

Artist statement

Regarding the National Pavilion of Haiti, 58. esposizione internazionale d'arte / la biennale di Venezia

I would like to convey my gratitude to the office of ministers of culture and foreign affairs of the republic of Haiti, the official curator Giscard Bouchotte (initiator of the annual nuit blanche) of Port au prince for selecting me from the global Haitian diaspora to represent Haiti in the 2019 58th Venice Biennale. Additionally I would like to thank our small team which included Albertine Kopp of Caribbean Art Initiative, based in Basel Switzerland, and her local Venetian partner Mara Sartore of the Light Box Group. And proper mention to gallerist Caryl Crochemar-Ivrise of espace d'art contemporain 14°N 61°W (Martinique FWI) for the clarity brought to the conversations and solutions amidst the challenges faced to stage an independent pavilion project.

The Haiti Pavilion (Le pavillon d'haïti a la 58ème biennale de venise 2019) for the 58. esposizione internazionale d'arte / la biennale di Venezia was scheduled to take place in the annex of the Circolo Ufficiali della Marina Militare di Venezia (The Navy Officers Club) at Calle Seconda de la Fava, 2168 and Fondamenta Arsenale. It is with great chagrin that the haitian pavilion was not able to be realized in the final month of a half year effort. The confluence of funding issues and most importantly speed were critical factors that give virtue to early commitments by the necessary support networks necessary with large ambitious cultural projects. Given the timeframe and last minute loss of the space there has not been an official cancelation of the pavilion by the ministers of culture and foreign affairs nor by the biennale di Venezia officials. The Haiti pavilion stands in this discomfoting space of being unofficially canceled by the default of circumstances beyond the control of many who have morally supported the effort during the political turmoil the island has understandably prioritized.

I have worked with many deeply committed curators through the years who have engaged with my work with the seriousness the "soft power" cultural diplomacy requires. The late Nigerian born curator Okwui Enwezor years ago encouraged me personally to sustain a contemporaneous relevance in my art, which I continue to do. South African curator Tumelo Mosaka engaged me in dialogue spanning two years convincing him of my inclusion in his pivotal exhibition *Infinite Islands : Contemporary Caribbean Art* at the Brooklyn Museum. Curator Tatiana Flores, of Venezuelan roots, extended the exploration a decade later with her Getty Foundation exhibition *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* for which I created my *Waters of Kiskeya*. Young curators like the Paris based Elise Atangana (with Abdelkader Damani and Ugochukwu "Smooth" C. Nzewi) included my artworks in their *Dakart, Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain de Dakar Sénégal*. The Grand Palais's epic survey exhibition *Haïti: Deux siècles de création artistiques* offered me the opportunity to work with collaborating curators Mireille Peridon Jerome (Petion-ville) and Régine Cuzin (Paris) where it was an honor to be in artistic dialogue with my contemporaneous colleagues from Haiti and our diaspora. The diversity of my work has been highlighted by the american curator Valerie Cassel Oliver (Senior curator, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) in her important *Radical Presence Black Performance* exhibition. I continue to work with fascinating figures in the curatorial world such as the ascending Cameroun born Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in his *The Incantation of The Disquieting Muse* and my recent solo installation *Unfinished Histories vol IV* in the gothic ruins here in Berlin where I have had a small atelier since 2002.

The intended Haiti pavilion with the title and theme *THE SPECTACLE OF TRAGEDY* was to include a selection of recent artworks in my conversations with curator Giscard Bouchotte based in Pétiion-ville. The intended conceptually based artworks comprised of *Still Life With Flowers/ the spectacle of tragedy* a recent sculpture installation addressing the emblematic death of a young girl, Fabienne Cherisma, in Port au prince 1 week after the 12 January 2010 earthquake. Two large video-projections, *Bling* which explores consumptive madness in our capitalist era and uses the black-a-moor (such as the venetian Othello and dutch Zwarte Piet) and *Gloria* a video as an act of perverse surrender in the face of violence against dignity

during the refugee crisis experience. A final work was to commemorate the 100 year anniversary of the US Marine assassination of the haitian figure Charlemagne Péralte during the islands occupation. A descriptive text of several artworks has been published in the official *May You Live In Interesting Times* catalog of the 58. Biennale di Arte. ISBN #978-88-98727-30-8 (pages 74–75)

In lieu of an unofficially canceled pavilion our collaborators at the Circolo Ufficiali della Marina Militare di Venezia (The Navy Officers Club) offered the possibility to exhibit artworks within their club space during the official preview days and public opening of the 58. esposizione internazionale d'arte / la biennale di Venezia on the 7th thru the 11th of May 2019. Three of my conceptually based artworks were proposed and exhibited in the Navy Officers club (plus a staged public/private sidewalk performance) . *The Waters of Kiskeya*, a nine panel map print of the caribbean, was displayed in the lounge. *The Love of God*, a large acrylic painting based on an astonishing beggar's sign from Madrid was displayed in the private Officers club's seminar room. And a special biennale edition of sottobicchiere (coasters/sous-verres) from my *Negerhosen2000* series were printed and used in the bar/restaurant depicting a text from the philosopher Walter Benjamin who is known to have committed suicide while fleeing european fascism. The interplay between these works reflected the pavilion's theme of *The Spectacle of Tragedy* without Haiti being the sole figure where tragedy is unveiled. And finally in the public space of Venice a framed photograph of the beggars painting *El amor de dios* could to be seen (or ignored) by the more than 500.000 visitors *la biennale di Venezia* estimates will arrive to experience the poetic works of international cultural workers like myself and other haitian artists in the future manifestations of the Haitian Pavilion at the *esposizione internazionale d'arte*.

It is critically important that Haiti have a continued presence in the cultural opportunity offered at the Venice Biennale. The value of "soft power" of cultural diplomacy is its persistent engagement in a global conversation that we have had in asserting our voices since our forceful self-declaration of independence of 1804.

May I cite from Azad Belfort's recent 14 May 2019 Le Nouvelliste article "...Nous espérons [aussi] que cette prestigieuse Biennale continuera d'être un rendez-vous majeur pour l'art haïtien. Mais il n'y a pas que cet événement. Il y aussi toutes les grandes foires qui se tiennent régulièrement à travers le monde et dans lesquelles nous sommes quasiment absents. Le temps est sans doute venu pour la société haïtienne, dans toutes ses composantes, de commencer à accompagner l'art et les artistes haïtiens dans la voie de ce renouveau et de cette flamboyance qui avaient fasciné l'André Malraux de «l'Intemporel» à Soissons la Montagne. Venise n'est qu'un pas parmi bien d'autres à faire sur la route du futur de l'art haïtien." Source: <<https://lenouvelliste.com/article/201698/haiti-a-la-58e-biennale-de-venise-2019>>



– Jean Ulrick Désert May 19, 2019 Berlin

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