

# Anticipations of Alterity: The Production of Contemporary Haitian Art through Inter-klas Encounters

## 1 Introduction

This article analyzes how a new artist group called *Atis Rezistans*, also known as the artists of *Gran Ri*, emerged in the artistic scene in Port-au-Prince in the early 2000s and how these artists from weak socio-economic strata have been presented around the world in different curatorial frameworks by various curators in the last fifteen years.<sup>1</sup> Since their first exhibition at *Le Centre Culturel AfricAmerica* in Port-au-Prince in 2001, the artists and their artworks have moved between extreme socio-economic strata and within hierarchical social interactions. The members of this group live in a *bidonvil* (shantytown) and struggle against extreme poverty on a daily basis; their art objects, however, are presented in museums by international curators and consumed by educated elites. The exhibition history of the group started in the late 1990s when artist André Eugène opened his ateliers as a *musée d'art* (art museum) and invited art enthusiasts to witness the works produced in the informal neighborhood between Grand Rue and Rue du Magasin de L'Etat (Fig. 1).

From this neighborhood, the group's art pieces travelled first to the art institutions of Port-au-Prince (e.g. *Le Centre Culturel AfricAmerica*, the *MUPA-NAH* museum, and the *Institut Français*) and expanded from there into the wider Caribbean. Since 2004, the art objects have also been presented in the United States and in European art museums since 2007. Attached to these different locations are also different curators, which express varied ideological agendas within their curatorial practice for the art works. In this context, Bruce Ferguson understands exhibitions as ideological media. He argues that exhibitions are by no means neutral rhetorical transmissions of information but "strategic system[s] of representation." (Ferguson 1996: 178) Following Ella Shohat

1 I would like to thank Sarah Dornhof and Nanne Buurman for their insightful comments on an early, unpublished version of this article.



**Fig. 1.** Installation shot of André Eugène’s musée d’art in Port-au-Prince, photo © David Frohnapfel, 2015.

and Robert Stam, it is not enough to say that art is constructed. We have to ask constructed for whom and in conjunction with which ideologies and discourses (Shohat/Stam 1994: 180). This article will show that by analyzing the systems of representation which have framed the institutional representations of artworks by *Atis Rezistans* particular ideological formations come to light which often reveal more about the curators’ perspectives than about the artists’ individual points of view. The tension between curatorial framing and individual artistic statement is, of course, not particular to *Atis Rezistans*. I will argue, however, that the case of *Atis Rezistans* exemplifies an aggravation of very common practices in the art world, i.e. the fact that “curators prioritized a method of exhibition making by using extant art objects and artifacts, employing them as *illustrative fragments* [...]” (O’Neill 2012: 5) I am speaking of aggravation because such disconnection becomes all the more revealing when artists and curators are separated by their socio-economic position, formal education, and ethnic background. The art works by *Atis Rezistans* address a wide range of very diverse topics. Their artistic interest is difficult to be framed by a single term and their practice is often not clearly determined. Their work includes but is not limited to (1) socio-critical topics about Haitian society, (2) political themes, (3) *vodou*-inspired works, (4) animal depictions or (5) autobiographic stories. All

these topics (and more) are presented next to each other in the artists' autonomous exhibition spaces in Haiti. As soon as the art objects travel to art institutions, however, *vodou* and *poverty* become the dominant defining frameworks for the artworks. In other words, their sculptures become *illustrated fragments* to talk about (1) *socio-economic alterity* and (2) *cultural difference*. *Atis Rezistans'* main purpose in international exhibitions is to mediate their vision of Haitian popular culture and Haitian popular culture is almost always equated with *vodou* religion. The members of *Atis Rezistans* are required to represent not themselves as creative individuals but as representatives of their Haitian popular culture. In Maksaens Denis' documentary *E Pluribus Unum* (2002), the founder of the group Jean Herald Celeur formulated the importance of *vodou* for his artistic practice:

Because when I began to work by taking inspiration from Vodou, I felt more liberated. I express myself much better [...] Vodou is merely an inspiration. Many people believe that Vodou is sorcery. Diabolic stuff. But they do not see the true aspects of Vodou, which are a specific language. A freedom to think. (Celeur in Denis 2002)

Celeur's affirmative understanding of *vodou* as a decolonial "freedom to think" radically changed in the last thirteen years. In one of our interviews in 2014, Celeur described a typical situation where *vodou* is used by foreign curators to restrict his creative productions:

For an exhibition in Paris I created three large bird sculptures. Visitors repeatedly asked me which lwa [*vodou* spirit] represents a bird in Haiti. I had to laugh about this question. I explained to them why I was laughing and told them what my birds are really all about. When I visited Britain a couple of years ago I saw a swarm of beautiful birds playing in a park. My friend explained to me that these birds are only here in summer but will return to Africa in winter. Triggered by this story I imagined a world without borders. If my daughters would become birds they could just leave Haiti and travel freely around the world without restrictions. But anything you do as a Haitian artist they try to limit and reduce to *vodou*. If you make glasses for a sculpture they will probably ask you, 'so which lwa is using glasses in Haiti. It must be a gede spirit, right?' Anything I create becomes *vodou* in their imagination. It is so ridiculous and it limits my creative vision. (Celeur 2015)

What happened between 2002 and 2014? Why did Celeur shift his understanding of *vodou* as a form of free artistic expression to *vodou* as a discourse restricting his creativity? I argue that Celeur had to realize that the most valued attribute required of Haitian artists is their cultural difference. Here, I refer to art historian and artist Olu Oguibe, who described this situation in his book *The Culture Game* (Oguibe 2004: xii). The struggle that 'non-Western' contemporary

artists seem to face on the global scale is not ‘Western’ resistance to difference but the “insistence of difference.” Oguibe explains: “It is not that any one [sic] would want to disavow difference, for we are all different one way or another, after all. The point is that this fact of being ought not to constitute the crippling predicament that it does for all who have no definite ancestry in Europe.” (Oguibe 2004: xiv–xv)

I argue that the socio-economic tensions and hierarchies which exist between artists from a *bidonvil* neighborhood in Port-au-Prince and curators from a *klas piwo a* (higher class) produce rhetorical and curatorial figures of difference and at the same time material artistic responses which negotiate such curatorial frameworks in return. *Atis Rezistans* are not mute ‘subalterns’ manipulated by curatorial ideas; they employ their own agency by creatively reacting to different anticipations for Haitian art. In this unbalanced situation of power, artists often negotiate the expectations, desires, exoticisms, or instructions of their curatorial networks very directly and in a nearly ‘auto-orientalistic’ manner (Fig. 2).

Elizabeth McAlister reminds us that the question whether popular culture in Haiti is conservative or progressive and characterized by resistance or accommodation misses the point: “The relevant question may be: How does popular culture help people survive?” And she goes on to explain that “repressive contexts tend to generate double-voiced, allegorical, and parodic expression.” (McAlister 2002: 180) *Atis Rezistans*, for instance, actively and very strategically try to use visiting curators as a resource to improve their precarious living situation. Curators function as “control officers” (Oguibe 2004: xii) of the global art system; Haitian artists have to convince such gatekeepers so as to partake of global art circuits. My interlocutors repeatedly discussed their annoyance that *blan* (foreigners), researchers, curators, artists, and tourists visiting the neighborhood are predominantly interested in their relationship to the religious system *vodou*. Several artists even mentioned that as soon as they refuse to become interlocutors for the religious system, they will not be able to see the particular curator or researcher again and thus risk to vanish entirely from the artistic or academic discourse.

Haitian curator and artist Barbara Prézeau Stephenson and her early curatorial work for *Atis Rezistans* between 2000 and 2006 will be of importance for the issue at hand. My focus on Prézeau Stephenson is due to the fact that she has proposed an important counter-narrative that barely finds recognition in the ongoing discussion of *Atis Rezistans* in Europe and the United States. It is not that her individual curatorial practice substitutes a Haitian truth for ‘Euro-North-American’ falsehood. But it is symptomatic and very telling that a female Haitian curator, who works predominantly in Haiti and strongly favors horizontal, decentering, and pan-Caribbean artistic networks, barely finds rec-



**Fig. 2.** Sculpture Bawon Kriminel by Papa Da a.k.a. Jean Alphonse Junior, photo © David Frohnafel 2014.

ognition for her work in Europe and the United States. Unfortunately, Haiti's first biennale project curated by Prézeau Stephenson, the *Forum Transculturel d'Art Contemporain*, still lacks academic attention. While the focus of my work is mainly informed by hierarchical inter-*klas* relationships between the members of *Atis Rezistans* and their various curators, it is equally important to explicitly underline the remaining hierarchical constellation between different curators.

## 2 Urban Sculptures

Prézeau Stephenson is one of the leading advocates for Contemporary Art in Haiti. She founded *Fondation AfricAmerica* in Port-au-Prince in 1998 as a platform and administrative structure to support contemporary Haitian artists. Such autonomous, artist-run initiatives (like *Fondation AfricAmerica* in Haiti, *Fresh Milk* in Barbados, *Alice Yard* in Trinidad and Tobago, or *NLS* in Jamaica) fulfill important functions for the visual arts in the Caribbean, a region that often struggles with a lack of local institutional support and with invisibility in a trans-regional context. Many artists presented in today's international exhibition circuit, artists who form the new canon of contemporary Haitian art, started their careers with *Fondation AfricAmerica*. Prézeau Stephenson's agenda for *Fondation AfricAmerica* was rooted in a pragmatic principal: contemporary artists from Haiti first of all need administrative, financial, and educational support to be able to be recognized on a supra-regional level. Her engagement with *Atis Rezistans* started in 2000, when the two founding members of the group, Jean Herald Celeur and André Eugène, introduced themselves to her and invited her to see their sculptures and assemblages. The following year, she curated their first exhibition outside the *Gran Ri* neighborhood, an exhibition entitled *Baka, Monstres et Chimères (sculptures urbaines II)* at the newly founded *Le Centre Culturel AfricAmerica*. With her curatorial work, Prézeau Stephenson laid the groundwork to open-up the neighborhood for a new contemporary art clientele, helped to free the artists from being perceived as producers of tourist craft, and enabled them to transition into the prestigious field of contemporary art. Further, Prézeau Stephenson helped the artists to connect with an important network of established art agents from Haiti (e.g. installation artist and painter Mario Benjamin, gallerist Reynald Lally, video artists Maksaens Denis, curator Giscard Bouchotte, and gallerist Mireille Pérodin Jérôme, among others). There is barely any academic research examining these local inter-*klas* dynamics. *Atis Rezistans* are mainly culturalized by a marginalized socio-economic position and described as the expression of an allegedly 'authentic working class' culture of the *mas pèp-la* (common people) and as a form of 'subaltern' resistance from below. Prézeau Stephenson also established the first guided tours through the neighborhood to give visiting art professionals the chance to witness the urban contexts of art produced in Port-au-Prince. In the following years, Prézeau Stephenson continued this practice of showing the neighborhood mainly to Caribbean, Latin American, and African art professionals who visited Port-au-Prince on occasion of the *Forum Transculturel d'Art Contemporain*. The *Forum*, a biennial founded by Prézeau Stephenson in 2000, is intended to strengthen transnational bonds between contemporary artists from Haiti and art professionals from the wider Caribbean, Africa, and the Americas.

Prézeau Stephenson's strong focus on *horizontal* networks and South-South relationships stands in a symbolic trajectory with the first installments of *La Bienal de la Habana* in the 1980s and early 1990s and is intended as an artistic space of decolonial resistance that "provide[s an] alternative space to the art routes inherited from modernity." (Niemojewski 2010: 100)

According to Prézeau Stephenson, her interest in *Atis Rezistans* originated in an art historical reflection. She used Celeur, Eugène, and Frantz Jacques a.k.a. Guyodo to illustrate the shift in Haitian artistic production from a predominantly peasant origin to an *urban* milieu. The early 'masters' of Haitian art – Hector Hyppolite, Jasmin Joseph, or Philomé Obin – worked in a time when 89% of the Haitian population was still employed in the agricultural sector, whereas today over 40% of Haitians live in urban centers (Prézeau Stephenson 2012: 64). Prézeau Stephenson links this shift in location of artistic production to a shift in media (from painting to sculpture). The medium sculpture had been perceived as tourist craft, and Prézeau Stephenson started a series of *sculptures urbaines* exhibitions that highlighted the medium's importance within the artistic scene in Haiti. The artists' socio-economic position became a central curatorial framework to present the art works of Eugène, Celeur, and Guyodo. The three artists were accentuated as artists from an informal neighborhood in the city center of Port-au-Prince and their art works became culturalized expressions of a marginalized societal position: "Daily violence, hunger, thirst, air and water pollution, and the constant clamor of engines and horns, have distorted, bent, and compressed the torsos, faces, and jaws [of the sculptures] packed into the city center workshop/garage." (Prézeau Stephenson 2008: 101)

The fourth *urban sculpture* exhibition took place in Barbados in 2003. On occasion of the *Annual Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA)*, which centered on the topic *Popular Art and Public Art*, Prézeau Stephenson presented art works by Eugène, Celeur, Maksaens Denis, Killy, Jean Camille a.k.a. Nasson, as well as her own sculptures. Through the parallel presentation of artists from very different socio-economic strata and educational backgrounds, her exhibition presented the artistic milieu of Port-au-Prince as an urban milieu. A central piece of the exhibition was a chair created by Celeur in the late 1990s (Fig. 3).

Prézeau Stephenson was the first curator who exhibited this particular object as a contemporary art piece and highlighted its artistic value. Similar pieces have been produced by Celeur anonymously for the *Marianne Lehmann Collection* in the mid-1990s. The *Lehmann Collection* is an ethnographic art collection of mainly ritual *vodou* artifacts based in Port-au-Prince. However, the ritualistic or religious use of many of these objects was questioned by art professionals working in Port-au-Prince during my research. Prézeau Stephenson made a clear point by integrating this 'chair' piece into a contemporary art set-



**Fig. 3.** Installation shot of Prézéau Stephenson's *Urban Sculpture* exhibition in Bridgetown, Barbados, in 2003. The photograph shows the installation of three art works by Jean Herald Celeur. Photographer unknown (Photo courtesy *Fondation AfricAmerica*).

ting; she thereby drew a line between ethnographic ritual artifact and contemporary art object. Celeur confirmed in an interview that the *vodou*-inspired works he produced for the *Lehmann Collection* had never been intended for ritual use and were mainly produced for commercial reasons (Celeur 2014).

Indeed, Prézéau Stephenson's descriptions of the art pieces factored out the use of *vodou* iconography as a source of inspiration in several exhibitions. This perspective stands in sharp contrast to all following exhibitions by other curators after 2004. Prézéau Stephenson bypassed the existing *vodou* narrative of the group and concentrated mainly on their socio-political relevance by encouraging the artists to respond to current events in Haiti. By highlighting the socio-political within her curatorial framings, she strategically undermined anticipations of cultural alterity that have clung to (and restricted) Haitian art since the foundation of the *Centre d'Art* in 1944. According to Prézéau Stephenson, the presentation of Haitian art often comes along with the preconception that art in Haiti is supposed to be without dependency on a socio-political reality and without political discourse. Following Kobena Mercer, art historian Wendy Asquith speaks of a *hyper-visibility* of Haitian artists; this *hyper-visibility*



ity, however, did not lead to an open integration in an art historical narrative. Instead, it marked these painters discursively as “primitive,” “naïve,” or simply as “unchanging” and thus placed them chronologically before the canon of ‘Euro-North American’ art history (Asquith 2014: 6). A name closely associated with this exoticizing perspective on Haitian painting was writer, art dealer, and curator Selden Rodman. According to art historian Edward J. Sullivan, Rodman’s books created one of the most vigorous stereotypes that exist within the domain of Caribbean art (Sullivan 2012: 362). The “joyous nature” of Haitian art described by Rodman assured that the vast majority of the public in the United States and Europe would associate Haitian cultural production from a *klas anba* (lower class) with the “joyful,” the “intuitive,” and the “child-like.” Rodman holds *vodou* accountable for that joy and argued that *vodou* gives these ‘peasants’ their deep “spiritual satisfaction.” (Rodman 1988: 18) Prézeau Stephenson’s engagement with a new generation of artists from lower socio-economic strata challenged exactly these former discourses of Haitian art as an apolitical and socially unaware artistic practice: “[E]ach one of [*Atis Rezistans*] sculptures is a cry of revolt.” (Prézeau Stephenson 2008: 101) Prézeau Stephenson’s collaborations with the group primarily took place in an extremely precarious period for Haiti, and her exhibitions reflect this delicate social situation. The interim period between 2004 and 2006 following president Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s departure is considered one of the worst in Haiti’s history; it is marked by an extreme rise and spread of violence, including kidnappings and increased numbers of victims of gun violence (Schuller 2008: 200). On occasion of Prézeau Stephenson’s 4th *Forum* with the title *Exploited Bodies (Corps Exploits)*, she organized the *Sculpture Pour La Paix* exhibition at *Musée du Panthéon National Haïtien (MUPANAH)* with Celeur, Guyodo, Eugène, and the Togolese visiting artist Kossi Assou. Each artist created a sculpture out of weapons for the yard of the *MUPANAH* museum. These weapons had been confiscated in Haitian neighborhoods experiencing gang violence and had been made available for the artists.

The artist Eugène dressed himself on the day of the opening with dark sunglasses, which had colorful skull images printed on its lenses and wore a black silk hat (Fig. 4). Skulls, sunglasses, and silk hats are symbols commonly associated with the *gede* spirits.<sup>2</sup> Eugène thus performatively countered Prézeau Stephenson’s more assimilating curatorial approach with his own embodied *vodou* narrative. While Prézeau Stephenson tried to factor out such potentially stereotypical interpretations of Haitian art, Eugène returned them to the

<sup>2</sup> Art historian Veerle Poupeye kindly called my attention to Eugène’s self-fashioning. She attended the exhibition opening in Barbados in 2004.



**Fig. 4.** Portrait of André Eugène with skull sunglasses and silk hat, photo taken by Reynald Lally in Port-au-Prince in 2013 (photo courtesy Reynald Lally).

discourse by using the *vodou* narrative to claim his Haitian identity in this foreign artistic milieu in Barbados.

Prézeau Stephenson's first exhibitions in Port-au-Prince produced quite a shock in the audience. The board of the private museum *Musée d'Art Haïtien du Collège St Pierre* asked for the closure of one of her exhibitions shortly after opening. According to Prézeau Stephenson, the art pieces had been considered too vulgar and too ugly by the museum's staff: "I have been asked why we have to show these horrible things in exhibitions? And my answer to them was that reality is a lot uglier than these art objects. When you go to their ateliers this art piece is beautiful in comparison to what you are going to see." (Prézeau Stephenson 2014) In her study on Haitian *rara*, Elizabeth McAlister describes the hidden political dimension that can be expressed through vulgarity, obscenity, and sexual innuendo in popular Haitian culture. McAlister reads these vulgarities within postcolonial conditions and as the last bastion of uncensored speech for the *mas pèp-la* (common people) in the Haitian public sphere (cf. McAlister 2002: 61). Vulgarities and obscenity give the *mas pèp-la* a free space untouched by the literate *klas*. The literate *klas* in Haiti is in turn able to confirm their own 'civilized' and 'refined' status by rejecting such popular obscenities:

Vulgarities, expected of the poor by the rich, are the lyrical route by which disenfranchised Haitians carve out expressive space in the public arena. Because of the cultural politics wherein obscenities are disdained and dismissed, obscenity becomes a form of speech that allows the powerless to nav-

igate into spaces of opposition, community, and a certain kind of powerful publicity. (McAlister 2002: 65)

Prézeau Stephenson's first exhibitions have been censored because she broke down this inter-*klas* agreement: By transferring the allegedly 'subaltern' obscenities from the streets of Port-au-Prince into museums, these works invaded the 'high art' spaces of the *klas privilejye*.

Prézeau Stephenson, as a trained art historian, deals with the strong hierarchy between her and the artists by trying to coach the artists to be prepared to work autonomously in institutional art settings. This perspective, of course, risks paternalism and forces artists from lower socio-economic strata directly into *boujwa* ("bourgeois") concepts of art presentation. But Prézeau Stephenson also increased the audience for the artists' own exhibition spaces by inviting art professionals into the neighborhood to visit the *musée d'art* on *Atis Rezistans'* own local terms. By keeping both social spheres in mind, Prézeau Stephenson works like a cultural broker and her curatorial work offers mediation between two different exhibition modalities of two different socio-economic milieus. At several installments of the *Forum Transculturel d'Art Contemporain*, the audience was able to witness both social spheres simultaneously and thus experience the art works presented by the artists in their own *musée d'art* and compare that experience to more institutional environments like *Le Centre Culturel AfricAmerica*. Prézeau Stephenson also experimented to transfer the artists' autonomous curations into institutional environments. Guyodo's first solo exhibition (*GUYODO* at *Centre Culturel AfricAmerica* in 2004) is surprisingly the only exhibition in the fourteen years of exhibition history which tried to transfer local exhibition modalities into institutional art spaces (Fig. 5).

### 3 Vodou as an Authenticating Mechanism

Prézeau Stephenson's decision to ignore the existing *vodou* narrative in the presentation of Haitian art for several exhibitions needs to be understood as a curatorial strategy that tries to counter redundant and generalizing expectations for Haitian art and to break away from the idea of Haitian art as an apolitical discourse. *Vodou* as a Haitian art discourse is very much a given in the common understanding of Haitian art and culture. Prézeau Stephenson tries to offer a new reading by leaving out particular aspects of artistic practice that relate to a common knowledge of Haitian culture. Prézeau Stephenson actively undermines the ongoing naturalization-processes of expected discourses for Haitian art in Europe and the United States by opposing these persisting stereotypical expectations, which often use *vodou* as a stimulus of exotic desires.



**Fig. 5.** Exhibition GUYODO at *Le Centre Culturel AfricAmerica* in Port-au-Prince, curated by Barbara Prézeau Stephenson in 2004. Photographer unknown (photo courtesy *Fondation AfricAmerica*).

Art historian Wendy Asquith has identified these expected types of content and inspiration for Haitian art as “vodou, naiveté, primitivism, market scenes, and idyllic landscapes.” She also rightfully added “catastrophe” as a new legitimate discourse for artistic productions from Haiti since the earthquake of 2010 (Asquith 2013: 227). In the genealogy of exhibiting *Atis Rezistans*, it is important to point out that as soon as an international art circuit got involved, *vodou* became the defining characteristic in the presentation of the artists. Prézeau Stephenson’s emphasis on the socio-economic alterity of the group became interwoven with an interest in cultural alterity. I do not wish to imply that Prézeau Stephenson understands political resistance and *vodou* as oppositional. Historically, both are very closely intertwined since the Haitian Revolution of 1791 (Dubois 2005; Ramsey 2014), and Prézeau Stephenson’s work as an artist is evidently informed by an awareness of this circumstance. The religious system *vodou* has been a medium to articulate strong political and decolonial agendas. But since the North American occupation between 1915 and 1934, *vodou* has also become a crucial mechanism to *other* and demonize Haitian society. It was no coincidence that exactly around the time of occupation, the North American movie industry started to transform the local religion into a racist trope of hor-

ror and fear. It formed part of a larger racist discourse that tried to legitimize and reinterpret North America's aggressive hegemonic expansion into the Caribbean as a civilizing mission by demonizing Haitian society in the process (Hurbon 1995: 181). Pseudo-ethnographic and racist writings like *The Magic Island* by William B. Seabrook, first published in 1929, were crucial in this process. The international imagination regarding Haiti became closely intertwined with these varied exoticizing and racist projections of *vodou*.<sup>3</sup> Considering this history of changing signification, every exhibition about *vodou* art or *vodou*-inspired art also faces these racist imaginations. Consequently, audiences are not blank slates when they attend exhibitions but filled with prejudicial ideas and racist projections.

It is a network of 'Western' curators and scholars, among them Donald Cosentino, his former student Katherine Smith, art historian Marilyn Houlberg, and British photographer and curator Leah Gordon, who put a strong emphasis on *vodou* and the on *gede* spirits in particular as a cultural, religious, and political framework for producing the art works by *Atis Rezistans*. The *gede* or *Guédé* are a family of *vodou* deities (*lwa*), which are closely connected to death, life, sexuality, and the cemetery (Métraux 1959: 83). McAlister describes these *gede* spirits as social critics from 'below':

In Vodou, jokes using betiz are the special province of Papa Gede, the bawdy spirit of sex and death who tirelessly works, jokes, and heals. The Gede are quick to satirize the ruling order in general, and with it anybody in authority or in a position of respect. Elsewhere I have written that by linking sex irrevocably with satire, the Gede spirits are the ultimate social critics in Vodou, uniquely able to make political commentary in both domestic and national arenas. Through the jokes and betiz, both Papa Gede and the Rara bands become free to parody, to question, and to laugh [...]. This is because betiz opens a philosophical space for opposition and rejection of the suffering of the world through laughter. (McAlister 2002: 60–61)

3 An important historical factor was François Duvalier's use of the *vodou* religion, which he used to strengthen his regime since its beginning in 1957. From the start, Duvalier constructed himself as a *père spirituel* (spiritual father) by using visual motifs associated with the *gede* spirits, *Bawon Samdi* in particular. Thus, he encouraged rumors to be a spiritual leader and powerful *bòkò* himself. Kate Ramsey describes: "Although Haitian governments had long regarded Vodou as a potential parallel power, no president had attempted to co-opt this decentralized religion on the scale undertaken by Duvalier. [...] Just as Duvalier sought to install members of his secret police, the *tonton makout* (themselves named after a childhood bogeyman), in the hierarchies of the governmental, military, and civil society institutions, so he recruited oungan, manbo, *bòkò*, and *sosyete sekrè* officers to join his force and, after 1962, to serve in his civil militia, the *Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale* (VSN)." (Ramsey 2011: 251)

Exhibition catalogues show that allocating *Atis Rezistans* in the frame evoked in McAlister's description, the curator network tries to counter racist representations of Haitian culture and to find mechanisms to highlight socio-political dimensions in *vodou* aesthetics. The most important exhibitions in this trajectory in recent years have been *Lespri Endependan: Discovering Haitian Sculpture* (2004), *Death & Fertility: Haitian Pavilion at Venice Biennale* (2011), *In Extremis: Death & Life in 21st Century Haitian Art* (2012), and *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou* (2012). All these exhibitions helped in the process to integrate *Atis Rezistans* seamlessly into a historical narrative of the *vodou*-inspired arts of Haiti. The exhibition curated by Donald Cosentino and Elizabeth Cerejido took place at the *Frost Art Museum* in Miami in 2004 and started this process. Like Prézeau Stephenson's exhibitions, *Lespri Endependan* dealt with the importance of sculpture as an artistic medium in Haiti but presented the history of Haitian sculpture mainly through the influence of the *vodou* religion. Backed by important art institutions in Europe and the United States, this curator network was able to produce a discourse that became quickly naturalized as a dominant framework. Cosentino shifted the focus from in general to the subcategory of the *gede* spirits (Cosentino 2013: 36). North American writer and journalist Amy Wilentz remarked critically in her review of the exhibition *In Extremis* (2012) that this framework represents a problematic voyeuristic outsider expectation on Haitian culture (Wilentz 2013). The repeating focus on the *gede* spirits can indeed be understood as an expression of a wider discourse that dramatizes Haitian art in a sensationalistic manner and very much plays into the hands of socio-voyeuristic and exotistic fascination, an instance that often comes along with poverty, catastrophe, and Afro-Caribbean blackness. A recurring description of the art works by *Atis Rezistans* is *post-apocalyptic* or *apocalyptic* and is also rooted in this dramatizing gesture:

Their assemblages transform the detritus of the world's failing economies into distinctly urban apocalyptic images, whose take on Vodou evoke a cyber-punk science fiction vision. Their use of readymade and recycled components is only partially driven by economic necessity; for them, it also carries an inherent social commentary on Haiti's position in the global economy [...]. (Gordon 2012a: 24)

Gordon goes on to compare the art works to a biblical new-born Adam that "leaps from postindustrial waste, raising specters to haunt the dark landscape of globalization." (Gordon 2012b: 109) The aspect of time in these metaphors is significant. While the "naïve painters" of Haiti have been marked as timeless and anachronistic and positioned in an archaic time before art historical narratives, their contemporary counterparts seem to have hurried ahead into a post-apocalyptic future. What both descriptions have in common, to speak with

Johannes Fabian, is that they deny these artists coequality (Fabian 2002: 31). The discourse remains allochronic and therefore creates an asymmetrical temporal opposition that positions the artists in a time that is not *ours*. The term “post-apocalyptic” should not be understood descriptively for the art works but rather as a comment of curators’ understanding of the current world system. *Atis Rezistans*’ function in current curatorial framings is never based on individual creativity. Rather, they are stand-ins for Haitian culture, religion, and their socio-economic strata. Gordon reflects furthermore about the devastating downside of aggressive capitalism and expands Prézeau Stephenson’s more local socio-economic context to a global systemic level as she describes the art works as “a Mad-Max-like vision of a free-market economic future going to hell in a handcart.” (Gordon 2012b: 24). The poverty of the group needs to be constantly re-evoked because the artists stand in for millions of anonymous urban poor suffering under the circumstances of neo-liberal capitalism.

Although the *vodou* aspect of some of the art works connects them to a wider system of visual culture from an anthropological and religious perspective, most curators clearly define these objects as secular art pieces produced for exhibitions (Cosentino 2015: 27–28). British curator Alex Farquharson highlights the secular aspect of the art works presented in his exhibition in his curatorial statement for *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou*: “[Kafou] is very much an art exhibition, one that acknowledges rather than blurs the interstice between work of art and ritual object [...]” (Farquharson 2012: 9) It is significant that photographer, filmmaker, and curator Leah Gordon offers a contrary reading to this secular perspective on Haitian art. She was part of the larger curatorial staff of *In Extremis* and also co-curated *Kafou*. Gordon became the unofficial manager of *Atis Rezistans* around 2009. She established herself as a curator for the presentation of art works by *Atis Rezistans* at a time of growing international interest in the artists. Her documentary *The Sculptors of Grand Rue* (2008) was screened in both exhibitions to give a local context for the art pieces and offered the artists a platform to talk about their art, religion, and their experiences of living in an informal neighborhood. The documentary that can be found online helped to widely disseminate the *gede* framework (Gordon 2010). One scene in this documentary is of particular interest for our discussion: Gordon presents Eugène feeding a human skull integrated in one of his sculptures ritually in his exhibition space in Port-au-Prince. This scene introduces a new component into the discourse, which Prézeau Stephenson explicitly denounced: the ritual use of art objects. Gordon further uses this particular scene as a general introduction to speak about the artists at conferences. In an interview published in the exhibition catalogue to *In Extremis*, Gordon describes how *Atis Rezistans* artist Jean Claude Saintilus shifted places with a *gede* spirit called *Mazaka La Kwa* several times in the course of the interview (Gordon 2012c).

She presents the conversation as a continuous monologue by Saintilus and leaves out her own interview questions in the process. Throughout the interview, Saintilus dissolves into an avatar of the *gede* spirit and is barely talking about his artistic practice. The interview transforms him into an interlocutor for Haitian spirituality and the *gede* spirits in particular. His perspectives on his art, his aspirations, or points of view are to a large degree absent in this conversation or solely expressed in relation to his spirituality. I am not disputing Saintilus' religious worldview or the fact that this conversation happened in this form or another. But this perspective endangers Haitian artists to once again become exotic fictions that produce radical alterity. Here, such fictions are based on curatorial selection processes, processes which blur the line between art and religion in a way similar to the skull-feeding scene in Gordon's documentary. Gordon's perspective produces problematic responses like the following by literary scholar Carolyn Duffey: "The simultaneity of life and death is also always evoked in the works of the artists in their training program, as it is in the vodou altars in the homes/ateliers of the *Atis Rezistans*, who define themselves as *oungans* (priests)." (Duffey 2015) Duffey transforms all members of *Atis Rezistans* into *houngan* (vodou priests); she gives a very culturalizing dimension to vodou-inspired art works and fails to ask about individual discursive strategies for the use of vodou in these art works. This perspective also demonstrates disregard towards local *houngan*, who lose the status of religious specialists as Duffey implies that every member of *Atis Rezistans* can easily become a vodou priest. This obstructs the chance to ask why a particular artist is using vodou for particular discursive reasons in carefully manipulated and constructed pieces of art. Indeed, political and socio-critical content in the art works of *Atis Rezistans* are not exclusively narrated through the lens of *gede* spirits. In this culturalizing perspective, the danger remains that Haitian artists are transformed into objects of primitivist desire; thus, they are only offered a place in 'Euro-North American' museums if they are able to prove that they are a redemptive, exotic, and religious alternative to 'Euro-North American' modernism. I argue that in this particular case, a dissimilating mechanism of presentation becomes a cultural *Othering*; it pretends to correspond to a reality in the life of these artists but instead displays them as objects of exoticist fascination. Christopher Steiner describes how artists in *Côte d'Ivoire* stage a ritual use to satisfy the demand among 'Western' clients for 'authentic' objects, i.e. items that supposedly are produced solely for local communities (Steiner 1994: 74). Steiner explains how the ascription of a ritual use of art objects becomes an authenticating mechanism for European collectors, because it imbues art objects with a local meaning that transcends the relationship-triad between object, local artist, and visiting collector. The members of *Atis Rezistans* are cross-culturally intertwined with the 'Euro-North American' art world and



linked to the contemporary art establishment in Port-au-Prince since the late 1990s. By staging a local ritual use for their art works, Gordon in collaboration with Eugène distances the art pieces from being productions for traveling curators (and for Gordon herself, for that matter) and instead invents a new local meaning. This strategy performatively and fictionally produces authenticity for these works. It also re-opens the door for an exoticist fascination that culturalizes the artists in the process. In the terminology of Victor Li, this perspective can be described as *neo-primitivism*, i.e. a primitivism in the service of the West's own self-criticism. Here, the 'primitive' is seen as a corrective to the malaise of Western modernity (Li 2006: 15). Cultural or socio-economic alterity needs to be constantly re-evoked, because a contemporary neo-primitivist searches for an alternative to the threat of a homogenizing modernity and aggressive global capitalism. They find this alternative in lower socio-economic strata in Haiti and the *vodou* narrative of their artistic practices.

I do not wish to imply that we can reduce the use of *vodou* solely to a hierarchical negotiation between foreign desire and local pandering. Coming back to Celeur, *vodou* is and remains important as a heritage claim and as a decolonial space for creative thinking. But a process of cultural, temporal, and racial *Othering* has fixed the art works by *Atis Rezistans* as an easily consumable and readable commodity for 'Western' audiences in relation to *vodou*. It is no longer the Haitian artist who is able to decide what *vodou* means for his or her individual artistic practice. This process has culturalized and reified the art works so that they conform to a common knowledge of Haitian culture, which produces a fixed generalizing reality.

#### 4 Conclusion

The members of *Atis Rezistans* compete for very limited resources in close proximity. Many curators and scholars seem to forget that visiting curators and scholars are one of the main resource these artists are fighting about. It is important to describe these artworks as inter-*klas* negotiations which are not produced in a cultural vacuum. So far, there is very little academic research which examines these hierarchical inter-*klas* dialogues; instead, the artists are culturalized by their marginalized socio-economic position and described as allegedly 'authentic' expression of Haitian 'working class' culture. It is significant that *vodou* became a source of *representational conflict* within the neighborhood but never presented as such in exhibitions. Instead, it is normalized and culturalized, because 'this is what Haitians do.' Artists like Guyodo or Celeur position themselves critically to *vodou*-inspired art by other artists of the group (e.g. Eugène, Saintilus and Papa Da, whose names are closely connected

to Gordon's curatorial work since 2009). However, every artist in the neighborhood, Eugène included, made it very clear that *vodou* is only one source of inspiration among many others. Adjusting the iconography of their art pieces to visitors is a common selling strategy for all artists living in the neighborhood who have to sell in order to support their families. If visitors want to see the *vodou* spirits *Damaballah* or *Bawon Kriminel* in their sculptures, many artists will not oppose this wish, although the particular sculpture was originally intended to discuss a different theme. After I realized that many artists try to adjust the descriptions of their art pieces to my own interest in *vodou*, I asked Celeur in an interview how important it is for an artist to be honest. He explained in return:

Let's say that the foreigners who are coming in this neighborhood are only interested in our truth in relation to *vodou*. They want us to be *vodou*, so we give them *vodou*. They come here and want to know everything we know about *vodou* and not only about our art pieces. Maybe therefore many of the artists here don't say what they really think. (Celeur 2014)

In renouncing *vodou*, Haitian artists from lower socio-economic strata are not renouncing a religious worldview but the work of a network of 'Western' curators who produce a very narrow reified 'ethnic slot' for European and North American audiences. This established a rewarding system for Haitian artists who willingly reify their cultural differences. All artistic expressions that do not relate to *vodou* risk becoming invisible because, after all, *vodou* is what 'they' do.

Nirmal Puwar describes such processes of inclusion as an almost "benevolent imperialism" of 'Euro-North American' institutions, which enable women of color, for example, to speak out of charity and guilt:

The participation [...] of racialized "others" is thus as marked subjects who can't escape their "ethnic" identity. The racial particularity [non-Western artists] are said to carry is highly visible, while the particularity of whiteness [...] is invisible. [...] It is on these limited and narrow terms that recognition is most easily granted. (Puwar 2004: 70)

Very aware of this institutional 'ethnic slot' system for Haitian artists, Prézeau Stephenson decided to fade out the *vodou* narrative for several exhibitions to open the door for new readings and alternative interpretative approaches for Haitian art which helped to produce spaces where artists from lower socio-economic strata could claim their individuality as contemporary artists. She concentrated on socio-political relevance by encouraging Celeur, Guyodo, and Eugène to respond to current events in Port-au-Prince and countered former

interpretative approaches for Haitian art, which presented artist from weak socio-economic strata as apolitical, religious beings.

Curator Okwui Enwezor asked what distinguishes the practices of curatorial fieldwork from those of ethnography (Enwezor 2012: 21). One very crucial difference is that many curators I analyzed do not describe how their personal hierarchical involvement as part of this artistic network influences the art works and the artistic field they are moving in. Curators assume a hierarchical position similar to cultural anthropologists during fieldwork but without necessarily applying anthropological and sociological methods to reflect their practice as an embodied practice and to make their hierarchical position within the neighborhood visible. Instead, they present curatorial selected end-products and thereby write themselves out of object histories. Drawing on Nelly Richards, I argue that it is not enough to occasionally present objects from marginalized communities but to go further and ask,

[...] to what degree has [the] heterologous recuperation of the marginal (of the decentred) become anything more than a simple declarative position, or contributed effectively to modifying the institutional-discourse pact, endorsed by the official chain of powers and functions of the centre? It is a question – strictly speaking – of ascertaining whether or not the alleged fragmentation and dispersal of the centre modifies the categorization of power that established imbalances with regard to exchanges of value and meaning. (Richards 1994: 263)

The social-relationships these travelling objects and artists encounter on their journey remain embroiled in hierarchical social interactions. The mechanisms of power are not dispersed by generously transferring artistic objects from marginalized groups into centralized institutions, because they express themselves in personal relationships.

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