

## **A moment to celebrate? Art of the Caribbean at the Venice Biennale**

### **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 and 2019; Antigua and Barbuda, 2017 and 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 the local institutional structures and professionals that surround them. This paper seeks to critically explore 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.

### **INTRODUCTION**

With much excitement it was announced in 2015 that, ‘in its 41<sup>st</sup> 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 one to assess the significance of Grenada’s first outing at Venice this way. In a catalogue essay reflecting on the Spice Isle’s inaugural presence at Venice, curator and historian Frederika Adam argued that, ‘Grenada must respond to this historic first step to ensure [it] returns to Venice in 2017’ (Adam 2015). 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 in 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’ 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. The celebratory reactions of those newly initiated year-on-year 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 celebratory claims about what the Biennale has offered to them. We 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, we will interrogate the extent to which national Caribbean pavilions at the Venice Biennale are well positioned to stimulate significant and lasting development of artistic careers, communities and arts infrastructure within the Caribbean region as has been claimed.

### **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 47<sup>th</sup> edition, held in 1997, curator Dan Cameron summarized the dismal state of affairs by declaring the institution 'moribund'. 'Venice is sinking' he announced, '[and] 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' (Cameron 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 (Tapei, 1992 and Shanghai, 1996); Senegal (Dak'art, 1990); the UAE (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 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, this 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, 21<sup>st</sup>-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 seems to flip 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' (Amidon, 2004: 108). Rather than considering La Biennale 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 globalised art world.

Going further still in praise of the elder Venetian institution, Frederika Adam has suggested that for Grenada taking part in La Biennale in 2015 signified 'the presence of "Grenadian art" in the international art world' and that, additionally, for the nation's practitioners 'a bridge has been formed with the contemporary art world' (Adam 2015). Here, we begin to see 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 (F. R. 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 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 (Veneto Insider n.d.). While the 2017 edition, logged 86 national participants and promoted first time representations from Antigua and Barbuda, Kiribati and Nigeria (La Biennale 2017). 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, claims for the biennial event 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’. With characteristic floridity he declares, ‘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 his expression on the subject of the Biennale may be unique, his arguments in favour of its strengths as a site for scrutiny of the contemporary global condition have been echoed in the work of scholars with greater critical distance.

In her recent study, *The Global Work of Art*, art historian Caroline Jones examines the historical development of global, biennial-style art events and argues that these can be productive spaces that force us to critically reflect on the contemporary global condition (Jones 2017; see also Meskimmon 2017: 269-272). The 56<sup>th</sup> edition of La Biennale held in 2015, 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 left in its wake worldwide: his execution of this appraisal met with some mixed responses (see Genocchino 2015; Sharp Baskett 2016; and Montero Sabin 2016). Enwezor’s edition grabbed headlines nevertheless 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; and 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’.

Yet, to speak in fetishistic tones of the Venice Biennale as a ‘truly global’ site of exhibition that has pushed us ‘into an era of post-Westernism’ is to gloss over the layers of uneven privilege embedded in the structure of the event (Adam 2015). Reviewing Enwezor’s edition of the Biennale, J. J. Charlesworth 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’ (Charlesworth 2016). It could certainly be argued that

Venice's premier art platform for the meeting of nations masks as much as it illuminates about our 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: 22-9).

### **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. Yet, artists and curators of the Caribbean have continually highlighted flaws in this system, which disadvantage practitioners in their region (Baratta 2015b). As a member of the US-based curatorial team that staged the Jamaican pavilion at the 49<sup>th</sup> 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' (Amidon 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 we might now term 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, such as Britain, Germany and Greece, with Giardini pavilions the cost of participating at the Biennale that year was between €250,000 and €500,000 (Harris 2013). 'Year after year,' Baratta claims, the Biennale 'moves forward', 'presenting an instant overview of today's worldwide art production' (Baratta 2015b; 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 2013-2014: 4; see also Madra 2006: 526). 31 nations, mainly European and thus First-World, continue to populate the limited real estate of the Giardini 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 refers to as 'semi-permanent' pavilions on a long-term lease of around 20 years (Baratta 2014).<sup>3</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 realised outside of both these sites (the

Giardini and the Arsenale) and were scattered around the city of Venice in Palazzi and other venues. While such arrangements may enable national projects with more modest budgets to be executed, an upshot of being situated outside of the biennial'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: 'resign yourself to the fact' Tim Blanks recently advised, 'that you can't possibly see everything on offer' (Blanks 2017). 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 (Mains, quoted in Weber, 2018). Yet, this was less than 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 in Chioggia: one bus ride and two vaporetto rides away from the Giardini, a trip that would take just under two hours. 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' (Amidon 2004: 102). For many postcolonial states, who – by no coincidence – are also classed as Developing Countries, the financial obstacles facing them are a serious impediment to equal participation at Venice, with far-reaching consequences: something La Biennale is yet to acknowledge.

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' (Gerard Frank, quoted in Weber 2018). Frank speaks from experience, as an artist 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'. That required him to raise \$70,000 in total, \$20,000 of which he sought to secure through online crowdfunding initiatives. This situation, he conceded, is 'actually not uncommon ... if you're not a well-known artist ... selling for millions.' However, he admits 'it's a higher level of stress to create the work and on top of that, raise the money' (Weber 2018; and Gerard Frank 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. 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 (See Grenada Arts Council; Art School Greenz; Art House 473).

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. Following his own stint there in 2011, Jamaican-born artist Charles

Campbell 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, ‘it’s the informal networks that we turn to when we need to get things done’ (Campbell 2012; and Campbell n.d.). 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, materialised. Lamentably, the plutocratic nature of the private sphere can result in even the most well-designed of these initiatives revealing 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 (see for example: M.R. Trouillot 1990; D. Nicholls 1996 [1979]; J Jelly-Shapiro 2016; J. Branche 2019). Yet, not all such private arts initiatives conform to this pattern. Artist André Eugène, of the Haiti-based collective *Atis Rezistans*, resides in the Grand Rue neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince in a *bidonville* 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). In interview, 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’ (Eugène quoted in Savage 2010).

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 assuming and exploring our era, however critically, as one witnessing a globalising art scene, the *Ghetto Biennale* draws attention to ‘the hollow irony of an apparently “globalised” art world...in light of the hardened borders faced by the majority of the world’s population’ (Savage 2010 ??). This international art event was devised out of necessity, in 2009, as *Atis Rezistans* were repeatedly denied visas in order to participate in such events, or even 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 amongst the artists of the *Grand Rue*: 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 come in for some criticism, notable amongst these being whether it facilitates a form of poverty tourism for visiting artists, it nevertheless continues to thrive and adapt with significant support from local communities. In interview in 2016, looking back over the *Ghetto Biennale*’s first four editions, Eugène explained how it had become a tool for local artists to gain recognition, opening up unprecedented opportunities in terms of international mobility and access to art events abroad: ‘I think the *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’ (Eugène quote in Casseus 2017). One such opportunity opened up to the *Atis Rezistans* following the establishment of the *Ghetto Biennale* was the chance to present their work in Haiti’s debuting national pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> edition of the Venice Biennale held in 2011 (Asquith 2013).

Haiti was represented in Venice by two separate exhibition sites *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 (both outside of the Giardini and Arsenale). Sculptural works by members of *Atis Rezistans* were on display in each site, with the latter being dedicated entirely to three artists – André Eugène, Jean Hérard Celeur and Jean-Claude Saintilus – then all part of the collective. At this second site, the three artists presented provocative, figurative assemblages typical of the *Atis Rezistans* 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 Biennale's 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 profound disparities of wealth and opportunity at play within the contemporary art world: where 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 prized more highly.

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

If artists from global South settings, like the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Caribbean region, gain access to the Venice Biennale there are still clearly profound structural inequalities to negotiate once present. 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 that 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, in 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 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 Syrian 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 2011). With the significant

involvement of a handful of Grenadian artists, gallerists and, however nominal, of 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 Bahama's debuting pavilion in Venice is instructive. Among key actors behind the Bahama's project, staged in 2013 at the 55<sup>th</sup> edition of the Biennale, a link was also made between presence at the Venice Biennale and the development of local infrastructure. Crucially, however, in this case 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 Bahamian 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 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary festivities but, rather, the culmination of a decade of 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations marked in the arts sector by the founding of the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas (NAGB) '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 link 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 Biennial. 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 ambition and capacity of the small island nation's arts sector: an impressive marker of achievement. Yet, crucially, as James contextualises these remarks, she makes clear that the Bahamas entry into the Venice Biennale was neither the wishful beginning of an attempt to establish 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 55<sup>th</sup> Biennale di Venezia 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 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, appointed as founding director of NAGB, the priority was sustenance of this new national arts institution and, through it, nurturing 'a healthy cultural ecosystem' in the Bahamas (NAGB).

It is notable, however, that the Bahamian government – who had cultivated this new initiative 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 – in Tavares Strachan – a solo featured artist all then



based in the United States (Bahamas National Pavilion 2013). Yet, notwithstanding his place of residence at the time that the Bahamian national pavilion was staged in Venice, Strachan has frequently maintained strong links with his birthplace through his arts practice. Contextual information given about Strachan and his work to accompany the Bahamas' pavilion website notes this. It highlights, for example, 'one of Strachan'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 impacts that space travel and sea exploration have on the human body led to his involvement in the establishment of the nascent Bahamian Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center (BASEC) (Bahamas National Pavilion 2013). Curatorial context for his Venice Biennale participation then goes on to assert that 'Strachan's work emphasizes the migratory, cross-cultural nature of contemporary artistic production'.

Among his works on display in the Bahamian pavilion, *Here and Now* (2013) tackled these themes most directly. The work 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 in 2013, Strachan explained 'when I think of the word "here" it often reminds me of the idea of "home", of how we define that.' He continues, 'the 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' (Viveros-Fauné, 2013). Installing these shattered phrases within a national pavilion at Venice, Strachan seems to challenge conventional thinking about what it means to belong to a certain nation or place. He alludes to the diasporan experience and particularly that facet of it which has been most heavily theorised 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 taking part 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 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 so the Bahamian pavilion - took a refreshingly candid look at the conundrum posed by the Venice Biennale's pavilion structure to diasporan 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 Jamaican 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 (Amidon 2004: 103). The pavilion exhibited work by three Jamaican-born artists, all of whom were resident in the US. Among these was artist Arthur Simms, who Amidon acknowledges as the real driving force behind the entire project. Moreover, she explains that, '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' (Amidon 2004: 102-3). Therefore, despite Jamaica having the oldest National Gallery (founded in 1974) in the Anglophone Caribbean, the fiscal climate in the nation is such that significant barriers still remain to taking part in international biennials.

In such a situation, Amidon explains, 'efforts and individuals from abroad have become the well-intentioned voice of the island'; a dynamic that, she notes, was paralleled in the organization of Latin American and African regional pavilions at the 2001 edition of La Biennale (Amidon 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 of 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) (Amidon, 2004: 109).' What Watson suggests is that the decision to exclusively focus 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 Jamaican pavilion, Amidon acknowledged that, 'though the pavilion purported to be a culturally representative "national" one, "nativist" artists did not present. Jamaican Intuitives' she continues, 'were not even considered for participation ... [because] such localized art would have caused discomfort' (Amidon 2004 104, 109, 122).<sup>4</sup> Echoing this sentiment, Sociologist Olav Velthuis has observed that the Venice Biennale inhabits an art world 'where "local" has become a pejorative term ... a synonym for insignificant artist'. In contrast, he notes, "'international" is now a selling point in itself' (Velthuis 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).

One recent Caribbean pavilion which 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 57<sup>th</sup> edition of the event in 2017 (Baratta 2019). It was a solo show of work by the reclusive polymath Frank Walter, entitled 'The Last Universal Man' in tribute to the extraordinarily broad range of his multidisciplinary work, which included copious writings and compositions as well as sculpture and painting. Within each of these streams of work, his production is also 'free and wide'. 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 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 characterised by a tender intimacy emerging as it does from the

particularities of a localised milieu (Paca 2017). Reception of this debut offering was overwhelmingly positive. Curator Thelma Golden enthused about the ‘fascinating and moving glimpse’ the exhibition offered in Walters life and work, while Nico Kos Earle admired how the exhibition ‘invite[d] visitors to inhabit the creative world and discover the humanist vision’ of Walter (Golden in Buck and Morris 2017; Kos Earle). 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.

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, this 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 staged 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 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 amongst these was the exhibition’s eponymous work by Timothy Payne: 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 neglect its multisensorial and performative elements in favour of representational portrayals centred on ‘props or photographs’ that ‘view it as illustrative of ideals, facts even, of Caribbeanness or of historical processes in the region’. Tellingly, curator Claire Tancons as well as art historian Krista A. Thompson have both linked these curatorial approaches to anthropological modes of display ‘through which the region was produced as an object of knowledge’ particularly for outsider audiences (Tancons 2012, 42; Thompson 2012, 99). The staging of such an exhibition 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, or the extent to which it offers a simulacrum of a globalised art world. This point cuts 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. Barbadian 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’ (Hadchity 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 to it 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.

Thus there is 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 globalising art scene, for whom there are difficulties and frictions surrounding their movement and participation in art events that emphasise globality. These artists describe not some rosy picture of positive change for Caribbean art communities, but one that they share with the most excoriating critiques that have been levelled at globalisation, its disadvantages and discontent. The artist Winston Kellman, writing from Barbados, has highlighted a long-running '(dis)connection between local and global expectations for Caribbean arts' (Kellman 2016: 87), which in turn has seen him advancing a personal and contingent response. Kellman's politics centre on refusing such 'global expectations', specifically that artistic success may be epitomised by the traducing of locally-distinctive identities and art practices. Kellman writes:

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. (Kellman 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 at the same time as supplying the semblance or simulacrum of attachment to place that would satisfy the 'global' demand for a (manufactured) 'local' flavour.

Kellman's position is one of many appeals to the Caribbean's art communities centred 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 that does locally-grounded Caribbean experience no favours. There is inspiration to draw here, when recognising the widely felt desire to sustain a robust and vibrant Caribbean community, 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, when 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, how may Caribbean communities see the way toward an alternative, longer-term prospect for understanding and supporting themselves in the face of globalisation without reverting to a chauvinistic

localism, nationalism, anachronistic or otherwise, and an entrenched identity politics? In short, how can the articulation of the global and the national, demonstrated in recent accession of Caribbean countries to Venice, 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, the vocabulary they have used to effusively promote art's globalising currents. With an eye on Barbados, Therese Hadchity emphasizes that a very different set of perspectives could be explored through an open and attentive reflection on the work of many artists from the region: 'I see 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' (Hadchity 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 globalising 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 globalising conditions of patronage and public reception for the region's art (Savage 2010; Gordon 2017; Frohnapfel 2018).

Indeed, extolling the alleged benefits-for-all of contemporary cultural exchange in an expanding globalising field such as Venice seems to give little heed to the fact that for many Caribbean artists, the 'milk and honey' of globalisation 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 do well to note the risks of partiality and to consider those experiences from the Caribbean that rest on the flipside of globalisation.

At the same time, the salient theorisations 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, 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: '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'. He continues: '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' (Weibel 2013: 24, 27). But those 'translations and transfers' are more modest than is boasted of them and there is no rounded agreement that we

have reached anything like a ‘postethnic state’; 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. Nor is the will to enjoin that process, or a sense of hope that it is one that 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 art historical analysis here, which might explore the comfortable distance that permits the liberal hopefulness in cultural globalisation embodied in 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 consistently signal the desire of 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 with the fact or extent of their impact in the postcolonial Caribbean and for the majority of its artists yet to be proven.

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

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

<sup>3</sup> For more on country classifications used in this article see United Nations 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'intuitives' was coined in 1979 by David Boxer (1979), then director of the National Gallery of Jamaica, and for a survey show that featured works by self-taught artists including Everaldo Brown and John Dunkley.