

THE GERM OF THE FUTURE?

Ghetto Biennale: Port au Prince

Polly Savage

In the stampede for heroic press shots, few aid agencies working in Haiti's post-earthquake ruins stopped to consider local strategies for self-organisation and recovery. Now, as 20,000 US troops amass in Port-au-Prince, Haitian People's Group PAPDA¹ predict that the perspectives of Haitian civil society will have 'little to no weight'² in the Post Disaster Needs Analysis, or in the reconstruction process, relative to the U.S. government, the IMF, the Inter-American Development Bank, and other global powers.

Since the 1804 declaration of independence, the Haitian experience has been vicariously played out on the international stage, ventriloquised with whichever primitivist, sensationalist or paternalist agenda is in vogue. Most recently, as what Anthony Iles calls 'a concentrated vision of the ravages of capitalism on a population and a study of the desperate means available to those who would oppose it'³, Haiti's rapidly expanding slum population, along with the rest of the global south's billion-strong pool of surplus labour, have provided a hyper-saturated culture industry with a prophetic vision of a new revolutionary class, prompting Žižek to claim that 'the new forms of social awareness that emerge from the slum collectives will be the germ of the future'.⁴

Representations of what Mike Davis calls the 'informal proletariat',⁵ whether rooted in 'hyperbolic admiration' or 'ethnographic scorn', have often resulted in what Derrida terms an 'interested blindness'.⁶ The imposition of 'bourgeois benevolence',⁷ Spivak famously concludes, leaves the subaltern no space from which to 'speak'.⁸ One month before Haiti's post-earthquake frenzy of hyper-mediation however, an event took place in Grand Rue, a UN-designated 'red zone' of Port-au-Prince, which set out to momentarily explode this perennial aporia of post-colonial discourse.

The Ghetto Biennale was conceived and organised by Atis Rezistans ('Artist Resistance'), a collective of sculptors who lived and worked in the area, including Andre Eugene, Jean Herard Celeur, Ronald 'Cheby' Bazile and Destima 'Louco' Pierre Isnel, with curators Leah Gordon and Myron Beasley, and numerous members of the local community. The impoverished downtown district has long been a centre of artistic production, and the narrow alleys bustle with welders, carvers and cabinet-makers. Towering above them stand the group's eight-metre effigies of vodou spirits, fashioned from bed frames and truck chassis salvaged from the nearby scrap yards. Lining the paths and dotting the roofs, dystopian figures emerge from bald tyres, computer husks, twisted hubcaps, discarded timber, blown speaker cones, dismembered plastic dolls, rusted nails, and human skulls gathered from the city's over-subscribed cemetery.

Over the last decade, the group's works, and its context, have attracted a host of curators who have presented it internationally in service of a range of nationalist, religious, philanthropic or outsider paradigms. In 2007, for example, the group were invited to create a sculpture entitled 'Freedom!' for the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, with support from development agency Christian Aid. The artists thus found their work caught at the nexus of several conflicting agendas, enlisted as a social project by the charitable funding body, as an artefact for the museum, as an embodiment of 'Haiti' for the press department, and as a footnote for the redemptive, nationalist narrative of the UK's bicentennial commemoration of the parliamentary abolition of the slave trade. 'I was very happy to do it', said Celeur, 'but ideally I would prefer to work with a gallery than with a charity'.⁹ Other exhibitions, the group explained, have used their work to reinforce negative images of Haiti, such as human rights abuse and poverty. 'Often people focus more on the slum than the works themselves'¹⁰ said Guyodo, a former member of the group.

Another catalyst for the Ghetto Biennale came in 2004, when the group was invited to participate in an exhibition of Haitian art at the Frost Art Museum in Miami. Their work

was shipped out, ready for exhibition, but when the artists applied to the US Embassy for visas to attend the opening, they were refused. At a presentation two years later, Eugene remarked of one of his pieces: 'that skull belonged to a man – I don't know who he was - but I do know that during his life he would never have got a visa - and now he's in England!' Largely excluded from the international Biennale circuit, the hollow irony of an apparently 'globalised' art world is bitterly obvious to the artists, who sent Nicolas Bourriard an unanswered invitation to the event, challenging him to defend his notion of the artist as "homo viator", the prototype of the contemporary traveller',¹¹ in light of the hardened borders faced by the majority of the world's population.

Confronted with these limitations and misrepresentations, the collective decided to reclaim the mechanisms of exhibition practice on their own terms, and hold an international event in their own space. Eugene had initiated the process several years previously by opening his studio and yard as 'Pluribus e Unum Musee d'Art', explaining: 'I had the idea of making a museum here in my own area, with my own hands, because the artists here never had their own thing. They always let the Big Man exploit them.'¹² In a conversation between Eugene and his partner Leah Gordon, the idea emerged to appropriate the Biennale concept, qualifying it with the incongruous term 'ghetto', the artists' preferred designation for their local area. An announcement was posted online, inviting submissions for a 'Salon des Refusés for the 21st Century', and asking 'what happens when first world art rubs up against third world art? Does it bleed?'¹³

The group received over one hundred applications, and selected thirty-five, on the basis of their practical and conceptual sensitivity to the conditions of Grand Rue, with preference given to works produced in situ. Funding was secured for a rental car and two interpreters, but participants otherwise covered their own expenses. On November 28th 2009, artists began arriving from the US, Jamaica, Australia, Sweden, France, Italy and the UK, commencing three weeks of collaboration, before a final day of exhibition and performance in a specially cleared, open-air lot in Grand Rue.

The ghetto and the biennale share strangely intertwined histories, both beginning in the city of Venice, and both entailing the demarcation of identity, and contingent zones of exclusion. The term 'ghetto' is traced back to the sixteenth century gated Jewish district of Venice, an early mechanism for defining and containing an immanent other, today echoed in the UN's designation of 'red zones' in Port-au-Prince, which their staff (and post-disaster aid administrators) are strongly advised to avoid. The biennale emerged in the nineteenth century as the progeny of the Colonial Exhibition; a device for defining and hierarchising rigidly policed nationalist paradigms. Both institutions were thus engaged in demarcating and regulating social zones. The Ghetto Biennale proposed that, in conjunction, the boundaries of these zones might be neutralised, working symbiotically as a kind of cultural anti-venom, to produce what the press release termed 'a third space'¹⁴. 'It's like electricity', explained Eugene, 'when you put positive and negative together, the light comes on!'¹⁵ This was not, of course, the first attempt to bridge these social chasms. Assimilation of the urban poor has long served to inject novelty into jaded art systems, and more recently, to satisfy cultural funding criteria. The organisers of this, and future Ghetto Biennale editions, have inherited a formidable series of pitfalls to navigate.

In Haiti, and elsewhere, artists have often drawn on the ghetto as a source of raw inspiration, to support Primitivist paradigms. In his appropriation of Rio de Janeiro's Favela de Mangueira in the 1960s and '70s, Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica positioned the favela as a site for 'deintellectualisation'¹⁶ (desintelectualização), the imaginary obverse of the 'excessive intellectualisation' of the city's art circuit (oblivious to the fact that, as Eugene observed, 'there are all kinds of people in the ghetto; artists, writers, intellectuals').¹⁷ Nevertheless, as Richard Pithouse observes, the ambiguity remains that the lack of regulation and institutional framework which on one hand provides the conditions for these autonomous spaces, represents on the other hand a total absence of the basic state services

required for a viable urban life (water, electricity, sanitation, refuse removal)¹⁸. There is also therefore the risk that this precariousness and deprivation is romanticised as a revolutionary space. In an art market which feeds on capitalist critique, the strategies by which Grand Rue residents cope with social deprivation paradoxically represent considerable cultural capital today, since, as Josephine Berry Slater observes, ‘a vicarious worship of all things bricolaged, improvised and threadbare – read pauperised – has taken hold... the acid bath of poverty is the urbane consumer’s chemical peel of choice.’¹⁹ Another danger is therefore that this unregulated zone of creativity will in time revert to an institutional model, whether by developing its own structures of power and zones of exclusion, by being restaged for the museum, or through unacknowledged recuperation by the culture industry. In these mediated scenarios, the distinctions between the ghetto and the Biennale risk being actively reinforced, as at the 27th São Paulo Biennale in 2006. Drawing on Oiticica’s ideas, the Biennale’s education department initiated the Centre-Periphery Project (projeto centro-periferia), establishing five ‘education centres’ in the city’s favelas, where residents were to be ‘conceptually prepared’ for a visit to the Biennale. Weekly buses ferried the freshly-educated favela residents to the exhibition, while a second bus took Biennale visitors in the opposite direction, on a tour of the favela. As if to further reaffirm these ‘invisible boundaries’²⁰, the following São Paulo Biennale, in 2008, saw a group of young pixador graffiti artists forcibly removed from the pavilion by security guards and arrested after their intervention in a gallery space left empty for ‘participation’. The terms of engagement here are rigid; the ‘periphery’ is assimilated as cultural capital, as a conceptual counterpoint, to balance visitor figures or to normalise a sense of crisis, but never as an active agent within that cultural arena.

So to what extent did the Ghetto Biennale avoid these pitfalls? Many of the visiting artists undertook relational, process-based projects, often providing residents with strategies for self-representation, and avoiding excessive mediation or spectacle. UK artist Tracey Moberly continued her long-running ‘Mobilography’ project, distributing camera phones to youths in Grand Rue, and inviting them to document their daily routines. ‘Frau Fiber’ (Carole Frances Lung), initiated the ongoing ‘Made in Haiti’ project with local tailor Jonas Labaze. Buying bundles of ‘Pepe’, the second hand clothes shipped in bulk from the US for resale in Haiti which have decimated the country’s textile industry, they reworked the clothes into new garments, which were then branded for resale back to US markets. The event provided a space for close collaboration and creative exchange, with local residents taking part in the majority of projects. Tasmanian artist Nancy Mauro-Flude worked with a group of local children to develop a street performance using hand-made percussion instruments and circuit-bent voice decoders. UK artist Bill Drummond continued his touring choir project *The 17*, twinning a performance by school-pupils from Grand Rue with one by a UK school, and with the help of the area’s residents, UK artist Jesse Darling constructed a ‘Trash Church’ from locally sourced plastic waste, which then became a space for performance, film screenings and music. Several visiting Haitian artists also participated, including a group from the FOSAJ arts centre in Jacmel, who produced a large mural, and students from Cine Institute, also in Jacmel, who collaborated with US artist and film-maker Flo McGarrell on an adaptation of the final chapter of Kathy Acker’s ‘Kathy Goes to Haiti’. The final event was disordered, noisy, intense and euphoric, throbbing with music and colour. The Jacmel-based Lakou dance group performed ‘Zonbi Zonbi’, exploring the notion that ‘it’s not just after death that a person becomes a zombie ... many people become zombies without even knowing it’.²¹ Grand Rue group ‘Tele-ghetto’ comprised a three-man ‘film-crew’ who interviewed participants throughout the day (including the Minister of Culture) using plastic oil-can ‘cameras’ and polystyrene ‘microphones’, whilst other impromptu participants played music and added new works to the walls. ‘The best thing about the Ghetto Biennale’, said Eugene afterwards, ‘was that it mixed everyone up, without

any discrimination. White and black enjoyed it and relaxed together. I liked that'.²² The event also allowed the Grand Rue residents to project a positive vision of their home and their work. 'We hear all the bad things that are said about Haiti on the news', said Belle Williams, coordinator of Ti Mouns Resistans art workshops for local children, 'so I'm very happy you all had a chance to see what a Haitian ghetto looks like – to see that it's without violence... It's helped us to understand that our work is of great value in the eyes of the outside world'.²³ Louco, who one month later would fall victim to the earthquake, said 'today, in the midst of all these people, I can sense that the whole world is watching us. I really feel like now I do exist.'²⁴

By virtue of its self-organised autonomy, the specificity of the site, and its participatory and relational structure, the first Ghetto Biennale genuinely seemed to disrupt the zones of exclusion entrenched in both contemporary art systems and the geo-politics of the global poor. In this amorphous, chaotic, de-institutionalised space, the distinctions between artist and audience, between city and gallery, and, to a certain degree, between the 'informal proletariat' and the homo viator appeared momentarily blurred. In the conference which followed, consensus was that a liberated, revolutionary space had emerged; a 'germ of the future'. The participants nevertheless expressed divergent desires for, and responses to, the event. For many of the visiting artists and academics with intellectual and creative investment in critique of global capitalism, the event marked a space beyond the critical paralysis of the culture industry. For many of the local artists surviving at the extremity of global capitalism, the event marked an opportunity to gain and control access to systems of representation within the culture industry; a space beyond the ghetto.

Ghetto Biennale: Port au Prince 28 November – 18 December 2009

In memoriam: Destima 'Louco' Pierre Isnel, Flo McGarell, and all the other artists, writers, intellectuals, musicians, players, workers and fighters lost in the January 12th earthquake, 2010.

Endnotes

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22. Andre Eugene, Personal Communication Port-au-Prince 23/12/09
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A fund has been set up for the surviving members of the Grand Rue community, who suffered considerable damage in the earthquake: www.foundry.tv/haiti

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Biography

Polly Savage is a Teaching Fellow in Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She is currently working on a book for the Triangle Trust, and conducting research about curatorial practice and post-independence history in Angola at the Royal College of Art, London.