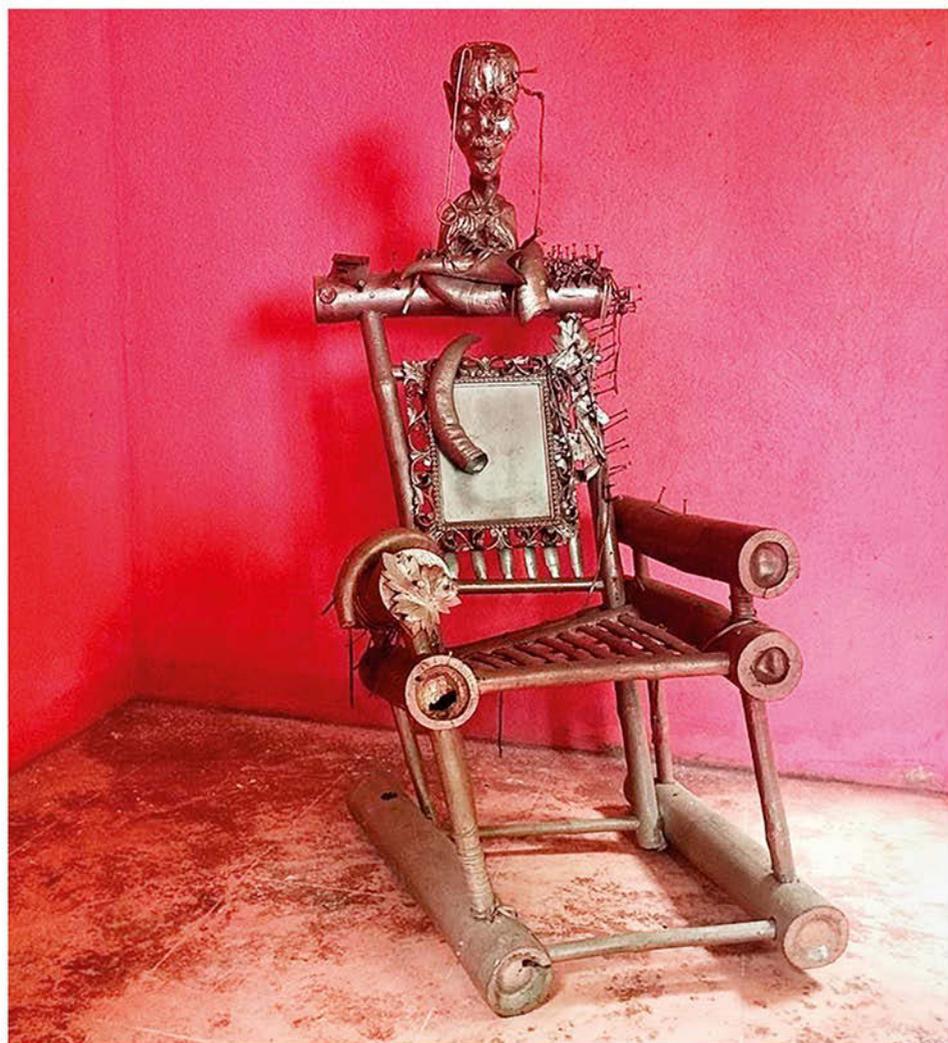


David Frohnapfel

# ALLEVIATIVE OBJECTS

Intersectional Entanglement  
and Progressive Racism  
in Caribbean Art



[transcript] POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

## From:

*David Frohnapfel*

### **Alleviative Objects**

## Intersectional Entanglement and Progressive Racism in Caribbean Art

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The global field of contemporary art is shaped by inter-racial conflicts. *Alleviative Objects* approaches Caribbean art through intersectional entanglements and combines decolonial epistemologies with critical whiteness studies and affect theory in order to rethink 'Euro- and U.S.-centric' perspectives on art, race, and class. David Frohnapfel shows how progressive racism in the discourse on Haitian art recenters Whiteness by performing benign, innocent, and heroic identifications with the artist group *Atis Rezistans*. While the study turns critically towards Whiteness, it also turns away from it and towards the compelling contributions of Haitian curators and artists to the decentralization of contemporary art.

**David Frohnapfel** studied art history, comparative literature, and religious studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich and at the Universidad de la Habana in Havana. He works on contemporary art and visual culture from the Caribbean region and defended his dissertation, *Disobedient Musealities. Dialogue and Conflict in the Art Scene of Port-au-Prince*, at Freie Universität Berlin in 2017. His research focuses on decolonial theory, critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and affect theory. He also worked as curator of *The 3rd Ghetto Biennale: Decentering the Market and Other Tales of Progress in Port-au-Prince* together with Leah Gordon, André Eugène, and Jean Herald Celeur, and curated the exhibition *NOCTAMBULES on Queer Visualities* on the occasion of *Le Forum Transculturel d'Art Contemporain*.

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I have struggled—and on occasion stumbled—my way through life since I have decided to write a Ph.D. on intersectional conflicts and solidarities in the art world of Port-au-Prince. When you start writing a book, only a few people tell you about how hard it is really going to be, how heavily it can weight on your soul and influence your mental health, or about the financial and material difficulties you will encounter along the way. More so, if you are not coming from a family with money and you do not fully embody that (haunting and unsettling) heteropatriarchal norm. Many colleagues you encounter in the early stages of your career are the ones who have turned their books into academic success stories. Yet, many of us will not be able to follow in those footsteps and our conflicting relationships with academia will silently fade into the background of the conversation.

I dedicate this book to all struggling young scholars I have met throughout the years, who have not finished their work because they had to encounter that academia and the art world are not evenhanded systems detached from a material reality or the bodies we inhabit.

When I started researching for *Alleviative Objects*, I also did not expect that my inquiry of the unacknowledged racism of many leftist-leaning progressive art professionals (myself included) would come along with so much personal pushback, resentment, and white fragility. My affective performance of surprise here reveals of course my own white ontological denial of the racist world we live in and the complex investments that white progressives sustain with privilege and their sophisticated performances of innocence.

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## Introduction

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In 2013, I spent several days in London to visit an art exhibition at a gallery that presented artworks by the Haitian artist group *Atis Rezistans* alongside *drapo vodou*<sup>1</sup> (*vodou* banners) and several photographs by British artist, filmmaker and curator Leah Gordon. The gallery, located in a historical 18th-century building, presented Haitian artists on three different floors. I wanted to find out how Haitian artists from lower socio-economic strata are showcased to buyers in commercial galleries. I therefore decided to tell the gallerist the made-up story that I work as an assistant for a Berlin-based art collector looking to expand his mainly Eurocentric collection with artworks from the Caribbean and Latin America. I introduced myself to the gallerist after I had spent some time in the gallery looking at the Haitian art assemblages staged dramatically against black painted walls. I asked the gallerist if she could help me to understand the Haitian artworks a little better. The gallerist started with some introductory words about the exhibition and artist collective *Atis Rezistans*. She explained to me the common

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1 Sequin-covered *drapo vodou* or *vodou* banners derives from the *vodou* religion. They serve in temples to elevate and ritually salute the *lwa* (spirits). Traditionally they are about 91.4 x 91.4 cm in size and their designs are based upon cosmograms called *vèvè*, which symbolize a particular *lwa*. Since the 1950s they also became commodities for tourists and galleries. Tina Girourard explains, “Creating a *Vodou* flag is a complex process not unlike making stained glass windows. In both cases, the master artist creates the design but relies on assistants to carry it out [...] The assistant brings the work to life, with one hand above and one below the cloth, their dexterous fingers rhythmically sewing sequin by sequin, in a five-step process: needles guide the thread up through the cloth, through the sequin, through the glass bead which will hold it in place, then back down through the sequin to the cloth. A typical work requires from 18-20.000 sequins (usually 8 mm) to be sewn, a feat accomplished in about ten days.” (Girourard 1995: 357-358)

narrative of the group: the artists are living in abject poverty in a slum in Haiti, recycle everyday detritus into art and are inspired by the *vodou* religion. Afterwards she brought me to the basement to show me some black and white portraits of Haitian men and women in costume at the carnival in Jacmel photographed by Leah Gordon. As the gallerist showed me the first photograph, she paused for a moment, smiled at me, and said: “You know, you and me we couldn’t travel to Haiti, we would get instantly killed over there. It is such a dangerous country for people like us.” Her comment took me by surprise and I was thrown off by the disconnection of her excited, smiling face and the image rushing through my head of how we would both get shot or otherwise killed in the streets of Port-au-Prince. I asked the gallerist in return how the photographer of the images manages to survive, given that she is British and white<sup>2</sup> like the both of us. The gallerist answered that Gordon had been traveling to Haiti for about twenty years and that her partner was Haitian and lived in one of the most dangerous and poor areas of Port-au-Prince. Her experience and relationship secured her travels and she was able to bring us these wonderful photographs back from her journeys. Gordon’s photographs became part of a heroic travel narrative of a white, female photographer from Europe setting out to risk her own life by traveling into the ‘heart of darkness’ to bring us exotic knowledge from an inaccessible and dangerous culture. The 18th-century building, which houses the gallery felt suddenly very colonially charged. Gordon’s black and white photographs, which intend to tell us something about ‘subaltern’<sup>3</sup> narratives of Haitian history

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2 I do not use the terms ‘white’ and ‘Black’ as biological categories but as cultural, political, and anti-racist concepts. ‘Race’ as a biological category is a fiction but a fiction with severe—even life-threatening—consequences for racialized bodies. Cultural anthropologist Gloria Wekker, following Ruth Frankenberg, describes Whiteness as referring “to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally, produced, and, moreover are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination. Naming ‘Whiteness’ displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance.” (Wekker 2016: 24) Whiteness in this sense is a complex structure of privilege that provides certain bodies, which conform to a somatic norm, better access to resources, capital, and opportunities. Nirmal Puwar describes that as soon as people do not conform to a white somatic norm they are quickly read as space invaders who do not belong (Puwar 2004: 8). I will come back to the discourses on race in more detail throughout the book.

3 The term ‘subaltern’ goes back to the work of Antonio Gramsci and relates closely to his concept of hegemony (Gramsci 2014: 52-55). Celia M. Britton explains: “Gramsci established the concept of hegemony – the claim that the ideology of the dominant

through costume and masquerading traditions, became deflated and filled with something else: racism and the criminalization of an entire nation. I also realized why I was suddenly standing in the basement of the gallery: the gallerist tried to shift my attention away from the current art exhibition about Haitian art on the main floor and to the standard programming of gallery artists by showing me some of the stored artworks. My sneaky collector-assistant-alter ego backfired, as the gallerist saw me as a potential client. The artworks by *Atis Rezistans* and the *vodou* flags are supposedly not in the same price range compared to the standard programming presented in the gallery, and she started to show me her more ‘Western’ range of products. I reminded her that I was here for Caribbean artists, and as I left the gallery I kept wondering: what is the function of *Atis Rezistans* and their artworks in European art institutions? What are the affective politics shaping the bizarre disconnect between a pleased smiling white face in regard to the content of a conversation about violence and poverty in the ‘Global South’?

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class in any society becomes the dominant ideology of the whole society; that is, those who do not belong to the class whose interests it serves will nevertheless subscribe to it. This kind of ideological ‘capture’ of a society accompanies political power and economic dominance, but Gramsci makes a basic distinction between power based on domination and power based on hegemony. Thus, it is important to note that hegemony is an ideological or, in the poststructuralist framework, discursive reality and that it is not correlated with any one particular class. The subaltern, for Gramsci, is the non-hegemonic subject, excluded from the dominant ideology’s representation of the society and its history [...]” (Britton 1999: 53). The term gained larger currency through the *South Asian Subaltern Studies Group* around Ranajit Guha and especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak 1994). John Beverley and Ileana Rodríguez founded in 1992 a ‘Latin American’ version of the *Subaltern Studies Group* to continue the legacy of politically committed scholarship. Rodríguez describes: “The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group saw subaltern studies as what Spivak calls ‘a strategy for our time’, with two essential postulates. One was to continue placing our faith in the projects of the poor. The other was to find ways of producing scholarship to demonstrate that in the failure to recognize the poor as active social, political, and heuristic agents reside the limits and thresholds of our present hermeneutical and political condition. Like the South Asian Collective, we were also dissatisfied with the realisation that the poor had not been recorded in a history of their own, but rather had been subsumed in a narrative which was not exactly their own.” (Rodríguez 2001: 3)

Fig. 1: Entrance to Frantz Jacques a.k.a. Guyodo's Atelier Timoun Klere



Situations like this one have become common since I started working on contemporary art from Haiti and its classed, racialized, and gendered entanglements. Speaking about Haiti as a white, European scholar often seems to follow two similar paths. The first one can be illustrated and summed up by the following congratulatory responses: “Wow, you really lived in a country like Haiti for over a year?”, “I think it is wonderful that you work about art produced by the urban poor!” White scholars, artists, and curators can acquire a huge amount of symbolic capital by the mere decision to travel to Haiti and to work about marginalized Black communities living in poverty. Some white scholars and curators are actively encouraging these heroic narratives. Curator Donald Cosentino, for example, describes his ‘expeditions’ into the tourist market *Marché En Fe* (Iron Market) in Haiti with the following narrative:

“To find [the artists] Pierrot Barra and Marie Cassaise, you must elbow and shove your way into the Iron Market. These artists keep their shop deep inside this century-old marketplace, an infernal warren of stalls and ateliers covered by a wrought iron shed all tarted up with faux minarets and turrets, like a Disney version of Arabian Nights. Similarities with Fantasia end there however, since this castle of Haitian commerce is located in the mud, filth and choking exhaust of downtown Port-au-Prince, a ramshackle city once de-

scribed by a disgruntled visitor as the ‘Paris of the gutter’. Depending on your sensitivity to heat, light, touch, noise and smell – on whether these sensations, pushed to an extreme, excite or frighten you – a descent into the Iron Market is a trip to heaven or to hell.” (Cosentino 1998: 7)

The description of the journey to heaven or hell transforms Cosentino into a Greek mythological hero like Orpheus and illustrates the affective dimension of adventurous excitement visiting curators experience in a ‘subaltern’ milieu in Haiti. The search for new artistic talents at the *Marché En Fe* becomes a heroic narrative of discovery for those curators brave enough to enter the hellish “Paris of the gutter” and to bring new ‘subaltern’ artistic talents to light. But this coin also has a flipside. Haiti, constantly produced as an exceptionally poor, victimized, failed state, can also quickly spark moral suspicion directed towards scholars, artists and curators working about Haitian art, which is indeed produced by one of the most vulnerable Black communities. This moral suspicion leads to a second path represented by the following responses: “Don’t you think it is very selfish of you to use the life stories of people living in misery for your own academic career?”, “Should a white, privileged scholar really work about Haiti?”, “What about the hierarchy between you and your informants?”, “Isn’t your research about class and the urban poor too primitivist for the field of contemporary art in 2016?”, “Have you even bothered to learn Kreyòl?”.

## DEHUMANIZATION THROUGH DEGRADATION AND IDEALIZATION

Haiti is an idea, an idea that triggers strong emotional responses: hostility, fear, pity, guilt, anger, lust, fascination, excitement, and heroism. As one of the revolutionary islands of the Caribbean region, the idea of Haiti resembles either a decolonial Mecca of Black resistance, the ultimate embodiment of ‘Third World’ victimhood, or a magical island of nostalgic, exotic, and spiritual Otherness. João Feres Jr., following Reinhart Koselleck, has classified three asymmetrical counter-concepts or semantic oppositions that dominant groups use to produce a shared identity by delineating another group outside the naming group’s characteristics. These three semantic oppositions are: (1) culturally asymmetric oppositions, (2) temporally asymmetric oppositions, and (3) racially asymmetric oppositions (Feres 2009: 186). Haiti as an asymmetrical counter-concept is commonly described in everyday conversations as exceptionally ‘more’: more impoverished, more magical, more authentic, more artistic, more sexual, more African, more religious, more resilient, more decolonial, more superstitious, more crea-

tive, more passionate, more grotesque, more dangerous, more backward, more rebellious, more victimized. Some of these labels are grounded in racist thought but others are empowering counter-concepts against degrading, racist ideas. It is important to keep in mind that processes of dehumanization are not only achieved through degradation; they can also thrive on idealization. Colin Dayan adroitly describes the process through which Haiti has been fixed in a status of being perceived as a metaphor (Dayan 2010). Haiti is commonly understood as “grotesquely unique” (Dayan 2010) and as an exceptional case of either ‘Black victimhood’ or ‘Black decolonial resistance’. Haiti as a metaphor oscillates between two different but intimately related poles: (1) degradation and (2) idealization. Both of these perspectives have in common that Haiti functions as a metaphor through a process of sublimation. Dayan explains further: “We must remember that both processes, whether idealization or degradation, displace the human element. We face a process of sublimation, up or down. Amid evocations of a desperate people and festering landscape, the media and the ‘humanitarian’ community continue to ignore the history and culture of Haiti.” (2010) Metaphors are by definition not the things they represent. Hence, Dayan goes on to ask: if we understand Haiti to be a metaphor, then what is Haiti a metaphor for? She locates the answer to her question in ‘our’ selfhood:

“Our selfhood is reflected, as in a distorting mirror, in our notions of Haiti. The metaphor exists, as the long, sorry story of its genesis and historical development demonstrates, to serve a purpose. And that purpose is connected with, and deeply rooted in, our notions of self and identity—which means also our notions of the other. Blackness, black freedom, black political independence, black cultural expression and specificity—all of these are fundamental notions, and all are represented—not metaphorically, but really—in Haiti. Yet fear, contempt, and hostility to this blackness all come to expression in the way we formulate our metaphors. If Haiti stands as a metaphor for misery, for helplessness, then outsiders can assume that such a nation needs the United States to save it. Though the particulars of history prove otherwise, the capacious and constantly shifting uses of metaphor bring us to that critical point where compassion becomes pity: taking care of people who cannot take care of themselves. What remains certain here is that narratives of protection are conducted by the free in the name of the bound, or to put it another way, definitions are in the hands of the definers.” (2016)

Nadège T. Clitandre, following Jean Michael Dash, argues that Haiti as a metaphorical representation risks to be transformed into a disappearing island, an island that disappears entirely under complex symbols (Clitandre 2011: 146). She argues that in media representations of post-earthquake Haiti the paradigm of

Haitian Exceptionalism<sup>4</sup> has centrally re-emerged. She states further that we have to theorize structures of Haitian Exceptionalism closely in order to be able to make differentiations between negative sides of exceptionalism, which are grounded in racist thought and cause Haiti to disappear further, and a positive side of exceptionalism as a counter-discourse which centers Haiti in global history and promotes Caribbean, African diasporic, and global affiliations (Clitandre 2011: 147). One of the central buzzwords Clitandre recognizes in this new positive language around Haitian Exceptionalism is resilience, which in fact accepts Haiti's unique history of Black revolution but dangerously fixes Haitians at the same time as an exceptionally poor nation with the extraordinary ability to withstand situations of suffering and marginality:

“But this positive language of Haitian exceptionalism, which recognizes Haiti's history of resistance, has been co-opt by the media in problematic ways. Resilience is the post-earthquake (re)production of Haiti by the media that makes Haiti legible to the world and fixes Haiti in the discourse of global poverty. We now talk of resilience of Haitians living in exceptional circumstances, so much so that they can live in a state of degradation for some time, and are able to do so because of a never ending history of struggle and resistance that now gets foregrounded to recognize their exceptional ability to suffer.” (2011: 152)

We will see in the main case study of my research that the members and drop-outs of the Haitian artist group *Atis Rezistans*, a.k.a. the artists of *Grande Rue and Rue du Magasin de L'Eta*, often play directly into the hands of this discourse of resilience. They are commonly understood as “[m]orphing societal dregs into expressions of joy and beauty” (Grimes 2008). They are poor and marginalized but resiliently resist their marginal position in society by transforming the detritus of the “world's failing economies into distinctly urban apocalyptic images”

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4 Clitandre explains further that the term Haitian Exceptionalism goes back to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (2015) book *The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean and the Word*. Trouillot describes that in the nineteenth century an exceptionalist paradigm was developed to be able to speak about Haiti, which overemphasized Haiti's singularity to make Haiti recognizable after Haiti's revolutionary history had been silenced as an “unthinkable non-event” (Trouillot 2015: 70). Trouillot argues that the emphasis on Haiti's singularity is a methodological and political move to counter the former negation of Haiti through a positive recognition of Haitian identity, history, and culture and that Haitian Studies today have to move beyond the fiction of this Haitian Exceptionalism.

(Gordon 2012: 24) for art exhibitions and coffee tables. Artist Eric Grimes highlights the aspect of impressive resilience in *Atis Rezistans*' artworks in his review of the exhibition *Vodou Riche: Contemporary Haitian Art* (2007) at Columbia college's *Glass Curtain Gallery*:

"The tale of contemporary Haitian art speaks to humanity's innate drive to self-expression and how this passion has never been constrained by something as comparatively trivial as poverty. *Vodou Riche* was a superb exploration of a wealth of art coming from an extremely poor nation. [...] The style in this exhibition that most literally converts social poverty into visual wealth comes from a group known as 'the sculptures of Grand Rue'." (2008)

The members of *Atis Rezistans* also commonly narrate the name of their group through this discourse of resilience. Artist Getho Jean Baptiste explained to me in an interview:

"As far as I remember, [Jean Herald] Celeur came up with the name of our group. Celeur did an art piece. A man with two hands out of iron. He wanted to articulate that if Haitian people would not have iron hands, they would not have enough resistance and would die. We will die if we do not have iron hands. Because Haitians, although we are hungry, we always have the strength to keep on working. Well, we resist against this oppressive system. [...] You have to eat. You have to drink. You have to pay your rent. If you have children, they have to go to school. You have to resist against that. For me this is our form of everyday resistance." (Getho 2014)

Following Clitandre, however, I argue that the members of *Atis Rezistans* risk becoming disappearing artists in this discourse, artists disappearing under complex symbols produced through prejudicial anticipations of a "racialized common sense" (Wekker 2016: 19). We will see in my study that the members of *Atis Rezistans* often do not represent themselves as individual artistic producers and that they are seen as a prolonged process of Haiti's metaphorical status. They oscillate in this trajectory between the following three correlated readings: (1) resilient decolonial revolutionaries, (2) victims of an aggressive neo-liberal world order, and (3) an exotic and socio-economic Other. *Atis Rezistans*, as victims of the global aggressive capitalist world order need to be saved, as 'subaltern' resistant fighters they need to be celebrated, and as the exotic, socio-economic Other they need to be carefully policed against the constant threat of 'Western' or 'bourgeois' assimilation so as to remain 'authentically' other. But how do these artists from lower socio-economic strata see and narrate their own

position in the globalized artistic milieu? This book is fundamentally structured around these oral histories. I understand my conversations and interviews with the members and dropouts of *Atis Rezistans* as an autoethnographic forum. I return theories written about the artists and their artworks back to them to listen to their responses and opinions (cf. Bratt 1991).<sup>5</sup>

## FIELD OF RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

I understand my research as a contribution to ongoing discussions about the provincialization and decolonialization of dominant ‘Euro-U.S. American’ epistemic regimes and the decentering of artistic and curatorial practices in an increasingly globalized art world (for the concept of provincialization, see Chakrabarty 2000). How and where is knowledge produced and which social actors are capable to participate actively in the production of that knowledge? The theme of my analysis is the transnational contemporary art milieu of Port-au-Prince. My main foci are the members and dropouts of the Haitian artist group *Atis Rezistans*, who opened their studios and yards as autonomous *musée d’art* (art museums) in a *bidonvil* (informal neighborhood) between *Grande Rue* and *Rue du Magasin de L’Etat* in Port-au-Prince, and the network of supporters this group has established since the early 2000s in Haiti and abroad. As far as social profiles of the main group are concerned, the group is almost exclusively male, its members’ ages range from early twenties to late fifties and most of them grew up in the *Gran Ri* neighborhood in downtown Port-au-Prince. Their network of supporters consists of artists, curators, collectors, tourists, expats, locals, boutique owners, cultural anthropologists, art historians, and journalists from very different backgrounds and nationalities.

I follow the travelling artworks by *Atis Rezistans* over the globe from Haiti to the wider Caribbean region, to Europe, and the United States and analyze the hierarchical relationships these objects and their artists encounter on these transnational journeys. Every new location comes along with a different set of ideologies and agendas. Curator Tumelo Mosaka argues that “[t]he artwork is a mobile entity; it moves physically between places, and temporally through history. Its

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5 Mary Louise Pratt defines autoethnography as “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represents to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others constructs in response to or in dialogue with those texts” (1991: 34).

meaning changes depending on its social context, location, and audience. As such, the works do not present a singular coherent identity but rather exist in manifold realities distributed through diverse spaces.” (Mosaka 2007: 19) Instead of concentrating on the analyzes of exhibitions of art objects presented in art museums, *Kunsthallen*, and galleries, I will shift the focus of my research away from this art historical, discursive analysis of curatorial selections and object iconographies to the wider social fabric of hierarchical relationships in which these objects are embedded. In my reading, the artworks are not without social context and are part of social infrastructures of power. The main theme of my book revolves around the artistic and socio-political means by which artists, curators, and scholars transform, contest, reestablish, and challenge the boundaries of interracial and inter-*klas* dialogues in globally entangled art milieus. How does a hierarchical social fabric resonate in art exhibitions, object iconographies, and curatorial selections?

Art historian Partha Mitter (2008) pointed out that, from a Kantian a priori view of aesthetic, the concept ‘art’ is often regarded as neutral and disinterested, which systematically ignores the implications of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Exactly these implications are crucial for my research. I follow Ella Shohat’s and Robert Stam’s argument that “[a] full understanding of media representation [and the art world is one of those systems of representation] requires a comprehensive analysis of the institutions that generate and distribute mass-mediated texts as well as of the audience that receives them. Whose stories are told? By whom? [...] Who controls production, distribution, [and] exhibition?” (Stam Shohat 1994: 183)

Cultural anthropologist Gloria Wekker (2016) describes in her book *White Innocence* that interracial encounters often functions within a racialized common sense that was established in four hundred years of imperial rule and still plays a vital, but unacknowledged part in meaning making processes in the Netherlands today. Wekker, following Edward Said, explains this racialized common sense as a cultural archive which is centrally located in our minds, feelings, and institutionalized realities:

“The cultural archive is located in many things, in the way we think, do things, and look at the world, in what we find (sexually) attractive, in how our affective and rational economies are organized and intertwined. Most important, it is between our ears and in our hearts and souls. The question is prompted by a conception of an archive as a set of documents or the institution in which those documents are housed. My use of the term refers to neither of those two meanings, but to ‘a repository of memory’ (Stoler 2009, 49), in the heads and hearts of people in the metropole, but its content is also silently cemented in

policies, in organizational rule, in popular and sexual cultures, and in commonsense everyday knowledge, and all of this is based on four hundred years of imperial rule.” (Wekker 2016: 19)

Following Wekker, I argue in my book that the scholarly, curatorial, and personal engagement with a group of Black Haitian artists from weak socio-economic strata closely relates to this racialized common sense. The cultural archive produces a cultural repertoire that we constantly access unconsciously and consciously in exchanges and dialogues with racialized minorities. I examine how this cultural archive also influences the academic questions we preferably choose to discuss when it comes to Black artists from lower socio-economic strata. Haitian art in this trajectory relates often to a racialized idea produced through that cultural archive. I combine Wekker’s approach with feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker’s concept of epistemic injustice to analyze hierarchical social interactions. Fricker (2007) analyzes how minority testimonies are often dismissed through practices of epistemic marginalization. She reads epistemology in combination with ethics and argues that epistemic marginalization occurs when the prejudice of a hearer causes a person to be “wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007: 20). If a speaker is not fulfilling a particular preconceived prejudicial idea in a hearer, this situation will quickly produce epistemic dysfunctions which lead either to credibility excess or credibility deficit:

“The idea that (what I am calling) testimonial injustice constitutes an ethical wrong that can be non-trivial, indeed profoundly damaging, and even systematically connected with other forms of injustice in society, is not much appreciated. If it were, perhaps we would be more ready to voice our resentments and argue them through to some sort of rectification; and perhaps a social shift would occur towards developing a better vocabulary and forum for airing and responding to such complains. Perhaps too we would be more ready and able to change our patterns of credibility judgment so as to become less likely to inflict testimonial injustice on others.” (Fricker 2007: 40)

The main thesis of my dissertation is that access to white art systems is more easily granted to Black artists from lower socio-economic strata when they do not disrupt the racialized common sense through epistemic dysfunctions vis-à-vis their network of ‘Western’ curators and scholars and follow instead the route predetermined for the common reception of their artworks. To disrupt the preconceived, prejudicial idea of what Haitian art is really all about can quickly produce credibility deficits and hence disappointment, which influences curatorial selection processes, artistic collaborations, and social relationships. Epistem-

ic marginalization influences not only curatorial selections but also scholarly selection: not every Haitian is seen capable to become a legitimate interlocutor and representative of the Haitian art world. Some Haitian artists and curators and their artistic and/or curatorial practices seem more credible than others. Thus, a central question for my research is how this “deep structure of inequality in thought and affect based on race” (Wekker 2016: 2) unfolds in inter-class and inter-racial relationships and epistemic regimes within the artistic, globalized milieu today, which often presents itself as generous and inclusive of racialized minorities—even though statistical investigations beg to differ (cf. Mellon Foundation 2015).

Walter D. Mignolo (2011), following Anibal Quijano’s concept of coloniality, argues (in line with Wekker) that the ‘West’ from about 1500 to the current stage of globalization has built a universal frame of racialized, gendered, and classed knowledge that subalternizes other forms of knowledges. Within a genealogy of Afro-Caribbean thinkers, Mignolo proposes the necessity to develop decolonial mechanisms to disengage and delink from this process of epistemic marginalization by turning former objects of study into subjects: “Decolonial thinking and options (i.e. thinking decolonially) are nothing more than a relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity [...]” (2011: 10). He argues further that

“[d]isengaging or delinking doesn’t mean that it is possible to ‘get out’ of modern epistemology [...] as one walks out of the summer resort and goes home, just like that. Delinking means not to operate under the same assumptions even while acknowledging that modern categories of thought are dominant, if not hegemonic, and in many, if not in all of us. [...] Delinking [...] means to think from the silences and absences produced by imperial modern epistemology and epistemic practices.” (ibid.: 205-206)

Decolonial options are achieved, according to Mignolo, through epistemic disobedience, which is a transdisciplinary method that betrays ‘epistemically correct’ reasoning and interpretation: “A decolonial platform is trans-disciplinary and originated at the moment that standard conceptions and practices of knowledge (e.g. all disciplinary formations) have been both ‘advancing’ modernity and ‘contributing’ to coloniality of knowledge and of being.” (ibid.: 189) Thus methodologically, I use a queer scavenger methodology proposed by Jack Halberstam (1998), which strategically resists disciplinary coherence:

“A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally

excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence.” (ibid.: 13)

Academic research from a vantage point of marginalized, formerly colonized, and indigenous communities enjoins a strong awareness of the tainted colonial legacy of our own academic project as well as the hierarchical social interactions in which one is persistently embedded as a white scholar, like myself, when working about Haiti. The production of knowledge can be an aggressive endeavor which relocates white scholars in positions of being naming and discursive authorities. I experienced in Haiti that my own white body can be read as offensive and threatening despite any supposedly ‘good intentions’ of my research project. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes something similar in her study *Decolonizing Methodologies*:

“From the vantage point of the colonized [...] the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. [...] It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. Just knowing that someone measured our ‘faculties’ by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. [...] It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations.” (ibid.: 1)

In order to analyze the unacknowledged cultural archive at a discursive, emotional, and structural level, I combine in my analysis discourse and narrative analysis, Decolonial and Post-Colonial Theory, Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness Studies, and Intersectionality. I interpret art objects, curatorial descriptions in exhibition catalogues, and academic writings and combine this analysis with ethnographic and sociological literature on poverty tourism and volunteer tourism in the ‘Global South’. I also base my research on participatory observation in Port-au-Prince where I stayed for thirteen months to communicate, interact, and work together with many different actors of the artistic field. During thirteen months of fieldwork in Haiti between 2011 and 2015, I conducted informal conversations and structured and semi-structured interviews with a

diverse array of actors within the cross-cultural artistic field of Port-au-Prince. Such an approach is necessary to grasp the sociological preconditions of how artists from different sections of Haitian society interact with each other and with a wider contemporary artistic milieu. Haitian student Herold Leon helped me to translate my structured interviews with the members and dropouts of *Atis Rezistans* from Kreyòl to English. We will see in the course of this book that the livelihood of the *Gran Ri* artists depends on the relationships they establish with a network of visiting foreigners. Thus, I decided to be careful in citing critical opinions by the artists, which I encountered in conversations and interviews. Especially in chapter three, several voices of artists are cited anonymously in order to protect them from a potential backlash from their support network. Most of these critical opinions are also shared by a large number of artists, which is why I did not name the individual artists who articulated these opinions.

I also worked as assistant curator at the *2nd Ghetto Biennale* in 2011 and co-curator at the *3rd Ghetto Biennale* in 2013 in order to understand the politics of this art event from within. My own white body and experiences in the field are centrally part of the data I analyze. Working as a white, male, queer scholar and curator in Haiti produces its own set of hierarchical interactions rooted in white privilege. White, heteronormative, cis-gendered, and able-bodied identities are commonly produced as unmarked, universal, and invisible because the rest of the world is constantly racialized, culturalized, and framed as a specific particularity aside from universal grand narratives. Sara Ahmed calls this process “hardening of histories into barriers in the present” (2017: 136) and describes how those barriers are hegemonic in their invisible claim for a universal truth. But those hardenings of history accommodate only a particular group of people and their specific needs. For those accommodated, those barriers are often invisible. Scholars like Gloria Wekker (2016), Ruth Frankenberg (1993), Grada Kilomba (2017), Peggy Piesche (2017), Richard Dyer (2017), among others, have shown in their writings how naming Whiteness displaces it from the unmarked status that is itself an effect of its dominance: “the production of whiteness works precisely by assigning race to other” (Ahmed 2004). Race is a fictional construct that does not exist. But racism has real-life consequences and severe effects. However, conversations about the effects of Whiteness—critical intentions notwithstanding—risk forcing attention back to white perspectives in a self-centered manner just in moments when different voices should be heard. Hence, Ahmed (2004) provides a skeptical reading of critical whiteness studies as an anti-racist practice in her article *Declarations of Whiteness*. She argues that articulations of anti-racist Whiteness often stay in a performative sphere and are not doing the anti-racist work they claim to do.

“I will suggest that declaring whiteness, or even ‘admitting’ to one’s own racism, when the declaration is assumed to be ‘evidence’ of an anti-racist commitment, does not do what it says. In other words, putting whiteness into speech, as an object to be spoken about, however critically, is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist. To put this more strongly, I will show how declaring one’s whiteness, even as part of a project of social critique, can reproduce white privilege in ways that are ‘unforeseen’.” (ibid.)

Ahmed furthermore describes the importance of a ‘double turn’ in critical debates about white privilege in progressive milieus:

“[T]o turn [critically] towards whiteness is to turn *towards* and *away* from those bodies who have been afforded agency and mobility by such privilege. In other words, the task for white subjects would be to stay implicated in what they critique, but in turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to *turn away* from themselves, and *towards others*.” (ibid., emphasis added)

The chapters of my book navigate Ahmed’s double turn by repeatedly turning self-critically towards Whiteness, while also turning away from it and towards Haitian artists and curators and their important contributions for the decentralization of contemporary art. We will see in the course of this book how racial bias is largely unconscious and conversations about race seem to conflict with a white progressive self-image of being benign, good, and innocent (Wekker 2016). This self-image hinders the recognition and accountability of Whiteness as a “terrorizing imposition” (hooks 1997: 165-179). Many anti-racist scholars and activists have taught us: it is not a question of *if* we are racially biased but *how* white supremacy as a structure shapes our perception about the past, about the present, and the institutional reality we have inherited to keep Whiteness as a structure of discursive and material power in place. I often use myself as a placeholder in this book in order to debate how a societal structure of oppression and inequality becomes embodied in our behaviors, our emotions, and also expresses itself in everyday interactions between individuals. Saidiya Hartman (2020) warns us that the interpersonal can deflect from larger societal structures of oppression if we lose sight of the intimate structural relation racism maintains with class oppression. She writes: “The possessive investment in whiteness can’t be rectified by learning ‘how to be more antiracist.’ It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism.” (ibid.) Taking Hartman’s and Ahmed’s warnings into account, I still con-

sider critical whiteness a productive tool to unmask the often unacknowledged epistemological dimension of Whiteness in academia and how a racialized common sense continues to shape knowledge productions. Following feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1988), I describe the knowledge I produce in this book as a situated form that rejects a fictionally disembodied universal frame of objectivity without a clear location.

I will come back to hierarchical dispositions of knowledge productions in different moments throughout the book. By combining in my methodology discursive analysis with participatory observation, I also seek to describe hierarchical interactions between actors of different socio-economic strata, nationalities, and races, which often camouflage unequal hierarchies through a heroic, celebratory rhetoric of successful inter-class relationships. How do these hierarchical inter-*klas* interactions and the racialized common sense influence the final curatorial object selections we encounter in art museums, curatorial descriptions, and scholarly writings? The social network I inquiry ranges from (1) post-colonial art professionals who try to find mechanisms to de-exoticize redundant and stereotypical expectations for contemporary Caribbean art, (2) foreign curators and artists who are fascinated by exactly these expectations of cultural and socio-economic alterity, (3) Haitian visitors at the *Gran Ri* neighborhood who are also attracted by aspects of socio-economic and cultural difference, (4) casual tourists from abroad who are looking for a possibility to engage with an ‘authentic’ slum neighborhood in the ‘Global South’, (5) gallerists and collectors who capitalize on the categories ‘outsider art’, ‘voodoo art’ and ‘contemporary art’, (6) NGO workers who intend to help the urban poor, (7) local owners of artisanal boutiques for artistic souvenirs, (8) politically motivated visiting artists who are searching for participants in socially-engaged art projects to produce communal inter-*klas* spaces, and (9) art sociologists and cultural anthropologists who analyze exactly this complex network of social relationships. To navigate a career as an artist in this social network of diverse and often conflicting interests requires flexible artistic identities. Most of the members of *Atis Rezistans* developed multiple discourses alongside curatorial and market-driven demands and are able to adjust simultaneously to very different interest groups for their artworks. To access the cultural archive located in our minds and feelings, a central focus of my research lies on Affect Studies, particularly the work by queer-feminist scholar Sara Ahmed. I also follow Jennifer C. Nash, who argues that one of the most crucial insights of Affect Studies has been its “invitation to consider how structures of domination feel, and to suggest that simply naming those structures fails to do justice to how they move against (and inside of) our bodies” (2019: 30). In this book, I am interested in the ways that “global politics and his-

tory manifest themselves at the level of lived affective experiences” (Cvetkovich 2007: 461). I structured the book ‘atmospherically,’ according to the following six sentiments produced through inter-*klas* and inter-racial relationships between Haitian artists and their network of supporters: (1) disappointment, (2) expectations of gratefulness, (3) heroism, (4) optimism, (5) anger, and (6) sympathy.

Academia is a restricted social environment where white, able-bodied, male, and cis-gendered bodies take up more space and receive more recognition than others. I therefore decided on a citation policy for my academic work. I predominantly work with BIPoC scholars for the theoretical backdrop of my research in order to inscribe my work into an intersectional path of knowledge production. Ahmed explains the necessity for a better awareness of how citations can screen out certain bodies in academic spaces:

“[C]itational structures can form what we call disciplines. I was once asked to contribute to a sociology course, for example, and found that all the core readings were by male writers. I pointed this out and the course convener implied that ‘that’ was simply a reflection of the history of the discipline. Well: this is a very selective history! The reproduction of a discipline can be the reproduction of these techniques of selection, ways of making certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline, and others not even part. [...] I also stated that this citational structure is ‘most or usual citational practice.’ And I think within feminist and gender studies, the problem does not disappear. Even when feminists cite each other, there is still a tendency to frame our own work in relation to a male intellectual tradition.”<sup>6</sup>

## CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN ART

Curatorial interest in the artworks of *Atis Rezistans* started in the early 2000s. This interest relates to wider discursive formations gaining shape in the globalized artistic milieu since the 1990s, which Paul O’Neill has described as a shift from “post-modern pluralism” to “curatorial post-coloniality” (O’Neill 2012: 59). Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera articulates the new mission statement for the artistic field since the 1990s as follows:

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6 While Ahmed (2013) is mainly concerned with the discursive formations of ‘race’ and ‘gender’, I am also concentrating on how we can insert ‘class’ into this academic debate. Sara M. Mitchell, Samantha Lange and Holly Brus (2013) similarly show that men are more likely to cite other men in their academic work and that even female scholars are more likely to cite men. Although my topic is not explicitly a feminist one, I think that it is still important to clearly state that my work is embedded in feminist concerns and theory and heavily informed by a Black, feminist, intellectual path.

“The history of art has, to a large extent, been a Eurocentric story. It is a construction ‘made in the West’ that excluded, diminishes, decontextualizes and banishes to bantustans a good part of the aesthetic-symbolic production of the world. It is becoming increasingly urgent [...] to deconstruct it in search of more decentralized, integrative, contextualized and multidisciplinary discourses, based on dialogue, hybridization and transformation, open to an intercultural understanding of the functions, meanings and aesthetic of that production and its processes.” (Mosquera 1995: 121)

These processes of including Latin American artists are not without their newly produced hierarchies. Arlene Dávila (2008) argues that survey exhibitions showing Latin American art in the United States function through an established hierarchy for Latin American countries: while countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina are positioned on top and are most frequently presented in survey shows, countries of the Caribbean region are often at the bottom of this representational hierarchy. According to Dávila, this hierarchy reveals a racist underpinning of survey shows, which use the notion ‘artistic quality’ to camouflage their Eurocentric, racist bias for Latin American art:

“These countries were said to have greater and longer art traditions, or to have been historically more ‘open to international art movements’, or simply to have ‘better artists.’ Marta Traba (1994), for instance, makes a distinction between ‘open-door’ and ‘closed-door’ countries. She attributes the supposedly greater artistic development of artists from Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina to the fact that those countries have received more European immigrants and thus have more contact with European art trends than the Central American and Caribbean countries. [...] The racist underpinnings of these hierarchies of Latin American countries are quite apparent. What is baffling is that they continue to be veiled by notions of artistic ‘quality’.” (Dávila 2008: 127)

Artist and curator Nii Ahene’La Mettle-Nunoo argues in the exhibition catalogue to the exhibition *Karibische Kunst Heute* at the Documenta Halle in Kassel that “Caribbean art of the present-day, with exception of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, did not develop far enough that it could find international recognition on a wide basis.” (1994: 114)<sup>7</sup> He asks subsequently if the “[static style of Caribbean art] is possibly a side product that comes along with life on an

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7 My translation from the German original: “Die karibische Kunst der heutigen Zeit, mit Ausnahme der von Puerto Rico, der Dominikanischen Republik und Haiti, hat sich nicht so weit entwickelt, daß sie auf breiter Basis international anerkannt werden könnte.”

island, that is exposed to the outside world only in limited ways.” (ibid.: 116)<sup>8</sup> Through the trope of the island, Mettle-Nunoo evokes here a very problematic, colonial conception of the Caribbean region as a place of isolation, frozen in time. The Caribbean region, however, is not an island but an archipelago. In his study *The Repeating Island*, Cuban Novelist Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) resists seeing the Caribbean as an isolated entity and describes it instead as an interconnected, rhizomatic island bridge, as a meta-archipelago, without boundaries or center:

“This is again because the Caribbean is not a common archipelago, but a meta-archipelago [...], and as a meta-archipelago is has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center. [...] If someone needed a visual explanation, a graphic pictures of what the Caribbean is, I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way, the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe’s firmament, that sketches in an ‘other’ shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness; change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter.” (ibid.: 4)

Martinican writer Edouard Glissant (1989) developed in the 1960s his literary and political concept of *Antillanité* (Caribbeanness), which also describes the Caribbean experience by accentuating a shared rhizomatic experience of multiple relationships. *Antillanité* intended to disassociate the regional identity from *Négritude*’s search for universal African, pre-colonial cultural roots:

“Die Antillanité markiert einen epistemologischen Bruch mit der Négritude, denn sie bemüht sich nicht mehr um territoriale Wurzeln, und wenn schon Wurzeln, dann Luftwurzeln bzw. ‚Flugwurzeln‘ oder submarine Wurzeln, dich sich in einem offenen, ephemeren Raum bewegen. [...] Glissants Ansatz der Antillanité [...] stellt der Césaire’schen Exteriorität eine Interiorisierung der antillanischen Realität gegenüber, welche sich in einem amalgamen, synkretistischen Kultur zeigt. [...] Denn weder die Assimilation (an die Kultur der Kolonisierer) noch der Rückzug zur afrikanischen Ausgangskultur sind realisierbar. [...] Ziel der Antillanité ist es, die unterschiedlichen Geschichten der Antillen in einen Zusammenhang zu bringen, den karibischen Kontext als Zentrum zu setzen und eine über die frankophonen Antillen hinausgehende karibische Föderation, also einen unabhängigen politischen Raum zu gründen, der sich an der konkreten insulären Realität orientieren und aus der euro-amerikanischen Abhängigkeit hinausführen soll.” (Ueckmann 2014: 116-117)

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8 My translation from the German original: “Ist dies möglicherweise ein Nebenprodukt des Lebens auf einer Insel, die nur begrenzt der Außenwelt ausgesetzt ist?”

Michelle Stephenson follows Glissant's and Benítez-Rojo's approaches and develops an archipelagic, maritime approach for Caribbean studies, which understands the Caribbean Sea as a connector of different territories rather than a 'sea water curtain' or isolator:

"A more maritime approach to Caribbean studies focuses in a more material way on the geofom of the island itself, on the fact that what distinguishes islands is that they are surrounded by water. For some this signifies the island's solitariness and singularity. What the sea also signifies, however, is the island's inescapable, littoral connectivity to everywhere else and, certainly, to other islands. [...] This approach would begin from and stay with the geography of the isles, the relationships between lands and sea, even as it notes the influences of that geography on those aspects – peoples, cultures, ideas – of the Caribbean that have traveled to far-flung, diasporic, metropolitan, and continental spaces. [...] It is the archipelago, as opposed to the island, that offers a vision of bridged spaces rather than closed territorial boundaries. [...] Caribbean insularity emerges not as parochial, fixed, and self-enclosed but rather as a crucial component of a terraqueous planet whose land- and water-spaces are connected by a fundamentally archipelagic logic. The island becomes a rim opening the sea, in a rhythm and tension between movement and settlement, plantation colony and ship, island and mainland, land and water." (Stephenson 2013: 11-12)

Against this background, curator Tumelo Mosaka explains that the title for his exhibition *Infinite Island* (2007) at the *Brooklyn Museum* in New York "was invoked to suggest a Caribbean space defined by its possibilities rather than its boundaries" (2007: 19). To increase pan-Caribbean links between different artists and institutions in the archipelagic region, rejecting artistic isolation and perceptions of 'insular backwardness' is a central, frequently-debated endeavor for many contemporary art platforms located in the Caribbean: from several biennales taking place in the region, like the first Havana biennales in the 1980s and the 1st Biennale *Internationale d'Art Contemporain* in Martinique in 2012, to the academic journal *Small Axe*, Holly Bynoe's *ARC magazine* launched in 2013, to Barbara Prézeau Stephenson's *Le Forum Transcultural d'Art Contemporain* taking place in Port-au-Prince since 2001 and several other residency programs by artist-run initiatives like *Fresh Milk* in Barbados, *Alice Yard* in Trinidad, or *Ateliers '89* in Aruba and, in a diasporic sense, also Alanna Lockward's performance art festival *Be.Bop: Black Europe Body Politics* in Berlin.<sup>9</sup> The problematic im-

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9 These pan-Caribbean, artistic networks often seem to group themselves along traditional linguistic lines of Spanish-speaking, French-speaking, English-speaking, and

age of islands as ‘isolated places frozen in time’ shapes the larger perception of Caribbean artists as equally isolated, anachronistic, and behind the times. Art historian Leon Wainwright (2011) argues in his study *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* that the aspect of time is crucial for understanding why art history has failed to consider the Caribbean as a theme of scholarly interest:

“With historicism comes the accusation of anachronism that has been an impediment to many Caribbean artists’ efforts to claim their place as artists. They have been forced to negotiate the view that their art was ‘behind the times’, the challenge of being regarded as somehow lagging behind the newest developments in the art of their day. Indeed, anachronism became the defining qualification most attached to artists of the Caribbean and its diaspora in Britain by art critics and art historians during the post-war period. [...] But no matter how deeply artists of the Caribbean and its diaspora would infiltrate those spaces, it was the politics of time that provided the myth of them as outsiders and mere mimics of European art, only ever in a process of ‘catching up’ with a heritage that was not theirs.” (2011: 4-5)

Since the 1990s, several survey exhibitions on contemporary Caribbean art in Europe and the United States have been eager to correct this imbalance by showing that Caribbean islands have indeed vibrant, contemporary artistic scenes and

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Dutch-speaking islands in the region. Art professionals working in Haiti complained to me on several occasions that they often feel unnoticed by wider pan-Caribbean processes of network building, especially when it comes to English-speaking art networks. Many pan-Caribbean art infrastructures are also shaped by funding opportunities and access to resources which are particularly scarce in Haiti. Museums in the United States and Europe often offer possibilities for pan-Caribbean exchanges in survey shows about contemporary Caribbean art. Huge and expensive survey shows like the ones in ‘Euro-U.S. American’ art institutions unfortunately cannot be made possible within many museums in the Caribbean (biennales are the exception). Some islands which are overseas departments also have easier access to European resources than other independent island nations. I think it is necessary for art historians to deconstruct rhetorical claims to pan-Caribbeanness and to review which artists are capable to participate in these intra-regional dialogues and who is left out from the process of pan-Caribbean network building. In brief, who are the gatekeepers of these pan-Caribbean contemporary art networks within the region and can we find in these networks a similar regional hierarchy like the one described by Arelene Dávila for the wider Latin American context?

complex art histories.<sup>10</sup> Nancy Hoffman's survey exhibition *Who More Sci Fi Than Us?* (2012) at *Kunsthall KAdE* in Amersfoort is maybe the most literal response to the process of exclusion of Caribbean artists through temporal asymmetric oppositions.<sup>11</sup> The title implies that it is not enough to be contemporary; Caribbean artists have to become futuristic in order to escape their former temporal asymmetrical marginalization.

Most of these contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions correspond to a post-colonial critique of the 1990s, which does not follow the postmodern pluralism for art proposed by former exhibitions like Hubert Martin's *Les Magiciens de la Terre* or Robert Farris Thompson's *Face of the Gods* in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>12</sup> *Les Magiciens de la Terre* was strongly critiqued by postcolonial art

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10 Here is a selection of the most important survey shows of Caribbean art in Europe and the United States since the 1990s: *Karibische Kunst Heute* (1994) documenta Halle Kassel, *Caribbean Vision* (1996) Miami Centre of Fine Arts in Florida, *Caribe: Exclución, Fragmentación y Paraíso* (1998) Casa de América in Madrid, *Island Nations* (2005) RISD Museum of Art in Providence, *Infinite Island. Contemporary Caribbean Art* (2007) Brooklyn Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Kréyol Factory* (2009) Grande Halle de La Villette in Paris, *Rockstone & Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art* (2009) Real Art Ways in Hartford, *Wrestling with the Image. Caribbean Interventions* (2011) Art Museum of the Americas in Washington, *Who More Sci Fi Than Us* (2012) *Kunsthall KadE* in Amersfoort, *Caribbean: Crossroads of the Worlds* (2012) El Museo del Barrio/Studio Museum Harlem/ Queens Museum of Art in New York, among others.

11 Nancy Hoffmann describes her title in the exhibition catalogue thus: "How could I capture the common denominator in a title without using the heavily burdened word 'Caribbean'? I remember, it was at Kingston Airport where I bought my first copy of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by the Dominican writer and Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Diaz. I devoured it on the airplane. On page 22, in a note, explaining why Oscar Wao had such a fascination of the science fiction genre, he stated exactly what I had always felt: 'It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?).' I couldn't have said it any better." (2012: 11)

12 Art historian Krista Thompson (2011) also describes how the Caribbean and the African diaspora has become a 'master symbol' representing post-colonial condition in general terms in the 1980s and 1990s for people, objects, cultures, and temporalities mixed or/and in motion: "There is not space here to examine what is lost and gained when the diasporic experience, often so informed by social marginalization, becomes a central paradigm that the broader society claims. Such pronouncements of and celebrations of syncretism, it is crucial to note, often continue to be enmeshed in specific

professionals as a “mistaken division between central and peripheral modernities—the latter perceived as something exotic, archaic, or antimodern” (O’Neill 2012: 59). Or, in Rasheed Araeen’s words: “The important point is that other cultures have already aspired to modernity, and as a result have produced modern works of art.” (1989: 11) O’Neill describes this development as a shift from postmodern pluralism to postcoloniality by juxtaposing two paradigmatic exhibition modalities developed by the two curators Jean Martin Hubert and Okwui Enwezor respectively:

“In distinguishing the curatorial approach of ‘Les Magiciens de la Terre’ from later exhibitions, it is important to consider representations of ‘otherness’. The former applied the rhetoric of postmodernist ‘pluralism’ of the time, while the later approaches of Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Catherine David, Charles Esche, Okwui Enwezor, Ivo Mesquita, and Gilane Tawadros could be defined as postcolonial. [...] For Foster, pluralism was a sham, inasmuch as it posited a celebration of difference within popular, consumer culture, while allowing increased networks, spaces, and objects for capitalization and cultural consumption. Foster was arguing against the idea that postmodernism was simply productive, against its celebration as a breakdown of distinction between high and low cultures. On the one hand, the curatorial gesture could be seen as opening up a radical prospect, through an acknowledgment of the lack of visibility of otherness; on the other hand, it could be seen as ultimately reifying certain power relations, by failing to articulate a political context that would make more meaningful the various forms of otherness alluded to within the exhibition.” (O’Neill 2012: 57)

And he goes on to explain that for Enwezor, on the other hand,

“[...] postcolonialism is not a discourse of distinction between elsewhere and here, but an entirely new way of reading the global entanglement as being postcolonial in its very nature – it is a starting point rather than an end point from which to consider our current global condition. Thus, the ‘postcolonial’ constellation’ is seen as a vast range of artistic practices that expand the definition of what constitutes contemporary culture. For Enwezor, the main point of historical intersection within this array of practices is their alignment in opposition to the ‘hegemonic imperatives of imperial discourse’.” (ibid.: 59)

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national, social, and racialized debates about difference. Some parties in hailing creolization and cultural blending may in fact be hostile to the idea of African diasporic cultures.” (ibid.: 20)

When it comes to Haiti, Gerald Alexis described in the mid-1990s that the foreign art market still tended to perpetuate the old idea that Haiti was the only country in the world whose artistic output is represented by works of ‘naïve painters’<sup>13</sup> without any academic training (Alexis 1995: 62). Alexis attributes this to the fact that in contrast to Cuba, for example, where the international art scene was inaugurated by a group of academically trained ‘avant-garde’ artists, in Haiti this happened with the presentation of so-called ‘primitive’ painters. Critics and collectors have celebrated these painters for their ‘authenticity’ and ‘pre-modern primitivism close to nature’ while modernist Haitian artists have been criticized as ‘derivative’ for their lack of distinctiveness from supposedly European art traditions (Alexis 1995: 62). Artists from the ‘naïve’ painting tradition have been presented hyper-visibly in ‘Euro-U.S. American’ museums since the 1950s while modernist Haitian artists, like abstract painter Lucien Price, for example, have been considered derivative of a ‘Euro-U.S. American’ tradition; their art was understood as a rejection of their Haitian culture and identity (Alexis 2012: 120). Art historian Veerle Poupeye describes similar tendencies for the wider Caribbean context:

“Caribbean art has developed in a polemical context and debate about its ‘Caribbeanness’ has played an integral part. It is a common notion, for instance, that authenticity in Caribbean art is measured by its independence from the Western artistic canons. This perspective has been a factor in the international success of ‘primitive’ Caribbean art and has raised questions about cultural and even racial stereotyping. Caribbean intellectuals have also questioned the metropolitan Western influences in modern Caribbean art which many see as a product of cultural imperialism.” (Poupeye 1998: 10)

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13 I use the term ‘Naïve Art’ or ‘naïve painting tradition’ only with inverted commas to distance myself from the problematic connotations that come along with the name of this Haitian art genre. I understand the term ‘naïve’ in a similar historical trajectory like the term primitive art. Haitian painters have been marked through this term as archaic, pre-modern, intuitive, primitive, or more authentic in order to produce the progressiveness of ‘Western’ modern art traditions. Shelly Errington (1998) describes in her study *The Death Of Authentic Primitive Art* the historical process of how ‘Primitive Art’ from 1935 till 1985 was institutionalized as opposed to or as a starting point for European modernity: “Like the history of art history itself, the discourse of ‘authenticity’ and ‘the primitive’ were made possible by the metanarrative of progress. The idea of progress, in turn, rests on the notion of linear time, which took its modern form during the course of the 19th century.” (ibid.: 5)

This dominant excitement for artists from lower socio-economic strata from the Caribbean region who proved, through their artistic practices, to be particularly ‘non-Western’ and thus ‘more authentic’ lasted till the 1990s in the ‘Euro-U.S. American’ art world. Jean Hubert Martin’s *Le Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition is a good example of how the Caribbean region is presented solely by works of *vodou*-inspired *feroniers* (iron sculptors) from the *Kwadebouke* (*Croix-des-Bouquets*) artist community in Haiti in the context of contemporary art (besides Cuban artist and *palero* José Bedía, whose conceptual, academically-trained art practice is rooted in the Afro-Caribbean spirituality of *Palo Monte Mayombe*, see Bettelheim 2001: 44). I had many conversations with expats in Haiti, who still enthusiastically celebrate Haiti’s current art scene for being simply less ‘Westernized’, ‘modern’, and ‘much more authentically African’ than many other ‘Europeanized’ and thus supposedly ‘spoilt’ artists from the Caribbean region, who are described as rejecting their cultural heritage and Blackness. It is of no particular concern for this continuing search for Haitian ‘authenticity’ that the ‘naïve’ painting tradition emerged in fact as an inter-*klas* and transnational exchange with a network of U.S. American supporters like DeWitt Peters in a time when tourism increased on the island (Richman 2008: 211). Art historian Carlo A. Célius (2016) argues more precisely that the primitivist paradigm for Haitian art originated as an ontological judgement by the Cuban art critic José Gómez Sicre in 1945. He associated a painting by artist Philomé Obin with a previously labelled artistic style as naïve and non-modern and created the naïve art-modern art dichotomy:

“The works were labelled naïve art, a genre that had already been established by the primitivist current in its later nineteenth-century European avant-garde formulation. It is in fact through the modernist invention of primitive alterity that naïve art emerges and that we are better able to understand the naïve art-modern art dichotomy. Defined as the art of the ‘Other’ by the so-called modern art that invented it, naïve art was necessarily excluded from modernity. Thus it is the discursive self-definition of the modern as such that excludes an otherness (‘othernesses’) that is also created and is constitutive of it. In this respect, naïve art participates in modernist movements.” (Célius 2016: 124-125)

Therefore, it is important to ask if the interest in Haitian art today is still influenced by the racist and simplifying paradigm described by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam: “If you are too unlike us, you are inferior; if you are too like us, you are no longer a ‘real’ black or Indian or Asian. Racism thus juggles two complementary procedures: the denial of difference and the denial of sameness.” (Stam and Shohat 1994: 24)

## DE-EXOTICIZING PARADIGMS

When I asked curator, artists, and art historian Barbara Prézeau Stephenson if she considered herself to be a Caribbean artist, she rejected this label and responded with exasperation: “No, David, I’m not waking up every morning thinking about a coconut tree.” Bahamian, London-based artist Blue Curry responded in an interview to the question if he feels burdened by his decision to use an aesthetic vocabulary associated with the Caribbean region in his art with the following answer:

“I hate being saddled with all of the superficial associations of the tourist destination just because the Caribbean can’t be understood in terms of critical thinking or contemporary art. I can’t tell you how many conversations I thought I was having about work which have ended as nothing more than fond recollections of sipping piña coladas while watching the sunset on a beach. Further, when you can be identified closely with a place on the periphery of the bigger art world, you’re considered an ‘international artist’, a pejorative term which is a ghetto to be avoided. If it’s not all of that to contend with, then there will be someone haranguing you about colonialism or the Diaspora and expecting that you take a position, because that is still the tired theory which is pulled out of the bag to interpret art production in the region. Identity politics are of no interest to me, and I don’t have to answer to them. I’m a visual artist born in the Caribbean who works with the image of that place, but I don’t claim to be making work representative of it, nor would I want it to be the main thing to define my practice.” (Curry, quoted in Archer 2016)

Most contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions follow a similar de-exoticizing paradigm and deconstruct prejudicial images of the Caribbean region produced through tropicalizing tourist gazes and racism.<sup>14</sup> Curator Tatiana Flores argues that Caribbean artists are “particularly sensitive to stereotypes, and much of their work calls attention to images as illusory and insufficient” (2011: 19). Artist and

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14 Art historian Krista Thompson describes in her study *An Eye for the Tropics* the term tropicalization or tropicality as “the complex visual systems through which the islands were imaged for tourist consumption and the social and political implications of the representations on actual physical space on the islands and their inhabitants. More specifically, tropicalization delineates how certain ideals and expectations of the tropics informed the creation of place-images in some Anglophone Caribbean islands. It characterizes how, despite the geological diversity within ‘the tropics’ and even in a single Caribbean island, a very particular concept of what a tropical Caribbean island should look like developed in the visual economies of tourism.” (2006: 5)

curator Christopher Cozier explains that the artworks selected for his survey exhibition *Wrestling with the Image* “are often in contest with a much longer history of distorted representations that continue to be internally and externally manufactured” (2011: 7). He goes on to explain,

“In a place like the Caribbean, we cannot take the agency of portraiture for granted, in the aftermath of a much longer history of topographical and anthropological representations. The subject position—the role of the subject—within the frame or field of pictorial representation is highly contested. Standard regional historical narratives of the Caribbean recount or register developmental shifts from persons being privately owned property—indentured workers and colonial subjects—to being citizens—of a republic, for example. But in the pictorial domain, we are still anthropological, cultural, national, ethnic or electoral commodities and signifiers. We remain labeled but nameless images. The moment of encounter and of exchange is what is at stake. The question is whether the purpose for taking the image shifts to real portraiture and not simply image-capture, in the worst sense of the term, leaving us as subjected signs of ourselves, in a kind of cultural doppelgängering that disturbingly reminds us of our traditional role within a visual territory not exclusively of our own making, or coyly performed.” (ibid.: 9-10)

Rejecting or reclaiming contested, prejudicial images of the Caribbean region is a central curatorial framework to present contemporary Caribbean artists in survey shows. Marta Fernandez Campa describes how *Wrestling with the Image* “often reveals an aesthetics that [...] always strategically resists categorizations and cultural reductionism. As viewers, our ability to interpret or ‘read’ artwork is constantly being challenged, that is, we are challenged to (re)consider our own perceptions, mostly although not exclusively, in regard to the Caribbean and its imagery.” (2012: 2) And Jerry Philogene highlights positively in her review of the same exhibition that “[...] brightly coloured flora and fauna, ganja-smoking Rasta men, picturesque market women, or affected vaudou imagery” (2011) were entirely absent. Many Caribbean art exhibitions also seem to counter the former desire for a Caribbean alterity with their choices of media: video art, installation art, photography, and especially conceptual art have become the dominant language of most of these exhibitions in order to reject distorted ideas of Caribbean backwardness. Many of these contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions seem to follow Terry Smith’s definition for contemporary art: “Contemporary Art is the institutionalized network through which the art of today presents itself to itself and to its interested audiences all over the world [...]. Contemporary Art practice is saturated with deep, detailed—but not always (or even often) systematic—knowledge of art history.” (Smith 2009: 109)

Director of the *National Art Gallery of the Bahamas*, Amanda Coulson, describes the general misconceptions people associate with art from the Caribbean with the following, telling juxtaposition:

“How can there be critical thinking? Conceptual art? Isn’t it all ‘tourist’ or ‘native/naïve’ art? This rather condescending assumption is, however, something we are largely responsible for perpetuating ourselves due to what is close to idolatry of our massive tourism industry, which leads to our own self-stereotyping. Generally, the images that the Bahamas—and much of the Caribbean region—tends to transmit to the world confirms this. Maurizio Cattelan’s Caribbean Biennale, which offered ‘ten chosen artists a one-week vacation on the enchanting island of St. Kitts, with no art and no work to do’ really didn’t help much and was, for a person of Caribbean descent, pretty offensive, because where else in the world do you, as a rule, sit around all day under a palm tree getting drunk and being nonproductive, right? [...] Again, I underscore that we ourselves are complicit in perpetuating this image, so I don’t blame the non-‘Belongers.’ One curator, walking out of Tavares Strachan’s Bahamian Pavilion in Venice last year said to me, very innocently, ‘Wow, that was surprising. It was so conceptual...’ and I just had to reply, ‘Yes, it really is surprising that we actually have concepts down there, isn’t it?’” (Coulson in Blatt 2014)

The genre conceptual art becomes a means to counter prejudicial depictions of the Caribbean region and also a means to prove the ability to ‘think critically’. But is critical thinking and ‘naïve art’, ‘native art’, or ‘tourist art’ really such a clear contradiction? Does Coulson’s argument need this delineation from ‘popular’ art traditions from the Caribbean region, which are mostly produced by artists from lower socio-economic strata who cannot afford academic training in art? Conceptual art is also not entirely innocent and detached from market demands: How does the interest and promotion of conceptual art relate, for example, to a particular class position and the global art market’s interest in conceptual art as one of its central commodities? We will see in the following chapters that the members and dropouts of *Atis Rezistans* emerged out of such a Caribbean tourist tradition and nonetheless developed a strong socio-critical approach for their artistic practices—precisely because they received opportunities to do so. These artists constantly navigate and try to escape narrow social, material, and intellectual confinements that occur when their artworks are merely perceived as craft and/or as ethnographic artifact.

Fig.2: *Assemblage Anbrase (Embrace)* by Getho J. Baptiste



Inscribing oneself into Caribbean aesthetic traditions is still a possibility as long as artworks are enwrapped in an academically-trained practice and critical discourse. Artworks by Ebony Patterson, Hew Locke, Maksaens Denis, Leasho Johnson, or Minia Biabiany illustrate how an ‘aesthetics of Caribbeaness’ within the field of contemporary Caribbean art can be produced by referencing aesthetic traditions from groups of lower socio-economic strata. Patterson’s work, for example, explores masculinity in Jamaican dancehall culture and is influenced by Haitian sequin art traditions like *drapo vodou* (*vodou* flags). Tatiana Flores comments: “For too long, the region has been subjected to stereotype, but it is encouraging that artists nevertheless choose to engage local subject matter—broadly understood—instead of retreating into a hermeticist visual language that would have them deny their surroundings and background altogether.” (Flores 2011: 25) These examples show that the de-exoticizing paradigm for contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions seems to have come with a catch for artists from lower socio-economic strata, who lose the status of being subjects of their own artistic practices as they become instead objects for Caribbean artists to investigate, appropriate, and be inspired by. ‘Subaltern’ Caribbean art traditions are often present in contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions only as a reference which is being appropriated by academically trained artists or as a written reference in exhibition catalogues. Therefore, the question arises if art scholars should start to discuss things like ‘inter-class cultural appropriation’ more critically by drawing on methodologies sensitive to intersectionality and an awareness of how class

inequalities continue to shape globalized art worlds. Are large-scale *vodou* flags created by Haitian artist Myrlande Constant, for example, less relevant to contemporary art than Patterson's socio-critical works?<sup>15</sup> I spoke about the lack of 'subaltern' positions in contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions since the late 1990s in an E-Mail interview with artist Charles Campbell. He explained:

"You won't find a lot of Jamaica's poor seeking recognition from the art world. Like everywhere else in the world the contemporary art world in the Caribbean is populated by educated, middle class people. – I'm not saying this isn't a problem, I'm saying that it isn't a distinctly Caribbean one. With a large proportion of poor it is of course more obvious in the Caribbean. There are all sorts of problems about who is and who isn't represented in the art world in Jamaica, but the idea that a more authentic art would come from the poor and uneducated is fraught with difficulty. Is that how we define ourselves or are defined by others?"

Bringing up the question about the inclusion of artworks by artists from lower socio-economic strata quickly raises fears of a former search for 'authentic Caribbeaness'. But can we take for granted that Caribbean artists from lower socio-economic strata really do not seek recognition (as well as symbolic and economic capital) from the art world, or are they simply not asked if they would like to have a seat at the same table? Writer and art critic Annie Paul points towards 'subaltern' visual art traditions in her article in the catalogue of the exhibition *Infinite Island*:

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15 I juxtapose Myrlande Constant so directly with Ebony Patterson not only because of aesthetic similarities in their artistic practices but also because both collaborated with each other at the 1st *Ghetto Biennale* in 2009 in Port-au-Prince. Patterson is very aware of the power imbalance in her art and her work can also be understood as a mechanism to draw attention to works by *drapo vodou* makers as a process of valorization. But the authorship for her project remains in her hands. Myron M. Beasley, co-curator of the 1st *Ghetto Biennale*, describes the project as follows: "Through a narrow hallway, the bedroom of a home became an installation by Jamaican artist Ebony Patterson. Known for juxtapositions which cast known Jamaican drug kings in female drag, she worked with two Haitian flag makers, Myrlande Constant and Roudy Azor, to produce five large sequined flags. While each was dedicated to a feminine spirit with the Vodou tradition, the icon was in fact depicted as a Haitian man. Altars at the base of each emblem presented offerings of food and artifacts associated with these spiritual beings." (Beasley 2012: 69)

“The Caribbean is striking in having produced subalterns, or members of the underclass, with distinctive and powerful voices of their own, whether expressed in painting and religion as in Haiti or music and dance as in Jamaica. Caribbean visual art cannot model itself on narrow modernist concepts and tropes without risking extinction. [...] Visual art has much to learn from this vibrant region where sound sculpts new, unimagined communities from people once treated as property.” (Paul 2007: 32)

Yet none of those artistic voices made it into the final object selection for display. What happened, after all, to Jamaica’s *Intuitive Artists* who were so heavily promoted and canonized by David Boxer and the *National Gallery of Jamaica* in 1980s (Poupeye 2007)? Or the quieter, barely researched Jamaican quilt and patchwork tradition produced by female family members?<sup>16</sup> Is every discussion about art forms from lower socio-economic strata instantly destined to return to a ‘primitivist’ search for authenticity produced by a white (and ethnographic) gaze?

Artist Mario Benjamin (2014) recounted to me that he had tried to pitch to curator Tumelo Mosaka the idea to include artworks by the members of *Atis Resistans* in the *Infinite Island* exhibition. According to Benjamin, Mosaka decided against the presentation of these particular art objects because he considered the recuperation of detritus into art and *vodou* imagery simply ‘too cliché’ and ‘too exoticizing’. The long-lasting exclusion of Caribbean artists in the ‘Western’ art canon through temporal, asymmetrical counter-concepts and the simultaneous representational power bestowed upon the Haitian ‘naïve’ tradition in the ‘West-

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16 Curator and former director of the *National Gallery of Jamaica*, Veerle Poupeye, describes her interest in Jamaican patchwork tradition as follows: “In November 2015, I conducted an interview with Jacqueline Bishop, coming out of our conversations about the ‘Explorations IV: Seven Women Artists’ exhibition at the National Gallery. That exhibition, among other things, asked why there is so little consideration, in the (art-)historical and material record, for the material creative production of Jamaican women, other than what has been consecrated as ‘fine art.’ And what has been so consecrated is constrained by narrow definitions of art and, closely related to that, a myopic, class-based view of who is an ‘artist.’ This somehow seems to affect women’s creative production more than men’s — almost all the artists who have been recognized as ‘Intuitives’ are men, for instance, in part because they more typically work in media that can be recuperated as ‘fine art’ such as ‘painting’ and ‘sculpture.’ Another reason is that women’s social roles have traditionally been defined differently across the class spectrum, with little space or recognition given to creative expressions of lower class women.” (Poupeye 2016a)

ern' imagination as more 'authentic' makes it understandably difficult today to include artists from lower socio-economic strata in contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions without falling back into the reductionist trap of postmodern pluralism. Wendy Asquith (2013-2014: 6), following Kobena Mercer, speaks of a hyper-visibility of Haitian popular artists in 'Western' art museums, but this hyper-visibility did not lead to an open integration into global art historical narratives. Instead, it marked these artists discursively through temporal asymmetrical oppositions as 'primitive', 'naïve', or simply 'unchanging' and thus placed them chronologically before the meta-narrative of progressive 'Euro-U.S. American' art history. Caribbean artists from all layers of society have suffered from this predicament and have had to prove again and again that they are legitimate global players in the artistic field by claiming their contemporaneity and their capacity to think critically.

The redundant exhibition modus of geographically defined survey shows for contemporary Caribbean art in 'Western' art museums is a constant reminder of this persisting problem of recognition outside a Caribbean "ethnic slot" (Puwar 2004: 70). We will see in chapter two that processes of inclusion, which often function within a logic of "conditional hospitality" (Ahmed 2012: 43), maintain the form of exclusion by articulating who is considered to be guest and who is host of these survey exhibitions. But instead of following Laymert Garcia dos Santos' suggestion that "contemporary art needs to recognize the intrinsic value of indigenous, ethnic art, not as a treasure of universal culture, nor as a legacy from bygone time, but as art that is also contemporary" (2009: 164), many curators for contemporary Caribbean art ignore Caribbean voices from lower socio-economic strata altogether. They do not want to risk sparking persisting resentments against a white gaze that is so intimately attached to the former historical presentation of these 'subaltern' art forms. A central task for my dissertation is to pursue the question if there is indeed a possibility to exhibit 'subaltern' artistic voices from the Caribbean region without falling back into primitivist and racist imaginaries that merely confirm existing prejudice.

I will describe in chapter three that the short timeframe for the presentation of postcolonial, academically trained artists from the Caribbean region in contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions in Europe and the United States through de-exoticizing paradigms has already produced a critical counter-response, which crystallizes in the emergence of the socially-engaged art festival called *Ghetto Biennale*. This art festival takes place within an informal neighborhood in Port-au-Prince in collaboration with the members of *Atis Rezistans*. I analyze in this book if this counter-response to contemporary Caribbean art exhibitions is a nostalgic return to postmodern pluralism as formulated in Jean Hubert Martin's ex-

hibition *Magiciens de la Terre* or, conversely, if it opens up new fruitful conversations alongside the intersectional vectors of race and class? Kim Dovey and Ross King argue that “[p]art of the potency of the image of the slum is that of a dystopic counter-image that cuts through the dream of modernity” (2012: 287). Similarly, it seems that the artworks by the members and dropouts of *Atis Rezistans* and the *Ghetto Biennale* function as a constant reminder in contemporary art institutions that global injustice and structural violence prevail. Curatorial debates around *Atis Rezistans* seem to ask insistently: what about the urban poor when it comes to the field of contemporary Caribbean art? Former terms like ‘authentic’, ‘pre-modern’, ‘primitive’ or ‘intuitive’ are replaced in written curatorial descriptions of the *Ghetto Biennale* by the politically charged Marxist term class and evoke new politics of deviance (Cathy J. Cohen 2004) in the field of contemporary art. The situation in Port-au-Prince shows a contemporary art world that enthusiastically promotes many artists from lower socio-economic strata seeking direct recognition from the globalized art world and claiming their contemporaneity. Institutions like *La Fondation AfricAmerica*, the *Ghetto Biennale*, and a network of commercial galleries specialized in the ‘naïve painting’ tradition promote a variety of artists from different sections of Haitian society.

## ART AS A POLITICS OF DEVIANCE?

Political scientist Cathy J. Cohen (2004) argues in her article *Deviance as Resistance* that scholarship about the politics of African Americans need to overcome a bias towards a politics that is not traditionally organized, declared, and respectable. Instead, she argues for a politics of deviance, which analyzes the agency and actions of those deemed ‘deviant’, those “under surveillance, those being policed, those engaged in disrespectable behavior. Missing from this understanding of Black politics is what Robin Kelley calls ‘a politics from below’” (ibid.: 32).

“Scholars, especially those interested in the evolving nature of Black politics, must take seriously the possibility that in the space created by deviant discourses and practice, especially in Black communities, a new radical politics of deviance could emerge. It might take the shape of a radical politics of the personal, embedded in more recognized Black counter publics, where the most marginal individuals in Black communities, with an eye on the state and other regulatory systems, act with the limited agency available to them to secure small levels of autonomy in their lives. [...] It just might be that after devoting so much of our energy to the unfulfilled promise of access through respectability, a politics of deviance, with a focus on the transformative potential found in deviant practice, might

be a more viable strategy for radically improving the lives and possibilities of those most vulnerable in Black communities.” (ibid.: 30)

Cohen calls for a new generation of scholars who concentrate on those marginal voices from Black communities, which many would prefer to see silenced and made invisible: “[o]nly by listening to their voices, trying to understand their motivations, and accurately centering their stories with all of its complexities in our work can we begin to understand and map the connection between deviant practice, defiant behavior, and political resistance” (2004: 33). Cohen’s argument also parallels Saidiya Hartman’s (2020) concept of waywardness as way to rethink what constitutes a radical Black tradition: What is considered a legitimate political action, what is considered respectable behavior, what exceeds the boundaries of normativity, and what fell from history because such behavior refuses to follow a politics of respectability and is deemed deviant? With the term waywardness, Hartman asks us to give more credit to those lived lives of everyday refusal as an “utopian longing and [a] promise of a future world” (ibid.: xv). Critical conversations about how politics of respectability have confined Black thought open up wider intersectional spaces for new solidarity. Both Hartman’s waywardness and Cohen’s politics of deviance help us to unfold those “silences within silences” (Trouillot 2015: 58) which were created by ignoring intra-group differences and peer-to-peer misunderstandings and violence within minority knowledge projects. Can we use Cohen’s and Hartman’s concepts in the context of a scholarship on art without reproducing longstanding racist fascinations about Afro-Caribbean art and culture? What would be at stake if we were indeed to include more artists who are “excluded from the middle-class march toward respectability” (Cohen 2004: 42) and actively refuse to be perceived as ‘respectable’? The consequences and stakes are a lot higher for Afro-Caribbean artists who constantly have to navigate their dehumanization, anti-black sentiments, and social structures of racist oppression than they are for a white, male scholar like myself asking these questions from a position of privilege. We will see in *Alleviative Objects* that academically trained artists and curators from Haiti are constantly brought into a position where they have to counter a credibility deficit and prove the legitimacy of their presence in ‘Western’ art institutions. Annie Paul (2003) has coined the term alter native to describe a double illegitimacy many contemporary Caribbean artists have to face in global, local, and glocal arenas.

“The alter natives are the illegitimate children of the nation who by virtue of differing race, class, gender, or sexual variables find themselves on the wrong side of nation stories

in opposition to the majority groups that assert ownership of the national or Caribbean space. Alter natives are a kind of internal refugee and suffer a double illegitimacy when they go abroad because their artistic practice is seen as elevated above or irrelevant to the realities of third-world countries by metropolitan critics. What, conceptual art in the periphery? Perish the thought. [...] The alter natives are natives without narratives, or perhaps those with unpopular narratives. Often their talent is recognized abroad before it is accepted at home.” (ibid.)

I also want to draw attention to the kind of emotional satisfaction that I have repeatedly encountered in conversations about my research with white colleagues and interlocutors, as soon as I brought up categories like ‘poverty’ and ‘voodoo’ in the specific context of visual art coming from the Caribbean region. *Atis Rezsitans* as a prolonged version of Haiti’s metaphorical status confirm anticipations. The artists are living extremely vulnerable lives, but we will see that they are at the same time quite powerful on a representational level. Ironically, conversations about *Atis Rezistans*’ artworks seem to make many white people feel comfortable in their identities and privileges because they confirm prejudicial ideas about what defines Afro-Caribbean art and culture. How can we disrupt usages of *Atis Rezistans* for the production of white progressive identities?

James Scott reminds us in his study *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* that “most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites” (1990: 136). Cultural anthropologist Elizabeth McAlister follows Scott in arguing: “Perhaps argument about whether traditional culture is conservative or progressive, characterized by resistance or accommodation, misses the point. The relevant question may be: How does popular culture help people survive?” (McAlister 2002: 162) In contrast to McAlister’s and Scott’s perspectives, the members of *Atis Rezistans* are directly produced and celebrated in curatorial descriptions as a ‘subaltern’ form of decolonial resistance ‘from below’. Following McAlister’s survivalist paradigm for popular Haitian art or, in Cohens words, the decision “to make the best out of very limited life options” (Cohen 2004: 40), I will discuss how the presentation of artists from lower socio-economic strata has to come along with an awareness of specific sets of problems. We will see in this book that the social inter-*klas* hierarchies, which artists and objects from ‘subaltern’ milieus encounter on their journeys to Europe and the United States, are not dismantled by good intentions alone, by a support network of white curators, or by generously showing artworks within institutionalized frameworks. I will retrace how many curators fail to reflect on their own hierarchical position of power in inter-

*klas* interactions with members of *Atis Rezistans*, and how these hierarchies in turn influence artworks and object selections for exhibitions. Granting artists from ‘subaltern’ communities new visibility in art museums does not automatically diminish social hierarchies—let alone abolish them—and does not guarantee that those artists are by the same token freely and self-reflexively articulating critical agency through their artworks. With the concept of infrapolitics, Scott (1990: 183) describes disguised forms of unobtrusive resistance which emerge in social situations of severe hierarchical difference. Thus, a central question for my study will be to discuss how infrapolitics influence art productions as well as personal inter-*klas* relationships between artists, curators, and scholars. Cohen also points out that,

“many of the acts labeled resistance by scholars of oppositional politics have not been attempts at resistance at all, but instead the struggle of those most marginal to maintain or regain some agency in their lives as they try to secure such human rewards as pleasure, fun, and autonomy. In no way is this statement meant to negate the political potential to be found in such behavior. It does underscore, however, my stance that the work marginal people pursue to find and protect some form of autonomy is not inherently politicized work and the steps leading from autonomy to resistance must be detailed and not assumed. We must begin to delineate the conditions under which transgressive behavior becomes transformative and deviant practice is transformed into politicized resistance.” (Cohen 2004: 38)

I will show that manipulating the desires and anticipations of this visiting group from abroad is a wayward infrapolitics, which can help Haitian artists to produce new inter-*klas* loyalties, better access to resources, and thus more autonomy in their lives. Artists who have to use art as a survival strategy will sometimes rely on seduction, trickery, and ‘auto-orientalist’ mechanisms to sell their artworks in hierarchical dialogues. Thus, these artists can become mirrors for a racialized common sense of white curators, artists, and tourists as well as their particular research or touristic agendas. Some of the artists I came to know in Haiti do not see their artistic practice as a process of direct political action or as a genuine artistic self-expression but as a quick mechanism to gain at least a little bit of money to eat something in the evening.

However, I do not want to produce a generalizing account in this book: of course, not all artists from lower socio-economic strata are unwilling to deconstruct prejudicial images through their art. We will hear many different voices which actively, and often angrily, resist prejudice and challenge the racialized common sense brought into the *Gran Ri* neighborhood by their network of sup-

porters. It is important to keep in mind that developing enough self-confidence in hierarchical inter-*klas* relationships to articulate critique against distorted images is a difficult task, especially if many of these images are not coming from clearly degrading but also from a rather romanticizing trajectory of metaphorical anticipations about Haiti. Is a taxing endeavor for the members of *Atis Rezistans* to acquire self-confidence in an intimidating structure of power (e.g. the global art world), which often excludes Haitian artists on the basis of skin color, gender, class position, and nationality or by marking them “temporal guest of someone else’s home” (Ahmed 2012: 43).<sup>17</sup> Everyone who does not fit this particular somatic norm (white, male, straight, cis-gendered, able-bodied, middle or upper-class) is read as a space invader (Puwar 2004) and is policed for being legitimately present in these social and professional environments. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ontological complicity, Puwar explains how different actors can experience social spaces differently with regard to their social disposition and learned habitus.

“We all participate in the games of our field. However, some people, due to their social trajectory—most especially their class background and scholastic training—are much more inclined to have a sense of the game, as well as the ability to play it. Their social trajectories have immersed them in a habitus that is ‘immediately adjusted to the immanent demands of the game’. As Bourdieu aptly puts it, ‘they merely need to be what they are in order to be what they have to be.’ [...] There are also degrees to which there is ontological complicity. Class is a crucial differentiator, and so are ‘race’ and gender. Race, class and gender don’t simply interact with each other. They can cancel each other out, and, in fact, one can compensate for the others. For instance, women who enter predominantly male environments with an élite familial or scholastic background will be inclined to have a habitus that allows for a greater degree of ontological complicity than those who have not had the same social trajectory. [...] Similarly, those racialized minorities who have had an élite background will have a habitus that is much more in keeping with the demands of the field than those who have not been immersed in this environment.” (ibid.: 126-127)

Puwar goes on to describe that ontological complicity often leads to ontological denial for people who are used to benefit from this particular structure of power: “Those [...] whose habitus is immediately adjusted to the demands of the field, do not feel the weight of the water, and hence they do not see the tacit normativity of their own specific habitus, which is able to pass as neutral and universal.”

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17 This phrase refers to Ahmed’s concept of conditional hospitality in social processes of inclusion, to which I return in more detail in chapter two.

(ibid.: 131) Insecurities and the lack of self-esteem are intimately linked to these social preconditions and to the capacity to relate to the construction of the somatic norm of straight, cis-gendered, white, middle and upper-class maleness. How can you become successful in the artistic globalized milieu if you are not the somatic norm and lack access to capital? How is success in the globalized art world even defined by the members of *Atis Rezistans*?

We will see in chapter two that a framework of being socio-economically and culturally other is probably the easiest possibility for members of *Atis Rezistans* to move into social ‘high art’ spaces without producing irritation and discomfort for others and themselves. Claiming to be only a temporal guest of someone else’s home, for example through strong emphases on cultural and socio-economic difference, produces conditions for temporal hospitality, but it also makes sure that the artists are perceived to be not at home. A colonial logic unfolds that recentralizes white authority and inscribes Black artists into a white pedagogy (Hartman 2020) in order to create new benign self-images. I will follow Campbell’s earlier remark as a central guideline for my analysis in the following chapters and ask repeatedly: Who is really capable to define whom, when it comes to the inclusion of artworks produced by the urban poor within hierarchical infrastructures of power in the artistic milieu? Who is speaking for whom, when it comes to inter-*klas* and inter-racial conversations in the artistic milieu? How do disguised infrapolitics and the racialized common sense influence the art practice of *Atis Rezistans* and the relationships with their support network, which often seems to be in ontological denial about their own persisting hierarchical position vis-à-vis members of *Atis Rezistans*?

While societies often operate with processes of aggressive assimilation in their engagement with cultural difference, the art world in commodified societies developed in contrast a “disarmingly friendly tolerance” (Ngai 2005: 345) for cultural difference—a tolerance which Puwar has called “an almost benevolent imperialism” (2004: 70) and Olu Oguibe a “Western obsession with and insistence on difference” (2004: xiv-xv). Graham Huggan (2001) also describes in his study *The Post-Colonial Exotic* how marginality is constantly packaged and reified into easily consumable exoticisms and thereby deprived of any subversive content.

“Exoticism effectively hides the power relations behind these labels, allowing the dominant culture to attribute value to the margins while continuing to define them in its own self privileging terms. What is more, the value it ascribes is predominantly aesthetic: marginality is deprived of its subversive implications by being rerouted into safe assertions of a fetishized cultural difference.” (ibid.: 24)

Thus, drawing on cultural theorist Nelly Richards (1994: 263), I argue in the course of this book that it is not enough to occasionally present objects from marginalized communities in exhibition displays. Instead, it is necessary to go further and ask: To what degree has the heterologous recuperation of the marginal become anything more than a declarative gesture? In brief, a principle guideline for my research is to show that it is crucial for art museums and curators to start changing the “terms of conversation, not just the content” (Mignolo 2011: 225).

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter one retraces how discussions about social marginality and class oppression in the art world can become a mechanism to produce epistemic marginalization for Haitian curators, and thereby center and authenticate the work of white curators and scholars in the discourse about contemporary art from Haiti. Despite inter-*klas* collaborations and complex artistic exchanges, the relationship between *Atis Rezistans* and the established contemporary art network in Port-au-Prince has been narrated by ‘Western’ curators, scholars, and artists in terms of friction, isolation, and rejection. I will show how mobile art actors produce narratives of *klas* friction, which claim that the local art scene in Port-au-Prince actively disapproves of *Atis Rezistans*, and thereby try to assume this supposedly lacking position of support. The artworks by the members of *Atis Rezistans* are often read as culturalized expressions of an ‘authentic’ marginalized, socio-economic reality. To be able tell a more nuanced story of *Atis Rezistans* as being deeply entangled in the larger contemporary artistic milieu of Port-au-Prince, I draw attention to (1) curator, artist, and art historian Barbara Prézeau Stephenson’s curatorial work in the early 2000s, and (2) to the installation art by artist Mario Benjamin. We will see how Benjamin’s artistic practice became a crucial factor for the emergence of *rekiperasyon* (recuperation art) in Port-au-Prince and the art spaces of the members of *Atis Rezistans*.

I will discuss in chapter two how Haitian artists from weak socio-economic strata are welcomed in ‘Euro-U.S. American’ institutions but mainly under self-serving interests. Sara Ahmed describes processes of inclusion of racialized bodies in white institutions as manifesting logic of conditional hospitality. In this logic, acts of inclusion maintain the form of exclusion. By combining Affect Theory with discourse analysis, I show how *vodou* is related to processes of inclusion through an inter-*klas* system of rewards, which relates to the racialized common sense and grants Haitian artists visibility. This sort of visibility, however, expresses the narrow confines of the ‘Western’ art system’s self-serving in-

terests to claim a position of benevolent tolerance. I argue in this chapter that by renouncing *vodou* in their artistic and curatorial practices, Haitian artists and curators intend to regain their representational autonomy after *vodou* has been used to culturalize and reify their artworks within “ethnic slots” (Puwar 2007: 40) as something easily consumable and readable for ‘Western’ audiences. *Vodou*, as an artistic inspiration within the *Gran Ri* neighborhood, is a *representational conflict*. But it is never presented as such in ‘Euro-U.S. American’ exhibitions, which solely focus on allegedly ‘authentic’, culturally intelligible dimensions within the art practices of *Atis Rezistans*. Curators tend to obscure their own influence on the history of these artworks through curatorial selection processes. I argue that by doing so, many curators write themselves out of the object histories and end up downplaying persisting inter-*klas* hierarchies.

In chapter three, I will analyze the politics of emotions produced by the socially-engaged art project called *Ghetto Biennale*. This art event takes place every two years in the neighborhood between *Grande Rue* and *Rue Magasin de L’Etat* in Port-au-Prince. It is curated by Leah Gordon and André Eugène and intends to reverse the logic of conditional hospitality by making the members of *Atis Rezistans* hosts of their own art event. I conceptualize the *Ghetto Biennale* as an artistic form of poverty tourism and as a curated social situation that is trying to bridge *klas* barriers. The art event is a challenging emotional endeavor which produces “politics of pity” (Luc Boltanski 2004: 21) as a coping mechanism through the direct interaction of (white) privilege with (Black) marginality. This challenging social situation often leads visiting artists to produce harmonious performances of inter-*klas* togetherness that risk silencing critical community voices behind a façade of excitement and heroic entitlement.

Chapter four analyzes how the infrastructure of power of the art community living at *Gran Ri* has been fundamentally altered since the *Ghetto Biennale* has started to take place in downtown Port-au-Prince. André Eugène could establish himself as the leader of the group and has developed a *gwo-nèg* (big man) system that draws many resources and attention to his *musée d’art*. The anger articulated by other artists living in the neighborhood, who refuse to follow the script of harmonious inter-*klas* togetherness, is frequently read not as a form of critical resistance against persisting forms of privilege, Whiteness, and inter-*klas* dependencies but is instead trivialized and banalized as envy or bitterness by visitors from abroad. Instead, I offer a reading which approaches these articulations of anger by highlighting their critical agency. The banalization of community antagonism and the inability to accept the critical agency contained in these emotions deflects responsibility away from the situation and increases the affective alienation of local artists from the *Ghetto Biennale*. In the second half of the

chapter, I shift the focus away from the founding fathers of the group and introduce two artists who have so far received less international attention: Getho Jean Baptiste and Alphonse Jean Jr. a.k.a. Papa Da.

Taking all previous chapters into account, I argue in chapter five that attempts to include cultural and socio-economic alterity in the form of reified and commodified art objects in highly policed exhibition environments are seldom a real threat to a given order, as their critical agency remains limited. *The Ghetto Biennale* exemplifies on the other hand that abandoning art institutions altogether and traveling to the ‘margins’ does not leave a racialized common sense behind, as it is not only manifest in institutions but also in our minds and feelings. I suggest that decolonial approaches have to start as projects of mental and material decolonization that seek to deconstruct precisely that racialized common sense in all of us. However, it is also necessary to go further and leave the field open for specialists of ‘originating communities’ to integrate their disobedient musealities in art institutions in order to dismantle the persisting colonial logic of museal systems, which often manifests in (1) a rhetoric of generous inclusion, and (2) in a progressive racist logic that performs white progressiveness rather than actively seeking to dismantle racist epistemologies. In conclusion, I explore the question if autonomous curations of Black artists from lower socio-economic strata can effectively contribute with their politics of deviance to a decolonial modification of the official chain of power in the globalized artistic milieu without being merely inscribed into white pedagogies as *alleviative objects* that perform emotional labor for white audiences. As conclusion and outlook, I argue that the artistic field should aspire to the creation of new sites for a radical reformulation of relationality and establish intersectional solidarities outside common social contracts.