

# FROM HAITI

## Gounda Gounda, The Ghetto Biennale and the Performance of Possibility by Myron M. Beasley

### ABSTRACT

**The Ghetto Biennale took place in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti in December 2009, only weeks before the devastating earthquake. The Ghetto Biennale and its performance of possibility was a striking backdrop to the national disaster, despair and international politics that followed. What is left are fragments, trauma, and narratives of things to come.**

**2009 November 18**

### **The Performance of Possibility— Downtown Port-Au-Prince**

In the midst of a circle of people at a building next door to the Unibank branch in downtown Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, is a man, insalubriously adorned in baggy white pantaloons covered with multicolored splashes of paint, held together at the hip with a necktie. His slacks are cupped above his ankle, exposing his mix-matched socks; his white collared shirt has a red, white, and blue-striped bodice attached with only one button. Slits along the backside of the sleeves expose both the flesh of his chest and his back. His movements rhythmically mirror the syncopation of the



**What has been lost is the continuity of the past...What you then are left with is still the past, but a fragmented past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation.**

—Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

Haitian Kanaval music emanating from the nearby portable CD player—he freezes with each break in the music and grins at the crowd before employing a prop: a single crutch that once rested against the building, in a playful and bawdy gyration. Some people join the gathered crowd that watches with excitement and laughs with encouragement at this busy intersection, while others walk in front of the performer signaling that this is an everyday scene in the bustling Port-Au-Prince. Others participate in this seemingly spontaneous public performance: one passerby slaps the performer's buttocks as he shakes it before the audience in a suggestive manner.

My companion Miracle, a 20-something who was born and has lived in Port-Au-Prince all of his life,

whispers, “this is what Haiti should be about... this is what we need, its what we used to have.” Miracle both laments a romantic past of his city and clings to a future of possibility. The performance, for those of us who witnessed it, evoked a moment of escape, a temporary relief from the harsh daily life in the country of Haiti. The nation island dubbed the poorest in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti has been plagued with self-serving leaders who have depleted its national treasury, and left a population struggling for the basic human rights, to food and education. Haiti is a country where more than fifty-five percent of the population is considered illiterate and the average daily income is two dollars a day. A country with little if any infrastructure, Haiti's stability is always in flux.<sup>2</sup> Always on a fault line.



from a colonial perspective). The western art world has privileged art that reflects a certain romanticism of a colonial past, with artwork characterized by tropical forestry, exaggerated silhouettes of the natives, and their ritual masks. Such works devoid of political and critical insight that accurately reflects both the historical and recent struggle of the lives of people in the African Diaspora.

The geological term evoked in the title, according to the curator and art critic Tawadros, connotes “a sign of significant shifts, or even of impending disaster,” the artists in the exhibition “trace the outlines of fault lines that are shaping contemporary experience locally and globally.” Further, he contends, “fault lines reveal themselves as fractures in the earth’s surface but also they mark a break in the continuity of the strata.”<sup>3</sup> Both the solo recital at the busy intersection of Port-Au-Prince and the Venice Biennale exhibition are performances of possibility. They are events or moments that evoke feelings of hope—a belief in a sheer promise of what could be, even against an undercurrent of proclaimed despair. The performance of possibility claims more than just an idyllic sentimentalism, it is a practical concept of the here and now that informs a visualizing of a promise, a yearning of what can or will come.

Yet, during this November day, as the performer entertains the crowd, it had been months since any type of protest, the existing government has been in place for five years, and Bill Clinton, appointed as the special UN commissioner to Haiti, lead business leaders to the island nation to help jump start the economy. The performer, noticeably clad as a pauper (as most of the onlookers were not) and carefully situated in front of a building of commerce, signals not only an advertisement, an invitation to purchase, he also signals a future, a possibility.

Like the pauper’s performance in the center of Port-au-Prince, the Fault Lines exhibition signaled a break in the circularity of the art world. Fault Lines was the title given to the African Diasporic exhibition at the 50th Venice Biennial in 2003. The exhibition included 15 artists from Africa and the African Diaspora, whose work ranged across media (painting, architecture, performance) and attended to issues such as migration, dislocation and post-colonialism, all of which generally revealed narratives of black life in this shifting global and contemporary world. The exhibition was also a rhetorical nod to the absence and continued marginalization of artists of African descent whose work speaks to contemporary and experiential politics of everyday life in the Diaspora (as opposed to the expected “traditional native art” encouraged

## 2009 November 12 – December 15

### “Worlds Collides/Performing in the Junkyard”

The Ghetto Biennale was an art happening that occurred in Port-Au-Prince from November 12-December 15 2009. The question posed on the prospectus of this event was, “What happens when first world art rubs up against third world art? Does it bleed?” An invitation was extended to artists from around the world to converge and work along side the artists of the Grand Rue neighborhood of Port-Au-Prince. Tagged as a literal red zone by the U.S. and U.N. officials, four major streets pin the neighborhood in; its main corridor is situated on Blvd. Jn. Jacques Dessalines, a massive thoroughfare:

The true width of the street 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, automobile fragments, to fresh fruits and freshly fried goat from the street vendors hovering over the piping hot cauldron of

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oil. But only steps away, peering through the hustle and clamor and movement of bodies the entrance of the Grand Rue neighborhood could be easily be passed as it were not for the tall sculpture figure of Gede with an extended penis dangling at its entrance. The sculpture serves as an invitation to a performance space...<sup>4</sup>

Led by Andre' Eugene, the Grand Rue sculptors have perfected the art of refashioning rubbish, dumped in the city from the industrialized countries, into statuesque markers of beauty. Their work has been exported and desired internationally, but the artists themselves, in some instances, are unable to attend their own art shows and openings The requirements for Visas and other documentation, not to mention the cost, make it challenging for some of the artists to leave the country. The work of the Grand Rue artists forbids a beckoning of the traditional faux naiveté art and touristy Caribbean fancy of tropical trees and fruits and instead manifests itself, in the words of Gordon, as a "hybrid of classic woodcarving, metal sculpture and assemblage. Their muscular sculptural collages of engine manifolds, computer entrails, TV sets, medical debris, skulls and discarded timber transform the detritus of a failing economy

into deranged, post-apocalyptic totems."<sup>5</sup> The conversation that surrounds the Grand Rue artists' work cuts across remedial readings and wraps itself in discussions between modernity, postmodernism and identity politics; Such work produced by these Haitian artists is far more generative, asking for a host of complicated questions, toward a futuristic moment of possibility and an often overlooked critical lens charting the hierarchies of power. So, the computer entrails are so much more than just parts. Recalling Said, the artists perform a "counter-practice of interference" one that, "restore[s] the non-sequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity as the fundamental components of meaning in representation."<sup>6</sup> Their work, dedicated to the Vodou energy of Gede, incorporates fragments (dead objects, including human bones) of the past. Assembled they create monuments pronouncing a future of possibility. A future that results from a rubbing of the developed against the undeveloped, the discarded objects with the cosmologies of the dead, a massaging that foretells a moment of the-not-now but the here-to-come.

As one of the co-curators of this unconventional biennale, foremost was my desire to engage in intercultural dialogues, to evoke a spirit of creativity and in the words of John Keiffer, to create a "third space"[...] an event or moment created through





a collaboration between artists from radically different backgrounds.”<sup>7</sup> Itinerant textile worker and performance artist Frau Fiber (aka Carole Frances Lung) worked along side Haitian tailors to refashion “pepe” (recycled clothing that is bundled and exported from the industrialized countries to Haiti to be sold on the streets) to a “Made in Haiti” brand that was shipped back to the USA and sold.<sup>8</sup> Environmental artist Situ Jones worked with a group of Haitian youth from Aprofisa, a community-based art collective, to bring attention to environmental concerns by making seed balls. The group created more than 1,000 balls that were a mix of floral and grass seeds with native soil that was then dispersed in exposed areas throughout the city of Port-au-Prince as a way of greenlining the city. Bill Drummond staged his international community performance 17 (the first location in the Americas) that included working with elementary school students in Port-au-Prince who were paired with students in London. The performance culminated in the children, lining the entire perimeter of the neighborhood, each uttering a sound to create music. Jamaican artist in Ebony Patterson, known for her gender juxtapositions of known Jamaican drug kings in which she casts them in female drag, in Haiti she worked with two Haitian

flag makers to produced five large sequined flags, each one dedicated to traditionally female vodou spirits. And photographer Laura Heyman, whose roaming formal portrait studio configured in middle of the neighborhood, invited families and individuals of the community to sit for a free portrait as they, the subject of the images, selected how they wanted to be photographed. Reminiscent of the Age D’or movement of African photography, the stunning images were given back to the subjects. In all, more than 30 artists from the U.S., Britain, Italy, Germany Norway and Tasmania arrived with proposals in hand. However, in most instances the invited artists had to reconfigure their projects to adhere to Haiti’s, particularly the Grand Rue’s, cultural and physical fault lines. The general ethos of this happening was negotiating collaboration and dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

The day of the opening brought much excitement. Artists from all over Haiti arrived and displayed their work, which included The FOSAJ Collective’s film screening in the Grand Rue hounfour (vodou temple); spontaneous embodied performances by Nancy Mauro-Flude held in the “Trash Church,” a temporary church made of used plastic water bags; videos by Roberto Peyre projected on the wall of ruins; and

a Rara band, a Haitian vodou marching band that marched through the limited open space of the Grand Rue. In addition, a group of Grand Rue youth—Alex Louis, Jean-Pierre Romel, and Steevens Rimeon—with their faux video camera made from a used plastic oil canister and a microphone created from a bundle of wood and wrapped with duct tape, roamed through the event all day, interviewing people about the event. Calling themselves “TeleGhetto,” their performance was captivating as they, adorned with their homemade press badges, garnered a spot alongside the national and international media to interview Haiti’s Minister of Culture, Marie-Laurence Lassègue. The mission of the group, according to Romel, is to “witness life in the Ghetto and to tell the world its stories.”<sup>10</sup>

The day after the opening, a group of international scholars invited to witness the event responded at a daylong conference. As the TeleGhetto roamed the room of the conference filled with people of the Grand Rue neighborhood and other Port-Au-Prince communities, U.S. Embassy officials and participating artists, the event (though planned in accordance to most academic conferences) was not immune to the “break in the continuity” that was to occur. After the first two panels it became apparent that the mere language used by several of the scholars excluded a large population of the audience—a language that even the translators had problems interpreting. Midway through the conference, I reconfigured the panels, replacing scholars with the young people and community members of the Grand Rue to share their experiences about what it meant to have artists from around the world come to work and dwell alongside them, to a panel of invited artists to reflect on what it meant for them to be in Haiti and to do this work. Poignant and at times emotional, the conference moved from “high theory” to honoring a grounded knowledge, a grounded theory. The academics became the audience with the Grand Rue community members becoming the theorists, theorizing their lived experience, and the crevices of the faultlines. The earth shifted.

## 2010 January 12

### Thirty-Five Seconds

At 4:53 p.m. The fault line, the earth’s surface shifts. A 7.0 magnitude earthquake shakes the country of Haiti and radically changes the landscape and the lives of many in thirty-five seconds. There is a break in the continuity of life.

## 2010 July

### Gounda Gounda, “I was not prepared for Haiti”

I return to Haiti for the first time since the earthquake. Though I had planned two earlier trips, they never materialized. I understand now that I too was ensconced in a state of melancholia, afraid of what I might see yet realizing that I had to return. As the plane glides into its final descent, my routine is to gaze out of the window as we fly over Cité-Soleil, then over the commercial ports with the neatly stacked saffron cargo boxes. My usual moment of anticipation is eclipsed with awe at the much-changed landscape. The saffron mixed with the brown and green mountains, and sometimes-rusty roofs are dwarfed by the prominent visual display of blue. The tarpaulin in its array from blue to turquoise to grey are bundled en masse and dispersed throughout the metropolis.

the reality of the shifts in the earth. My driver, Evens, greets me with a cheerful salutation, but his mood turns sullen as we proceed into the city. We make it down the winding road through the Delmas neighborhood. As we cruise down the hill I see only fragments of the National Cathedral, one of the lasting prides of the city; nothing is left but the skeletal frame with the remains of the huge stained glass windows dangling. It looks as if the earthquake just happened. “I want to forget about it,” Evens says. I think, “He will never be able to forget” as we skirt the debris, the rumble and stones in the middle of streets are a constant reminder, encouraging a not-forgetting. I remember the first sentence etched in my field-notes from my initial visit to the island in 2000, “I was not prepared for Haiti.” And now recalling the moment of the Ghetto Biennale, a performance filled with possibility, I find myself again feeling: I am not prepared for Haiti.

While checking in to the hotel in Petionville, the attendant utters the password for the Internet, Goundou goundou. Shocked, I reply “did you say goundou goundou?” Goundou goundou is the colloquial, the slang word for the earthquake. The formal kreyol word is tranbleman de te, but to connote how traumatic the event was on the lives of Haitians, they use the words, “goudougoudou”, shake shake, rumble rumble—an onomopoeiac word to describe the event, what and how they felt, the sound they heard during the earthquake—a word that best recalls the physical awe of those thirty-five seconds. Now, at the hotel in the center of Petionville with a tent city in front of the entrance, a hotel whose primary clients are U.N. officials to international aid executives, the phrase goudougoudou must be used to access the Internet.

I return to the Grand Rue. The sculpture garden of beautiful artwork is now morphed into a different type of garden, a different type of art. The debris mingles with the effigies to Gede, themselves made from debris and wreckage, and creates a hardly discernable landscape between the art and reality. What was around the corner is suddenly in the front yard. I thread my way into the space; the already small sliver of open space is replaced with supposedly temporary housing, kay ble (blue houses), more apropos tant ble (blue tents). All branded, “USAID: From the American people,” “CHINA” and “UNICEF” all making for themselves a “beautiful” display of ostentatious announcements of power from the developing countries vying for power on the island. However, the most appropriate by design and suitability to the climate and landscape are from the country of Venezuela with their open ventilating panels. The group of sculptures that once greeted visitors off the busy thoroughfare now competes for space with the tarpaulin monuments, the sculptures are now places for the dislocated to drape their clothing to dry.

“Nothing will ever be the same,” says Andre Eugene, “but I live in Haiti, we survive.” I ask about various community members, and then make my way through the neighborhood to visit people with whom I have worked, the realization of the shifting of the physical landscape unraveling itself to me on another level as I attempt to visit sites that no longer exist. Happy to see friends, some of whom I now consider almost family, the conversations quickly lapse into narratives of trauma. As psychoanalytic theory might suggest, trauma is situated in the remembering, not just the event itself. Sitting in Eugene’s space, what used to be a small yard in front of his room is now occupied with his tent, though his room still stands with several visible cracks in the wall, he does not feel comfortable sleeping inside. We sit in the exact spot, where he sat while being interviewed by two international journalists when the earth began to shake. He enacts what happens, words accompany his movement, as if words are not enough for me to understand or grasp his haunting. His performance informs me of a language of trauma that resides in the body. Eugene’s performance harkens Freud’s thoughts that memory is an archive, he suggest that language, the telling of the story is a way of “working through trauma.”<sup>11</sup> Eugene’s body moves differently now, recalling, remembering, and working through the goudougoudou.

Yet even against the abrupt reconfiguration of the Grand Rue space, I witness people making art. Eking out space wherever possible, I see Romel huddled against the back of a tent, painting a portrait on the rubber of a recycled tire and Claude placing the final touches on his selection of used pint size tin cans,

each chiseled with faces and strung together with wire then encased in a wood frame

Arranged by John Cusak, one of the participants in the Biennale, the TeleGhetto was invited to participate in a video swap with students from the Morepeth School in London. The video exchanged would be collected and broadcasted in the Putman Gallery which provided a real digital camera and a real microphone. Like the street performer I witnessed in downtown Port-au-Prince, the performances of the TeleGhetto span across the city. Seen in the local hotels or on the streets, the three men whip out their press badges and the hand-held miniature camera, as they record narratives of life post earthquake, they conclude their interviews with, “where do you see Haiti in the future?” They encourage their fellow Haitians to look forward, to a time to come. Benjamin lamented the loss of the storyteller (the archivist/collector) with the advent of technology, yet Eugene and others in the neighborhood share their stories –dealing with the trauma of the gounda gounda– the TeleGhetto captures the stories and the storytellers through technology. Even against the current geographic, political, and economic despair they roam the fault lines gathering narratives of survival, of daily life. Of possibility.

## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Arendt, Hannah. *The life of the mind. Vol. 1*. Harcourt Jovanovich, 1978. P 212
- 2 The most recent statistics on the condition of Haiti are found at the United States Department of State’s website <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1982.htm>
- 3 Tawadros, Gilane. “Contemporary African Art and shifting landscapes.” INVA: London 2003, P. 14
- 4 Beasley, Myron M. “Vodou, Penises and Bones Ritual Performances of Death and Eroticism in the Cemetery and the Junk Yard of Port-Au-Prince.” *Performance Research* 15, no. 1 (2010): 6.
- 5 Gordon, Leah. “The Sculptuors of Grand Rue.” *Raw Vision* 2008/9.
- 6 Said, Edward. “Opponents, audiences, constituencies and community”, in Hale Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1983, 157-58
- 7 See <http://www.ghetobiennale.com/>
- 8 See <http://madeinhaiti09.wordpress.com/>
- 9 Unlike the controversial Prospect I held in New Orleans after Katrina, the artists who participated in the Ghetto Biennale were not asked to bring work to be displayed, rather to create and work with the Grand Rue artists.
- 10 The TeleGhetto has a large presence on YouTube: <http://www.frequency.com/video/teleghetto/402539?embed=true>
- 11 See Cathy Caruth (ed.) *Trauma Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.