

## A Moment to Celebrate? Art of the Caribbean at the Venice Biennale

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### Abstract

In recent years, the sporadic presence of various Caribbean national pavilions at the Venice Biennale – Jamaica (2001), Haiti (2011), Bahamas (2013), Grenada (2015, 2017, 2019), Antigua and Barbuda (2017, 2019), Dominican Republic (2019) – has on each occasion been almost unanimously applauded as marking some sort of moment of ‘arrival’ or ‘becoming’ for artists of the Caribbean, and for the local institutional structures and professionals that surround them. This article critically explores what the gains are of such a presence beyond the fleeting ‘Venice effect’, of mega-hyped exposure to international audiences, curators, gallerists and other market actors. The alleged benefits-for-all of contemporary cultural exchange, in an expanding globalizing field such as Venice, are by no means shared equally, and such discourses gloss over layers of uneven privilege embedded within the institution.

With much excitement, it was announced in 2015 that ‘in its 41st year of independence, Grenada will take a great leap forward and be seen for the first time on the largest and oldest world stage, la Biennale di Venezia’ (Mains 2015). These are the words of Asher Mains, one of the Grenadian artists showing work in the nation’s first official pavilion at the Venice Biennale. His declaration frames this event as an auspicious moment of national progress and historical import, which is perhaps no surprise given his own involvement with the exhibition. Mains was not the only figure to assess the significance of Grenada’s first outing at Venice in this way. In a catalogue essay reflecting on the Spice Isle’s inaugural presence at Venice, curator and historian Frederika Adam (2015) argued that ‘Grenada must respond to this historic first step to ensure [it] returns to Venice in 2017’. In making the case for why this repeat attendance was imperative, Adam gave her own definition of the much-vaunted ‘Venice effect’, with a focus on the institution’s particular benefits for debuting nations. Venice, she explained, ‘[has] the power to introduce international art status to emerging artists and [offers] much needed exposure for new countries wanting to develop art institutions and infrastructure at home’ (Adam 2015). Investment in Grenada’s presence at Venice, then, was heavily laden with layers of expectation – not just about the increased momentum it could offer to individual artistic careers, but also its wider catalytic effect on building capacity in the originating national context.

Such expressions of enthusiasm and expectation have not been limited to the participants or observers surrounding the Grenada pavilion of 2015. Beginning with Jamaica in 2001 through to Antigua and Barbuda in 2017, Mains’s and Adam’s accounts are strikingly echoed in the commentary accompanying a cluster of first-time national pavilions from various anglophone and francophone Caribbean nations. Across this same period, the Biennale has admitted an increasing number of national participants to its ranks drawn from outside the event’s traditional Eurocentric quorum. Year after year, the celebratory reactions of those newly initiated are matched only by the self-congratulatory announcements of the Biennale itself, which – speaking on account of its participants – has made ever-greater claims to embody an apparently increasing globality for the art world.

The purpose of this article is to interrogate such statements about debuting Caribbean participants, as well as the celebratory claims about what the Biennale has offered these artists. The following sections will consider what is occluded by the exuberant rhetoric of ‘new nations’ at Venice’s

premier art event, including historicized and localized perspectives on art of the Caribbean; the impact that local government pressures and economic agendas can have upon curatorial decisions; and less celebratory visions of the Biennale and its corollaries. Furthermore, the analysis interrogates the claims and the extent to which national Caribbean pavilions at the Venice Biennale are positioned to stimulate significant and lasting development of artistic careers, communities and arts infrastructure within the Caribbean region.

### **Questioning the Reach of the Vaunted Venice Effect**

In the mid-1990s, the Venice Biennale was attracting a woeful lack of hype and flattery. In a scathing review of the institution's 47th edition, held in 1997, curator Dan Cameron summarized the dismal state of affairs by declaring the institution 'moribund'. He announced, 'Venice is sinking [...] if the Biennale is any indication, it's disappearing faster than anyone suspected'. Qualifying this assessment, he stated that 'crowds have been shrinking, state money has been drying up, and the press has been screaming for blood' (1997: 118). Contributing to this sense of the decline and stagnation of Venice was the concurrent explosion of new or revived biennial and triennial events beginning to proliferate across the globe: in China (Taipei, 1992 and Shanghai 1996); Senegal (Dak'Art, 1990); the United Arab Emirates (Sharjah, 1993); South Korea (Gwangju, 1995); and elsewhere in Europe (Lyon, 1991 and Manifesta, 1996).<sup>1</sup> The Bienal de La Habana had appeared slightly earlier in the Cold War era (1984) and was set up as an explicit counterpoint to the Venice Biennale. Responding to the Italian institution's privileging of artists from First World nations, Cuba's Caribbean-based biennial rejected the national pavilion model and dedicated itself to promoting artists of the Global South, with its first edition focusing exclusively on championing the work of artists of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Somewhat surprisingly, despite these challenges, and the variety of international art events that have sprung up to rival Venice since the 1990s, twenty-first-century curators and critics of Caribbean art have continued to fete the Venetian institution as the essential access route to recognition outside of local contexts. Reflecting on Jamaica's national presence at the Venice Biennale in 2001, curator Catherine Amidon flips the logic that underwrote the founding of events such as the Bienal de La Habana. Venice, she argues, with its well-established links to 'mass media [...] and the art market [holds the] tools that non-Western countries need to assert their place in the international art world' (2004: 108). Rather than considering La Biennale as an exclusionary space that hinders artists of the Global South, in Amidon's interpretation the networks of exposure offered at Venice are indispensable to those nations and can actually enable them to claim their due in a globalized art world.

Going further still in praise of the elder Venetian institution, Frederika Adam (2015) suggested that Grenada taking part in La Biennale in 2015 signified 'the presence of "Grenadian art" in the international art world', and, additionally, that for the nation's practitioners 'a bridge has been formed with the contemporary art world'. Such responses indicate the pitfalls of effusive praise of La Biennale, which can unwittingly spill over into a discourse that reinforces old hierarchies and ultimately leaves artists of the Caribbean 'timed out' (Wainwright 2011). For Adam, Venice is no longer merely a tool – however gilded – by which Caribbean artists can claim due recognition, but a site of exhibition that actually endows these artists and their work with contemporaneity and international relevance.

Complimentary reviews of this kind have helped the Venice Biennale to recover its footing as the 'world's pre-eminent stage for new contemporary art' among broader audiences (The Economist

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<sup>1</sup> These newer events joined earlier challengers to Venice's art biennial crown: Sao Paulo (1951), Documenta (1955), and Istanbul and Sydney (1973).

2017). No longer ridiculed as a decaying relic moving towards the fringes of the art world, it has been more recently billed as 'hard to beat' in terms of audience, as it is purportedly where 'the entire industry convenes' (Velthuis 2011: 23). Indeed, far from being overwhelmed by the competition of what now amounts to well over 200 regularly recurring art events around the globe, the Venetian institution has managed to use its longevity as an advantage.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it has counterintuitively achieved this success not by abandoning what was once almost unanimously viewed as its anachronistic national pavilion structure, but by expanding it.

A quick look at the number of national participants at each edition of the Biennale certainly confirms that these have swelled impressively. In 1997, Venice recorded 57 national representations (Romano 1997). A decade later, in 2007, national participations had risen to 76 (Venetinside.com n.d.), while the 2017 edition logged 86 national participants and promoted first-time representations from Antigua and Barbuda, Kiribati and Nigeria (La Biennale 2017a). Yet, beyond the statistics, the question remains: what is the quality of the Venice Biennale's self-styled globality? The institution's president since 2008, Paolo Baratta (2014), claims for the Biennale an almost mystical oracular role in its apparent ability to enhance the insight and understanding of audiences vis-à-vis what he calls 'the global world'. Baratta explains 'The Venice Biennale is the place where you see what happens in the world through a better pair of lenses. This is the forum where the global world can be better analysed. This is the melting pot of shared knowledge' (Baratta 2014). While the irrepressible enthusiasm of Baratta's expression on the subject of the Biennale might be considered as predictable self-promotion, his assumption of the institution's universality of insight suggested by his phrasing's singularity of perspective is somewhat alarming.

Yet Baratta's arguments in favour of the Venice Biennale's strengths as a site for scrutiny of the contemporary global condition have been echoed in the work of scholars with greater critical distance. Art historian Caroline Jones (2017), for instance, examines the historical development of global, biennial-style art events, and argues that these can be productive spaces that force a critical reflection on the contemporary global condition (see also Meskimmon 2017). Held in 2015, the 56th edition of La Biennale, entitled *All the World's Futures*, certainly aspired to meet this challenge. That year, the artistic director who conceived this theme for the showpiece International Art Exhibition, housed in the Giardini's Central Pavilion, was the late Okwui Enwezor. With this exhibition Enwezor sought to offer a probing critique of late capitalism and the wreckage that was left in its wake worldwide; his execution of this appraisal met with mixed responses.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, with regard to art and artists from across the Caribbean region, Enwezor's central exhibition was regrettably taciturn on the whole. This minimal engagement with the Caribbean was a significant oversight given that scholars, such as historian Hilary Beckles, have long positioned the region – which has been at the heart of colonial economies based on centuries of plantation slavery – as a 'primordial site of Atlantic modernity' (1997: 777).<sup>4</sup> As such, regional experiences offer diverse and invaluable insight into the ways in which capitalism, from its earliest form – or 'with its clothes off', as Gilroy memorably referred to it – has wreaked havoc on the fabric of society with long-lasting effects (1993: 15). Nevertheless, Enwezor's edition grabbed headlines for its inclusion of 'the largest number of artists ever from Africa or of African descent', and for his own status as 'the first African artistic director of the Venice Biennale' (Adam 2015; McGroarty 2015: 14). These credentials, along with Enwezor's chosen theme, were unsurprisingly commended by Baratta (La Biennale 2015), but also by external critics such as Adam (2015), who argued that they had 'finally made the Biennale representative of a truly global art exhibition'.

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<sup>2</sup> The Biennial Foundation's directory lists 238 active art events that take place on a recurring basis around the globe (Biennial Foundation n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> See Genocchio (2015), Sharp Baskett (2016) and Montero Sabin (2016).

<sup>4</sup> See also Williams ([1944] 1994) and James ([1938] 2001).

Yet to speak in fetishistic tones of the Venice Biennale as a ‘truly global’ site of exhibition is to gloss over the layers of uneven privilege embedded in the structure of the event. Reviewing Enwezor’s edition of the Biennale, the critic J. J. Charlesworth (2015) argued that ‘the pluralist, utopian rhetoric of the Biennale’, which would have us believe it to be ‘a great united nations of art [...] really represents a bad case of disavowal’. It could certainly be argued that Venice’s premier art platform for the meeting of nations masks as much as it illuminates about the art world. Indeed, the experience of those involved in Caribbean national projects at the Venice Biennale points towards the ways in which the gleeful rhetoric of globality surrounding this institution depends upon an obscuring of global socio-economic differences (Huggan 1994).

### **Informal Networks and the Obstacle of ‘Geographically Packaged Pavilions’**

Reflecting on the national pavilion structure of the Venice Biennale, Baratta has continued to congratulate himself ‘that [he] did not listen to the regrettable considerations made in 1998 claiming that the exhibition with foreign pavilions was outmoded’, and so did not reform this element of the event (Baratta 2015). Yet artists and curators of the Caribbean have continually highlighted flaws in this system, which disadvantages practitioners in their region. As a member of the US-based curatorial team that staged the Jamaica pavilion at the 49th Biennale in 2001, Catherine Amidon said of ‘geographically packaged pavilions’ that ‘this mode of organization presents economic obstacles for developing nations, as well as stylistic and conceptual pressures’ (2004: 100). Indeed, La Biennale’s current system for foreign national participation is based on a historical model that was designed around working with the governments of wealthy nations in what is now known as the Global North. Historically all national pavilions at the Venice Biennale – beginning with Belgium in 1907 – were created as permanent, free-standing architectural structures erected by foreign governments and located within the Giardini della Biennale: the traditional ‘nucleus’ of activity at the event. Across the course of the twentieth century, nations with the political and economic capital to follow this model constructed pavilions, which continue to be administered by a branch of their national government or affiliated body, and funded by both public and private sponsors. In 2013, it was estimated that for nations with Giardini pavilions, such as Britain, Germany and Greece, the cost of participating in the Biennale that year was between €250,000 and €500,000 (Harris 2013). Baratta claims, ‘Year after year [the Biennale] moves forward [...] presenting an instant overview of today’s worldwide art production’ (Baratta 2015; see also Velthuis 2011: 24). Despite this, the permanent nature of the pavilions housed in the Giardini has the effect of keeping the event mired in the politics of the past, marked by ‘the inequalities of a colonialist world order’, an ‘ethos of nation building [...] fascist bellicosity’ and later Cold War politics (Robinson 2013–14: 4; see also Madra 2006: 526). The nations – 31 in total – that continue to populate the limited real estate of the Giardini are mainly European and thus ‘First World’, and reap the rewards of a privileged position at the event.

As demand for space has far outstripped the capacity of the Giardini in recent years, most foreign national pavilions have not followed the traditional model (La Biennale 2017b). A second tier of national participants – including high- and upper-middle income countries such as Mexico, South Africa, Turkey and the UAE – have secured what Baratta (2014) refers to as ‘semi-permanent’ pavilions on a long-term lease of around twenty years.<sup>5</sup> These pavilions are not free-standing structures but newly renovated spaces within a complex of erstwhile shipyards, armouries and warehouses, known collectively as the Arsenale. Budgets for nations taking up these spaces can easily match those of nations with spaces in the Giardini. Turkey’s total budget in 2013, for example, was estimated to be €450,000 (Harris 2013). Yet statistics show that in 2017, over a third of national pavilion projects – including those of Grenada and of Antigua and Barbuda – were realized outside of both these sites (the Giardini and the Arsenale), and were scattered around the city of

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<sup>5</sup> For more on country classifications used in this article, see United Nations (2018: 139–47).

Venice in palazzi and other venues. While such arrangements may enable national projects with more modest budgets to be executed, a significant upshot of being situated outside of the Biennale's premium locations is lower footfall. Even the most ardent art aficionados are exhausted by the time they have toured the Giardini and expanding Arsenale; journalist Tim Blanks (2017) advises, 'resign yourself to the fact that you can't possibly see every- thing on offer'. It follows that venues further afield, or even those nearby but in an obscure location, have the additional challenge of drawing visitors away from La Biennale's main centres.

Susan Mains, Grenada's commissioner, was not unduly thrilled with 'the 60,000 people who passed through our pavilion in 2017' at the Fondamenta Zattere, Dorsoduro, just a ten-minute vaporetto ride away from the Giardini (cited in Weber 2018). Yet this was just under a tenth of the estimated number of total visitors to the Biennale that year (La Biennale 2017b). The challenge was undoubtedly even greater for the Jamaican project staged in 2001, which was held at the Antico Oratorio San Filippo Neri, half an hour's walk away from the Giardini among the labyrinth of Venetian alleyways. Indeed, Amidon herself acknowledged 'the pavilion's obscure location [...] in the back streets of Venice [...] hard to find and far from the active zones around the Arsenale and Giardini' (2004: 102). For many postcolonial states, who – by no coincidence – are also generally classed as 'developing countries', the financial obstacles facing them are a serious impediment to equal participation in Venice, with far-reaching consequences: something La Biennale is yet to acknowledge.

For artists hailing from the Global South in particular, the challenges involved in appearing at Venice are imbricated in the wider issues of access to artistic training and support. Grenada-born artist Billy Gerard Frank asserts that 'there are not a lot of opportunities for artists in the Caribbean due to lack of resources and lack of art education [...] a lot of artists have to leave to get an art education as the government is not interested' (cited in Weber 2018). Frank speaks from experience as an artist of colour, whose practice developed in exile from his homeland, while living in London and New York: a story of migration that is echoed in the biographies of innumerable artists of the region. Frank's comments on the deficiencies of Grenadian arts infrastructure are particularly relevant to these discussions, as he offers them in the context of his representation of Grenada at the Venice Biennale in 2019. He revealed that he was personally 'responsible for funding his presentation' (cited in Weber 2018). That required him to raise \$70,000 in total, \$20,000 of which he sought to secure through online crowdfunding initiatives (Frank 2019). This situation, he conceded, is 'actually not uncommon [...] if you're not a well-known artist [...] selling for millions. However, he admitted, 'it's a higher level of stress to create the work and on top of that, raise the money' (cited in Weber 2018). Like many of the Caribbean's 'small island developing nations', as the United Nations categorizes them, Grenada does not yet have any major publicly funded art institutions, such as a national gallery, or formal art education beyond secondary school level (2018: 139–47). As a result, artists themselves are burdened with creating a network of informal initiatives to try and fill the gap. Here, artists – and prominently those from the Mains family – preside over Grenada Arts Council (a voluntary initiative supporting visual artists), lead Art School Greenz (a private post-secondary educational enterprise), and operate private galleries and exhibiting spaces.<sup>6</sup>

Artists from across the Caribbean have called attention to parallel situations in their own context. One such informal initiative is the no-frills, artist-led residency programme at Alice Yard in Trinidad (Hadchity 2019: 18–20). Following his own stint there in 2011, Jamaican-born artist Charles Campbell (2012) commented on the situation facing Caribbean artists. He, like Billy Gerard Frank, pointed to 'the impoverished state of our infrastructure, suffocating hierarchies of our institutions and Byzantine structure of our bureaucracies [which] conspire to frustrate us'. As a result, he asserted

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<sup>6</sup> See Grenada Arts Council (n.d.), Art School Greenz (n.d.) and Art and Soul Grenada (2019).

that 'it's the informal networks that we turn to when we need to get things done' (Campbell 2012). Throughout the region, where there has been little will or capacity to offer public funding to the arts, local private initiatives have sprung up, and it is out of these enterprises that the Caribbean region's national pavilions at the Venice Biennale have, by and large, materialized. Lamentably, the plutocratic nature of the private sphere can mean that even the most well-designed of these initiatives reveal the fault lines of social privilege that afflict the postcolonial Caribbean: social hierarchies underwritten by pigmentocracies borne of the racist states, institutions and beliefs that governed these islands in the colonial era.<sup>7</sup> Yet not all such private arts initiatives conform to this pattern. Artist André Eugène, of the Haiti-based collective Atis Rezistans, resides in the neighbourhood of Leanne in Port-au-Prince within an improvised network of backstreets sandwiched between the remnants of elegant colonial-style architecture not far from the capital's main thoroughfares. Here, among the makeshift homes and workshops of other artists, craftsmen and welders, Eugène opened up his own studio and residence, over a decade ago, as Pluribus E Unum Musée d'Art (Smith and Austin 2017). Eugène explained that this decision was motivated by a desire to overturn the usual workings of social privilege: 'I had the idea of making a museum here in my own area, with my own hands, because the artists here never had their own thing. They always let the Big Man exploit them' (cited in Savage 2010: 492).

Out of the momentum of this first project, Atis Rezistans went on to develop another new initiative in collaboration with UK-based curator Leah Gordon: the Ghetto Biennale. This addition to the global biennial circuit differs radically from many of its other nodes. Rather than treating the contemporary moment, however critically, as one witnessing a globalizing art scene, the Ghetto Biennale draws attention to what art historian and curator Polly Savage describes as 'the hollow irony of an apparently "globalised" art world [...] in light of the hardened borders faced by the majority of the world's population' (2010: 492; see also Beasley 2012). This international art event was devised out of necessity, in 2009, as Atis Rezistans were repeatedly denied visas to participate in such events, or even to attend exhibitions displaying their own works, outside of Haiti. In response, the Ghetto Biennale invited artists from elsewhere to come to Port-au-Prince and make works with and among the artists of the Leanne neighbourhood, thereby enabling local artists to participate in international exchanges even if they struggled to travel beyond their own nation's borders. While the event has attracted criticism, notably as regards whether it facilitates a form of poverty tourism for visiting artists, it nevertheless continues to thrive and adapt with significant support from local communities. Looking back over the Ghetto Biennale's first four editions, Eugène explained '[T]he Ghetto Biennale opens doors in many ways [...]. In the past, there were many problems for artists to travel but now, since the Ghetto Biennale, it has become much easier. We meet many people and artists from other lands which permits easier movement' (cited in Casseus 2017). Clearly, then, in spite of the occupational hazards involved in international collaborations of this nature – particularly those forged between artists and curators working across the Global North–South divide – the Ghetto Biennale has become a tool by which some local artists have gained recognition and thus opened up unprecedented opportunities in terms of international mobility and access to art events abroad.

One such opportunity that opened up to Atis Rezistans, following the establishment of the Ghetto Biennale, was the chance to present their work in Haiti's debut national pavilion at the 54th edition of the Venice Biennale held in 2011 (Asquith 2013–14). Haiti was represented in Venice by two separate exhibition sites, both of which took place outside of the Giardini and Arsenale: Haiti: Kingdom of This World, within the third-floor galleries of the Palazzo Querini Stampalia; and Death and Fertility at the Riva dei Sette Martiri. Sculptural works by members of Atis Rezistans were on

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Trouillot (1990), Nicholls ([1979] 1996), Jelly-Shapiro (2016) and Branche (2008).

display at each site, with the latter being dedicated entirely to three artists – André Eugène, Jean Hérard Celeur and Jean-Claude Saintilus – who were then all part of the collective. At this second site, the three artists presented provocative, figurative assemblages typical of Atis Rezistans's eye-catching aesthetic: works made from discarded materials and scrap metal gathered in the vicinity of the Grand Rue. These works were housed in two unembellished freight containers pointedly positioned on the Venetian waterfront, adjacent to a landing area that serves the yachts of millionaires, just outside the main entrance to the Giardini. By making this choice of form and positioning for the Death and Fertility exhibition, the curatorial team – led by Daniele Geminiani and Leah Gordon – offered a stark visual juxtaposition each time the luxury pleasure cruiser of an affluent art patron pulled in. The scene made tangible the profound disparities of wealth and opportunity at play within the contemporary art world, in which the resources within reach of a private individual can so grotesquely exceed those at the disposal of governments in the Global South. It makes plain the absurdity of any claim that the Venice Biennale offers a site of exhibition 'open and without any borders', at which 'participating countries dialogue with each other' creating a 'melting pot of shared knowledge', as Baratta has claimed (Baratta 2019, 2014). Privilege creates an uneven playing field; in such a setting, some voices are louder than others, and certain strands of knowledge are prized more highly.

### **Sustainability and Presence at the Venice Biennale**

Even if artists from Global South settings, like the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Caribbean region, gain access to the Venice Biennale, profound structural inequalities remain to be negotiated. How to sustain a presence at multiple editions of the Venetian institution, for example, is a challenge that can trouble the most well-established national participants, but for representatives of nations in the Global South – whether supported by public or private financing – this is not ordinarily a practicable possibility for contemplation. Haiti's pavilion in 2011 – like those of Jamaica in 2001, the Bahamas in 2013, the Dominican Republic in 2019, and numerous other SIDS and middle- or low-income countries over the last decade – was a one-off project. Grenada, by contrast, has accomplished the impressive feat of taking part in three consecutive editions of the event between 2015 and 2019. This makes it the most frequent Caribbean nation to participate, excepting Cuba (which is a unique case, due to the nation's undoubted status as a regional leader in terms of its well-established public funding for the arts). Yet, to do so, Grenada's commissioning body has employed a contentious – though not uncommon – model for national pavilion projects.

The approach taken by Grenada's commissioning body (led in each case by artist and gallerist Susan Mains) has been to exhibit the work of artists from other international settings, with little or no connection to the nation, alongside the contingent of Grenadian artists. For example, in 2017, under curator Omar Donia, such artists (from Brazil, France, Bahrain, Canada and Lebanon) actually exceeded the number of Grenadian artists exhibiting in the nation's pavilion. Grenada is not the first nation to make such bargains, but they are not without controversy. Such an arrangement within the Syria Pavilion of 2011 – which was entirely organized by an Italian team – led to accusations that a crucial opportunity for Syrian artists to gain international exposure had been hijacked. As a result, there was a sense that ownership of Syrian nationhood had been compromised (Artinfo.com 2011). With the significant involvement of a handful of Grenadian artists, gallerists and, however nominal, Grenada's Ministry of Tourism in each of this nation's projects at Venice, there is a strong sense that Grenada's pavilions are not suffering from the almost total erasure of sovereignty that Syria's pavilion saw in 2011, but the parallels are clear. Yet, without substantial local public funding and institutional support or provision from La Biennale, can Grenada's artists be blamed for making such deals to gain access and visibility?

As a counterpoint to the Grenadian team's strategy of ceding space to non-national artists and sustaining private investment in the Venice Biennale as a precursor to achieving sustainable public

investment at home, the case of the Bahamas's debut pavilion in Venice is instructive. Among the key figures behind the Bahamas's project, staged in 2013 at the 55th edition of the Biennale, a link was also made between their presence at the Venice Biennale and the development of local infrastructure. Crucially, however, establishing lasting initiatives at home came first. As an upper-middle-income country, the Bahamas managed to secure a temporary space in the recently renovated Arsenale, and offered a slick and polished exhibition that belied its debuting status. Featured inside was the work of just one artist: US-based, Bahamian-born Tavares Strachan. Significantly, much like Grenada's earliest representation at the Biennale, this Bahamas pavilion marked an important national milestone: 40 years of the nation's independence. Yet, for those behind this Bahamian project, the nation's pavilion at Venice did not commemorate the beginning of the 40th anniversary festivities but, rather, the culmination of a decade of 30th anniversary celebrations marked in the arts sector by the founding of the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas (NAGB) (n.d.), 'the first institution of its kind in the history of [the nation]'.

In recounting her experiences as founding director of NAGB, curator and scholar Erica James, like her colleagues in Grenada, made a connection between national representation at the Venice Biennale and development of sustainable arts infrastructure in the postcolonial Caribbean. Jubilantly, she recalls that 'in 2013, just ten years after [NAGB]'s formation, this tiny country supported a pavilion at the Venice Biennale. To move that far and fast in the space of ten years is pretty remarkable' (James 2016: 12–13). For James, this staging of a Bahamian pavilion in Venice was clearly an indicator of growth in the ambition and capacity of the small island nation's arts sector, and an impressive marker of achievement. Yet, crucially, as James contextualizes these remarks, she makes clear that the Bahamas entry into the Venice Biennale was neither the wishful beginning of an attempt to establish a sustained arts infrastructure at home, nor was it the start of an extended relationship with the Biennale, in which funding was recurrently invested in staging art exhibits at successive editions of the flashy European extravaganza. Instead, James explains that the Bahamas representation at the 55th Venice Biennale was only able to happen thanks to the careful building of local arts infrastructure over the preceding decade in the form of 'a system of relations [that] the gallery's presence generated [...] the community, the culture, the art, the market, the audience had to grow [and] the gallery was in a position to direct that growth' (James 2016: 12). It is clear that, for James, the priority was sustenance of the nation's new arts institution and, through it, the nurturing of 'a healthy cultural ecosystem' in the Bahamas (NAGB n.d.).

Yet it is notable that the Bahamian government – who had cultivated this new initiative by foregrounding support of local arts communities – then commissioned a debuting national pavilion at the Venice Biennale that seems to have been largely developed at a distance, with a curatorial team and artist (Strachan) who were all based in the United States (Bahamas National Pavilion: 55th Venice Biennale 2013). However, notwithstanding his place of residence at the time of the Bahamian national pavilion, Strachan has maintained strong links with his birthplace through his practice. Contextual information on Strachan and his work on the pavilion's website notes that 'one of [the artist's] most iconic projects, *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want* (2006), consisted of a 4.5-ton block of ice [...] shipped Federal Express to the Bahamas, [where] it was exhibited in a transparent freezer at a primary school in Nassau'. The website also notes that his later interests in the impact of space travel and sea exploration on the human body led to his involvement in the establishment of the nascent Bahamian Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center (Bahamas National Pavilion: 55th Venice Biennale 2013).

Curatorial context for Strachan's Venice Biennale participation asserts that his work 'emphasizes the migratory, cross-cultural nature of contemporary artistic production' (Bahamas National Pavilion 2013). Among his works on display in the Bahamas pavilion, *Here and Now* (2013) tackled these themes most directly. It consisted of three vivid neon-light installations of the phrases 'I Belong

Here', 'You Belong Here' and 'We Belong Here' exploding into hundreds of tiny fragments. Discussing an iteration of this work in conversation with curator and art critic Christian Viveros-Fauné, Strachan meditated on the complex politics of location: '[W]hen I think of the word 'here' it often reminds me of the idea of 'home', of how we define that. [T]he fact that I'm from an island nation, is something I've never really been able to escape. It is a dual experience [...] so I make art that gives me the opportunity to explore these ideas. That's what 'I belong here' is all about (cited in Viveros-Fauné 2013). Installing these shattered phrases within a national pavilion at Venice, Strachan challenges conventional thinking about what it means to belong to a certain nation or place. He alludes to the diaspora experience, particularly the facet that has been most heavily theorized as exemplifying the postcolonial condition: that of a privileged class of mediators from the margins (increasingly relocated to the metropole), negotiating fragmented identities and the trade in cultural capital and commodities within a global system (Appiah 1991; Scott 1999). By participating in the Biennale as a representative for the Bahamas, Strachan seemed well aware of his potential role as just such a mediator, stating that 'the way that the Venice Biennale, historically and now, deploys the idea of "difference" as cultural tourism is an interesting problem to work with' (Bahamas National Pavilion: 55th Venice Biennale 2013). Yet Strachan resisted the Venetian institutions' self-interested goading of debuting national pavilions to become purveyors of cultural difference. Rather than elide the messy realities of the privileged postcolonial condition by appealing to markers of a Bahamian cultural essentialism, through Here and Now Strachan, and by extension the Bahamas pavilion, took a refreshingly candid look at the conundrum posed by the Venice Biennale's pavilion structure to diaspora artists.

### **A Counterpoint to Celebrated Globality**

The Bahamas was by no means the first Caribbean nation to accomplish a pavilion project via diasporic networks. Jamaica did so over a decade earlier. Curator Catherine Amidon reveals that the Jamaica pavilion staged at the 49<sup>th</sup> edition of La Biennale, despite its listing as an official 'national participation', was 'a pavilion without official backing' from the Jamaican government (2004: 103). The pavilion exhibited work by three Jamaican-born artists, all of whom were resident in the United States. Among these was artist Arthur Simms, whom Amidon (2004) acknowledges as the real driving force behind the entire project. Moreover, she explains, 'virtually all of the funding came from US sources', with the Jamaica Arts Alliance (JAA) – a US-based non-profit – offering 'critical support', most notably through its founding member Margaret Bernal, who was named as the pavilion's commissioner. Amidon admits that there was 'frustration from the island concerning the process' of developing this project via offshore networks. She acknowledges that the National Gallery of Jamaica in Kingston had previously managed the nation's presence at international art events, such as the Bienal de La Habana. However, she argues that the 'difficult financial situation in Jamaica constrains such initiatives', creating a situation in which the National Gallery has limited ability to respond. Indeed, Amidon points out that 'since independence [...] there has been no branch of government in Jamaica and no state-sponsored entity that has assumed formal responsibility for international biennials and art exhibitions' (2004: 102–03). Therefore, despite Jamaica having the oldest National Gallery in the anglophone Caribbean (founded in 1974), the fiscal climate in the nation is such that significant barriers still remain to taking part in international biennials.

This lack of state support further complicates the relationships between artists and curators in the region and those in the diaspora. In such a situation, Amidon explains, 'efforts and individuals from abroad have become the well-intentioned voice of the island', a dynamic paralleled in the organization of Latin American and African regional pavilions at the 2001 edition of La Biennale (2004: 104). Criticisms of this substitution – however well-intentioned and frequent in Venice – not only emerged from key figures within Jamaica's National Gallery, but also from resident Jamaican artists. For example, artist Stanford Watson argues for a 'need for the Euro-Americanized shakers and movers

to be more open minded and allow for localized concerns including context and concepts (specific to the island)' (cited in Amidon 2004: 109). Watson suggests that the decision to focus exclusively on the work of diasporic artists may not have been only the result of logistical challenges but, also, a matter of taste. Indeed, reflecting upon the choice of artists for inclusion within the Jamaica pavilion, Amidon acknowledged that 'though the pavilion purported to be a culturally representative "national" one, "nativist" artists did not present [...] Jamaican Intuitives were not even considered for participation [because] such localized art would have caused discomfort' (2004: 104, 109, 122).<sup>8</sup> Echoing this sentiment, the sociologist Olav Velthuis observed that the Venice Biennale inhabits an art world 'where "local" has become a pejorative term [...] a synonym for insignificant artist'. By contrast, he notes, "'international" is now a selling point in itself' (2011: 24). It is not entirely clear who Amidon was anticipating would experience discomfort at the exhibition of 'intuitive' Jamaican artists – the management of La Biennale? International audiences? Or diasporic organizers? However, she compellingly argues that this implicit constraint 'raises questions about the limitation and global integrity of the *national* pavilions' (Amidon 2004: 112, original emphasis).

One recent Caribbean pavilion that tested the limits of the Venice Biennale's claim to be artistically 'open and without any boundaries' was Antigua and Barbuda's debut offering at the 57th edition of the event in 2017 (Baratta 2019). Frank Walter: *The Last Universal Man 1926–2000* was a solo show of work by the reclusive eponymous polymath. It paid tribute to the extraordinarily broad range of Walter's multidisciplinary work, which included copious writings and compositions, as well as sculpture and painting. Within each of these strands, his production is also wide ranging. His paintings, for example, range from delicate yet daringly idiosyncratic portraiture shot through with concerns about class, race and status, to punchy abstract explorations of nuclear energy or facets of the cosmos. Barbara Paca's (2017) incisive curatorial framing of his work for the Venice show tells audiences that he 'def[ie]d categorization as an outsider or self-taught artist'. Nevertheless, his isolated existence – living in a 'shack on an Antiguan hillside' for the last 25 years of his life – has resulted in his body of work being characterized by a tender intimacy emerging as it does from the particularities of a localized milieu (Paca 2017). Reception of this debut offering was overwhelmingly positive. The American curator Thelma Golden enthused about the 'fascinating and moving glimpse' the exhibition offered of Walter's life and work, while curator Nico Kos Earle admired how the exhibition 'invite[d] visitors to inhabit [Walter's] creative world and discover [his] humanist vision' (Golden cited in Buck and Morris 2017; Kos Earle 2017). Such reviews suggest that the Venice Biennale's audiences can indeed be open to the distinctive concerns, contexts and concepts of an artist living and working in the Lesser Antilles. However, the narrative of an isolated polymath discovered and celebrated posthumously is undoubtedly a market-friendly one with a long history in the art world.

During his lifetime, Walter had hoped to foster an engaged community around his work by opening up his home and studio as an art centre. Though it was many thousands of miles away from his Antiguan residence, the exhibition in Venice was billed as a 'posthumous fulfilment of Walter's intention', and its success seems to have, somewhat incongruously, led to further public investment in cultivating a distant audience for Antiguan and Barbudan artists in the form of a second national pavilion at the Biennale (Paca 2017). This follow-up project in 2019 was entitled *Find Yourself: Carnival and Resistance*. It was conceived by a broader curatorial team and featured the striking sartorial remnants of recent Antiguan carnival displayed on mannequins at the centre of the exhibition space. Surrounding these were historic and contemporary photographic representations 'to illustrate daily life, weddings, funerals, and carnival' in Antigua and Barbuda (Antigua Barbuda Venice 2019). Eye-catching among these was the exhibition's eponymous work by Timothy Payne,

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<sup>8</sup> The term 'intuitives' was coined by David Boxer (1979), then director of the National Gallery of Jamaica, for a survey show that featured works by self-taught artists, including Everaldo Brown and John Dunkley

featuring hundreds of cherished sepia portraits of the nation's citizenry punctuated by bold images of carnival and resistance bringing blasts of colour and drama to the whole.

Antigua and Barbuda's second national pavilion had ambitious aims, promising to be both 'a global study of identity through expression or repression of ritual', as well as offering 'a message to challenge modern-day slavery and environmental inequality' (Antigua Barbuda Venice 2019). Perhaps because of these expansive aspirations, the curatorial framing of objects within the exhibition space fell back on tried-and-tested modes of curating Caribbean carnival: approaches that neglected its multisensorial and performative elements in favour of representational portrayals centred on what the curator Claire Tancons itemizes as 'props or photographs' (2012: 42). Such methods of curation offer a schematic impression of Carnival, 'view[ing] it as illustrative of ideals, facts even, of Caribbeanness or of historical processes in the region', as curator and art historian Krista A. Thompson explained (2012: 99). Tellingly, both Tancons as well as Thompson have linked these curatorial approaches to anthropological modes of display 'through which the region was produced as an object of knowledge', particularly for outsider audiences (Thompson 2012: 99). Carnival – in an airbrushed form – has also featured at the centre of tourist-friendly campaigning for much of the region for almost a century, and there is certainly a sense that this pavilion's titular invitation to Biennale visitors mirrors marketing strategies from this sector. The staging of such a recursive exhibition model in 2019 at the Venice Biennale as a national representation of the postcolonial Caribbean once again raises questions about the quality of the Venice Biennale's self-styled globality, and the extent to which it offers a mere simulacrum of a globalized art world. Tancons' and Thompson's analyses cut to the heart of critical thinking around the lauded concept of cosmopolitanism, which is often cited as a marker of internationalism or globality in the contemporary art world. Engaging these debates directly, Barbados-based art historian and gallerist Therese Hadchity explains that the language of cosmopolitanism 'appears to be a concession on the part of all involved, for the benefit of new global hegemony'. However, Hadchity argues that it 'is effectively an elevation of values and languages that pose no threat whatsoever to Western sovereignty' (2016: 32). In short, this concept proposes the apparently utopian principle that all can contribute to the construction of a cosmopolitan space, yet the reality is that the language of communication adopted in such spaces tends to favour the skills and concerns of metropolitan actors and, particularly, voices issuing from more powerful First World hubs. Relating this to the Venice Biennale, the effect is that despite advocacy of exuberant claims of its being an increasingly global event, key measures of artistic value in this space continue to reflect the tastes of market actors in the Global North.

There is thus an important counterpoint to the story of the Caribbean's celebrated inclusion at Venice under a discursively 'global' heading. It can be heard by listening to the majority of artists of the Caribbean, those who are not enjoying the spoils of a globalizing art scene, for whom there are difficulties and frictions surrounding their movement and participation in art events that emphasize globality. These artists do not describe a rosy picture of positive change for Caribbean art communities; instead, their views align with the most excoriating critiques that have been levelled at globalization, its disadvantages and discontents. The artist Winston Kellman, writing from Barbados, highlighted a long-running '(dis)connection between local and global expectations for Caribbean arts', which in turn has seen him advancing a personal and contingent response (2016: 87). Kellman's politics centre on refusing such 'global expectations', specifically that artistic success may be epitomized by the traducing of locally distinctive identities and art practices. Kellman explains 'The fact that some institutions in the Caribbean region seem to encourage the production of work to meet the market needs of an outward/international-looking audience means, to some extent, that younger artists are in danger of denying their lived realities in order to find acceptance in this more globalised space' (2016: 86). When such 'younger' artists, the emerging generation of practitioners – recent graduates, art students – try to target a more global circulation for their art in

the newly establishing network of sites for art's reception, they tend to do so by embracing technologies and media of art production that are themselves a metaphor of '(dis)connection'. Kellman's opinion is informed by his experience as a member of staff at the Barbados Community College, a further and higher education institution that delivers the island's only degree programme in fine art. All such patterns mark out a geography of movement in which artworks and artists apparently detach themselves from the material constraints of the Caribbean while supplying a semblance or simulacrum of attachment to places that would satisfy the 'global' demand for a (manufactured) 'local' flavour.

Kellman's position is one of many appeals to the Caribbean art communities based in the region in the hope that they will try to sustain themselves against a global imperative. It singles out the impact of cultural values and markets that diffuse a regime of taste and cultural consumption, which does locally grounded Caribbean experience no favours. Recognizing the widely felt desire to sustain a robust and vibrant Caribbean community, there is inspiration to draw here for a plethora of critical responses from the arts. It is worth highlighting that Caribbean artists themselves have frequently raised the issue of how to build lasting connections and communities in such a way as to circumvent the economies and discursive categories of 'the global'. Caribbean voices such as Kellman's have asked whatever happened to the region's politics of independence in the wake of twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalism. In the twenty-first-century aftermath, the soft-power vehicles of cultural resistance and a sense of sovereignty – ascribed to a widening spectrum of creativity in the framing literature on Caribbean culture – seem to have lost their power and direction. Indeed, Caribbean communities face the question as to whether they can see their way towards an alternative, longer-term prospect for understanding and supporting themselves in the face of globalization without reverting to a chauvinistic localism and nationalism, anachronistic or otherwise, or an entrenched identity politics. This in turn prompts consideration of how the articulation of the global and the national, demonstrated by the recent accession of Caribbean countries to Venice, might be *re-articulated*.

These questions lead in part to a critical look at how Caribbean pavilions at Venice have celebrated the region's diversity and transnationalism, and what vocabulary they have used to effusively promote art's globalizing currents. Also, with an eye on Barbados, Therese Hadchity emphasizes, 'the need for a more careful consideration of certain art and artists from the Caribbean which would serve, on the one hand, as a contribution to the ongoing critique of globalisation, and, on the other, to an exploration of current tensions surrounding nationalism in the postcolonial world' (2016: 32). Indeed, in working with art and artists of the Caribbean, curators and artists from elsewhere – as well as academics – soon become aware of the layers of uneven privilege embedded within an apparently globalizing art world, which cannot be simply undone through buoyant celebration of difference well-intentioned propositions for collaborative working or discursive disregard for borders. Such initiatives can, in fact, obscure the actual experience of inequality under globalizing conditions of patronage and public reception for the region's art.<sup>9</sup>

Extolling the alleged benefits-for-all of contemporary cultural exchange in an expanding globalizing field such as Venice seems to give little heed to the fact that for many Caribbean artists, the 'milk and honey' of globalization at large are not roundly enjoyed. This is an adverse outcome of commodifying the imagined geography of interaction and intermixing that has long been identified with the Caribbean in cultural commentary (Garrido Castellano 2017, 2019). Influential commentary stands a world apart from the actual struggles to negotiate a livelihood for artists in conditions of global disadvantage. Curators seeking to explore the cultural virtues of global mobility would

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<sup>9</sup> See Savage (2010), Gordon (2017) and Frohnapfel (2018).

do well to note the risks of partiality and to consider those experiences from the Caribbean that rest on the flipside of globalization.

At the same time, the salient theorizations of 'global contemporary art' that adhere to the Venice Biennale – its curatorial mission statements and interpretative texts, its art criticism, its advocacy arguments for the charitable funding of art in the 'Global South', etc. – do endeavour to account for the arts as a virtuous space of 'dissensus'. Art of the global contemporary has latterly come to be portrayed as a pedagogical place of healthy disagreement, of fractious yet bountiful social critique. Here, participants fall out with one another or openly clash, yet always do so productively, in demonstrations of cultural confluence by indirection. Such cultural clashes are thought to be as redemptive as they are spectacular. In his overview of such developments, Peter Weibel sounds a typically jubilant note celebrating the possibilities of the 'global contemporary'. Weibel claims, 'contemporary art in the global age addresses the opportunities for a gradual transformation of the culture of this capitalist world system and the attendant difficulties and contradictions as well as the opportunities for developing an understanding of other cultures and their equality, assuming that such art takes such qualities seriously and is worthy of its name. [...] Translations and transfers from one culture to another, in a multilateral and multipolar world, no longer create the hegemony of international art, but the re-evaluation of the local and the regional. [...] In this sense we are living in a postethnic age; we encounter the postethnic state of art' (2013: 24, 27). But those 'translations and transfers' are more modest than what is boasted of them, and there is no rounded agreement that anything like a 'postethnic state' has been reached; hegemonies and differences, ethnic or otherwise, are hardly evaporating or in transcendence. That such authorities can become intrigued by the potential held at the resistive underside of life in the arts may be a sign of their remove from the actual sites and subjects of struggle. The 'local and the regional' become alienated when their principles and narratives are mediated and retold in order to satisfy metropolitan taste.

The means to take part in such a scene of reputedly 'transformative' encounters, as Venice is presupposed to be, are not all shared by art communities of the Caribbean, neither is the will to enjoin that process, nor the sense of hope that it is one the Caribbean can sign up to on its own terms, even less so without joining forces with similar art communities across the Global South. Clearly there is a larger project of curatorial analysis here, which might explore the comfortable distance that permits the liberal hope in cultural globalization embodied by the Venice Biennale and its twice-remove from more everyday and concrete Caribbean experiences of misrepresentation, instability and material deprivation. Recent national pavilions at the Venice Biennale from the anglophone and francophone Caribbean have consistently signalled the desire of the artists and curators involved to develop the region's arts infrastructure. Yet, without lasting investment at home, curatorial projects at La Biennale, however successful, are only distant and momentary causes for celebration, as the fact or extent of their impact in the postcolonial Caribbean, and on the majority of its artists, is yet to be proven.

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