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The Ghetto Biennale: art and agency in a Haitian context

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THE GHETTO BIENNALE:
ART AND AGENCY
IN A HAITIAN CONTEXT

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Louisiana State University and
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# Table of Contents

Abstract......................................................................................................................................... iii

Introduction....................................................................................................................................1

The Contemporary Art Biennial as Defined Through Relational Aesthetics.................................5

The Ghetto Biennale: The Story of *Atis Rezistans* and The Globalization of Haiti......................20

On Site: The Projects of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale.......................................................................40

Conclusion.....................................................................................................................................64

Bibliography..................................................................................................................................66

Vita................................................................................................................................................75
Abstract

On January 12, 2010, the world was stunned when a massive earthquake struck Haiti. Following the crisis, author Jeremy Rifkin described the collective spirit that developed worldwide as man’s transformation into “Homo empathicus.” The social state described by Rifkin is one in which individuals leave behind their differences and rally around the common humanity that unites all humans. Despite proclamations of the earthquake’s ability to create a sense of equality among all people, the images coming from Haiti only added to the country’s lengthy list of ailments. The spectacle surrounding the earthquake was unsuccessful in generating equality, but instead, further reinforced Haiti’s status as a nation to be pitied.

By looking closer at forms of collaboration believed to produce democratic engagement, it becomes clear that these interactions can be more harmful than once believed. The 2011 Ghetto Biennale located in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, is one such event. The Haitian sculptural collective Atis Rezistans, hosted the event and invited artists into their neighborhood to experience the conditions they work under every day. The biennial’s title, A Salon des Refusés for the 21st Century, and its subsequent tag line, “What happens when First World Art rubs up against the Third World art? Does it bleed?” set the tone for the event. The Ghetto Biennale’s proposed question reveals a belief that the practice of relational aesthetics is a form of democratic engagement. Relational aesthetics purports that radical spaces of equality are created by simply bringing individuals together in the already-available networks of social interaction. The utopian agendas of many contemporary art biennials idealize the practice of relational aesthetics because they are believed to transform the limitations of social interaction into points of access within the existing networks of communication. This thesis will contest these claims by showing that the 2011 Ghetto Biennale projects did not fight, but further reaffirmed,
stereotypes against Haiti. This argument will not entirely condemn the Ghetto Biennale, but will propose that a redefinition of the art biennial’s purpose in society be considered to address its current social justice ineffectiveness.
Introduction

On January 12, 2010, the world was stunned when a massive earthquake leveled Haiti and left hundreds of thousands of people dead and millions without homes.¹ In the days and weeks following the earthquake a narrative of death and despair was continuously relayed from Haiti’s most devastated areas. Immediately following the earthquake, an international media response mobilized to show the world the devastation of the event. Individuals worldwide were urged by an array of international celebrities, ranging from former American presidents to pop-cultural icons, to give what they could to the cause. A self-sacrificial euphoria developed as spectacles of giving, ranging from telethons to a remake of Michael Jackson’s We Are the World, were undertaken to help raise funds for Haiti’s recovery.² Author Jeremy Rifkin defined this collective spirit as the emergence of “Homo empathicus.” Rifkin describes this term as a moment when “human beings come together as an extended family in an outpouring of compassion and concern.”³ The social state described by Rifkin is one in which individuals are able to leave behind their differences and rally around the common humanity that unites us all.

To support this form of collectivity, numerous images of people affected by the crisis in Haiti were used to elicit an emotional response from viewers. Those images, because of their common representation of humanity, were meant to compel viewers into action, further perpetuating the spectacle of aid surrounding the crisis. Unfortunately, the images of victims amid the earthquake’s debris also continued the centuries-long definition of Haitian people as hopelessly dependent on the charity of foreign nations.

To many scholars, the disparity presented by the media further reaffirmed Haiti’s negative identity as an isolatable Other. Due to the country’s prominent Vodou religion and unique cultural traits, stereotypes of Haiti’s exoticism have plagued the nation since its foundation in 1804.4 Despite proclamations of the earthquake’s ability to create a sense of equality among all, the images coming from Haiti added to the country’s already lengthy list of ailments. The devastation of the earthquake on top of social issues such as poverty and corruption further fortified Haiti’s stigma. Therefore, the spectacle surrounding the earthquake was unsuccessful in generating equality, but instead reinforced Haiti’s status as a nation to be pitied.

While the 2010 earthquake brought to light a number of social justice violations currently affecting the Haitian people, it was not a lone instance. This thesis will use the 2011 Ghetto Biennale, set in Port-au-Prince, as a case study to show that while often believed democratic, utopian-inspired collaborative processes can have lasting, negative repercussions for their participants. According to art historian Grant Kester, socially engaged art is fraught with the risk of calling for democracy from a structure of social relations that enacts inequality.5 As a socially engaged art exhibition, the Ghetto Biennale was meant to generate intercultural collaboration capable of uplifting contemporary Haitian artists.6 Despite this goal the event’s exhibition template based on equality resulted in the exact opposite effect.

The biennial, titled A Salon des Refusés for the 21st Century, along with its tag line “What happens when First World art rubs up against the Third World art? Does it bleed?” set the

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tone for the event. Through the Ghetto Biennale’s platform and proposed question, the common misconception of relational aesthetics as an egalitarian form of social engagement can be seen. Relational art practices propose that radical spaces of equality are created by simply bringing individuals together. The idea of relational aesthetics as an artistic style, theory, and form of cultural interaction exists today as a result of the current sense of isolation and inequality in society. Art biennials idealize the practice of relational aesthetics because they are believed to transform the limitations of social interaction into points of access. Unfortunately, this form of democratic interaction, due to the inherent flaws of contemporary society, still has the potential of having a negative effect.

This thesis puts forth an analysis of relational aesthetics to acknowledge the theory’s inherent contradictions, such as the democratic nature of all interaction, universal power distribution among all participants, and the abolishment of the distinction between artist and subject. By focusing on the utopian definition of the contemporary art biennial through relational aesthetics these contradictions are exponentially expanded. This discussion will first consider two different landmark biennial exhibitions, those presented in Venice and Havana, to trace the development of the utopian aspirations on which Haiti’s Ghetto Biennale was based. To understand the need for this exhibition the flawed relationship between Haitian artists and the contemporary art world will be presented. With this information an analysis of the projects of

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7 Ghetto Biennale, “2009 Call for Proposals,” www.ghettobiennale.com. The term “biennale” is Italian for “every two years.” This particular spelling is associated with the Venice Biennale. “Biennial” is the generic term assigned to the rapidly expanding number of international art exhibitions mimicking the model of the Venice Biennale. By selecting the term “biennale,” the curators of the event were commenting on the Venice Biennale’s power in shaping the contemporary art world. Throughout this thesis the Ghetto Biennale will be referred to as a “biennale” to maintain the original institutional critique on which the event was based. The event’s title also references a radical regime change that occurred in art history. “Salon des Refusés” evokes the 19th century French avant-garde movement. The French avant-garde, through the creation of radical exhibitions, rejected the dominant western canon of modern art and its exhibition styles. These events, like the Ghetto Biennale, appropriated the oppressive methods of exhibition to call attention to the disparities of the event’s structure.

the 2011 Ghetto Biennale will show that the event’s reliance on relational aesthetics did in fact maintain the adverse traits currently limiting the interactions between the visiting artists and the local Haitians. This effect is due to the projects’ frequent representation of the Haitian people in a way that revoked the host culture’s ability to effectively change how its nation is viewed worldwide, thus its ability to assert individual agency. Through the use of interviews with participants of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale, this research will propose that a significant redefinition of the event must occur. Without these changes the Ghetto Biennale will continue to solidify Haiti’s detrimental image as a nation and secure its home biennale as an ineffective event, incapable of maintaining the emancipatory sense of Haitian agency it set out to create.

First, for readers unfamiliar with contemporary art biennials and their continued domination by the ideas of relational aesthetics, a brief history of the relationship between the theory and exhibition format will provide a background against which the current developments of the Ghetto Biennale can be placed.
The Contemporary Art Biennial as Defined Through Relational Aesthetics

This section will consider the ideas of relational aesthetics along with its application in the contemporary art biennial. The belief of relational aesthetics as a socially just form of interaction developed in the 1990s as a result of the practices definition as universally democratic. Often collaborative art processes, like relational aesthetics, are defined by a contradiction where an apparently free aesthetic space is superimposed on the social and institutional reality of art with all of its implicit flaws. This discussion will be essential to the overall understanding of the Ghetto Biennale, as an ongoing project this event uses the practice of relational aesthetics to address the marginalization of contemporary Haitian art.

In *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), Nicolas Bourriaud stated that the current challenge to contemporary art is to reconfigure everyday life as a means to envision alternative realities. In this definition, contemporary art becomes a process by which social forms are manipulated, reorganized and incorporated back into the same social system from which they originated. Bourriaud uses the example of Rirkrit Tiravanija to define the intersubjective nature of relational art. Tiravanija is best known for his hybrid installation performances in which he cooks vegetable curry or pad thai within the gallery sponsoring his work. In *Untitled (Still)* (Figs.1-2), Tiravanija moved the entire contents of a gallery’s storeroom into the main exhibition space. In the storeroom he then created a “makeshift refugee kitchen,” with paper plates, gas burners

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12 Rirkrit Tiravanija is a New York-based artist. He was born in Buenos Aires in 1961. Tiravanija’s upbringing in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada greatly influences his work.

and kitchen utensils. Through the use of these materials the artist produced a meal for visitors to share.

By an action as simple as cooking, Tiravanija transformed the reality of contemporary life into a work of art. According to Bourriaud, the relationship between relational aesthetics and everyday life is a process of “postproducing social reality.” The term “postproduction” is defined as a “process of recycling or détournement” that allows the precarious nature of contemporary society to be deconstructed and critically addressed. Through this process contemporary art becomes a tool to examine and test today’s cultural and social structures. Likewise, to Bourriaud contemporary life is defined as a series of constructed occurrences. In the relational art of Tiravanija, the actual work becomes the everyday human interactions created at the gallery site. The detritus, utensils and food packets found following these encounters are mere testaments to the radical communication that occurred. Bourriaud’s theory is illustrated in relational art’s incorporation of interaction as a means to reject the legacy of modern art. Bourriaud commented, “It is not modernity that is dead, but its idealistic and teleological version.” This statement describes how the once-enthusiastic hope of modernism to create rational certainty and political utopias has been exhausted. Instead, according to Bourriaud,

These days, utopia is being lived on a subjective, everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiments. The artwork is presented as a social interstice within which these experiments and these new “life possibilities” appear to be possible. It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows. That is all, but it is quite something.

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 13.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 45.
Ultimately, this claim affirms that, through the networks of communication available today, revolutionary spaces can be created that help rectify society’s currently isolated condition.

Through the process of relational aesthetics, art no longer draws its inspiration from modernism’s optimistic visions, but, instead, now must undertake less grandiose efforts. For Tiravanija this process is accomplished by transforming the once isolating gallery space into an active site of engagement. Bourriaud states of this adaptation, “Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modeling possible universes,” a series of instances he further describes as microcosms of authentic human sociability. Therefore, instead of creating fantastical representations of the future, the true value of art lies in its ability to represent and repurpose the present.

Bourriaud proposes that the necessity for relational aesthetics lies in the denigration of human interaction resulting from modern technology. To describe this idea he explains,

These days, communications are plunging human contacts into monitored areas that divide the social bonds up into (quite) different products. Artistic activity, for its part, strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another. The much vaunted “communication superhighways”, with their toll plazas and picnic areas, threaten to become the only possible thoroughfare from a point to another in the human world.

While wary of technology, Bourriaud also introduces a theme of isolation that will be centrally important to understanding the relationship between relational aesthetics and the art biennial. The isolation generated by modern technology causes contemporary society to lose its ability to create authentic social interactions. Previously, theorists proposed that electronic connectivity was capable of creating a utopian universalism. One only needed to be connected to the available digital network to be free. The universalism associated with these forms of

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20 Ibid., 13.
21 Ibid., 8.
communication was soon replaced by isolation as individuals without access to electricity or computers were once again excluded.

Relational aesthetics rectified these issues in contemporary art. The gallery space became a site of human exchange and experimentation where renewed sociability could occur. Thus the basis of Bourriaud’s theory is that relational art reclaims society’s lost ability to create inter-human relationships, and ignites hope that a utopian way of life is possible.\(^23\) This reasoning revolutionized the opportunities for social equality as the arts were defined as spaces of emancipation capable of resisting isolation.

Bourriaud describes relational art as “art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and social context,” in contrast to modern art’s formation of “…independent and private symbolic space.”\(^24\) Through the application of a term coined by Karl Marx, Bourriaud defines relational art as a form of artistic production that “represents a social interstice.”\(^25\) In other words, the work itself becomes a space of possibilities, a free realm of human interaction. It is at these sites that communication can flourish and equality can be achieved. Bourriaud takes a liberal approach to the definition of “interstices” as found in Marx’s unfinished manuscript *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy* (1857) and *Capital* (1867). Marx explained social interstices as a marginalized area of the economy that is exempt from the law of profit.\(^26\) According to this definition, social interstices are only possible prior to the integration of the social divisions characteristic of bourgeois society.\(^27\) This type of interaction was only capable before the present capitalist social system was put in place.

\(^24\) Ibid., 14.
\(^25\) Ibid., 16.
Unlike Marx, Bourriaud uses a contemporary definition of this term to propose the presence of interstices in capitalist society by stating that “relational aesthetics does not represent a theory of art…but a theory of form.”\footnote{Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 19.} In this understanding, form itself is capable of generating open and continually developing encounters. The work of art becomes redefined as a space or structure capable of facilitating relations and interactions between entities in the world.\footnote{Ibid.} Unlike previous conceptions of form embodied by the tenets of modernism as exclusionary, relational artists offer dynamic forms that transform to meet the needs of contemporary society.\footnote{Ibid., 21.} Through this process Bourriaud envisions the new task of the relational artist as a mediator of exchanges within society’s predefined systems of interaction.

In relational aesthetics a new role is also assigned to the art audience. The viewer now becomes an essential part of the relational art works’ process. Through this process Bourriaud specifies that the role of the viewer is transformed because “the artwork of the 1990s turns the beholder into a neighbor, a direct interlocutor.”\footnote{Ibid.} In this system the subjectivity of the observer, through the art work, engages the subjectivity of the artist. To Bourriaud, these features were necessary in order to guarantee an equitable interaction. The actual art, when created through the ideas of relational aesthetics, is the space of interaction that occurred in response to the project. This allows Bourriaud to claim that relational art revolutionizes the relationship between artist and spectator: “meaning and sense are the outcome of an interaction between artist and beholder, and not an authoritarian fact.”\footnote{Ibid., 80.} The importance of relational art is found in the interactions that
occur, as these forms of communication provide moments of intimacy set apart from “the alienation reigning everywhere else.”

As a means to clarify his ideas on the increasingly participatory development in the arts, Bourriaud offers criteria to define these forms of engagement:

The first question we should ask ourselves when looking at a work of art is:
– Does it give me a chance to exist in front of it, or, on the contrary, does it deny me as a subject, refusing to consider the Other in its structure? Does the space-time factor suggested or described by this work, together with the laws governing it, tally with my aspirations in real life? Does it criticize what is deemed to be criticisable? Could I live in a space-time structure corresponding to it in reality?

These questions show how the ideas of aesthetic autonomy and socio-political claims can be superimposed on one another in free sites of engagement marked by relational artworks. These criteria outline an audience’s response to relational art that transcends the historically appropriate role of the viewer as a passive consumer or mechanized witness. This transcendence is important to relational art because its use value is defined as the interactions that occur over a work rather than the material object itself. Bourriaud sees an opportunity in these works to increase human encounters as a result of the structure of relational artistic practices and how they reconfigure social realities. No longer will contemporary art be defined by modernism’s classifications as unapproachable, intellectual or obtuse. These features are what made the ideas of relational aesthetics so important to the development of the contemporary art biennial.

A significant boom in contemporary art biennials occurred just prior to relational aesthetics’ 1990s rise in popularity. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the art biennial was considered the preferred mode of representation for the new globalized art institution. Its forms proliferated around the globe, appearing in a variety of cities including Istanbul, Liverpool, Gwangju, and, beginning in 2009, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. By hosting a biennial, cities hoped to gain visibility

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33 Ibid., 82.
34 Ibid., 57.
and secure access to the rapidly transforming networks of communication and commerce establishing the globalized world order. This simultaneous development is not coincidental, as both relational aesthetics and the art biennial presented ways in which individuals might guard against the harsh reality and isolation imposed on society by globalization. According to the sociologist Roland Robertson, the term “globalization” refers to the multifarious processes through which international cultural, ecological, economic and political connectedness increased throughout the world, particularly in response to the 1989-1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. The destruction of the opposing communist world order allowed capitalism to rise unimpeded throughout the world. The effects of these processes, instigated largely through economic liberalization and innovations in communication technologies, have, within the contemporary art-world, been most readily apparent in the large-scale, multi-annual survey exhibitions of the biennial. Arguably, the biennial has itself undergone globalization, growing in frequency from six recorded exhibitions in 1980 to estimations of over 300 in 2011.

The proliferation of biennials following the rise of globalization has also historically been tied to the rising prominence of cosmopolitanism. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall views cosmopolitanism as a subjective outlook that is frequently associated with a conscious openness to cultural differences worldwide but often in terms associated with cultural elitism. The term cosmopolitan identifies a small minority of mobile elites who have the opportunity to enjoy freedom of movement and communication. This freedom contrasts strongly with the experiences

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36 Ibid., 8-9.
of individuals confined by virtue of economic, political and cultural reasons. These restricted individuals are subjected to an isolation that further limits their developmental abilities within the confines of contemporary society. The inequality and perpetual isolation as a result of cosmopolitanism’s restless pursuit of experience, aesthetic sensation and novelty is the cause of contemporary society’s inability to generate the forms of interaction that relational aesthetics hopes to recover. Opponents of cosmopolitanism regularly note its similarity with colonialism and imperialism.

The traditional model of the art biennial, based on the Venice Biennale, is defined as an exhibition form embodying the traits of cosmopolitanism. Developed in 1895, the Venice Biennale began during the “age of empire,” a period in which the world was divided into territories defined around the land holdings of the world’s capitalist powers. The geography of the Venice Biennale still reflects the remnants of imperialism through its exhibition style by highlighting divisions between individual nation states. As a result of its hierarchy of nations, the Venice Biennale became extremely limiting to nations unable to gain prominence in the world’s rapidly expanding capitalist markets. Problems with this model soon arose as numerous countries, because of their perceived economic inferiority, could only be represented by anthropological specimens or primitive art fetishes. This problem has plagued marginalized areas of the contemporary art world including the continent of Africa. Historically, Africa has only been invited to exhibit as a continental pavilion in the Venice Biennale. This curatorial decision shows a tendency to view the continent of Africa as a single entity rather than a diverse

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Africa’s singularized representation shows that certain exhibitions, like the Venice Biennale, have caused a centralization of the art world. As a result, cultures on the periphery were plunged further into marginality and labeled as exotic. This process continued with regard to the art biennial until a drastic change occurred to the exhibition format in response to the rise of globalization in the 1980s and 1990s.

Started in 1984, the Havana Biennial was designed to showcase Third World contemporary art. This exhibition format rejected the display of nation states, as seen in Venice, as a means to critique the isolation inflicted on the art of the periphery as a result of the legacy of colonialism. The Havana Biennial represented an important forum for suppressed voices in the global art world. A defined goal of the biennial was to reject the traditional Western focus of power and decentralize current trends in contemporary art. The Havana Biennial’s greatest achievement was giving marginalized artists a voice in what some have called the contemporary art world’s system of apartheid.

To break away from the confines of this segregation a certain amount of idealism must be present in every biennial, and the Havana Biennial was no exception. This sense of idealism comes from the narratives of enlightenment and humanism that have been deeply engrained in artistic practices. The event was meant to generate the utopian models of artistic interaction traditionally denied by international exhibitions like the Venice Biennale. Gerardo Mosquera, the first curator of the Havana Biennial, describes this idealism: “around every biennial hovers a feeling that the event will contribute something positive to the human spirit, or even make this

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44 Youma Fall, “Dak’Art: Transplant or Adaptation of a Model?,” *Dak’Art 2010: 9th Biennial of Contemporary African Art* (Dakar: Senegal Ministry of Culture, 2010), 163-164.
world better.” Havana’s Biennial originated in the utopian desire to transform international power relations connected to the circulation of art. The biennial was part of Cuba’s strategy for publicizing its political ideology and crafting a positive self-image through organizing international events.

The Havana Biennial was conceived as an open space in which contemporary artists, critics, curators and scholars from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Middle East could meet and engage with each other free from the confines of dominant ideologies. While utopian in idea, the event was also pragmatic in that it created a platform for research and promotion at a time when marginalized artists were unknown beyond their local contexts. In the editions of the Havana Biennial he curated, Mosquera saw the Third World as a separate cultural form capable of ushering in a new global era. He stated, of this impending transformation, “If most of the world aspires to new international orders in the economic and information realms, seemingly it would also be necessary to defend a new international order of art and culture.” Mosquera’s new international order would not entirely reject western culture, but would transform it beyond all recognition. Therefore, like Bourriaud’s definition of relational aesthetics, biennials occurring in undeveloped areas would create revolutionary encounters by utilizing the same features of society that had originally caused the problems they were addressing.

The new process of interaction created by the Havana Biennial was defined through the exhibition’s curatorial agenda. From the beginning this agenda had a very explicit ideological

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47 Ibid. The 1984 and 1986 Havana Biennales were subsidized by the U.S.S.R.
48 Ibid., 200.
50 Ibid. Mosquera said of the marginalization the Havana Biennial was to address, “We, the Africans, the Asians, the Latin Americans have to shape Western culture, as the ‘barbarians’ shaped Christianity. I am certain that the result will not resemble today’s Western culture.”
goal: to stimulate communication between artists and intellectuals of the southern hemisphere while keeping the centers of economic power from monopolizing the distribution of contemporary art. In order to execute this plan, a series of horizontal networks of communication were created. Based on the nonhierarchical nature of these networks, all individuals, regardless of their position in the globalized world, could obtain acknowledgment. This platform was essential for marginalized nations because it allowed them to obtain exposure free from the limitations that have historically affected their worldwide reception. Organizers insured this practice by excluding artists from the dominant powers of the art world, including the United States and Western Europe.

The Havana Biennial is the avant-garde model on which the worldwide explosion of biennials in the 1990s was based. The biennial’s themes frequently considered topics such as integration and resistance in response to globalization. The sentiment of unification underlying these themes affirmed that culturally marginalized artists would have equal access to all areas of the art world, including biennial exhibitions whose access had been traditionally limited. Biennials deeply affected future developments in contemporary society and still influence exhibitions seen today, such as Haiti’s Ghetto Biennale.

In his essay titled “Arrivederci Venice,” Thomas McEvilley explained how the Third World biennials were initially seen as a radical challenge to the tradition of the Venice Biennale and its maintenance of the discriminatory nature of the Western dominated art world. Therefore, by using relational aesthetics, the art biennial became a source in which new forms of social interaction could be created from the system that had originally forced its creation. The

53 Ibid.
biennial’s ability to create equality from the discriminatory limitations of the art world was celebrated and frequently repeated. It was at these radical sites of interaction that the transformation of intercultural communication was believed to occur.

While utopian in concept, the art biennial and relational aesthetics’ use of pre-existing forms of social interaction to generate radical spaces of equality is not without contradictions. Many have criticized biennials, including Havana’s, because they frequently stiffen into their own centers of power involving new gestures of inclusion and exclusion. Mosquera writes that, after only a few exhibitions, the Havana Biennial had become a paradoxical global event. Its once egalitarian mission had become authoritarian, bureaucratic, and at times, repressive. George Baker has suggested that many of the larger biennials now seem to adhere to the logic of spectacle inflicting “phenomenological violence” upon their spectators and creating an increasingly uniform aesthetic experience. Baker alludes to a belief that the biennial is a product of social conditioning and must, therefore, be redefined to preserve its radical significance in contemporary society.

Many of the concerns associated with these events are a result of the dangerous universal quality that occurs when individuals submit to the supposedly democratic trends in globalization. Postcolonial critic Rasheed Araeen argues that in embracing multiculturalism, Western art institutions, including the biennial, merely camouflage the fact that they are “still dominated and controlled by the Eurocentric structures of modernity.” Political philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek made a parallel claim that multiculturalism and identity

politics have served to reinforce, while diverting attention from, multinational capitalism as the real cause of identity-based conflict and suffering.\textsuperscript{59}

While the biennial prides itself on the advancement of dialogue between global cultures, what we are witnessing, writes art historian Salah Hassan, “is not the ultimate recognition of plurality of history but a return to Western grand narratives in the guise of asserting ‘cultural difference.’”\textsuperscript{60} Through its call for democracy, the biennial has created a system that enacts inequality. All of these sentiments echo the concern that the subtle power relationships inherent in all interactions are not being considered.

The problems facing the Third World biennial have significantly afflicted the development of the Havana Biennial. Shortly after the biennial’s formation, it was unable to respond to the realities of the fall of Soviet Communism in 1989, including Cuba’s failed initiative to reinvent itself in the post-Cold War landscape. The biennial simply introduced minor changes that kept everything the same. Eventually, the biennial did evolve into just another standard international art exhibition. According to the conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer, the biennial mutated from “an alternative independent forum” into the “provider of international markets.”\textsuperscript{61} This quote shows that utopia can function as an impulse for agency and a machine for positive transformation. However, it can also be a way of ignoring the intricate realities of art and its production, circulation, and consumption.\textsuperscript{62} In essence, without maintenance and reaffirmation of its particular idealistic traits, biennials can reinforce the very tenets it was


supposed to combat, such as social exclusion, marginality, and inequality. The Ghetto Biennale was meant to remedy these isolating traits for Haitian artists including the sculptural collective *Atis Rezistans* ("Artist Resistance"). The current status of interaction between Haitian artists and the international art world will demonstrate how a lack of empowerment has historically plagued the country of Haiti.
The Ghetto Biennale: The Story of *Atis Rezistans* and the Globalization of Haiti

An increasing number of biennials, particularly those that operate outside of the developed world, engage with contemporary cultural politics. These exhibitions frequently highlight that some countries naturally fit in the contemporary art world and others, like Haiti, are not understood by the world’s art leaders. This dichotomy results in the formation of a dominant group and a marginalized one. Haiti has been on the periphery throughout its artistic history because of the world’s derogatory view of the country’s environment, as well as its artistic inspirations and ties to surrealism.

This section explores Haiti’s artistic history to show how its contemporary visual forms are combating the stereotypes endured by its society. In particular, the severe poverty and discrimination faced by the sculptural collective *Atis Rezistans* will show how a lack of individual choice and agency has limited the international expansion of Haitian art. According to Alfred Gell in *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998), the term agency is defined as the capacity of persons (and things) to act in such a way as to cause or direct the course of events in a social setting. In the postcolonial context of Haiti, agency is considered as an endowment of power in which persons, especially those who are normally marginalized and powerless, find themselves able to effectively shape their own future. The absence of this legacy in the Ghetto Biennale is precisely why the event failed to overcome the stereotypes necessary to solidify its definition as a socially just art exhibition.

Prior to the earthquake, the Ghetto Biennale’s Haitian setting, was supposed to endow the Haitian people with a capacity for individual agency. Unfortunately, the pre-existing structures of the contemporary art world present a pattern of limitations that have constricted opportunities for free choice in Haiti. Many believed the Ghetto Biennale was the site at which these

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limitations could be broached, resulting in a space where past social confines could be sloughed off in pursuit of new, more universally advantageous forms of engagement. Author John Keiffer defined the Ghetto Biennale site as a neutral “third space.”

The notion of a “third space” can also be tied to the interstices defined by Bourriaud and Marx. All of these spaces are defined as unbiased regardless of the current economic and political systems at the time of their creation. The validity of these neutral spaces today is questionable. Globalization’s negative influence on Haiti creates a severely impoverished environment incapable of being defined in the same sense as the interstices described by Marx and Bourriaud. For instance, the Ghetto Biennale presents a particularly enigmatic example, as its chosen site is located in the slums of downtown Port-au-Prince in an area defined by the United Nations as a “red zone” because of its high levels of poverty and violence. While defined as a slum, to locals this area is the site of a neighborhood known as the Grande Rue.

The Grande Rue (Figs. 3-4), nestled in the center of Port-au-Prince, is a vibrant and rambunctious place. To appreciate this space one must embrace the chaos of its overcrowded streets lined with houses precariously constructed from concrete and tin. The neighborhood is the epitome of an urban jungle, as its narrow and jagged pathways pose a hazard to those who traverse the area. Often a lingering scent of urine and sewage fills the air. Without the infrastructure necessary to provide garbage removal and sufficient indoor plumbing, waste in the area has a tendency to build up. The masses of rotting and decaying matter covering the area often eclipse the immense amount of creativity that also permeates this neighborhood.

Historically, the Grande Rue was an area designated for woodcarving and the production of woodcarving.

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64 John Keiffer, quoted in Ghetto Biennale, “2009 Call for Proposals,” http://www.ghettobiennale.com/. Keiffer’s comment references the “third space” originally defined by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhaba. For further reading on the original definition of the concept see Homi Bhaba, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994).
Figure 3. Street view of the neighborhood of the Grande Rue, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Swiatosław Wojtkowiak.

Figure 4. The narrow back alleys and tin roofs of the Grand Rue neighborhood. Image by PRI’s The World.
souvenirs exported to various Caribbean islands. Throughout the years the area has undergone a number of different industrial transitions, housing a variety of services ranging from cabinet making to automobile repair. Myron Beasely, co-curator for the 2009 Ghetto Biennale, describes the neighborhood of the Grand Rue, which was the site of the 2009 and 2011 Ghetto Biennales:

The true width of the streets is disguised for the spillage of people and cars pushing their way through the bustling boulevard. The narrow sidewalks are claimed by the street vendors selling everything from lumber and automobile fragments, to fresh fruits and freshly fried goat, but only steps away, peering through the hustle and clamor and movement of bodies, the entrance of the Grande Rue neighborhood could easily be passed if it were not for the tall sculpture figures of Gede with an extended penis dangling at its entrance.

The site and atmosphere of the neighborhood described by Beasely are the home of the sculptors of *Atis Rezistans.*

*Atis Rezistans,* a collective led by André Eugène, has perfected the art of refashioning the trash dumped onto Haiti from industrialized nations into statuesque works scattered throughout the neighborhood. Eugène, a self-taught artist and lifelong resident of the Grande Rue, defines the work of the collective as an act of resistance against the negative labels defining Haiti and its society. The industrial waste found throughout this once-thriving business center represents the muse from which *Atis Rezistans’* particular avant-garde aesthetic developed.

The atmosphere of poverty faced by *Atis Rezistans* greatly influences the way their particular artistic style is interpreted throughout the art world. As a result of their lack of

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69 The hierarchy of artists in *Atis Rezistans* is often contested. For this thesis the structure of the group was determined from *Atis Rezistans*’ website. Jean Hérard Céleur and André Eugène are listed as members of the *Grand Resistance* (*Grann Rezistans*). These two individuals are frequently considered the founding members of the group. Other artists associated with *Atis Rezistans* are listed as members of *Nouvo Rezistans* (*New Resistance*). These individuals include: Jean Claude Saintilus, Jean Robert Palanquet, Ronald Bazile, Gétho Jean Baptiste, Evel Romain, Wesner Bazile, and Riko. The site also lists Destimare Pierre Isnél as a member of *Nouvo Rezistans.* Isnél perished in the January 10, 2010 earthquake.
expendable income and formal art education, *Atis Rezistans* developed an artistic style defined as survivalist recycling.\(^71\) The group’s assemblages of discarded materials including engine manifolds, TVs, hubcaps, skulls, and plastic doll appendages transform the debris of Haiti’s failing economy into a critical commentary on the issues of isolation and marginality faced by the developing world.\(^72\) Unlike Haiti’s next-to-invisible position in the world’s economic markets, these monumental sculptures demand attention, as they tower over the neighborhood and its inhabitants. They also empower local artists to illustrate their cultural views and beliefs by giving these artists a voice in their own community. Beyond their size, these radical, morbid, and phallic sculptures shock viewers into acknowledging their presence due to their controversial, erotic representations of life and death inspired by Gede, the Vodou spirit of the cemetery, the guardian of the dead, and the master of the phallus.\(^73\)

The unique artistic features of *Atis Rezistans* can be seen in Céleur Jean Hérard’s *Untitled (Three Figures on Motorcycles)* (Fig. 5).\(^74\) This work is an assemblage of three humanesque figures abruptly confronting the viewer. Though each is more mechanical than human, their size and structure allow viewers to engage in self-comparison. Each figure was constructed using a motorcycle chassis for its body and a human skull for its head.\(^75\) The central figure has the addition of a massive phallus that extends four feet from its body. Formal academic interpretations might compare the work of Hérard’s Vodou-inspired imagery to Albrecht Dürer’s

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\(^74\) *Atis Rezistans* is based on an apprenticeship program. Its founders, Eugène and Hérard, have facilitated a system where the group’s older members pass on their artistic traditions to the group’s youth movement: *Ti Moun Rezistans* (“children’s resistance”). This subset of *Atis Rezistans* helps the youngest generation of the Grande Rue set goals and positively impacts the future of Haiti.

\(^75\) Grimes, “Reviews: Vodou Riche: Contemporary Haitian Art.”

*Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Fig. 6). In Dürer’s representation, the four horsemen, symbolic of Conquest, War, Famine, and Death, set a divine apocalypse upon the world as harbingers of the Last Judgment. In the work of Hérard, the fourth and final horseman of the apocalypse is missing; therefore the death that is necessary to end the suffering inflicted by the three present horsemen is unending. The apocalyptic nature of *Untitled* mirrors Haitian reality. Unable to find refuge from their arduous situation, the artists of *Atis Rezistans* use their work to comment on the trauma and isolation Haitians endure. Regardless of any specific religious connotation, broader issues become apparent when the sculpture’s creation in Haiti’s impoverished economy is considered.

The relationship of human misery and death to poverty becomes blatantly clear, as the sculpture confronts the viewer with its three hellish figures. The work of *Atis Rezistans*, through the use of death as its subject, directly confronts viewers, regardless of their financial and cultural background. Hérard describes the importance of this aesthetic decision: “I live in the reality that deals with poverty every day, which informs my work all the time.” This comment shows a common correlation between poverty and death by those already living in the margins of society. The poor simply cannot afford the luxury to ignore the ugly or uncomfortable parts of life; they make due with whatever they have available. It naturally follows that art originating from poor communities looks more fearlessly into the eyes of death. This is expressed very literally in *Untitled (Three Figures on Motorcycles)*, as the six hollow sockets of the sculpture delivers the exacting, neutral stare of death at the viewer. It’s essential to see death in the work

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76 Ibid.
78 Céleur, biographical statement, as quoted in Eric Grimes, “Vodou Riche: Contemporary Haitian Art,” Ereview.org
79 Grimes, “Vodou Riche: Contemporary Haitian Art.”
of *Atis Rezistans* to understand how creativity allows Haitians to deal with their current dismal situation.

The sculptures of *Atis Rezistans* literally take economic poverty and convert it to a visual wealth that is different from the artistic styles that are traditionally associated with the country of Haiti. Haiti’s best-known contribution to the history of art is a style of painting defined by Western art standards as naïve. Modernists used the term naïve to characterize artistic representations that captured the reality of human creativity without imitating photography.80 Traits of this artistic style can be seen in the work of Haiti’s most celebrated naïve painter, Hector Hyppolite’s *President Florvil Hyppolite* (Fig. 7).81 Naïve art is characterized by a childlike simplicity in subject matter and technique.82 The distinction of Haitian art as naïve did not bode well in the long run, as this term defined the works by their unaffected simplicity, often considered lacking in experience and judgment.

Haiti’s use of Vodou iconography has also had a similar marginalizing effect on the reception of Haitian art, which has indelibly framed Haitian culture as primitive and absurd—resulting in a view of Haiti as an exotic Other rather than a worthy collaborator. At the height of the celebrated naïve movement, Haitian artists working during the 1940s drew the attention of leading Parisian cultural figures such as André Breton, the founder and leader of the Surrealist movement.83 After his 1945 visit Breton said of Haiti’s artists, “Haitian painting will drink the blood of the phoenix and, with the epaulets of Dessalines, it will ventilate the world.”84 From this statement, Breton’s views of Haitian art as a much-needed revival of modern art can be seen.

Figure 7. Hector Hyppolite, *President Florvil Hyppolite*, ca. 1945-1947. Oil and pencil on paper, 30 x 24 inches. Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.
In 1946, Breton organized an exhibition of Haitian painting in Paris. While the international recognition was an accomplishment for Haiti’s self-taught artists, the show dictated that all future Haitian artistic forms would be defined through surrealism’s fantastical and exotic traits.

Today, Surrealism is viewed in art history as a movement that signifies unreality, the nonsensical, or the absurd. The work of the Haitian artists followed suit, as the association of these images with Surrealism further reinforced an image of Haiti as a magical and dreamlike primitive culture. This relationship was detrimental to the future respectability of Haitian art. These negative trends increased when the exoticism of Haitian art attracted the interest of tourists, ushering in a steady stream of revenue for the island’s lagging economy. The market for Haiti’s exotic aesthetic, as seen in its Surrealist and naïve painting, began to slowly die out in the late 1970s. However, the stereotypical image of Haiti as a primitive, undeveloped culture resulting from these artistic forms has been seared onto the nation.

The artists of Atis Rezistans are still struggle against these stereotypes in order to develop their art beyond its current definition as an exotic fetish. These lingering stereotypes are one of the main reasons that Haitian artists have been unable to achieve a sense of agency within their work or direct the future of their careers. The isolation faced by Haitian artists as a result of this stigma severely limits their ability to exhibit internationally.

This trend started to change with Atis Rezistans, but the group still faces limitations due to its Haitian origin, and its characterization as an exotic culture. One such example of these obstructions occurred in 2004. 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

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85 René Depestre, “René Depestre: Between Utopia and Reality,” The UNESCO Courier: Rebirth for Haiti (September 2010): 44.
86 Stebich, Haitian Art, 23.
when the artists applied to the U.S. embassy for visas to attend the opening, they were refused.\textsuperscript{87} While the work of \textit{Atis Rezistans} was allowed to communicate on a global platform, the artists, as individuals, were not. The restraints surrounding the work of \textit{Atis Rezistans}, including the refused visas, continued, globally, wherever the group exhibited. Prior to the 2010 earthquake Eugène and Hérard were frequently unable to attend private viewings of their work abroad due to either visa restrictions or a lack of necessary funding.\textsuperscript{88} In response to the limitations they faced, Eugène 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!”\textsuperscript{89}

Largely excluded from the international biennial circuit, the irony of an apparently “globalized” art world is bitterly obvious to these artists. According to Leah Gordon, curator of the 2009 and 2011 Ghetto Biennales, issues of immobility and exclusion are common occurrences for Haitian artists. These forms of exclusion have been felt by the Haitian artists, including Frantz “Guyodo” Jacques, a former member of the group, who became concerned that potential patrons were more focused on the slums of the Grande Rue than the art of \textit{Atis Rezistans}.\textsuperscript{90} This sentiment illustrates the group’s concern that their work will be used to reinforce negative images of Haiti, such as human rights abuse, poverty, and its legacy as a former slave colony, rather than showcase its history of artistic ingenuity.

These concerns have become reality over the last decade as \textit{Atis Rezistans} and the improvised, yet amazingly creative, context in which they work has attracted a host of curators. These curators have used the work of \textit{Atis Rezistans} to support a number of nationalist, religious,
and philanthropic causes. In 2007, the group was invited to create a sculpture entitled *Freedom!* (Fig. 8) for the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, England. This work was commissioned as a social project by the charitable organization, Christian Aid, to create an artifact for the museum. Beyond the materials presented, the work was transformed into an embodiment of “Haiti” for the press and a symbol of the United Kingdom’s bicentennial commemoration of the parliamentary abolition of the slave trade. The open-ended nature of *Atis Rezistans*’ work has been used by various institutions to instill the art object with meanings that were in line with the commissioners’ own agendas. When displayed for the purposes of other individuals and organizations, the freedom of expression the artists of *Atis Rezistans* attempt to achieve is not possible.

This problem increased in response to the January 12, 2010 earthquake. The crisis put a spotlight on the nation, but the attention further complicated Haiti’s quest for equality. Ironically, while society gave millions to Haitian recovery efforts, those slated to receive the funds were still excluded from the dialogue concerning their recovery. This mentality is a result of Haiti’s position as the pariah of the American continent. Haiti has never been able to elevate itself to nation status and is today more than ever, dependent on international charity. Through this process a distance is reaffirmed between Haiti and the developed world that strengthened the global tendency to define Haitians as a cultural Other. The pity resulting from this “othering” stems from Haiti’s identity in the popular imagination as an island full of irrational, devil-

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91 Leah Gordon, the curator of the Ghetto Biennale, served as a visiting curator on this project at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. It was through this project that she met the members of *Atis Rezistans.*
Figure 8. André Eugène, Céleur Jean Hérard, Mario Benjamin, and Haitian Youth, *Freedom!*, 2004. Metal, lights, and found objects. The International Slavery Museum, Liverpool. Image by Billy Fallows.
worshipping, progress-resistant, uneducated, accursed black natives.95 Often because of Haiti’s inability to be properly defined by the world’s dominant ideologies, the unique features of the nation are used to ghettoize its culture and people.96 While these issues go beyond simply art, Haitian artists have always felt the sting of this discrimination. Even Mario Benjamin, one of Haiti’s most financially successful artists, confessed that “There is a huge stigma about artists from our country… I’m fighting this, whenever I work, to take a position against what they expect from an artist from the Third World.”97

The fact that Atis Rezistans must deal with these issues on top of severe poverty creates a conflict around their work whenever it is exhibited internationally. Often the work of Atis Rezistans is displayed in an attempt to embody the ideas of multiculturalism, as a means to add an element of diversity to an exhibition. The exhibition of these projects is celebrated because these works enhance the cosmopolitanism of the individuals consuming them. Many praise these displays because they are thought to aid Haitian culture in communication within the larger scope of the international art world; however, this communication is not lasting. It is more likely that these one-sided forms of engagement will further disparage Haitian society.

Oftentimes the praise for exhibitions of Haitian arts and culture conceal underlying ethnocentric and soft xenophobic ideals. By simplifying the messages of socially critical images to mere representations of the Vodou religion, the art of Haiti is then more likely to fit into the dominant representations of Haitian culture expected by contemporary society. For instance, New York’s American Museum of Natural History mounted an exhibition of Haitian history in 1999 titled The Sacred Art of Haitian Vodou. According to the exhibition’s catalogue, “Vodou is

Haiti’s mirror. Its arts and rituals reflect the difficult, brilliant history of seven million people …” 98 In this show Vodou was used as a central theme uniting all of Haitian history to the present. This is problematic, as the Vodou religion, while prevalent, has not been involved in a number of the country’s historical and political milestones. This is just one instance of the derogatory direction in which curatorial choices can go when entire groups of people are generalized into universal representations meant to show art and culture.

A prime example of perpetuating Haitian stereotypes occurred with Haiti’s first exhibition as a nation at the 54th Venice Biennale in the summer of 2011. It was determined that members of Atis Rezistans and artists of the Haitian diaspora would be shown throughout the Venetian exhibition. The artists were split among two different exhibition sites. Haiti Kingdom of the World (Fig. 9), held in the galleries of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, featured internationally-known Haitian artists including Mario Benjamin and Maxence Denis. The other sites curated by Daniele Geminiani and deputy curator Leah Gordon, titled Death and Fertility (Fig. 10), presented the work of Atis Rezistans in two metal containers arranged as a cross in an open-air piazza.99

This division presented an interesting dilemma. The supposed Vodou-inspired work of Atis Rezistans, designed as a critique of the poverty and marginalization felt by the Haitian people, was separated from the globally-recognized Haitian artists who have regularly exhibited at biennials around the world.100 The deliberate separation of the Western-approved works from those of Atis Rezistans is problematic, as all of these individuals represent Haitian creativity. In

100 According to Frau Fibre, not all of the Haitian projects presented at the Venetian exhibition were Vodou inspired. The exhibition generalized the work’s subjects to fit the exhibitions Vodou theme. Frau Fibre, interview by Caitlin Lennon, January 27, 2012.

Figure 10. *Death and Fertility*, 54th Venice Biennale, 2011. Image by Rachael Cloughton.
response to this separation Gordon explained, “I think that the work of *Atis Rezistans* is very challenging, and for some shocking, as it deals with sex and death, Eros and Thanatos, through the lens of Vodou, poverty, and social exclusion.”¹⁰¹ Due to its controversial nature, the work of *Atis Rezistans* was separated. However, their inclusion and particular aesthetic was deemed necessary for display. It appears that the artists of *Atis Rezistans* traded the negative cultural stereotypes that originally limited their art for an institutionally-accepted Other status.

To confront the limitations that have plagued the exhibition of their sculptures, *Atis Rezistans* decided to reclaim the mechanisms of exhibition surrounding its work and hold an international event, much like the Havana Biennial, in their own space.¹⁰² It became apparent to the artists that past confines would always affect their art if something was not done to change the image of Haiti. The purpose of the Ghetto Biennale was to rectify these disparities. As an international art biennial, taking place in the neighborhood of the Grand Rue, the Ghetto Biennale was to be an exhibition at which Haitian artists could collaboratively challenge current Haitian stereotypes.

The specifics of the Ghetto Biennale were negotiated in a conversation among members of *Atis Rezistans*, including André Eugène, Celeur Jean Hérard, and their curatorial partner Leah Gordon.¹⁰³ During these discussions it was decided that *Atis Rezistans*, like other marginalized cultural groups, would appropriate the concept of an international art biennial to address the current limitations of the global art world.¹⁰⁴ The spectacle associated with art biennials would allow the artists of the Grande Rue to rebrand their location as an epicenter of contemporary artistic creativity. The title for the event, which dictated its future form, was created by

¹⁰³ Ibid.
¹⁰⁴ Ghetto Biennale, “2009 Call for Proposals.”
combining the term “biennale” with the inconsistent idea of a “ghetto”— the artists’ preferred designation for their space.\textsuperscript{105} The combination of these terms set the stage for an international event that would challenge the traditional notions of otherness currently dictating the communicatory potential of contemporary Haitian art. The structure of the Ghetto Biennale would be the life and art of Haiti as experienced through \textit{Atis Rezistans}.

Eugène initiated the process several years before the 2009 inaugural Ghetto Biennale by opening his studio and yard as a museum for \textit{Atis Rezistans} titled “‘E Pluribus Unum’ Musée d’Art.” As Eugène explained, “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.”\textsuperscript{106} After this space successfully generated communication among members of the community, it became the proposed site for the first contemporary art biennial in Haiti.

An announcement was posted online, inviting artists to submit project proposals for a \textit{Salon des Refusés}.\textsuperscript{107} Translated as a “Salon for the Refused,” this exhibition was meant to exhibit the work of artists and challenge standard conceptions of beauty. Prospective artists were asked to consider the question, “What happens when First World art rubs up against Third World art? Does it bleed?”\textsuperscript{108} This question was meant to challenge the factors that have historically separated artists from developed and undeveloped worlds. The Ghetto Biennale would transform the isolation of globalization into representations of solidarity, justice, and mutual respect.\textsuperscript{109}

Biennale participants were also encouraged to make their work using only the materials available to artists in Haitian slums. While \textit{Atis Rezistans} mastered this creation process, the junkyard scavenging and survivalist recycling necessary in the Grand Rue proved to be

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Mosquera, “The Havana Biennial: A Concrete Utopia,” 203.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

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challenging for many of the visiting artists. The artists, writers, and academics admitted to the Ghetto Biennale were forced to reformulate their projects numerous times to adapt to Haiti’s harsh environment.  

David Frohnapfel, co-curatorial of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale, describes this process of reformulation, noting that “the Biennale exhibition became something less staged and designed that can be labeled as rhizomatic ....” Frohnapfel believed that the Ghetto Biennale presented contemporary art directly and indirectly as an oscillation between different artistic poles and genres, a phenomenon that is perhaps best described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s metaphorical concept of the rhizome. This system of interconnectivity is based on a horizontal network of roots or access points. Any individual in this system can connect freely to every other. The rhizome is thereby a non-centered, non-hierarchical, and non-significant system that is solely defined by a circulation of states. These systems are forever continuous, as a rhizome can be broken or shattered at any given spot but will always start up again on one of its old lines. While new lines can occur, they are always somehow connected back to the same rhizomatic system from which they originated. Through these qualities, the Ghetto Biennale, according to Frohnapfel, functioned as a neutral space, as it was both equally open and non-centrally based. In this democratic form of rhizomatic exhibition the lines between ethnographic artifacts, contemporary art objects, and tourist-art are blurred. Therefore, at any point radically new social, historic, and economic situations based on equality could be created.

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113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., 9.
An examination of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale projects will show that in fact the exhibition’s construction mimics the neoliberal rhetoric of globalization seen throughout modern art. While the tension between “colonizer” and “colonized” seems simultaneously and continuously subverted, it still remains veiled under the euphoric sentiment of the Biennale. Attempts to negotiate this conflict can be seen in the observation that, over time, the Havana Biennial has stagnated and become mainstream, allowing artists from anywhere in the world to participate. Therefore, despite their decentered appearances, Third World biennials simply recreate the same system they set out to combat. As the following examples will show, the 2011 Ghetto Biennale did not provide the agency necessary to empower the artists of Atis Rezistans and the surrounding Grande Rue community to unburden themselves from Haiti’s historically-derogatory image.

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117 Mosquera, “The Havana Biennial: A Concrete Utopia,” 208. The 11th Havana Biennial (2012) will be the first installment to display artists from developed countries.
On Site: The Projects of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale

The disparity between the concepts of relational aesthetics and agency, as seen in the 2011 Ghetto Biennale, will be addressed here through an analysis and discussion of the individual projects to show that without drastic changes to the structure of the Ghetto Biennale, the event will continue to solidify the nation of Haiti’s detrimental image. It is through the individual projects that the Ghetto Biennale continues to falter in creating the emancipatory sense of Haitian empowerment necessary to deem this event successful. The inherent issues in the Biennale’s projects can be broken down into three main conflicts: misunderstanding of the individual projects’ purpose, lack of local input, and reiteration of cultural stereotypes plaguing Haiti on a global scale.

The Ghetto Biennale organizers desired the same type of utopian interaction as proposed by the theory of relational aesthetics. That is why the curators chose to use the biennial format. As Bourriaud argued, by setting up real interactive situations or forms of relationalism, like biennials, organizers do not “represent utopias” but actualize them. Myron Beasely, co-curator of the 2009 Ghetto Biennale, echoed this sentiment, “the goals were straightforward: to bring artists together for in-depth, cross-cultural communication and collaboration.” Curator Leah Gordon’s comments on the 2009 event’s outcome show her belief that the desired utopian space of interaction was created,

The Ghetto Biennale (2009) surpasse[d] all my expectations – truly it did – this was the creative act in extreme – it was an experiment of putting two extraordinary and incongruous worlds together … and that’s what led me to the revelation that the creative is an energy, a revolutionary energy and the products at the end, the art objects, are merely a part of that revolutionary energy…

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118 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 45-46.
This process of integration was achieved, according to Gordon, because “the creative act can intensely connect people from diverse genders, sexualities, classes, races, and nationalities.”

Despite the maintenance of the event’s structure from 2009 to 2011, the second Ghetto Biennale was not met with a positive response. Even Gordon’s views on the Biennale significantly changed. As she observed shortly after the exhibition closed, “The second Ghetto Biennale (2011) was far more conflicted than the first one …. This time people in the Grand Rue were better prepared and aware of the potential life changing affect it could have for them. This resulted in far more tourist resort type hustling ….”

The same negative sentiment described by Gordon was expressed by participants of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale. The boldest statement was voiced by Karen Miranda Augustine, a Canadian artist and first-time participant:

I wasn’t there to take disaster photos, to do research for a PhD, to shoot source material for a film — this wasn’t an anthropological exercise for me. I was there out of a love and respect for Haitian culture, history, art and spiritual expression …. At times, I almost felt as if I were one of the few who was there truly out of reverence.

The observations of art historian Nadine Zeidler paralleled these frustrations. Zeidler critiqued a portion of the projects at the 2011 Ghetto Biennale because, while informed by well-meaning charitable agendas, these projects provided only momentary spectacles rather than long-term engagement.

The comments by Augustine and Zeidler both show that, despite its neutral utopian façade, problems riddle the structure of the Ghetto Biennale.

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121 Ibid.
122 This comment is in reference to the overall structure of the Ghetto Biennale. Changes did occur to the Biennale’s curatorial team and selected artists between 2009 and 2011.
To expand the research available on this conflict, I conducted a series of interviews with the Biennale’s curators and artists. During these conversations, both Haitian and international participants presented their views on the Ghetto Biennale. Several participants questioned the purpose and benefits of the Biennale for Haiti and the international art community. Underlying these disparities were the vastly different definitions each individual had of what constituted a proper form of interaction with the Haitian people. These concerns, despite being extremely differentiated, were connected by a common trend: no artist at the event was willing to acknowledge the shortcomings of his or her project, yet a majority raised concern about the practices of other participants in the Biennale.

While the concerns of the participating artists further complicate the 2011 Ghetto Biennale, a common concern was seen regarding the event’s influence on the nation of Haiti. As the first Biennale following the 2010 earthquake, there were lingering questions about what constituted a responsible art practice in crisis situations. These concerns went unaddressed during the event because the exhibition’s structure contained no features to identify or handle negative interactions. Every form of collaboration was seen as positive because there was no method of critique capable of assessing the projects presented. This feature is a hallmark of relational aesthetics, which maintains, if there is interaction, then there is democracy.

Art historian Claire Bishop in, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” (2006) highlighted the shortcomings of Bourriaud’s theory. This essay focuses on the absence of the
critical judgment necessary to analyze the collaborative processes generated through relationalism. Bishop examined Bourriaud’s thesis alongside the models of democratic relations that it encouraged:

I am simply wondering how we decide what the “structure” of a relational art work comprises, and whether this is so detachable from the work’s ostensible subject matter or permeable with its context … The quality of the relationships in “relational aesthetics” are never examined or called into question … If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced and for whom?128

Bishop’s critique clearly rejects the universally accepted sociability of relational works.129 By presenting the political issues of relational aesthetics, these ideas outline why this form of interaction is problematic at the Ghetto Biennale. Bishop’s second concern with relational aesthetics is that it does not address the antagonism that necessarily exists in a democratic society. A key concept underlying these concerns is “context,” the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event or situation.130 Relational aesthetics does not possess the means necessary to assess an artwork’s frame of reference because this practice focuses instead on the forms of interaction and exchange created by a work.131

A comparison between A*BOUT’s 2011 Ghetto Biennale project and the egalitarian rhetoric of relational aesthetics displays this conflict. This comparison includes the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an artist whose practice was essential in illustrating the potential of relational aesthetics for Bourriaud. Gonzalez-Torres’ untitled paper stacks and candy pours (Figs. 11-12) create an interactive teaching site.132 These works reach out toward their audience, who are invited to take pieces away, while always contemplating the civic responsibility of how

129 Ibid., 61.

much to appropriate. This harmonious relationship was essential to Bourriaud’s definition of relational aesthetics as a facilitator of ethical cohabitation. Moreover, the interactive nature and inclusivity of relational artworks give the audience the role of completing the work of art. The democratic significance of this experience belongs to the sociable, open-ended, and non-coercive relations generated between event and audience, such that, as Bourriaud explains, there is “no precedence between producer and consumer.” The abolition of these roles proved problematic in the Haitian context of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale.

During the final week of the event, the German art collective A*BOUT, comprised of Viola Thiele, Silke Bauer, and Irina Novarese, collected stories and images for their project, A BOOK ABOUT (Figs. 13-14). By focusing on the relationship between art, archives, and the nature of contemporary memory, the group hoped to produce artists’ books and construct a temporary library for the Biennale. A BOOK ABOUT was a participatory, community-based art project in which local artists of all ages were encouraged to express personal views and everyday life experiences in individually crafted artists’ books. The books were then collected and displayed during the Biennale’s opening day in the Grande Rue.

A*BOUT believed its project was influential because, often, libraries in regions like Haiti are inaccessible due to high illiteracy rates. According to the project’s website, libraries are places where information, knowledge, and education are transmitted. The group believed that an emancipatory language of images could be generated by the Haitian people to record their own memories and identities. By allowing the inhabitants of the Grande Rue to construct their

133 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 52
137 Ibid.
Figure 13. Haitian artists taking part in a workshop set up by A*BOUT, 2011. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Viola Thiele.

Figure 14. The temporary library constructed by A*BOUT at the Ghetto Biennale, 2011. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Viola Thiele.
own library, the hierarchical order associated with written text, libraries, and archives was supposed to be eradicated. In a series of interactive events, A*BOUT sought to become facilitators of Haitian creativity, as all of the books’ images were created by locals.

Following the Ghetto Biennale, the temporary library was taken down and the books returned to Germany with the members of A*BOUT. This action ensured that the handmade books could tour Europe. In an interview, Thiele revealed that the books would not be returned to Haiti because they are made of paper and could be damaged in Haiti’s harsh slums. When asked if a digital library was possible, the artist stated that this prospect was not feasible. The group could not afford to commit the time and financial resources necessary to undertake such a process. A*BOUT does hope that the books will be published someday as a means to recuperate the costs of the materials brought from Germany. The original goal of providing Haiti with a library capable of allowing locals to define their own history was abandoned.

The practice of A*BOUT, while applying the same democratic ideals as that of Gonzalez-Torres, created, instead, a work based on unequal cohabitation. The group handed over the creation of its project to the Grand Rue neighborhood and, in a sense, became the project’s viewers. In the end, by forever removing the books from Haiti, the artists consumed all of the Haitian efforts presented in the project. Instead of rectifying the isolation of Haitian artists, this project further reinforced the negative stereotypes plaguing the country and only profited the visiting artists.

A*BOUT’s misconception of the equality of the communication presented in A BOOK ABOUT is a common theme among the artworks of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale. Unfortunately,

138 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
this position does not take into account the power each individual maintains when entering into a collaborative process. While Bourriaud views relational art as democratic, the space in which these interactions occur has been defined by other philosophers and theorists. When considered outside the confines of contemporary art, this space is nothing more than the communication between individuals.

In *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009) Susan Buck-Morss draws a connection between Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and Haiti. Hegel, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), outlines how the communication between individuals inevitably transforms into a relationship between master and slave. Buck-Morss goes so far to say that Haiti’s slave revolt of 1789 and subsequent revolution served as the subject for Hegel’s master-slave dialect. Hegel’s interest in the rebellion developed in response to its radical “rupture” of the Enlightenment’s definition of freedom as a natural, but not necessarily equal, human right. According to Buck-Morss, this “rupture” was caused because “Never before had a slave society successfully overthrown its ruling class.”

While few people today would define themselves as Hegelian, the master-slave dialectic is still prevalent because its definitive power struggle can occur during any form of engagement. According to Hegel’s logic, even the projects of the art biennial are representative of the master-slave dialectic. Art historian Andrew Hass describes how the term “master” has been historically

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145 Ibid., 74-75. By the eighteenth century, slavery became the root metaphor of Western political philosophy, connoting everything that was evil about power relations. Freedom, its conceptual antithesis, was considered by Enlightenment thinkers as the highest and universal political value. Yet this sentiment began to take root at precisely the time that the economic practice of slavery increased.
146 Ibid., 39.
used to describe the way artists dominate their subjects and medium.\textsuperscript{147} The ever-present power struggle in the creative arts does not bode well for the democratic ideals of relational aesthetics. Relationalism does not generate the radical “rupture” Buck-Morss defined as necessary to rectify the oppressive nature of the master-slave dialectic.\textsuperscript{148} This is seen in the Ghetto Biennale because both sides of the interaction have needs that must be met.\textsuperscript{149} Haitian artists desire more exposure in the art world, and the visiting artists desire a subject and site to execute, their projects. A power struggle ensued in which one group was subordinated to maintain the interaction.\textsuperscript{150}

The specific choices made by A*BOUT during the 2011 Ghetto Biennale suggest that Hegel’s Eurocentric and racist assumptions are still present, even in the supposed egalitarian space of art biennials.\textsuperscript{151} \textit{A BOOK ABOUT} reinforced contemporary forms of inequality as a result of the group’s censorship of submissions. Thiele observed that a number of the received images were unusable due to their erotic content (Figs. 15-16).\textsuperscript{152} These images were described as disturbing because in both the work of children and adults, representations of the phallus were frequently seen.\textsuperscript{153} These images were relegated to one specific artist’s book as a means to censor the offensive imagery. However, the phallus is a symbol in Haitian Vodou that represents the culture’s pantheon of \textit{lwa} or gods. It is through the symbol of the phallus that Haitian artists attempt to embody the qualities of life and death that are so important to all areas of humanity.\textsuperscript{154}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{147} Andrew W. Hass, “Artist Bound: The Enslavement of Art to the Hegelian Other,” \textit{Literature &Theology} 25, no. 4 (December 2011): 380.
\item \textsuperscript{148} Buck-Morss, 71-72. According to Buck-Morss, the master-slave dialectic is surpassed when slaves achieve self-consciousness and demonstrate that they are not things, nor objects but subjects who transform material reality.
\item \textsuperscript{149} Hegel, \textit{The Phenomenology of Spirit}, 63.
\item \textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 65.
\item \textsuperscript{151} Robert B. Pippin, \textit{Hegel’s Practical Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
\item \textsuperscript{152} Viola Thiele, interview by Caitlin Lennon, February 22, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{154} Gordon, \textit{The Book of Vodou: Charms and Rituals to Empower Your Life}, 86-87.
\end{itemize}
The symbol of Gede is an erect phallus that is frequently seen in the work of 
Atis Rezistans. A*BOUT misinterpreted the importance of the images they collected, as Gede is often represented as the protector of Haitian society. Its powers help achieve truth, maintain life, and protect the country’s future through its youngest generations. Instead, A*BOUT interpreted these images outside of their cultural context and reaffirmed negative Haitian stereotypes. Though censored, according to Thiele, all of the books will eventually be displayed. A*BOUT’s negative classification of these images will shape their future reception.

According to Buck-Morss, the Hegelian dialectic, or the relationship on which the master-slave dialectic is based, is the presentation of two sides of an issue, usually via some form of discussion or interaction. In specific terms, a thesis gives rise to a reaction, an antithesis, which contradicts the position of the original argument. The tension between the two is resolved by the development of a synthesis. The unwillingness of the Haitian and international participants to acknowledge projects that raised concern during the Biennale caused the dialectic to stagnate, which means that the synthesis in these interactions will never be achieved. As a result, the Haitian people remain subordinate and devoid of the empowerment the Ghetto Biennale was supposed to create.

A few of these crucial conflicts, including the distribution of power in post-earthquake Haiti, can be seen in projects like Dreams, Rev Ou. This video resulted from the collaboration of Mexican-American artist Robert Gomez and Tele-Ghetto, a Haitian guerilla media collective that originated during the 2009 Ghetto Biennale. Tele-Ghetto (Figs. 17-18) was spontaneously initiated when its members began to “phantom film” the proceedings of the Biennale by

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157 Buck-Morss, Haiti, Hegel, and Universal History, 74. Hegel’s original discussion on the structure of the master-slave dialectic can be found in Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, 29-30.
158 Zeidler, “2nd Ghetto Biennale.”
mimicking the actions of the international filmmakers that inundated the Grande Rue neighborhood.\(^{159}\) By fashioning a pretend video camera from a plastic oil container, the group proved that its lack of expensive video equipment did not stop them from taking part in the international art world. The group considers its pretend filming as a performance of resistance capable of rectifying the international media’s tendency to negatively represent Haiti. Unfortunately, the project’s first interactions in 2009 are only recorded in photographs.

After the Biennale the group began to record its process of fake filming with donated video equipment. In its first “real” film, the group defined its mission as showing the reality of Haitian life.\(^{160}\) The group criticized the tendency of mainstream media sources, especially following the 2010 earthquake, to censor and exploit certain areas of Haitian society in hope of obtaining storylines that fit the expected persona of impoverished nations.\(^{161}\) Tele-Ghetto vowed to not “edit the reality of their work,” but instead show all aspects of Haitian life.\(^{162}\)

While Tele-Ghetto is made up of three young Haitians: Alex Louis, Romel Jean Pierre, and Steeens Simeon, for Dreams, Rev Ou Gomez worked with only one member of the local film crew—Jean Pierre.\(^{163}\) For twelve days Gomez and Jean Pierre collected hours of video from around Port-au-Prince, including numerous interviews with Haitians describing their dreams and hopes. Entrenched Haitian stereotypes emerged as the collaborative project evolved. The end result is a melancholic montage in which a handful of individuals describe their dreams for the future of Haiti. While bittersweet, the video reaffirms the current image plaguing Haiti as

\(^{160}\) Tele-Ghetto uses YouTube to disseminate its videos.
\(^{161}\) Zeidler, “Ghetto Biennale, a Salone des Refusés for the 21st Century.”
Figure 17. The Haitian guerilla media collective Tele-Ghetto at the 2009 Ghetto Biennale. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Leah Gordon.

Figure 18. The Haitian guerilla media collective Tele-Ghetto at the 2009 Ghetto Biennale. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Leah Gordon.
a wounded nation that will not recover. A troubling feature of the video comes at the end, when Gomez sits alone in front of the camera and makes a plea in Haitian Creole for the achievement of Haiti’s dreams (Figs. 19-20). The impoverished neighborhood of the Grande Rue and its artists serve as the background for this segment. When Gomez remarks, “this is our video,” the Haitian artists correct him by saying, “this is your video.”¹⁶⁴ Gomez brushes off this interruption and reemphasizes the collective aspect of the video.

In an interview with this author, Gomez asserted that the controversial scene was not critical to the project or its representation of the Haitian people.¹⁶⁵ The artist affirmed that he and Jean Pierre collaborated on every portion of the project.¹⁶⁶ However, Jean Pierre never appears on screen. His absence makes viewers question how the ideas of agency were actually negotiated between the artist and the Haitian community. Despite these inconsistencies, Gomez argued that the democratic nature of the video’s production exceeded the image of the Haitian people it presented. While the original goal of the video was defined as adding to Haitian cultural empowerment, what is presented shows an entirely different agenda that reaffirms the popular media’s image of Haiti as a nation to be pitied.¹⁶⁷

The neglect of Haitian agency seen in Dreams, Rev Ou began during the collaborative process. Instead of supporting the mission of Tele-Ghetto, on which the project was based, Gomez and Jean Pierre edited and censored certain dreams they received. For instance, one little girl declared that her dream was to one day become a “bitch.”¹⁶⁸ This dream was cut from the final video. While abrasive, her dream did not fit the artists’ desired image of the Haitian people.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

In another unreleased version of the video other stylistic choices were enacted to frame a particular image of contemporary Haitian society. In this version the choppiness of the editing done by Gomez and Jean Pierre at the Ghetto Biennale was smoothed. The emotional quality of the film was heightened when the original single piano soundtrack was replaced with that of a dramatic philharmonic orchestra. Gomez said he will be submitting this version to film festivals. In its final form, the video is more likely to empower the artist as opposed to the Haitians who served as its subject. Gomez will dictate when and how the video is shown while the subjects have lost contact with the project.

*Dreams, Rev Ou* proved that an enquiry into the power relations involved in collaborative art and the extent to which individuals are cajoled into participatory projects is necessary. This problem exponentially increased at the Ghetto Biennale because each participant’s agenda was influenced by his or her previous opinions of Haiti. While the principles of relational aesthetics state that autonomous forms of engagement can be created from the existing systems of social interaction, the equality in these interactions is contestable. In fact, these interactions have proven more likely to expose the biased nature and fragility of social bonds.

Artist John Miller proposes that these conflicts can aid in exposing the social features that are to blame for widespread dissatisfaction with biennials. Instead of treating the interactions of the Ghetto Biennale as a space of social emancipation, they must be considered as sites of contradiction. By reflecting on the biennial as a cluster of contradictions and the challenges they present, it is possible to conclude that biennials will inevitably fail in some respect. The

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172 Jodie Dalgleish, “Negotiating Contradiction: The Biennale and the Contemporary Curator” (Ph.D. diss., University of Otago, 2008), 82.
uncontested praise of relationalism by creators and commentators on the 2011 Ghetto Biennale is
to blame for this event’s particular failures. The platform of multiculturalism merely
camouflaged the fact that the Biennale is based on systems of collaboration dominated by the art
world’s centers of power.173

In “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents” (2006), Claire Bishop outlines a
forceful reassessment of artistic collaboration based on ethical rather than aesthetic terms. This
means that participatory art projects should be judged solely with regard to the egalitarian form
of relationships enacted by the work, instead of evaluating it “as art.” Through this process,
Bishop deemphasizes art’s previously assumed concern with pleasure, visibility, engagement and
the conventions of social interaction, in order to enhance its value as a social practice.174

In her reassessment, Bishop calls for an introduction of “ethnographic realism” in
collaborative art practice.175 This brings to mind the concept of ethnography defined by James
Clifford as “ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant
observation.”176 This is not so much to posit the collaborative artist as an ethnographer per se, or
“outside observer,” as it is to note the extent to which participatory art practices often involve a
close, if not intimate, degree of familiarity with given social groups over extended periods of
time.177 This reasoning helps to understand why the projects of the Ghetto Biennale have failed
to create the desired neutral spaces of engagement expected from relationalism. Instead, the
Biennale must be mindful of the problems plaguing ethnographic practices. This includes the
ethical quandaries that consider how communities are co-opted, represented, and in some

175 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 70.
176 James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture Twentieth Century Ethnography (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
177 Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” In The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century
instances exploited, in the name of making art. This requires the definition of an ethics of engagement and high level of self-critique in order to rectify the disparities of collaborative processes. The application of critique in the Ghetto Biennale as merely an afterthought is not sufficient, as even the most celebrated projects of the event will prove to be problematic in their practice.

The need for this level of critique can be seen in the collaborative project of, two-time Ghetto Biennale participant, Allison Rowe. Rowe’s 2011 project *Aid for USA and Canada* (Figs. 21-22) was designed to broach the topic of Haiti’s problematic image following the 2010 earthquake. After the catastrophe, billions of dollars in aid were pledged to Haiti from all corners of the world. With the level of funds provided, one would assume that the small nation of Haiti would have recovered from the wreckage of the earthquake. Unfortunately, the recovery process has been slow, and accusations of the misappropriation of funds are common. Many Haitians are disappointed with the scant amount of recovery that has occurred over the last two years. Rowe’s project used the medium of performance to open up a dialogue on these issues. The artist made her way through the Grande Rue neighborhood asking individuals to give aid to the United States and Canada. These actions afforded participants the power to give individual, unedited opinions.

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179 Ibid., 601-603.
180 Allison Rowe is a Canadian artist based in Toronto. Rowe also participated in the 2009 Ghetto Biennale. In 2009, Rowe studied the relationship between Haiti and global warming in a work titled *Mapping the Coast*. The project was a public performance and sculpture that sought to mark where sea levels will be when global warming increases ocean levels. Rowe determined that Haiti is ill prepared to deal with the environmental changes that will inevitably occur.

Figure 22. Installation of *Aid for USA and Canada* at the 2011 Ghetto Biennale. Allison Rowe, *Aid for USA and Canada*, 2011. Performance and objects. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Clare Samuels.
Following the 2011 Ghetto Biennale, Rowe took all of the audio histories, sculptures, trash, pleas for assistance, and recipes she collected for display in Canada. Materials from the project will be used to generate an international discussion on foreign aid. Rowe doesn’t plan to end the project with the Biennale. 185 The artist has personally written a thank-you note to each individual that participated in *Aid for USA and Canada.* 186

Rowe deemed her project successful because of its ability to engage Haitians in an international dialogue on controversial issues. 187 Despite this sentiment, the problems with *Aid for USA and Canada* lies in the responses it will generate when displayed outside of the project’s original Haitian context. There is no guarantee that the display of its content will not reemphasize the marginality of Haiti or its current definition as a victimized nation. Therefore, despite the care Rowe took to negotiate neutral relationships, this project comes up short.

Another example of a promising, yet troubled form of interaction is seen in Carole Frances Bazile’s projects at the 2009 and 2011 Ghetto Biennales. Also known as “Frau Fiber,” Bazile identifies herself as an American textile worker, activist, artist, and choreographer of garment production. 188 Bazile, known for her sewing rebellions, went to Haiti to revitalize the defunct textile manufacturing industry. 189

By recognizing that Haiti is prone to labor exploitation by multinational apparel companies, Bazile created an alternative at the Ghetto Biennale. 190 *Made in Haiti* (2009-2011) (Figs. 23-24) was developed, together with two local tailors, to refashion *pepe* (secondhand

186 Allison Rowe, interview by Caitlin Lennon, February 16, 2012. Rowe personally wrote, in Haitian Creole, a thank-you note to each of the project’s participants. The artist is working with members of *Atis Rezistans* to ensure delivery.
187 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid., 100.
Figure 23. *Made in Haiti*, 2009. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Myron Beasley.

Figure 24. Carole Frances Bazile (“Frau Fiber”) assists on garments for *Made In Haiti*, 2011. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Image by Myron Beasley.
clothing sent to Haiti) as a means to subvert exploitive practices and initiate an ongoing collaboration.\(^{191}\) The project paid the tailors a living wage, allowed the workers to have an equal voice in decision-making, and created desired goods out of discarded materials.

Negotiation was a key aspect of this project. Bazile established a fair salary by asking the tailors to place a value on their production.\(^{192}\) The crew then worked for two weeks to create a line of clothing with the *Made in Haiti* label. All of the garments were made in the project’s outdoor manufacturing center, which consisted of a table, two manual pedal sewing machines, and a coal-heated iron.\(^{193}\)

*Made in Haiti* appeared to be the ideal form of collaboration for the Haitian context of the Ghetto Biennale. Between 2009 and 2011 Bazile transformed her DIY philanthropic project into a business opportunity for the Haitian people. Unfortunately, apparel journalist Andrea Change noted that sales for *Made in Haiti* declined and the project lost money in 2011. Her article warned that if business does not improve, several risk factors could force the radical brand to seek financial protection.\(^{194}\) According to Bazile, *Made in Haiti* is at a crossroads where it must either grow to become a business or remain art.\(^{195}\) Bazile has stepped away from the project.\(^{196}\) The future is uncertain for this once very successful collaborative process. This crossroad does not bode well for the Haitian collaborators, as they are now left without the support and international connections *Made in Haiti* originally endowed.

It is clear from the projects presented that the Ghetto Biennale cannot be judged solely by the assumed equality of its interactivity. Although Gordon stipulated that the products at the


\(^{193}\) Ibid., 77.


\(^{195}\) Carole Frances Bazile, interview by Caitlin Lennon, January 27, 2012.

\(^{196}\) Ibid.
end, the art objects, were merely a part of the Ghetto Biennale’s revolutionary energy, these material outcomes are extremely important.\textsuperscript{197} The absence of a measure of success in the event’s collaborative processes means that, the Ghetto Biennale’s end products become more important—the accepted record of success. Regrettably, an analysis of the projects of the 2011 Ghetto Biennale show that the end result of these pieces recreated the same problems Haiti and its artists have always faced including misrepresentation, exploitation, and abandonment.

\textsuperscript{197} Gordon, “2009 Ghetto Biennale Project Archives.”
Conclusion

The most troubling feature of the Ghetto Biennale occurred after the event closed. All of the visiting artists, scholars, and journalists returned to their international homes publically touting the success of this radical event. In the Grande Rue life went back to normal. The artists of Atis Rezistans returned to their work, and Haiti went on being defined as a damaged nation. The disparities between these two drastically different outcomes beg the question, who actually benefits from the Ghetto Biennale? Throughout the Biennale there was no acknowledgement of whether or not its projects respected the Haitian subjects, let alone obtained the consent of those involved. These deficits are disheartening because they are precisely what the Biennale desired to subvert.

Upon review the interactions that occurred at the 2011 Ghetto Biennale are far from the socially just, neutral engagements the event was expected to generate. While the impetus of the Biennale was sound, when its context and projects are considered the event inevitably failed in generating the sense of empowerment it set out to create. According to Alfred Gell’s theory of art and agency, this is because artworks never exist independently or discretely.\(^\text{198}\) Instead, “art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents,” such that they act in particular ways in specific situations.\(^\text{199}\) Despite the celebration of relational aesthetics and its application in the biennial, relationalism is bound by the understandings and opinions of those who comprise its interactions. In the case of the Ghetto Biennale, its projects exemplified the marginalization and exploitation Haiti has experienced as a result of globalization.

While author Jeremy Rifkin believed that the relationship between Haiti and the rest of contemporary society ascended to the lofty plateau of universal equality defined as “Homo

\(^{\text{199}}\) Ibid., 7.
empathicus,” the problems with the Ghetto Biennale proved different. The failure of the Biennale lies with the unwillingness of its participants to voice their critique of projects. Overall, the absence of critique betrays the fact that the social interstices or utopian spaces of interaction defined by Bourriaud are not possible in today’s globalized society. Curator Leah Gordon acknowledged that many of the same concerns presented in this thesis shape her current research, but despite these concerns, plans are underway for the third Ghetto Biennale, which will, once again, be held in the slums of Port-au-Prince. Gordon is at the forefront of the planning process. In a recent interview Gordon described how the 2013 Ghetto Biennale, will not implement a level of critique, but instead, will stipulate a “lens-free” platform of engagement. The expression “lens-free” means that the 2013 Biennale will reject projects requiring cameras and video equipment.

These changes are not enough to curtail the negative trends of the Biennale. One could speculate that the Ghetto Biennale, by avoiding its larger problems, will, like the Havana Biennial, stagnate and become a mere replica of the repressive system it was meant to critique. No definitive answers on the future of the Ghetto Biennale exist, but one final sentiment must be expressed. The execution of a biennial requires a sense of trust among those who comprise its site. This feature is particularly crucial in the Haitian context of the Ghetto Biennale. It is up to everyone involved to define and implement a critical process capable of ensuring that the trust of all the Biennale’s participants is maintained.

200 Leah Gordon, email message to the author, April 14, 2012.
201 Zeidler, “Ghetto Biennale, a Salone des Refusés for the 21st Century.”
202 Ibid.
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Vita

Caitlin Lennon was born in 1987 in Neenah, Wisconsin. In 2009, she received a degree of Bachelor of Arts from The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 2010 she attended Louisiana State University to pursue a degree of Master of Arts, which she will receive in May 2012. Her current research focuses on art created in response to crisis situations. The Ghetto Biennale came to her attention while researching post-earthquake soap operas shown in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Caitlin has presented papers on contemporary Haitian art at conferences in Leeds, San Sebastian, and Savannah, Georgia. In 2011 she attended the 2nd Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince. Her thesis research was directly influenced by this trip. Caitlin hopes to keep researching contemporary Haitian art, and she looks forward to the 3rd Ghetto Biennale, which will be held in 2013.