporadically participate in more permanent Venetian structures. However, the shipping containers used to house the *Death and Fertility* exhibition were much more unique in this regard. Recalling the mobility previously implicit in tents and pavilions, their makeshift appearance underscored more explicitly the fleeting presence of Haiti's national pavilion in 2011, which could be packed up and moved out in a matter of hours.

The exhibition housed in this mobile structure, *Death and Fertility*, was curated by Daniele Geminiani in collaboration with Leah Gordon and presented ten sculptural works by three artists – André Eugène, Celeur Jean Hérard and Jean Claude Saintilus – who form part of the collective *Atis Rezistans*, based in the Grand Rue neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince. Each of these crude, figurative sculptures was fashioned out of recycled ready-mades and then placed within an exhibition space that was itself created from two repurposed freight containers, positioned perpendicularly to each other to form the shape of a tau cross. When put together the exterior of these rusty, rectangular vessels – having been chosen in red and blue – carried the Haitian national colours, while the interior wall surfaces remained a rough off-white, met by a heavily scuffed floor covering. Inside, the works were installed minimally. At the entrance of the first container visitors were greeted by Saintilus' *Gran Brijit* (2010) [Figures 10.1 and 10.2], while grinning at the far end of the space was Eugène's *Dokto Zozo* (2010). In the second container Hérard's fierce triad, *The Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (2010) faced out onto the lagoon and within each space several smaller sculptural works – a trio of makeshift crucifixes and a trinity of figurative fusions – perched on purpose-built ledges at either side, staring down at passers-by like the many miniature Madonnas crammed into wall-nooks around Venice. As a whole

Figure 10.1: Jean Claude Saintilus, *Gran Brijit*, 2010, mixed media (170 x 70 x 70 cm) Haiti's *Death and Fertility* site at the Riva dei Sette Martiri, Venice © Marcus Gora 2011.

Figure 10.2: Jean Claude Saintilus, *Gran Brijit*, 2010, mixed media (170 x 70 x 70 cm). Photograph Leah Gordon 2011.

Figure 10.3: Killy aka Patrick Ganthier, *Croix des Bossales*, 2011, mixed media (variable dimensions) shown in *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* exhibition site at Fondazione Querini Stampalia. Photograph Conor McGarrigle.

then, this site was a stark intervention on the Venetian waterfront, not far from the Giardini's main entrance.

Meanwhile, away from the wide expanse at the edge of the lagoon, almost a mile in the opposite direction, was the second site for the Haitian pavilion. Curated by Giscard Bouchotte, *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* presented a survey of contemporary Haitian visual art. This sculptural, installation, painting, photographic, mixed media and multimedia work was displayed within the much more conventional gallery setting of the Palazzo Querini Stampalia's third floor exhibition space.¹ The eighteen artists represented were: Sergine André, Élodie Barthélemy, Mario Benjamin, Jean Hérard Céleur, Maksaens Denis, Edouard Duval-Carrié, André Eugène, Frankétienne, Guyodo, Sébastien Jean, Killy, Tessa Mars, Pascale Monnin, Paskö, Barbara Prézeau, Michelange Quay, Roberto Stephenson and Hervé Télémaque. A number of figurative sculptures – a cluster of small relic-like works, tall totemic creations, and a brightly buffed wheelchair with a reclining occupant all formed from the refashioning of salvaged

materials – by Hérard, Eugène and another founding member of the *Atis Rezistans* group, Guyodo, appeared within this pavilion site also. Additionally, there was a number of mixed media installations featured, such as Sergine André's fluorescent *Gédé Gateway no.3* (2011). Killy aka Patrick Ganthier's *Croix des Bossales* (2011) included a fleet of delicately constructed, brightly coloured boats, each containing the depiction of a different face and an enigmatic symbol. Pointing toward the viewer these seemed to offer an escape from the rest of the installation's zombie-like portraits and funereal furniture (Figure 10.3).

In another room, video works by Quay and Prézeau sat alongside a digitally printed work by Denis (an explosion of colour from which a figure begins to emerge), and the eerily empty photographic series of tent-camp dwellings by Stephenson, entitled *Haiti, The Earthquake City* (2010). Hung periodically throughout the display were a number of two-dimensional pieces, including Duval-Carrié's richly sparkling, mixed-media portrait on aluminium, *Le promenade du Grand Baron* (2010), a new untitled series by the preeminent Spiralist artist in many modes, Frankétienne, and a dark swirling polyptych by Jean, his *Gestes de courage malgré tout: Ignorance et Tourmente* (2011).

¹ Some installation shots of the *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* exhibition in Venice can be found online at: http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice_biennale/2011/info/haïti

In choosing to structure Haiti's first pavilion as a set of two physically separate exhibitions, the Haitian committees asserted their national presence within a longer thread of internal critique, reassessment, and adaptation of the Venice Biennale's national pavilion structure. Since the 'post-colonial' decade of the 1990s, when demand grew for national representation – one which could not be met practically within the already saturated grounds of the Giardini – a pattern of more ephemeral rather than fixed national pavilions has appeared at the Venice Biennale (Wyss and Scheller, 2011, p.114). In 2011, the number of nations participating rose to an unprecedented 89 with only 30 of these being the traditional nations – mainly First World and European – that own permanent pavilions. The remaining 59 nations were represented through ephemeral sites, while a number were represented either through multiple sites or shared regional pavilions, such as those based on many artists' transnational and diasporic identities. Other national participations with more than one pavilion site at the 54th Biennale included: the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia; the Republic of Moldova; Norway; Romania; and Switzerland. Among the shared sites were the Italo-Latin American Institute (ILIA) and the Central Asia Pavilion.

Illuminating and regenerating the national pavilion?

Taking up the mantle of International Art Exhibition Director in 2011, Curiger settled on the theme of *ILLUMInations*. As the definition quoted at the beginning of this article reminds us, illumination may be about making something knowable as much as visible. Curiger's central exhibition theme referenced this art institution's intention to do both. But by breaking down her chosen moniker into its constituent syllables and emphasising the last two, Curiger shone a particularly bright light on the contentious issue of national representation through Venice's pavilion structure.

The recent innovations of ephemerality and multiplicity, as applied to national participations at Venice, serve to respond to spatial limitations – such as those imposed by the Giardini – as well as to underline what are now widespread external criticisms in the expanding field of 'biennialogy'. Among these is the suggestion that national structures at global art events are insidiously anachronistic (Mosquera, [1992] 2002; Baker, 2004; Pastor Rocas, [2005] 2010). This charge of outdatedness has been levelled at the Venice Biennale's national structure on many grounds ranging from the architecture of its permanent pavilions, to the Giardini's pan-European exclusivity and tacit imperialism. For

many critics, the very division of art by nation is incongruous with the institution's various claims to be experimental and relevant to the contemporary 'global' moment.

Such criticisms have prompted the creation of various alternative international platforms for the exhibition of contemporary art. An early manifestation was the establishment of the Havana Biennial in 1984, with Gerardo Mosquera's ([1992] 2002, pp.267–37) objective – framed by way of postcolonial discourse – to support artists and curators from the 'Third World' or 'global South' who were either being excluded from existing institutional 'centres', or else compromised by exhibitions that showed up a 'Marco Polo Syndrome' with regard to its consumption of the colonial world beyond Europe and North America (Harris, 2006, pp.336–8).

The director of the 2011 Venice Biennale, Curiger, faced such charges of anachronism with brisk rebuttal, countering that architecturally, aesthetically and conceptually its national pavilions are a piece of history which provides a stimulating dialectical backdrop for exhibiting artists and curators who are considering timely questions of nationality in the contemporary moment. Attenuating her engagement of such debates further, Curiger (2010) explained:

“ The term 'nations' in *ILLUMInations* applies metaphorically to recent developments in the arts all over the world, where overlapping groups form collectives of people representing a wide variety of smaller, more local activities and mentalities. ”

The group of artists presented at the *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* site was not a discreet collective, but a diverse set of contemporary artists from an array of backgrounds whose heterogeneity seem to correspond with 'recent developments in the arts all over the world' – namely the increasing recognition for artists with transnational experience. Indeed, the majority of these Haitian artists, although many remain rooted in Haiti, have studied or lived abroad for extended periods, or belong to the large Haitian diaspora living and working in cities around the world, and ranged along a spectrum from Frankétienne or the *Atis Rezistans* to the more itinerant Stephenson.

In another sense, although it was not billed in any official capacity, Haiti's *Death and Fertility* site and its focused display of work by the *Atis Rezistans* fulfilled another element of Curiger's definition of a nation at the biennial: the localised collective. Formed in the mid-nineties this group is no stranger to the global phenomenon of the biennial, having adapted

the format in 2009 in order to found (together with curator Leah Gordon) the Ghetto Biennale, which hosted its inaugural edition in their 'downtown slum neighbourhood' on the Grand Rue (see: Ghetto Biennale, 2009). This 'germ of the future' (Savage, 2009, pp.491–95) responded to the false universality and utopianism of an art world that may promote discourses of transnational fluidity, while operating in an expanding international biennial circuit, but in reality has limited the transfer of economic inequalities and political hierarchies from the wider world.

Curiger's additions to the biennial format at Venice this year, which were intended to broaden the pavilion structure beyond national politics, were the *Para-Pavilions*. These 'large sculptural-architectural structures' were spaces in which works of art were not simply placed one beside another but *inside* one another, in order to 'foster a process of mutual inspiration and interaction' (Curiger, 2011, p.46). Although the *Para-Pavilions* provided 'more dynamic' spaces within the central exhibition, they appear at a biennial whose structural foundations have always been and continue to be overwhelmingly nationalised. Their construction through artistic collaborations is formed 'on the impulse of the curators' rather than through the 'collectives of people representing a wide variety of smaller, more local activities and mentalities,' a feature that Curiger (2011) has suggested is formative to their conception and yet has resulted in elements that are in fact indistinguishable from the wider exhibition. Particularly strong criticism of these new elements was voiced by the Biennialist collective (n.d.) who saw the *Para-Pavilions* as a retroactive attempt to neutralise and absorb extraneous criticisms into the biennial's structure.

By contrast with these, meanwhile, were the scintillating skeletal sculptures by *Atis Rezistans*, formed from the discarded frameworks of human bodies and man-made objects – the cargo filling the *Death and Fertility* site. Located on the Venetian tourist front in the disembarkation area of luxurious cruise liners, its freight illuminating and 'transform[ing] the detritus of a failing [global] economy' (Geminiani, Gordon and Cosentino, 2011, p.21), this was a 'meta-object' that instituted 'mutual exchange' with its environment. Many of the salvaged elements that comprised these sculptures were parcelled out from the 'First World' as charitable donations to Haiti and corporate cast-offs. Here they were creatively deployed in ways perhaps inconceivable to those who disposed of them. They demonstrate a critical perspective on the tensions between a corrosive Old World and a vibrant rebirth that can spring from the disregarded.

Reconsidering national art and identity

André Eugène is one of the artists represented at the *Death and Fertility* site and a member of the *Atis Rezistans* collective. He opened his studio off the Grand Rue in Port-au-Prince, after being repeatedly denied visas to countries outside Haiti that were hosting exhibitions of his art. Transforming his studio into the renamed *E Pluribus Unum: Musée d'Art*, Eugène explained 'It's usually always the bourgeoisie who own the galleries. But I wanted to have ... not only a gallery, but it must be a museum' (2011, p.23). It is significant that Eugène has sought not only to recreate his studio in Port-au-Prince as a space for the display of art. He also presents his workspace as a de facto museum, creating a less commercial space that might officiate a history through a collection of objects presented for their national importance.

This is just one example of how contemporary artists from Haiti have tried to push viewers, gallerists and collectors beyond the historic formation of a now stagnated narrative centred on a homogenous national identity for Haitian art. The 'hypervisibility' and great acclaim with which the work of the 1940s 'first generation' of Haitian artists was exhibited internationally were key in this formation. The term 'hypervisibility' was persuasively applied by the writer Kobena Mercer (1999) to the exhibition history of black British art, and there is much to suggest a similar saturation internationally of those artists who Selden Rodman (1980) had shown to be foundational in the creation of a Haitian national story. As suggested by the label 'first generation', it was perceived that prior to the emergence of this group Haiti had been a vacuum with regard to 'high art'; and so the art of figures such as Hector Hyppolite, Philome Obin, Rigaud Benoit, Castera Bazile and Wilson Bigaud offered a national benchmark. Yet, the premium given to such 'Haitian art' would have the effect of excluding from exhibition and historiography other kinds of visual practice from Haiti and its diaspora, as somehow outside the category of art and as inauthentic.

The ways in which Haitian art was illuminated after the 1940s always cast the same shadows. Both in exhibition and art historical writing Haitian art was overwhelmingly presented as naïve, playing its part to define negatively and reinforce Euro-American Modernism – the defining narrative of early-twentieth-century art history. Erica James – who served as founding Director and Chief Curator of The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas – in her 2008 doctoral dissertation, demonstrates that this lack of sophistication surrounding the discourse should be of concern for artists throughout the Caribbean region.

She explains that the drive behind her research was ‘to find reasons behind the absence of the Caribbean in discourses that developed around the work of artists from the region when they entered global exhibition spaces’ (James, n.d., p. 1). At the root of her research she has responded to variously formulated perspectives that negated the very existence of Caribbean art, most notably Maurizio Cattelan’s show-piece titled *The Caribbean Does Not Exist*. At a panel discussion relating to the exhibition *Global Caribbean I*, James described her research as a pointed response to ‘an author from *Art in America* magazine saying, “Fine art doesn’t come from the Bahamas”’ (James, n.d.; *Caribbean Art World Magazine*, 2010).

In reaction to similar misconceptions and discursive absences, Haiti’s pavilion sites emerged on the Venetian cityscape in 2011, asserting the unequivocal presence of contemporary fine art from Haiti. In line with Erica James’s scholarly intervention, the Bahamas came hard on the heels of Haiti, with their inaugural national pavilion at the 55th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2013. Nassau-born artist Tavares Strachan, who now lives and works in New York, was chosen to represent the Bahamas in their ‘pop-up pavilion’ situated within the Arsenale’s former sail-stretching warehouses. Of the immersive space it created, the pavilion’s website suggested that:

■ Three geographically and culturally disparate sites—the Venice Arsenale, downtown Nassau, and the North Pole—will momentarily coexist in the Bahamian pavilion. ■

Such a momentary presence, however, no matter how innovative and triple-layered, does not ensure long-term recognition of an individual, let alone national, contemporary fine art practice. As James identified, what is needed in addition is a discursive presence which can accompany, support, document and ultimately outlive the physical presence of an exhibition and grant it further recognition.

One of the artists at the frontline of such focused initiatives among Haitian artists is undoubtedly Miami based artist and curator Edouard Duval-Carrié. Through his work he renders absurd any statement about fine art not existing in the Caribbean, and acts as a catalyst for the increasing development of understanding and debate surrounding Haitian art. Inspired by the complexity and dynamic vision of his oeuvre, a whole cohort of scholars (for example: Sullivan, 2007; Cosentino, 2004; Sharpe, 2007) drawn from a variety of disciplines, has engaged with Duval-Carrié and *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* was a clear development in this. Aside from including two of

Duval-Carrié’s works, the exhibition was the third in the ongoing multi-exhibition project *Global Caribbean*, launched in 2009.² The first exhibition in this series was also curated by Duval-Carrié and in his opening statement he emphasised that when creating affirmative discourses on Caribbean art, merely demonstrating existence is not enough, since the real danger of ghettoization suggests that what is needed above all are connections to wider global art narratives:

■ My aim with this exhibit is not just to show that these islands all have artists worthy of the appellation but more so to underline the universality of their ‘regional’ visions. ■

(Duval-Carrié, 2009)

He has explained the delicate balancing act of identities that these artists are aware of as they strive to create a regional discursive presence, and yet try to avoid being isolated:

■ Though most of the art world seems to find comfort and sound commercial directives in having a common and easily identifiable definition (i.e. Latin American art), this is exactly what many artists find too tight a shoe ... particularly in this highly individualistic and diversified art world. ... I feel that the national provenance of these artists is at times irrelevant even when they strive to create a discourse that could be coined as regional. ■

(Duval-Carrié, 2009)

This ambivalence towards an easily consumable national or regional identity itself provides a fruitful critical space and a potential curatorial framing-device for Haitian art, capable of breaking old moulds. Indeed, curator Giscard Bouchotte’s (2011) conception of *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* was a way of ‘returning to the fundamental myths associated with Haiti and, without praising it, of sublimating Haiti’s chaos and its possibilities.’ Bouchotte’s framing suggests that he recognises the importance of engaging with historic narratives and identitarian politics, particularly pertinent at a nationally structured biennial. A further reason may be found in the views of artist Mario Benjamin, who has continually pushed against myths surrounding a Haitian national art style. In a recent documentary about his practice, Benjamin (2008) set out what he feels to be the limiting expectations often held about the formal qualities of Haitian art:

2 Global Caribbean site [online], available at: <http://theglobalcaribbean.org> (accessed: 12/8/11).

for a lot of people an Haitian artist is related to a certain type of inspiration, a certain type of colour, and when these things are missing, one feels uneasy and can even doubt the legitimacy of that art. 7

For the *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* exhibition, Benjamin created an enigmatic work, *Makro* (2011) comprised of neat rows of identical, mostly transparent, Plexiglas chairs embellished with digital photographs of mackerel heaps printed on their seats and backs. The work has been read as a commentary on overcrowding in contemporary Haiti (Kay, 2011). But, in the context of this exhibition, with its theme of ambivalent national identities, the piece may be read differently: for the way that it addresses the issue of easily consumed national identities assigned to artists in the exhibition, and speaks out against the tired accounts of art from Haiti underlined by dominant art historical narratives.

Another instance of this was the nearby installation by Pascale Monnin, *Royaume de ce Monde: L'ange Sacrifié* (2011) (Figure 10.4), comprising a graceful figure suspended from the ceiling, spinning on a delicate thread to face Haiti's recent presidential candidates, many of whom weave national narratives that position them as heirs to a eulogised Haitian Revolution. Monnin has explained that the spinning figure was

inspired by Carpentier's protagonist Ti Noel, who was enslaved under the French colonial regime, and who 'fights the war of independence in Haiti and yet ends up the slave of King Henri Christophe', an early Haitian monarch. Such nationally-prized myths are swathed in a romanticism which deserves to be unravelled. As Edwidge Danticat (2006) explains in her recent introduction to Carpentier's novel, 'a revolution that some consider visionary might appear to others to have failed.'

This questioning of Haitian identity and the sanctity of its founding narratives is not a drive to erase national myths, however, nor to reject completely the possibilities for national identity; indeed, many of the artworks in *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* are imbued with culturally specific references. But they encourage the sort of engagement that may tease apart the common construction of a homogenous Haitian identity, and so open onto questions about the legitimacy of cultural formations that seem to 'transmit national and ethnic meaning' (Jones, 2010, p.82). Monnin's angel, for example, recalls Walter Benjamin's description of the angel of history:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon

Figure 10.4: Pascale Monnin, *L'ange Sacrifié*, 2011, mixed media (variable dimensions) shown in *Haiti: Royaume de ce Monde* exhibition site at Fondazione Querini Stampalia. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph: © Paolo Woods.

wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned ... This storm is what we call progress. 𐀀

(Benjamin, [1968] 1999, p.249)

Such resonance between *L'ange Sacrifié* and Benjamin's musings on history (incidentally, his celebrated volume of collected essays shares its title with Curiger's central exhibition) draws attention to the replayed 'catastrophes' of Haitian political history and the 'wreckage' of natural disaster. It also encourages a reconsideration of the linear narratives of art history that have formed to offer a genealogy of progression and plot a narrative for a definitive set of artists located in one part of the world. Such sequential accounts draw discourses away from a host of rich artworks, artists, movements and narratives, and Haitian and Caribbean histories of art come to suffer. In Benjamin's terms they are caught among the wreckage of progress.

Responding to ILLUMInation with opacity and relation

In addition to the clear index to Walter Benjamin's writings, Curiger (2011, p.44) has cited an array of eclectic and duly international inspirations for the Biennale theme of 2011: '... from the fiercely poetic *Illuminations* of Arthur Rimbaud ... to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages and the philosophy of illumination in twelfth century Persia' and more locally to the painting of sixteenth-century Venetian artist, Tintoretto, whose 'reckless search for light' adorned the opening walls of the show. As has been shown, this list of luminous connotations travelled in new directions when refracted through each of the works displayed in Haiti's two exhibition sites. Indeed, in a much more direct sense the Haitian pavilion's curatorial team responded to Curiger's central theme by quoting the words of Martiniquan writer Édouard Glissant (taken from a recent interview: 2009 cited in Curiger, 2011, p.369). These formed a substantial part of the text on Haiti's national profile page in the 2011 Venice Biennale Catalogue:

𐀀 When the West conquered the world, it kept repeating 'We bring civilization, we bring the light,' but it was not true. Comprehension means absorbing something within oneself. It means applying your own rules to others. I'm saying that

this is not possible. I do not claim to tell you how you have to be in reference to my light system. I demand everyone's right to opacity. 𐀀

The choice of this polemic statement to accompany Haiti's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale was a significant one. Glissant's words provided a pointed rejoinder, not only to the specific ILLUMInations theme at the 2011 Venice Biennale but to the broader fact of powerful institutional mechanisms at work in the modern and contemporary art world. These have an institutional influence which was demonstrated through the aptly chosen imagery of a work entitled *Marquee* (2011) which was presented by the Algerian artist Philippe Parreno. Situated above an entranceway into the central international exhibition, Parreno's light-sculpture comprised rows of brightly-glowing light bulbs akin to the decorative pulsating signs that gave New York's 'Great White Way' its luminous nickname (McQuire, 2005). The positioning of this piece in Venice drew parallels between the power and glamour bestowed through the architecture of light in the early years of theatre and the approval conferred on those whose work is exhibited by authoritative institutions in the art world. Appearance within global exhibitions has become a much sought-after rite of passage, offering commercial legitimacy for contemporary artists (Thornton, [2008] 2009, pp.45-6). Why then does the over-arching discourse surrounding Haiti's national pavilion seem so ambivalent towards participation in this illuminating spectacle? How can the Glissantian desire for opacity be reconciled with promotion on a global platform? And why should both be sought simultaneously?

The first step towards answering these questions is to clarify the meaning of 'opacité' for Glissant, a term centrally employed in his genre-defying literary work. It emerged most clearly alongside many other ideas that span his writing in *L'intention Poétique* (Dash, 1995, p.97) and has been translated as 'obscurity' in English editions of his texts (Glissant, 1989). Such a direct translation is problematic, however, since a desire for 'obscurity' – the desire to remain unknown or concealed – is hardly commensurate with the invocation of the term in the context of a major promotional initiative such as the Haitian pavilion.

Considering further that the curators of the Haitian pavilion had asserted 'everyone's right to opacity', evidently it is the terms of being seen and understood – being brought under the 'light' of biennial exhibitions – that comes to be of issue. There is a crucial distinction to be drawn between moving passively into the glow of biennial publicity, and being in active control of an exhibition's power to illuminate. This was alluded

to by Mosquera in an interview with Gerhard Haupt on the subject of participation in global exhibition circuits. He observed: 'There's a difference between trying to be an active presence in these circles and letting oneself be subordinated.' It is in response to such a history of subordination through exhibitions – to experiences of reductive explanation, being burdened with a 'myth of authenticity' (Mosquera, [1992] 2002, p.270) in contradistinction to Euro-American modernism – that the Glissantian demand for 'obscurity' is made. Further, for Glissant the concept of opacity did not function alone but was inextricably linked to – and worked in tandem with – the theory of 'relation' that he began developing in 1960s Martinique at a time when the assimilationist policies of France threatened the cultures of overseas territories. Glissant explained that 'without opacity creating cultural diversity, the ideal of relation is impossible' (cited in Dash, 1995, p.97; Glissant, 1997), to suggest that any acknowledgement of cultural difference has at the same time to recognise an inherent connectedness in our shifting identities. Such recognition causes reconsideration of how to relate to 'others' at a deeper level.

These are particularly pertinent issues within the context of a nationally-structured, global exhibition space, in which comparisons are inevitably made. As a postcolonial nation Haiti's identity and ability to relate in the broader international arena has been marred by a history of reductive symbolism. Since its revolutionary establishment as an independent nation at the turn of the nineteenth century, Haiti has been overwritten with ambivalent racial symbolism: as a synonym for either black pride or degeneracy (Jackson and Bacon, 2010, pp.7–24; Dash, 1988). In recent decades this two-sided symbolism has been reconfigured, and overt racial characterisation has been substituted by political and economic allegory, and black pride has become a revolutionary exaltation. Haiti carries the historical tagline of 'the first black republic' or 'the only nation born of a successful slave revolt'. But it has also been the target for fears of racial degeneracy, political stagnation and economic impoverishment, always exacerbated by natural disasters. The result is Haiti's reputation for being 'the poorest country in the Western hemisphere' (Botwinick, 1978, p.5; International Slavery Museum, 2007).

Not wishing to achieve visibility for contemporary art of Haiti by way of any of these symbolic identities, curator Giscard Bouchotte distanced the first Haitian pavilion at Venice from both the 'eulogizing' of 'founding myths linked to Haiti' and 'the charity it [Haiti] is being offered', most recently on account of the January 2010 earthquake:

Before the earthquake, Haiti did not figure on the official circuits for contemporary art; today things are even more complex. In a country occupied by humanitarian aid agencies, the devastation paradoxically betrays any attempt to construct 'professional' relationships. 7

(Bouchotte, 2011, p.7)

Mindful of the pitfalls of such patterns, the curatorial ambitions for each of the sites of the Haitian pavilion at Venice was 'neither solitude nor surrender': a demonstration therefore of a relationship between 'opacity' and 'relation' (Glissant, 1989). What was sought at these sites of exhibition was the possibility for Haitian artists to inhabit highly visible display spaces where they were not required to expose and essentialise themselves before an established institution or another's 'light-system', but rather could 'relate' through the complexity of their work.

It would be worth asking whether such ambitions were achieved, or frustrated, by the choice on the part of Haitian artists and curators in 2011 to participate in such a traditional event as the Venice Biennale – the oldest institution on the global biennial circuit, distinguished by an apparently unshakeable structure of national pavilions. Was this the most effective platform at which Haitian artists could promote their contemporary work, while simultaneously questioning the historical formation and expectations placed on Haitian art as a national entity? I have been arguing that it was, and that only in the context of such a self-consciously global exhibition could this localised project be realised. The historical importance of Haiti's debut at Venice can be seen by the heat and light in which it began to melt away the older art historical approaches, making way for a regenerative space of exhibition.

Melting away the old

In response to one of the most celebrated works at the centre of *ILLUMInations* in 2011, art critic for *The Guardian* newspaper, Jonathan Jones, found the overriding message to be 'woefully apocalyptic'. Viewing the acclaimed time-telling device of Swiss artist Urs Fischer – a slowly melting, monumental wax replica of Giambologna's sixteenth-century sculpture *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1574–83) – Jones found it to be 'representing the violence and chaos of this century' (2011). But that same chaos, when considered in relation to the Haitian pavilion, opens up further possibilities. This is chaos and destruction not as the apocalyptic end, but as a new beginning, in a new round of creation. For Glissant 'the way Chaos itself goes

around is the opposite of what is ordinarily understood by “chaotic” and that opens onto a new phenomenon: Relation ... whose disorder one can imagine forever’ (1997, p.133). Glissant’s imagination of the world in chaos is far from any despairing pronouncement of doom; equally far, therefore, from the sort of response evidenced by Jones in his art criticism. The significance of this difference becomes clearer with a look at Glissant’s notion of *Le Chaos-monde*. It emerges when he describes ‘the creative unpredictability of the explosive archipelago of cultures represented by the Caribbean,’ which Glissant sees as ‘exemplary in th[e] creative global “chaos” which proliferates everywhere’ (Dash, 1995, p.24).

If Urs Fischer’s work is then read in relation to Celeur Jean Hérard’s most recent series of sculptures, entitled *Zonbi*, which expresses a destructive chaos, the focus falls on the hierarchies of mainstream art histories. They may be seen as just one aspect of a regenerative process that may transform the contemporary art world. Hérard (quoted in the Haiti pavilion press kit) explained that his *Zonbi* series encapsulates the position to which he often sees Haitian artists being subjected. The title *Zonbi* denotes ‘an individual who is under someone else’s influence’, and was chosen ‘to represent the common point of view that large artistic institutions have of the artists in Third World countries’ (2011, p.9). Fischer’s piece involves the melting away of monumental candles and the meaning is complete: it signals the apocalyptic destruction of an idiosyncratic and outdated institutional system centred on one region of the globe, at the expense of its ‘Others’.

Equally, such a display of chaotic destruction may be read in the work of Haiti’s *Atis Rezistans*, sculptural works that have often been referred to as post-apocalyptic creations. Here the Gédé, embodying death and fertility, are already one step ahead of Jones’ assessment of Venice in 2011. André Eugène’s contribution to the *Death and Fertility* part of the Haitian pavilion is a smirking *Dokto Zozo* (2010) (Figure 10.5), which smiles knowingly as it sits listening through his stethoscope to the outsized phallus protruding from the black sheets of a coffin below. This is new life springing from death, certainly. While here, in and around *Dokto Zozo*, the metaphor extends as metamorphosed waste materials, the disregarded remnants of the consumed have become the fleshy matrix of stark and powerful Gédé. Through the bricolage of Jean Claude Saintilus, a worn-out child’s doll is draped with rosary beads and becomes a sacred infant nestling in the arms of *Gran Brijit*, (recalling Leonardo’s Madonnas of the renaissance past), who in

turn is crowned with a halo formed from a tattered umbrella bearing the flag of the United States.

Jones was not alone among critics in pronouncing a vision of doom for the Venice Biennale in 2011. I began by suggesting that it has long been challenged in art scholarship, with a focus on its chief structure of national pavilions and its marginalisation of art from outside the ‘global North’. However there are some who see in its idiosyncratic system – with its recent innovation of including ephemeral and transnational elements – a model for the future. Beat Wyss and Jörg Scheller, for example, have written about the ‘bazaar of Venice’ that although the pavilions were ‘constructed as national beacons’ they are not what they were and ‘today they rather illuminate the resilience of the local’ (2011, pp.125-9). The pavilion format on this account may serve to open up viable opportunities for comparative – or relational – rather than global histories of art.

At the 54th edition of La Biennale di Venezia, the national structure of this event and the controversy surrounding it became a space in which Haitian artists and the associated curators could confront some

Figure 10.5: André Eugène, *Dokto Zozo*, 2011, mixed media, Haiti’s *Death and Fertility* site at the Riva dei Sette Martiri, Venice. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Wendy Asquith.

distinctly local concerns, while extending their critiques to a global audience. They addressed the potential gains and pitfalls of nurturing a national and regional identity in relation to key wider debates. It was a turn of events that demonstrated in practice that, as Caroline A. Jones pragmatically surmised, 'the pavilion component of biennial culture in Venice has proved useful' (2010, p.83). It might be better to conclude that all those who participate at the Venice Biennale have worked together in adapting the national pavilion structure. They have made it into a useful space at which to debate pertinent issues – whether of nation and identity, and matters of scale and historical memory – and thereby transformed Venice into the site rather than the object of controversy. For Haiti this meant that the death of older artworld hegemonies and myths of universalism were ritually enacted, and an oversimplified idea of homogenous 'Haitian art' could be killed off too. From the wreckage of this creative chaos, a multitude of complex practices emerged, which refuse to be contained or entirely perceived, but share a relation to a new global image under Haiti's first pavilion.

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