WEIRD Commerce at the Ghetto Biennale
(Proverbs from the Gossip Wall)

Gen yon ti moun ki di yon blan li grangou epi blan an di li tann li pral dèyè manje. Lè li tounen li tounen ak yon grenn Marinad… (lol!!!!)

A little child says to a white person 'I'm hungry.' The white person says 'Wait for me, I'm going to get you some food.' The man comes back with one little patty… (lol!!!)

In 2010 three psychology professors at the University of British Columbia wrote a paper for the journal of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* entitled 'The Weirdest People in the World?'[1] WEIRD, an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic, was used to describe the kinds of society that people taken as representative of 'normality' in the majority of human behavioural studies conducted at these (mainly American) universities come from. I'm using it here to designate, in the most general terms, the social background of the visiting artists to the Ghetto Biennale, an art event that has been taking place in Haiti since 2009. The basic proposition is that WEIRD artists tend to have very specific ideas about art's meaning, value and social function, received from WEIRD art schools, university educations and participation in WEIRD art worlds, and that these ideas are not necessarily shared by people who have not been so conditioned by that realm. The WEIRD outlook is generally utopian, idealistic, progressive and socially responsible, and often sees art as antagonistic to, or somehow corrupted by, utilitarian, commercial or monetary aims. As Hans Abbing argues in *Why Are Artists Poor?* such beliefs are based largely on the thinly-veiled Romantic myth that art is somehow 'holy'.[2] I would add that such holiness is bolstered by the dominance of Marxist critical theory in WEIRD art schools and universities, which transforms these quasi-theological beliefs about art's sacred purposes into critical, anti-capitalist and socially emancipatory ones.

Ti machoun'n a yon dola ou fé sòs

With one dollar we can make a sauce

The Ghetto Biennale is an international art event that takes place in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital city. It was the brainchild of the British photographer and filmmaker Leah Gordon and the Haitian arts collective Atis Rezistans, who live and work in the Lakou Cheri area of Grand Rue. After the 1980s, when tourism went into steep decline[3], the artists and artisans of Lakou Cheri - who traditionally produced tourist art for the nearby Iron Market - began using their traditional wood-carving and metalwork skills to create brutal, unsettling and often comedic, large-scale sculptures of the grim and lascivious Guede family of Vodou spirits, associated with the nearby cemetery. These sculptures, which combine wood, metal, bones, skulls, car parts and found objects sourced from the local area, strikingly express the material conditions in which they are made. Since the mid 90's a group of artists from Lakou Cheri have been making work under the collective name of Atis Rezistans (the older members) and Ti Moun Rezistans (the children of Atis). The legacy of traditional tourist art production still survives in Grand Rue and continues to be part of a largely unacknowledged dynamic underpinning the biennale. Part local Haitian art fair, part social experiment in cross-cultural artistic collaboration, the biennale recently celebrated its fourth instantiation.

La jounen an vwayaj penitans make jou

A bad journey marks your day

Visitors are rarely left unaffected by their experience of the Ghetto Biennale. Upon arriving at the airport in Port-au-Prince they will likely be struck by the marked poverty of the country compared to the one they departed from. The consequences of the nation's increasing dependence on international NGOs - especially since the earthquake of 2010 and the cholera epidemic which followed in its wake - and the influx of US dollars brought by the now meagre stream of tourists, is immediately evident from the over-supply of local

drivers vying for their taxi fares. The reality of Haiti's economic and infrastructural poverty is made tangible on the journey from airport to hotel. It is something that, no matter how angelic or thick-skinned one's demeanour, inevitably shapes your encounter with the event. Grand Rue is a major commercial and transit artery for the city and, as such, is particularly choked with traffic, debris and exhaust fumes during the day. Its roads, mostly unlit at night, are filled with treacherous potholes and open drains that often spill over into the streets, forming pools of effluent and oil. The daily movement of goods and people along "the rue" means that there is always work to be done, wares to be sold and money to be made. But the conditions in which people live in and around Lakou Cheri, with no access to continuous running water or electricity, no basic sanitation or plumbing, no public services to speak of, and one toilet for sixty people, make it a far more materially impoverished environment than anything you're likely to find in the poorest parts of the UK.

On the whole the local people of Grand Rue are Kréyol-speaking Haitians who live in global-grade poverty.[4] Many, though not all, are Vodouisants/Catholic, some Protestant, and most would describe themselves as Black (as opposed to White or Mulatto) Haitians. The visiting artists are of different races, ethnicities, and religions (or not), speak English and other languages (but usually not Kréyol) and live in conditions of relative global affluence. Most of the visitors are educated to university level, most of the locals are not. Most of the visitors are progressive, unequivocally humanitarian, socially, sexually and culturally liberal, egalitarian, democratic and of a generally Left-leaning political persuasion. Some of the locals share these values. Others do not. The visiting artists are mixed gender, the local artists mostly male. Obviously there are many different attitudes and beliefs within the two groups and my characterisation of them is very rudimentary. I certainly don't mean to suggest that there aren't common values, interests and affections between the two groups, or that cultural differences aren't quickly overcome during the event. But as any artist who has been involved will know, no amount of artistic collaboration and goodwill between locals and visitors is going to

change the fundamental disparity of wealth and opportunity on a macro scale.

Making work with members of the Lakou Cheri community is an experience that usually leaves visitors profoundly altered. Such an experience, which is essentially non-monetary, constitutes one of the principle rewards for participation in the event. For locals, collaboration with visiting artists can also be a transformative experience, and the relationships they form often continue well after the biennale. But while the principle benefits for visitors are largely experiential, for the locals the direct financial rewards for participation are very important. Some of the complexity, frustration and difficulties experienced by visitors to the biennale involve negotiating this asymmetry, and exchanges (monetary, artistic or otherwise) that take place have to confront and overcome clear linguistic, economic and cultural barriers. It is largely in the overcoming of these differences that the most valuable learning experiences are had, the most unexpected, rewarding and inspiring works made, and lasting relationships forged.

Yap pale nap travay

They're talking, we're working

One of the three curatorial themes of the 2015 Ghetto Biennale was 'Kréyol', the native language of Haitians, spoken by the majority of the population and particularly the poor and less formally educated.[5] In order to find out local residents thoughts about the biennale, I hung a large piece of blackboard-painted canvas in the main yard, left a pot of chalks beside it, and invited people to write their *Zen* (Kréyol for gossip) about the event. The *zen* was documented at the end of each day and the blackboard sponged clean for the following. The first piece of gossip came from local artist Mabelle Williams, one of the few local, female Haitian artists involved in the event:

> ***Fok ou ta la pou'w ta wè 3 blan ki al nan mache jis Petyonvil sak pi bel la ki saw panse yo al achte? Yo al acchte plim poul***

You had to be there to see three white people going all the way to the market in Pétionville just to buy chicken feathers.

The brunt of this gossip was a group of *blancs* (international visitors, whether Black or White), so unfamiliar with the markets of Haiti that they would rather travel several miles to procure material for artworks that they could have bought just as easily around the corner (i.e. in Grand Rue). What makes the joke funnier for locals is that Pétionville is one of the wealthiest parts of Port-au-Prince, home to Haiti's most affluent residents and the location of its more established and respectable art galleries. The anecdote reveals an important fact about the real economics of the Ghetto Biennale. Beyond bringing attention to the work of Atis and Ti Moun Rezistans, and raising important questions about the role of contemporary art in a severely imbalanced global-cultural economy, one of the event's main economic functions is to bring revenue, in the form of 'tourist dollars', to Lakou Cheri. So every dollar spent elsewhere is a dollar lost to the community.

In order to make their work the visiting artists have to form relationships with members of the local community. So beyond hotel costs and flights, most of the visitor's expenditure during the event involves buying goods and services from people who are directly or indirectly involved in the Lakou Cheri community. A common frustration expressed by visitors is how much money they end up spending there. This may come as a surprise in a country commonly identified as 'the poorest in the Western hemisphere', but it is not uncommon in places where tourism generally operates above and beyond the wider society. It also has to do, in part, with navigating the currency ratio between US dollars and Haitian gourdes. Break a $10 bill and you'll get approximately 600 gourdes. In order to simplify the unstable relationship between the two currencies, Haitians use a virtual currency called the Haitian dollar: 1 Haitian dollar = 5 gourdes, a permanently fixed rate. So $10 US = 600 Gourde = $120 Haitian. This translation between US dollars, Haitian dollars and gourdes can make negotiating prices in Haiti, which are often informal, a confounding affair that takes time to master. And once your

dollars are broken they soon dissipate into the wider economy. Sometimes it just seems simpler, at least for those with sufficient disposable wealth and a poor head for currency conversion, to hand over a $10 or $20 and wait for a response: enough? Your change will usually be handed back to you in a handful of gourdes.

The most characteristic economic difference between the experience of visitors and locals at the Ghetto Biennale is that money generally flows from the former to the latter, while the trade in artworks generally moves in the opposite direction. Their relative affluence and transient presence in Haiti puts visitors in the position of potential buyers of Haitian art, a category that most WEIRD artists are unaccustomed to. A WEIRD artist might well visit a friend's studio to discuss their work, and point out a particular work that is exceptionally good. Their friend may thank them. But they would probably not ask how much they would give for it, or be disappointed if they didn't want to buy it. At the GB however, a visit to a local artist's studio is inevitably taken as a sales opportunity. This can be a disconcerting and confusing experience for WEIRD artists, who generally don't regard art as something they want to own, or can afford – they don't think of themselves as potential patrons or collectors. So while the visiting artists are making participatory, socially engaged, ephemeral and non-commercial artworks, their Haitian colleagues are making sculptures, paintings and artisanal goods that they expect visitors to buy from them at good prices.

Se annepye ki pou ba wou enpotans twal kay

A centipede can teach you the importance of an old rag.

Another reason for the unanticipated expense of the biennale is that most of the visitors are relatively poor in their home countries. Many are young, recently graduated, self-funding and without institutional support. It's not uncommon to hear them explaining to their Haitian colleagues that, back home, they are poor too. And it's true that artists in developed countries like the UK are generally poor relative to other professionals. Recent statistics

suggest that on average artists in the UK earn just half of the national median salary of £20,000 from their art alone, bringing them close to minimum-wage levels, a figure which, for most of them, drastically plummets after the age of 45-50. The situation is even worse women, who, in society where women generally earn 18% less than men, earn 50% in the artworld.[6] If the UK art world has a Gini coefficient (the statistical measure of economic inequality) as high as that of Haiti (which perhaps explains why some a WEIRD artist's identify economically with their poorer Haitian colleagues). There is in statistical fact a similar disparity of wealth between the richest UK artists and the majority of their low-earning artistic colleagues as that between the wealthy elites of Pétionville and their compatriots in Grand Rue. But of course, relative to most of the artists in Lakou Cheri, who, as urban Haitians can expect to earn on average $400 per annum, the visitors are still very wealthy, despite their relative poverty compared to the WEIRD world's art stars.

It can come as something of a culture shock to these poor and idealistic visiting artists, that they are in fact remarkably rich, not only in financial terms, but also in terms of the social, economic and professional opportunities they have as artists in the WEIRD world, where universal primary and secondary education, universal health care, fully-functioning state apparatuses, public services and state-subsidized arts funding are largely taken for granted. The consequence of this inescapable asymmetry is that visiting artists are repeatedly confronted with the reality of their fiscal, social and material security relative to their hosts. It is something that can generate a high degree of cognitive dissonance for WEIRD artists who don't ordinarily see themselves as a privileged, global class. The experience of finding oneself far richer than one's hosts, while trying to maintain a belief in art's sacred, emancipatory, non-commercial and socially transformative function, can be a profoundly confusing and potentially transformative one.

As we have seen, for visitors the rewards for participation in the Ghetto Biennale are largely immaterial: new knowledge, learning and experiences; a

significant addition to one's artistic CV; and a measure of cultural capital that can increase one's chances of securing exhibitions and future funding (as long as the Ghetto Biennale retains its credibility in the WEIRD artworld). What the locals get is revenue from the sales of their work; a large infusion of US dollars into the local economy during the few weeks of the event; the opportunity to meet and work with international artists and to learn from them; to develop friendships and social networks with artists outside of Haiti; and to get greater international visibility for their work.

What is therefore shared between visitors and locals in the Ghetto Biennale is a learning experience brought about by meeting and working with people with different artistic outlooks, traditions and expectations; artistic credibility within a global arts context; the creation of new works for exhibition; opportunities for future collaborations and artistic partnerships; and the creation of new social networks. What differs are the long term economic benefits of participation, which for the visitors will accrue over time and for the locals are expressed in concrete economic terms for the few weeks of the biennale (after which it will largely dry up). Cultural capital accrued by locals through participation will occasionally transform into access to funding, group shows, new artistic initiatives, higher level art education in Haiti or travel abroad. But this is unusual, given the relative lack of art organisations in Haiti, and the barriers to entry for poorer Haitians with neither French nor English as a second language.

In the longer term what local artists and the community would benefit from are steadier streams of income and opportunity than the Ghetto Biennale, for all its creative projects and partnerships, has been able to provide. The challenge for visitors who want to maintain their WEIRD ideals about the socially transformative and emancipatory powers of contemporary art is to create works that can withstand confrontation with the non-universality of their universalism. Without this their participation in the Ghetto Biennale could be seen as artistic poverty tourism for WEIRD artists, the experience of

which they can cash in back in the WEIRD art world in the competition for recognition, visibility and status.

Tripotay pa dyòb

Gossip is not a job

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1 Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan, 'The weirdest people in the world?' *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* Volume 33, Issue 2-3, pp 61- 83, June 2010, Cambridge University Press, 2010 (http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~henrich/pdfs/WeirdPeople.pdf)

2 Hans Abbing *Why are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, University of Amsterdam Press, 2002

3 There are a number of factors that led to the decline of tourism in Haiti at this time, most importantly international awareness of the real conditions of poverty in Haiti made public by the so-called Haitian boat people fleeing life under Duvalierism; the discovery of HIV/AIDS amongst Haitian refugees in Florida; and the subsequent association of Haitians as one of the three vectors of the epidemic (along with Haemophiliacs and Homosexuals: i.e. the so-called '3 H's'). Further, a military junta imposed after the exile of Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier in 1986 was followed by two decades of violent political turmoil – including two military coups against the popular President Aristide – and the rise of the so-called 'Chimères', the gangs who supported him and who were made famous in Asger Leth and Milos Loncarevic's 2006 film *Ghosts of Cité Soleil*. There has been little opportunity for tourism to be revived since then, especially after the devastation wrought by four hurricanes in 2008 and the earthquake of 2010, which cost the lives of an estimated 200, 000 people.

4 According to the UN Human Development Index (HDI), which expresses a composite of national statistics measuring life expectancy, education and standard of living, Haiti is ranked 163rd in the table of 188 nations. It is, according to this index, a country of low human development. (http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI)

5 The *lingua franca* of the educated classes, who often speak English too, is French.

6 Martin Kretschmer, Lionel A. F. Bently, Sukhpreet Singh, Elena Copper, 'Copyright Contracts and Earnings of Visual Creators: A Survey of 5,800 British Designers, Fine Artists, Illustrators and Photographers, Social Science Research Network', March 2011 (http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1780206)
It is worth noting that Fine Artists, who, unlike commercial artists, do not expect to get paid directly for making art, are defined by the survey as those who give 50% of their total working time to it.