

## **The Ethos of Community: Modern Art of Haiti from the 1930s**

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**Abstract:** Latin American modernism(s) has always attracted the attention of art historians because of its historical context of colonialism and highly syncretized culture. Its arts show how different forces, intrinsic or extraneous, converge and interact to result in what is deemed Latin American modern art today. Haiti, being a Creole-speaking country which is mainly composed of African descendants, cannot always find an appropriate place within this discussion. The two historical accounts of modern art - that of Latin America and that of the Caribbean - intersect but do not collaborate to form a coherent narration. What is the more urgent problem here is that Haitian modern art is hardly defined or described. This thesis examines the art of Haiti after the 1930s and arrives at the conclusion that the ethos of community could be utilized to characterize the idiosyncrasy of Haitian modern culture. Community permeates in every aspects of Haitian modern life: from society, economics, to politics and religion. The artworks of Préfète Duffaut (1923-2012) and Laurent Casimir (1928-1990) reveal how community is depicted in oil paintings and how this theme is related to the social and economic life of Haiti. The participatory art of Joëlle Ferly (1970- ) and the photographic series of Josué Azor (1987- ) show how community is established in the religious life of Haiti. The theory of the ethos of modernism by American art historian Esther Gabara, the concept of “other modernisms” by Australian art historian John Clark and the theory about participatory art by Claire Bishop are examined here and form the general analytical structure of this thesis. The research is based on a careful reading of the historical documents and scholarly works which explain the significance of community for Haiti and on a series of art historical literature which visualize the development of Haitian art from the 1930s until recent years.

**Keywords:** Haitian art; ethos; community; multiple modernisms; participatory art; Préfète Duffaut; Laurent Casimir; Joëlle Ferly; Josué Azor

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## Introduction

My study in the Department of Art History of Leiden University over the past year has revolved around two general themes: interculturality and modernism. Due to a disciplinary background in Spanish language and literature, I have always sought for examples from Latin American art history which could be fitted in these two themes. On the other way round, the theories about interculturality and modernism have also offered me with a new perspective when reading artworks which are produced in this region. The selection of Haiti as the case study initially originates from my interest in the kind of art represented by Hector Hyppolite, a rather “primitive” art in modern times. However, also coming from a non-Euramerican cultural background, I found it hard to either re-cast an anthropological anachronistic view on Haitian art or to analyze the consequences of doing so. It is my personal belief in that each culture owns something (the ethos) that can ultimately distinguish itself from all other cultures that led me to consider the concept of “multiple modernisms” and Haitian art happens to be a rich resource in this aspect as well.

This work is the final proof of my Master Art History and the main research question that it deals with is “what can be defined as the ethos of Haiti in relation to modernism?” Modernism has been one of the perpetuating interests in art history both within and beyond the Euramerican academic tradition. Latin American modern art is of no exception and has already attracted much scholarship. However, just like other non-pedigreed modernisms, Latin American modernism also remains difficult to define. Is there a different way of narrating Latin American modernism? If so, how could the modernism of each Latin American country interact with this context? The existing voices which try to cast light upon these questions are multidirectional and the improbability of reaching an agreement (even an agreement over a central polemic will do) somehow dissipates, little by little, the pictorial strength that we perceive from Latin American artists’ works, as well as the effort to accentuate modernism in a more globally art historical manner. Although this work bases its discussion under the premise of multiple modernisms, it also agrees with that in choosing the term “modernism”, we still tend to find something like an overarching value or spirit for the art from different cultures. For example, there are critics who believe that Latin American modernism takes the form of postmodernism because its art of this period actively “engage popular culture, decenter the authorial subject, undermine scientific truth, and interrupt the forward motion of progress - social, individual, and even narrative.” (Gabara 2008, 15) Yet in spite of offering this refreshing opinion, these authors still insist in the term “modernism”, which once again proves the urgency to reexamine the theories related. Since the 1930s, Haitian art has always distinguished itself from other Latin American or Caribbean countries’ art in a more fundamental way: many Haitian artists are self-educated and their artworks are soaked with a popular quality - the world of the Vodou religion. Because Vodou has a much longer tradition than the introduction of Western art into the island country, art of this category has also enjoyed a relatively

integrate route of development, which makes it easier to observe where modernism breaks with the traditional and how it is compared to other modernisms.

The trunk of this thesis could be divided into two parallel parts. Chapter 1 and 2 are dedicated to the theorization of Latin American modernism and a reading of the artworks from Préfète Duffaut and Laurent Casimir. Chapter 3 and 4 tackles the thematic of community-based art and offers an interpretation of the performance carried out by Joëlle Ferly and a photographic series by Josué Azor. The concluding chapter aims at explaining how the ethos of modernism in Latin America is transformed into the ethos of community in Haiti in the modern times. The two seemingly disparate sets of theories involved in this work enter into a dialogue in this chapter, completing the scenario where “the ethos of community” is elevated to the guiding characteristic of Haitian modern art.

Chapter 1 reviews the principal existing literature on Latin American modern art and opts for Esther Gabara’s (2008) idea of the ethos of modernism as the theoretical framework of this thesis. This framework is, in turn, in harmony with a more historiographical concern which is the multiple modernisms, or the “other modernisms”, as formulated by John Clark. (2008) The term “ethos” here can be understood in several ways. *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two definitions of ethos: the first refers to “the characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era” and the second contrasts it with *pathos*, “with reference to ancient Greek rhetoric and art.” (OED 2014) It is clear that the first definition of ethos frames ethics as a way of living together and building community, which altogether brings out a shared spirit. Because there is already a sense of cohesiveness implied in the definition of ethos, one of the special characteristics of Haiti is that the Vodou religion serves as a natural condition of forming this spirit of community. Indeed, the modern organization of Vodou followers is quite different from that of Christianity in the sense that the latter usually perform an independent life outside the church. Although Vodou does have a great impact on the daily life on Haiti, it could not explain the formation of community in Haiti in an exhaustive way: other non-religious factors contribute to the ethos of community as well. The second definition of ethos derives from classical rhetoric, but its actual use nowadays designates the aesthetic sense, which could better be rephrased as a “way of life” and tactics of survival, rather than a series of formal mandate. (Gabara 2008, 7) To be more specific, it is related to the social and economic side of the modern life in Haiti. This work is structured around these two basic definitions as well: it analyzes the paintings of Duffaut and Casimir as an attempt to establish a relationship between the Haitian modernist aesthetics and its socio-economic situation, which includes the density of population, the market as a major form of economy, etc. It gives an interpretation of the performance of Ferly and the photographs of Azor to how their artworks are spiritually (religiously) motivated and politically significant, taking into consideration, in particular, the recent four years after the 2010 Haiti earthquake. However, it would be naive to render Duffaut and Casimir solely aesthetical and Ferly and Azor, ethical, as the two facets of the ethos of modernism are inseparable in their works. Therefore, the decision to distribute the argumentation into two parts is for a well-ordered structure, rather than a hasty simplification.

Chapter 2 briefly traces the history of Haiti after the year 1934, in which United States retreated its governors from the island. Special focus is given to the 1950s, which was described by some as an epoch of renaissance. (Gold 2013) It examines the social and economic status of those years and the personal background of Duffaut and Casimir to give an interpretation of their paintings. Duffaut's imaginary cities is a mix of reality and his ingenious "urban planning" and Casimir's patterned daily scenes record how Haitian people struggled to survive but maintained an optimistic attitude towards life at the same time. The genre of these paintings is quite usual: it is not precise to denominate them landscape, urban paintings, portraits, or genre paintings since neither of these seem to be what the artists really choose as the theme. However, the way in which they use the canvas produces a fierce tension and even a feeling of anxiety (almost a trypanophobia in Duffaut's and *horror vacui* in Casimir's) for the spectators and both effects are caused by the depiction of multitude of gathering people. So it may well be the case that it is the extravagance of people that they want to emphasize as an expression of community life.

Chapter 3 brings into dialogue the works of several theorists which elaborate on the community-based art. This topic faces the same problem with Latin American modernism: a dozen of concepts are created in description of this emergent phenomenon in the art world yet neither seems to be fully convincing. This thesis selects Claire Bishop (2012) as a starting point because compared to other critics, her view of the "participatory art" turns the spotlight more to this art medium's political implications and potential consequences. This approach has not only made the linkage between the ethics and the spiritual and political life of modern Haiti more accessible, but also facilitates a comparison between other Latin American participatory art and the performance of Ferly since it is true that the continent as a whole respond to the history of colonialism and that both countries share the experience of dictatorship. The concern for the consequences, rather than the cause or the theorization of the process of making, is also helpful when it comes to the urgent need of Haiti to boost the national spirit in the recovery from the 2010 earthquake.

Chapter 4 first makes the comparison between participatory art projects of Argentina in the 1960s with Ferly's performance *Revolution* in 2011, trying to figure out the elements which has conditioned latter's work. The thesis gives an attempt to interpret the work also as one imbued with Vodou symbol, which further could be seen in the photographic series *Pwojè Vodou* (Project Vodou) of Josué Azor. Moreover, the chapter shows how community as the core of Haitian modern life has remained unchanged throughout the years. Together with chapter 2, this chapter completes the panorama of the ethos of community. While Gabara mainly substituted the ethos of modernism with the ethos of photography in Mexico and Brazil, this work believes that the community could also be an alternative of modernism in the context of Haiti. Along with this effort, the work has tried to expand the theory of Gabara on Latin American modernism in making it less medium-specific.

The concluding chapter briefly states how the two set of theories engaged in this work could be drawn towards each other. It also tries to answer the ultimate questions which were raised by Clark

and Gabara. If every locale has a history of modern art, how is the notion of modernism regulated in the world art history? Throughout this work, I have intended not to make a distinction between Haitian modern art and Haitian contemporary or postmodern art. However, as exemplified in the first chapter, there are some art historians who have already been working in the direction of constructing Haitian contemporary art. Therefore, what would the ethos of community do to the contemporary artists in Haiti who continuously face “related challenges of globalization, and image-saturated modern world, and new technologies of imaging race and gender”? (Gabara 2008, 12)

## **1. Dialoguing of Two Accounts: the Positioning and Reading of Haitian Art of the Modern Times**

A peculiarity about the historical account of modern Haitian art is that it has been included in two different contexts: the art history of Latin America and that of the Caribbean. The two geographical regions overlap and interact extensively and so do the two different accounts. This amounts to the complexity of the reading of Haitian art especially when concepts from both sides come together contradicting each other. For example, *indigenismo* - the way to exalt the pre-Columbian heritage and to incorporate it the fine arts - is often perceived as a contemporary and contrasting phenomenon to modernism in the context of Latin American art. (Ades 1989) When modernists looked for a ‘liberating’ force in art, the supporters of *indigenismo* widely absorbed motifs from ancient civilizations embracing an idea similar to that of the noble savage. To draw inspiration from popular culture and folk art was not considered *indigenismo* at the beginning for it is a trend which came much later in the 1970s. (Lucie-Smith 1993, 7-20) But when it comes to Haitian art, not only does the term *indigenismo* loses much of its validity because of Haitian art’s relative disconnection with its pre-Columbian heritage, but at the same time, Haitian artists’ resort to local Vodou motifs was a result as much as of the encouragement from European sponsorship as of the promotion of a national identity by the government. (Poupeye 1998, 64-7) Therefore, it is urgent to find an overarching theory or opinion that could combine reconcilable points of both contexts before making an analysis of the modern art from countries such as Haiti, Cuba and Dominican Republic.

The most general historical accounts of Latin American art used to view Haitian modern art as represented by a handful of artists who were associated to the Centre d’Art since the 1940s. These included figures such as Hector Hyppolite, Rigaud Benoit and Philomé Obin. Their artworks were always defined as Surrealist paintings because upon discovering them, André Breton appraised them for having revealed a world of mysteriousness, characterized by depictions of Vodou gods and rituals. However, reexamined today, it is knowable that these artworks are more likely the source rather than the participants in Surrealism. (Ades 1989, 227-33) The paintings of Hyppolite lacked the layer of unconsciousness and automaticity of European Surrealism, and the art of Benoit and Obin frequently addressed social topics, which gave their works a rather realist tone. Behind this categorization is

perhaps the deep-rooted historicism or an attempt to fit Haitian art into the well-established, greater historiographical paradigm of modernism: the names of the primitive artists of Haiti often appeared along with those who really witnessed the avant-garde, such as the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. (Wainwright 2011, 1-21) Not all historical accounts agreed with this classification and Edward Lucie-Smith, (1993) for example, omitted these ‘masters’ of Haitian art in his *Latin American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. He also traces the origin of Latin American modern art in a different way from Dawn Ades, (1989) stating that the modernism did not fully unfold until the 1920s, while the latter dates it to the independence movements. While both are justifiable, it should be noted that although Haiti was the first country to gain independence in Latin America after years of struggle, it has not been able to institute a healthy political system on its own. For more than two hundred years after independence, Haiti has always been suffering from political ups and downs: military governments and governments led by mulatto elite took turns to control the country most of the time and dictatorship, foreign occupation or intervention took place for the rest of the time. As a consequence, it is especially hard to demarcate a starting point of Haitian modernism. However, it is generally agreed that the years from the 1930s to the 1950s did see a revival or blossom of Haitian arts and culture, which was partly permitted by the finalization of the American Occupation in 1934.

In comparison, the historical accounts of Caribbean art very often tend to stress the multiculturalism of the region in the first place and the difficulty itself to thread such incongruent cultures and arts. The effort would sometimes end up in an over-simplified generalization of the diversity or fragmented narratives of art from each country or territory only loosely grouped by styles and periods. (Poupeye 1998) (Mosaka 2007) It seems that the only way to deal with arts from the Caribbean is to narrate them in even smaller contexts or altogether, separately. Nonetheless, it is useful to see what these accounts offer for understanding Haitian modern art. In *Caribbean Art*, Veerle Poupeye (1998) traces the sprout of Haitian modern art to a collection of essays written by the Haitian scholar Jean Price Mars titled *Ainsi parla l'oncle*. In this publication of 1928, the scholar called for a reevaluation of Afro-Haitian popular culture. Rather than Surrealist, Poupeye considers those early paintings commissioned by galleries such as Centre d'Art to be intuitive art. The term “intuitive art”, borrowed from Jamaican art historian David Boxer, is an alternative for “primitive art” and “naive art” showing an effort to detach from the notion the racial and social preconceptions. It is used to emphasize that the artists’ work were often untutored and visionary, which in turn reflects their lack of access to educational resources in a society strictly divided by bloodstream. The art of the intuitive artists differentiated itself from that of the elitists and did not engage European avant-garde influences. However, they were parallel in incorporating nationalist ideas and Vodou elements. This shows again that in the context of Haitian modern art, the distinction between *indigenismo* and modernism was not such a clear-cut one as that of other Latin American countries.

Jean Claude Garoute, known as Tiga, was the founder of the Poto-Mitan school in 1968. The school turned to Vodou cosmology and pre-Hispanic culture as a basis of aesthetic investigations



during the most suppressive dictatorship of Haiti, the governance of the Duvaliers. Haitian artists were sometimes forced to turn to general existential, social and cultural issues when public political commentary was restricted. Tiga also initiated the Saint-Soleil group in the early seventies, project which saw the emergence of a group of peasant artists. The movement was viewed as an important revitalization of Haitian art and a transition linking the modern and the more contemporary Haitian artists. In the south of the island, Bernard Sejourné created the School of Beauty, which adopted a lyrical style with the depiction of nature, landscape and human figures. Haitian art after the deposition of Jean-Claude Duvalier led to freer artistic expressions such as the street murals in Port-au-Prince. These works show more diverse sources of inspiration and foreign influences. (Poupeye 1998) The art and career of the new generation of Haitian artists such as Mario Benjamin, Maxence Denis, and Edouard Duval Carrié reveal the globalized scene of world art in the contemporary period. (Mosaka 2007) The analysis of their works could not be realized without considering Haitian's socioeconomic and political context, as well as its interaction with the international art market.

Various theoretical frameworks are also offered by art historians to analyze the modernism in Latin America or the Caribbean. Annie Paul, (2007) for example, identifies two poles of art making in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Caribbean represented respectively by Haiti and Cuba. The rest of the Caribbean islands would fall roughly into the gray area between the black and white. She concludes that Haitian modern art was to a large extent confined by the historical determinism of being stereotypically identified with exotic and exaggerated visual descriptions. This determinism originates from the foundation of Centre d' Art in 1944 and was strengthened by Frantz Fanon's argument of that the spiritual and mythical life added up to Haitian natives' feeling of inhibitions facing the colonial or post-colonial discourse. The determinism was also solidified by Edouard Glissant, who believes that the Creole oral tradition was the cause for Haitian artists' choice of subjects. Meanwhile, in Cuba, the revolution succeeded in reorganizing the social and economic life of the country and pledged free education for those talented in art. "Although art production is completely state-funded, Cuban artists enjoy an unparalleled freedom in choice of styles and themes. And unlike their counterparts in many other socialist states, they are not corralled into versions of Soviet social realism." (Paul 2007, 26) Yet despite of being systematic and explicit when documenting how Caribbean modern art was viewed in the past, Paul fails to provide a clear answer of how to overcome the dichotomy of the choice of the "local, traditional, nationalistic, spiritual" versus the "cosmopolitan, modernist, international, substantial". In her further attempt to deconstruct high modernism, Paul quotes Stuart Hall to suggest that the Caribbean postmodernism will be characterized by an opening up of boundaries. Modern art will exit the museums and galleries and enter the streets, producing various forms of "vernacular moderns or popular moderns", (Paul 2007, 32) such as the existent Jamaican music and dance - for visual arts, we must wait and see. The most significant part of her argumentation consists nevertheless in her envision of what this postmodernist spectacle actually means for Caribbean artists and general public: it allows them to represent and express for themselves and to be concurrently the subject and

the object art. What she proposes as a “postmodernist” alternative resonates more with Esther Gabara’s (Gabara 2004) formulation of Latin American modernism as an expression of its ethos.

According to Gabara, (2004) ethos is “a form of cultural production that emerges at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. This practice proves to be neither obsessed only with the formal composition and purity of the work of art, nor reducible to a didactic political message.” The ethics here does not only refer to the morality of the people but also to “the characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations” (OED 2014) It may be helpful to rephrase the concept within the scope of this work: the ethos is the mentality or a way of thinking which supposedly has made Latin American art tradition distinct from other traditions and Haitian modernism dissimilar to other modernisms. In the case of Brazil, Mário de Andrade expressed the ethos neither in the artistic language of European primitivism nor in the language of *indigenismo*. And what is important here is not the new language he created, but the prerequisite of doing so: the freedom of representation based on his true feelings and his way of thinking about the people, city, national identity and spirit after the independence. (Gabara 2004) Thus Latin American modernism lies not in stylistic changes, oscillation between, or abandonment of the two poles, but in the region’s ethos. It is an active spirit rather than a passive reaction.

To analyze Latin American modernism is to lean the emphasis to its art, literature, and philosophy in search of its ethos. The methodology is situated in the historiography of multiple modernisms, or, “other modernisms” as defined by John Clark. (2008) What he advocates is practically an objective reading of non-Euramerican art. That is not to say that all non-Euramerican art should be examined exclusively, which in the case of Latin America will be impossible, but to give up preconceptions about modernism and modernity when doing so. In fact, Clark’s conclusion of the third types of “other modernity” is in accordance with what Gabara formulates as the ethos. He believes that there are different ways of understanding the multiple modernisms: on a tactically descriptive manner, the other modernism of a certain region is marked by its cultural differences; and on a strategically methodological level, one can see the other modernism as inlaid in “an overall historical set of patterns which have particular structures whose variation is limitable”. (Clark 2008, 405) Apart from these two basic mentalities of considering other modernisms, another type includes interspaces, which suits the situation of Latin America, where the genealogical descent is incomprehensible without considering extraneous influence. (Clark 2008)

However, multiple modernism as an approach is also questioned for its significance and validity by some theorists for it seems quite easy to slip into a disguised way for “unfavorable cultural comparisons on the basis that separate temporalities are hardly of parallel or equivalent historical value.” (Wainwright 2011, 9) However, the ethos of a country could be seen as an accumulation of spatial and temporal experiences which provisionally converge in the current political boundaries of this country. In an idealistic pattern, the accumulation starts from the moment when the first human being sets his or her foot on this land. If we believe in this uninterrupted pace of transition, when no

holocaust occurs to destroy the whole civilization, then it is easy to contradict the false anthropological anachronism imposed upon the multiple cultures. To take a step back, we could at least build a model of multiple modernism, if not multiple “civilizations” in this way because it is true and tragic that the epidemics brought by the colonizers did change the whole course of Latin American history. As a consequence, the current work still bases itself in the general framework of multiple modernisms and refers to the idea of that Latin American modernism derives from its ethos in its analysis of Haitian modern art. To be more specific, this is to require that we first acknowledge Haiti’s modernity and its individual dynamics in transferring modernity to its modern art. Subsequently, it is necessary to give up the formal Euramerican art discourses which constricts the concept of modernism to certain features and which set up the boundaries between the pre-modern, modern and postmodern. Thirdly, it is also important to reexamine what actually constitute the objects of study of Haitian modern art. While Euramerican modernism is mainly concerned with fine art, performance, Vodou rituals, and an act of raising fund for reconstruction may also be contained in a more generalized concept of art. (Clark 2008)

What are the characteristics of Haitian modern art and how does it fit into the overarching theory of Latin American modernism? How has Haitian art changed from the modern times to the contemporary? In order to answer these questions, the work chooses one or two artists from both the modern period and the contemporary period. This seemingly far-fetched selection of examples spanning a temporal gap of nearly fifty years actually takes into consideration of the impossibility of free expression under the most oppressive regime - the dictatorship of the Duvaliers, namely, ‘Papa Doc’ from 1957 to 1971 and ‘Baby Doc’ from 1971 to 1986. It is not to say that art totally disappeared in this period, and it will definitely be instructive and meaningful to see how Haitian art reacted to the politics, but for now, it would be a fair to conclude from different historical accounts (Bellegarde-Smith 1990) (Vieux-Chauvet 2010) (Gold 2013) that the living conditions and psychological status of the artists and authors of that time were severely damaged compared to either pre- or post-Duvalier era. This has indeed caused a fracture in Haitian art history and its consequences could be seen better from posterior artworks.

## **2. The Renaissance of the Fifties and its Artists**

To read Haitian art in the framework of Latin American or Caribbean modernism, it is important to demarcate the starting point of this movement. Almost all texts on Haitian arts and culture indicate that the three decades from 1930s to 1950s were a threshold to something new, although not all were sure how to define this novelty. As mentioned above, art historians who trace the origin of Haitian modern art to the 1930s emphasize especially the termination of the American Occupation and the increase of nationalistic sentiments. The Centre d’Art was established in May 1944, and at the same time, two major UNESCO exhibitions of modern art was held in Paris, both exhibiting modern art

from Haiti. These two events draw international attention to the island and provided a platform for the further development of Haitian art. (Poupeye 1998, 64-7) However, it was not until the 1950s when all the advantageous circumstances turned into an optimistic effect. The blossom of Haitian arts and culture was denominated the “renaissance of the fifties” by American author Herbert Gold. Visual art was an important aspect of this renaissance: new pigments were provided, artists received economic compensation for their artworks, and murals of public architectures were commissioned. The project of the murals for the Episcopal Holy Trinity Cathedral in Port-au-Prince, in particular, gave artists both freedom and responsibility that must be well balanced in the execution of the work. Apart from visual art, literature, music and dance all enjoyed prosperity as well. The renaissance of the fifties was characterized for a revival of the spirit of the nation and its people after the termination of the American Occupation in 1934. (Gold 2013, 51-68)

Préfète Duffaut was one of the representatives of this “renaissance”. His artworks are characterized by a synthesis of divine spirits and mundane reality from the very beginning. He claimed to have started his career after receiving a command from either his sister or Virgin Mary in his dream and he is known for the depiction of his home village, Jacmel, situated in the southern coast of Haiti. (Monnin 1975-9) (Domond 2006) (Préfète Duffaut, Piété et urbanisme imaginaire 2008) While the village is indeed surrounded by mountains and waters, Duffaut adds his own imagination when depicting it. The dream bridges, the winding paths which lift the island to the height of the sky, and the figure of gods which sometimes occupies the center of the canvas have together endowed his images with a sense of fantasy. What is also singular of his works is the way in which he depicts the people. They are frequently reduced to innumerable tiny black dots which fill up wherever they can logically exist: on crooked roads, in open spaces like city squares, and in the beaches, etc. Their individual identity is clearly unrecognizable and they do not seem to form a community, which is shown in some other contemporary artists’ works as an expression of the collective identity. In latter case, although the people depicted are also anonymous, their collective appearance becomes meaningful because they participate in all sorts of historical events and social activities. But we are not totally uncertain about these tiny figures of Duffaut either: their skin color is black and they often wear clothes of “tropical colors” such as red, yellow and green. Naturally, they are ordinary people from Jacmel, just like Duffaut himself. It is a “group-self-portrait” in the sense that all the figures look alike paraphrasing the physical attributes and personality of the artist himself, being black and being satisfied with the liberty to choose his own colors, rather than disguising himself as a primitive Vodou artist.

Duffaut participated in the project of murals for the Cathedral in Port-au-Prince: he painted the murals *The Streets of Jacmel* and *The Temptation of Christ*. (Russell 2013, 58) As argued by Gold, (2013, 51-68) this experience might have given him the idea to combine a social function into his paintings. A radical example of this incorporation of social meaning is when Duffaut accepted the Ary Bordes’s commission to portray Haiti’s problem of overpopulation in 1974. Bordes was the first Haitian physician in bringing Western medicine and contraception to his country in the 1960s. He

believed that methods such as birth control and teaching mothers the “right” ways to deliver and rear children would help Haiti to shake off poverty and to step into the right track leading to modernization. The paintings of Duffaut are lost now, but it is said that they “portrayed Haiti so overcrowded that people spilled off the sides of cliffs.” (Silvia 2014, 265) These artworks did attract some attention from the U.S. to the issue (Silvia 2014) and some critics would go very far in their interpretation of the densely aggregated human figures, arguing that Duffaut has foreseen the consequences of the excessive growth of population and that in his view, alien beings will eventually establish relation with Earth, either conquering or rescuing it. (Monnin 1975-9) However, with a retrospection of Duffaut’s earlier paintings, it is obvious that the artist has fixed this way of depicting people at a very early stage. For example, the painting *Harbor*, realized in 1956, already shows this tendency. (Image 1) The small harbor is clamped by hills and houses on the left and right and the sea extends itself to the foreground, where a little urban square is depicted. The road is painted with light ochre, contrasting the color of the buildings which is always changing. Therefore, the view of the spectators is easily guided by the winding road which girdles all the way around the harbor and the people which gather on the road are emphasized, upon being repeatedly observed by the viewers. The human figures occupy all the spare spaces in the picture and even the narrow paths at both far ends are represented with queues of people.

It is true that some later works of Duffaut such as *The Basins Bleu* and *Imaginary City* seem to boast the inclusion of even more people: thousands of them all drawn one by one by hand, but the difference is about the scope rather than the quality. In *Imaginary City* (Image 2), for example, a whole city is constructed with brush. The fictional city is composed of approximately a hundred houses and a dozen of bridges. Bridge has been a symbol of scarcity in Haiti because of the very bad condition of transportation. There is a saying in Haiti - “if you could always make a detour, you will never walk across a bridge.” (Li 1983, 544) So the bridges depicted in *Imaginary City* are more of what Duffaut would plan for his city and for Haiti. However, throughout these artworks, the way of depicting the community has been the same, with all the figures taking up the spaces left in light ochre. The widening of Duffaut’s perspective could be roughly illustrated with the comparison of another *Harbor* (Image 3) painted in 1956 and a 1995 work titled *Haiti* (Image 4), the latter being pretty much the culmination of this effort. The scope of *Harbor* was so small - only focused on one bridge and several rows of houses near it - that exactly eleven people would suffice to fill up the spare spaces, meanwhile the scope of *Haiti* is so large - mapping the whole country in one work - that only one or two people are depicted to stand for a city in a symbolic way. In a way, Duffaut returns to his starting point by shrinking his scale. As a result, although Duffaut’s depiction of community does reflect the actual density of population of Haiti, which is the second highest among all Latin American countries, it is unsatisfactory to simply conclude that Duffaut actually transmitted via his paintings a fear for overpopulation because the density in his art has not really changed along with its real growth through the years.

The Haitian writer Marie Flore Domond, (2006) who has a personal relationship with Préfète Duffaut, attributes “the joviality of the figures, their glitter and the composition of the colors” to the artist’s “tendency to always wish to dominate the primitive symbols in an original way.” While it is true that Duffaut should be categorized as an intuitive artist because he did not receive academic artistic training before he picked up the brush, but it is hard to define what elements in Duffaut’s fantasy cityscape really count as “primitive symbols” - the tankers, the elevated bridges, and the catholic churches are all Western motifs, and his personal style in structuring the cities and depicting the communities is highly individualistic, which did not echo in the artworks of his contemporaries. So the far-fetched categorization can hardly offer us a new perspective or a new approach. What is more valuable of Domond’s account is that she noticed the artist’s attitude towards the community: “However, through various misfortunes, the artist showed certain bitterness about the egoist and unjust behaviors of the majority of the community, though without rancor. He undoubtedly desired more solidarity and gratitude, perhaps.” (Domond 2006) Duffaut keeps a deep affection for Jacmel and its people; his imaginary vision is based on its real geographical features: the harbor village is situated right at estuary of Riviere de la Cosse, surrounded on three sides by hills. As a child, Duffaut used to assist his father, a boat builder, as a carpenter. On the way to his father’s workshop, he had to climb over the mountains. (Préfète Duffaut, *Piété et urbanisme imaginaire* 2008) This childhood experience partly explains the choice of theme and the composition of his artworks. More importantly, Duffaut’s paintings recall the ethos of Haiti during the 1940s and early 50s, a period of relative stable transitions of government. The Revolution of 1946 could be seen as a sign of the awakening of the historical self-consciousness of the general public. Strikes and protests were organized by government workers, teachers and shopkeepers, opposed to the presidency of Elie Lescot. The five following years of the presidency of Dumarsais Estimé (1946-1950) was quite special in Haitian modern history. For the first time a representative of the anti-elitist and anti-mulatto position was elected. Estimé expanded the educational system, encouraged the development of rural cooperatives, and raised the salary of civil servants. The portions of middle-class and lower-class blacks are raised in the public sectors. He also suggested Vodou to be considered a religion equivalent to Catholicism. However, failing to meet the elite’s demand and with the economic decline, he resigned in 1950. The successive presidency of Magloire (1950-1956) was a corruptive one and saw the rise of François Duvalier, which soon grasped power and imposed three nightmarish decades on the island country. It was in these circumstances that Duffaut started to paint.

But how should we define the ethos of Haiti during the 1940s and 50s? Analyzing the Carnival and Rara parades in Haiti in the 1990s, McAlister (2002) specifies that it is an “ethos of play”. And looking back to the 1950s, Gold (Gold 2013, 56) describes the same joyful spirit of the people calling it “continual eruptions of playfulness, as if Carnival and Rara could be made to inhabit the entire year.” Haitian people are glad that they have survived the political instability and were still alive: passersby greeted each other on the street, stopped to exchange the story of the day, songs, dances and artworks

are frequently improvised. It is not a coincidence that the two scholars, from quite different backgrounds and approaches, arrive at exactly the same conclusion. Evidence of this ethos of play is also traceable in Duffaut's paintings. In the *Harbor* of 1956, the figures are not simply arrayed in geometric patterns. Right under the artist's signature, a cheerful couple is looking in the direction of the ship. The man, dressed in gray with a sombrero, extends his right arm as if he is waving to the ship or specifying something far away that he described to his partner. The woman, wearing a white dress and a ponytail, turns slightly towards the direction the man is pointing or waving at. She holds her partner's hand and the couple, seems to be still in movement. Following the direction of their steps along the baluster, there are three groups of three people which seem like families wandering around in a festival. Around the greenbelt in the square, there are also some couples holding both hands. Whether they are dancing, playing games or simply chatting, the scenario is rendered with a joyful atmosphere. Although the scale would not permit us to verify the activities in which each figure is involved, the great variety of their postures and motions suggest that they are entertained in different ways. The play is thus also seen as the sum of very individualistic expressions of habits and freedom. Even when later the figures are dwindled even more, the colors of the cloths still remain diverse. It is perhaps the reflection of a personal aesthetic inclination and also a symbol of the idiosyncrasy of the community - a community is always sustained by its diversity and fluidity.

Unfortunately, the renaissance of the fifties did not last long because Françoise Duvalier soon rose to power. It was a "story of balance within unbalance" and a "respite in a long attractive disaster". (Gold 2013, 68) Haitian modern art has left its influences on future generations but curiously, this inheritance was first demonstrated in a group of disgruntled artists' breaking away from the Centre d'Art. In 1950, the Foyer des Arts Plastiques was founded and the members claimed themselves to be modernists, including Lucien Price and Dieudonné Cedor. The development of Price is mainly due to the contacts of Haiti with the Caribbean and European avant-garde movements and he is said to be the first Haitian artist to bring full abstraction into the island country. Meanwhile, Cedor originally created primitive paintings, and the intention of the dissident group was to integrate the primitive into the mainstream modernism and to transform modernism into something more closely related to the Haitian public. Apparently, there is a lack of stylistic coherence and cohesion within the Foyer des Arts Plastiques, and this eventually led to its end. The Foyer des Arts Plastiques never really showed a comparable reputation to that of the Centre d'Art. (Poupeye 1998) Casimir was born on May 8, 1928 in Anse-à-Veau, a small town also situated in the southern peninsula of Haiti. He first joined the Centre then left for the Foyer, which may be a proof of his artistic attitude which values the depiction of popular life more than that of Vodou themes, which at the time were highly manipulated by foreign buyers. However, it was for the stylized crowd scenes that he became famous among the collectors later on. His artworks mostly feature open-air activities such as market business or leisure pursuits like cockfighting, as shown in the homonymous work painted in mid-1970s (Image 5). (Russell 2013)

In fact, the works of Casimir shares quite some general similarities with that of Duffaut. Firstly, both increase the density of his figures. In *Cockfighting*, the figures stand so compactly from the foreground to the background that they nearly take up the whole space within the frames. Basically, no gaps are left between any two figures, except in the bottom where one can still distinguish different person's legs, in the middle where the sea of people is divided by houses and in the top where distant mountains are depicted. Secondly, both artists prefer bright "tropical" colors. The palette of Casimir may be narrower than Duffaut's, but he would not dare to use it in such a contrasting way. The third similarity is that both depict figures gathering for certain social activities. Duffaut has also created works that show, for example, the Catholic procession and trades. *Cockfighting*, nevertheless, is a popular sport in Haiti. People would bet on the rooster of the participant for money. At first glance, Casimir seems to be only bringing all the attributes in Duffaut's artworks to a more radical level, causing a fierce expression of the same feelings. The idea of the Foyer of absorbing European modernism does not seem so evident. However, taking a step back to grasp all the content on the canvas at once, one can quickly perceive the highly abstract pattern of the colors. For example, two rows which both contain figures in white are drawn apart. There seems to be also a central axis governing the symmetry of orange and yellow. This axis runs down and guides the viewers' sight towards the circle where the cockfighting is taking place. The circle is also guarded by two figures wearing sombrero standing in symmetrical opposition. The individuals are depicted in a more uniform and monotonous way where their body is roughly represented by one brush of color. A few strips are added to this color patch as if to indicate that body still has some volume and the arm is reduced to a forceless string attached to the body. Most of the figures are in profile, showing one eye. The few figures which entirely face us, curiously, hold both their arms. This weird body language is not totally inexplicable if the painting is examined parallel with *Crowded Market* (Image 6), drawn in 1972. Here, the figures which face us are all sustaining the fruit or vegetable on their head with two arms. The artist may just want to show the audiences how people in Haiti transport their item to or inside the market. Just like in *Cockfighting*, people in the row on the top of the canvas are also uplifting their empty arms. It is not a coincidence and the artist is probably repeating his pattern to forge a personal style. He directly uses his market figures in the context of cockfighting, thus awkwardly; some of them were not changed of their gesture.

The market scene of Casimir is a typical theme of visual arts under the Duvaliers. There was not much freedom of expression, so Haitian artists had to either comment on the politics in an obscured way as Jasmin Joseph, or bluntly turn to other general existential, social and the cultural issues. (Poupeye 1998, 130) The artworks of Casimir have lost much degree of the animated spirit of the people in Duffaut's works. The crowd in *Cockfighting* emits a tense feeling of alertness: nobody really seems to be focusing on the game. Although the figures are arranged tightly and there does not seem to be much interactions. The wide-opened staring eyes communicate what is not possible to transmit with verbal language and the whole painting causes certain anxiety and pressure to the viewers.



Nevertheless, Casimir truly registers the community life of Haiti, which could be seen as another aspect of the national ethos. In Haiti, the end of colonialism did not bring away the heavily lopsided economic structure: the economy is principally supported by the labor-intensive agricultural section, and the mulattos, who have mostly inherited the land left behind by the French colonizers, in turn leased it to the farmers. The technical level of farming is low since the higher-class people were not interested in long-term development of the economy. (Li 1983) In this situation, the market has become a fundamental space for economy because it is the only way families and individuals could sell the crops of their land or handmade gadgets to buy the necessities from others. The labor was here is divided unequally among men and women and the latter would often need to assume a double responsibility of both raising children at home and going to the market to sell and buy daily necessities. (Silvia 2014)

If modern art of Latin America and the Caribbean is, first of all, a double positioning of the artists as both the object and the subject, then Duffaut is the best representative of this tendency among all artists of the same generation. “The uncharted area between formal skills and the people’s visions, which kept Haitians separated from themselves for centuries, was beginning to find expression.” (Gold 2013, 57-8) Duffaut found his way of self-expression; he mixed the theme of tropical palette, which used to do palm trees, beaches and Creole maidens in an objectifying manner aiming at the cruise-ship buyers, with a subjective vision of the communities and personal visualization of the Vodou gods. The Centre d’Art contributed to lessening the shackle of the artists with support of money so that the artists did not always need to depict themselves and Haitian people as how they were imagined by the customers. The pictorial style of Duffaut is also a result of this change and the motto of the artists would be “Me, I’m the painter.” (Gold 2013, 58) Therefore, even it may be seen by art historians as such, it is unfair to say that Duffaut has drawn in a style which progressed towards abstraction. His attitude towards cosmopolitanism or nationalism is not a particular one, nor does he totally embrace or reject modern technologies. Duffaut is only faithful to the freedom of expression and his philosophy of art could be situated in a space between representation and action. As an aesthetical and ethical response without determinate content, Duffaut’s artworks reveal the possibility of an alternate modernity. (Gabara 2008) However, the ethos of community is not limited to the aesthetics created by Duffaut and Casimir in their paintings, it is also reflected in the religious life of Haiti and could be attached with an active role even in the politics. While the oil paintings may lack this kind of energy, examples of community-based art in Haiti are produced in this direction.

### **3. Participation, the New Theme of Art**

Many authors have elaborated on the new tendency in the art world that presents the art through collaboration. Generally, the artworks grouped under this kind have a more open-ended meaning, which being positioned in a space as an exhibition, provokes the discussion and negotiation between

the artist and the spectators, and between the spectators themselves. Subjectivity and objectivity, mainstream society and the marginal are topics which emerge with this new tendency of art. However, different art historians and critics also employ variable terms to denominate this trend and their opinions are not uniform.

As one of the primary authors who addressed this thematic, Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) coins the concept of “relational aesthetics” and argues that the new type of art, or “relational art”, should be viewed as social interstice. He believes that relational art takes as its theoretical background the sphere of human actions and he pays special attention to the social context which conditioned the appearance of relational art. It is born out of a pressure of urbanization, which as a substitution for more direct terms such as standardization, mechanization and efficiency, still permeates into all aspects of the modern society. Under urbanization, the artworks are displayed as luxury items which are only asserted by an autonomous and private symbolic space. The relational art emerges when the “state of encounter” has been elevated to the status of an absolute civilizational rule. Bourriaud’s theory is of no much difference to others’ up to this point, and it is his considering relational art as a whole a voice of the marginal that makes his theory more distinctive. Borrowing the term “interstice” from Karl Marx, Bourriaud utilizes it to refer to the free spaces and times in art that it not organized by everyday life. And these spaces and times promote an inter-human intercourse that is not simply imposed on us. Basically, results of the urbanization of society, such as superloos and ATM machines reduce human interaction and relational art revives this communication for the society. When being exhibited inside a gallery, the relational artworks temporarily and actively create a micro-community or “domain of exchanges”. This community or domain is then evaluated on the basis of relational aesthetics: whether its form is coherent, what alternative values it presents and what image of human relations it offers us - thus there is no stylistic and iconographic links between different relational artworks and the only common point is the sphere of inter-human relationships. For Bourriaud, the emergence of relational art was unprecedented because it does not take some former aesthetic movements as their starting point, yet there is also an important difference between relational art of the 1960s and that after the 1980s, asserting that in the 1960s, the artists were more concerned of the interstice within the art world, while now the emphasis is placed on external relationship and the art’s resistance of the society as a spectacle.

Similar to Bourriaud, Grant Kester (2004) also pinpoints that there is a new aesthetics which accompanies what he calls “dialogical art” or conversational art, but he grants aesthetics a preceding role when Bourriaud tends to confine aesthetics to the artwork itself. The former deems conversation and connectivity as the prominent values of an artwork: “communication in art is what makes the work beautiful” - if one is allowed to roughly summary his ideas. Instead of exhibiting an end product in which the meanings are concealed, dialogical artworks provide a common space where public discussion, face-to-face conversations and mass media converge. While the original intention of dialogical art is to facilitate interaction between diverse communities, the realized projects

demonstrate how a new community and, frequently, an effective solution are formed in the process. This kind of art also steps out of the museums and galleries which are sometimes managed by state sovereignty themselves. As such, it is obvious to see that Kester is more devoted to delineating a new aesthetical value of this kind of artworks. Besides, Bourriaud did not try to pull relational art out of museums because he thinks that it is the public space inside which facilitates the communication, while many of the case studies chosen by Kester took place somewhere else, making it explicit that his aesthetics is not one strictly bound by art, but is conclusive of the taste of a whole society.

Claire Bishop (Bishop 2012) uses yet another term, “participatory art”, to describe this new phenomenon. An intriguing transition of focus could be identified here, since relation, conversation, and dialogue seem to stress mainly the interconnectedness and the exchange, while participation sounds more transparent and insinuates an active decision from either the artists or the spectators’ part to join in certain activities. Both relational art and dialogical art involves certain degree of participation, although in former case, the artist still enjoys the privilege to decide what to transmit to the public, although he or she is not sure whether the attempt would be successful or what other response to expect from the audience. Nevertheless, dialogical art and participatory art functions more like acting in a film - the artist is conceived more as a collaborator or producer of situations and the audience becomes the co-producer or the participant. Bishop is aware of the multiple terms which have been created, and she chooses “participatory art” due to the fact that this kind of artworks involves many people. She frankly acknowledges the same rhetoric which her theory shares with that of Bourriaud, but she also claims that the artists she discusses “are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of participation as a politicized working process.” (Bishop 2012, 2) In other words, it is not in the forms of art that Bishop distinguishes herself from Bourriaud and Kester, but in what results from participatory art. So compared to the humanistic and philosophical perspective of Bourriaud, Bishop very much concretizes what changing political conditions artists from different countries are faced with, such as the dictatorship in Argentina in the mid-1960s. She also argues that the participatory art belongs to an ongoing history of attempts to rethink art collectively, which looks forward to recovering the collective vision of society frustrated by the historical avant-garde of the 1910s, the neo-avant-garde towards 1968, and the fall of communism in 1989. (Bishop 2012, 1-10)

However, there are also different voices about participatory or community-based art, which is represented by Hal Foster (2004), who has maintained relatively disinterested before the prosperity of similar terms and relevant theoretical works. He enumerates four principal reasons which make him less optimistic than other critics. Firstly, he believes that the meaning of the artwork, or its relation with an inclusive society, is based solely on a shaky analogy. That is to say, the celebration of the marginal of Bourriaud, or the political upheaval initiated by artworks by Bishop might run the risk of the over-interpretation of the artworks. Secondly, the great social forms under urbanization might be a condition to be defended instead of being overthrown, for it seems after all, that creators of relational

art and participatory art value precisely the intervention and rigorous organization above other things. Furthermore, he questions the purpose of emphasizing sociability because it may end in a pursuit of formalism where the collaboration becomes good in itself without justification. And last but not least, participation might be merely a pale, part-time substitute for it appears threatened in other spheres rather than an active and promising force as argued by Bishop.

At this point, we can roughly attribute the three theories to three logics surrounding community-based art: the reasons, the subject itself and its consequences. What unites these critics is the same set of theoretical reference points. All believe that collaborative art “re-humanizes a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production” (Bishop 2012, 11) and at the same time, all are potentially arguable because on the one hand, the rosy terms will drop out the contradictions. After all, “‘relational aesthetics’ might be sucked up in the general movement for a ‘post-critical’ culture - an art and architecture, cinema and literature ‘after theory’.” (Foster 2004, 195)

Moreover, although community-based art is often linked with contemporaneity, it is worth mentioning that Bourriaud also discusses its inconspicuous relation with modernism. He proposes to read “modern” as a taste for aesthetic experience and adventurous thinking. (Bourriaud 1998) In its modern history, Haiti has always suffered from political instability and sometimes, dictatorships. And in the sense of art history, it is also difficult to delimit contemporary art from modern art. Both Préfète Duffaut and Laurent Casimir continued painting even until the 21<sup>st</sup> century but their styles and the choice of themes remain relatively the same. As one of the few documented performance art in Haiti, the participatory artwork *Revolution* by Joëlle Ferly, demonstrated in the following chapter, aims at uniting Haitian people to confront various extraneous powers, either natural or of mankind. As a result, Bishop’s theory on participatory art will be used to analyze *Revolution* and the piece will still be considered fitting the general framework of Latin American modernism.

#### **4. From Depiction to Participation: Community as the Core of Haitian Modern Life**

The 2010 Haiti earthquake which occurred near Port-au-Prince caused more than 100,000 deaths and irredeemable economic loss for its people. The low effectiveness of the Haitian government and the historical consequences of American agricultural policies towards Haiti have only worsened the situation, leaving the civilians with almost no techniques but the burden to rescue themselves. The administration of the country was later handed over to the United Nations, which sent out peace-keeping force and the reconstruction of the country could not be realized with all the volunteering efforts of the professionals from other international and regional organizations. Yet until recently, two-fifths of the Haitian population still depends on the agriculture sector, which is composed mainly of small-scale subsistence farming and is very vulnerable to other natural disasters such as hurricane. According to statistics of 2010, the unemployment rate in Haiti reaches 40.6% and more than two-thirds of the labor forces rely on informal jobs, such as selling hand-made products or crops in the

market. (Haiti n.d.) Although it may seem perverse, it is nevertheless a true statement that community, as the core of Haitian modern life, has remained fairly unchanged because of the economic stagnation. In the outskirts of the cities, Haitian people have formed smaller communities in which different tasks are roughly assigned to individuals so that the whole group can manage to survive. (Qi Ji Ji Jin Hui 2013)

The sense of community is not only felt among Haitian people, but also among the foreigners who are assisting the country and by foreign artists as well. Following the news of the earthquake, the Guadelupe artist Joëlle Ferly came to Haiti in 2011 to carry out her performance named *Revolution*. The performance consisted of the artist herself standing still for 24 consecutive hours on a pedestal near the center of Port-au-Prince without eating or drinking and rotated a quarter of the tour on each hour, symbolizing an attempt to “take an entire day to observe the place and most importantly the people, whom have all lost relatives in the catastrophe and no doubt went through enormous trauma themselves”. (Artist Joelle Ferly's performance in Haiti 2011) The spectacle attracted more than 15,000 visitors who stopped to stand in front of her, and at least another 10,000 people who peeked out when driving by. Since the catastrophe, Haiti has always been under the spotlight of international mass media, and the artwork aims at reversing the gaze. The relationship between the artist and the viewers is a more equitable one: while the Haitians are offered an “object” to look at, the artist also has the chance to glance around in an extremely painstaking way since she does nothing else than observing her surroundings. The project was realized as a teamwork: the logistic of the piece had to be coordinated, the traffic and the crowd was mediated. Due to the fact that the place of the performance was chosen without giving prior notice to the police, the team member also had to invigilate the scene through night and day. The physical status of the artist herself was also under risk because the weather was hot in the last few hours of the performance, the mediators also poured water over her time to time. Local artist Josué Azor served as the photographer. (Artist Joelle Ferly's performance in Haiti 2011) In many ways, Ferly's project could be categorized as a piece of participatory art, as defined by Claire Bishop in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. (2012)

As a newly emerged artistic interest since the early 1990s, participatory art refers to the artworks which involve many people. She emphasized that the creators of participatory art are more interested in “the creative rewards of participation as a politicized working process.” (Bishop 2012, 2) Although participatory art is nearly a global phenomenon now, its original forms were not totally similar in different contexts. In Latin America for example, the participatory actions were triggered by brutal military dictatorships. While Argentina embraced participatory art in the 1960s, artists in Brazil were redirecting the European abstraction towards a more liberal expression of colors and textures. (Bishop 2012, 105) This comparison by Bishop somehow reaffirms the multiple tracks of modern art in Latin America. Apart from both being part of Latin America, Haiti and Argentina do not share many similarities in art and it would be forceless to trace the influence of Ferly's participatory art to its

Argentinian predecessors. However, in spite of a span of approximately 50 years, the final result and the idea of their artworks are quite alike.

In November 1966, Oscar Masotta hired twenty elderly, lower-middle class people for the project titled *Para inducir al espíritu de la imagen* (To Induce the Spirit of the Image). The artist paid them to stand in front of the audience for an hour. Electronic sound and glaring spotlights were casted. The exchange of money for performance was part of the project and Masotta honestly recorded how participants paid him more attention after he had raised their wage. Therefore, it is believed that the artwork sharpened the economic and psychological distance between the viewer and performers, making explicit an act of social sadism. In other words, the performance reflects how difficult it was for the ordinary people to act against a greater social pressure such as the dictatorship. Two years later, Oscar Bony created another participatory artwork in response to *To Induce the Spirit of the Image*. His project *La Familia Obrera* (The Worker's Family) featured a working-class family sitting on a platform for eight hours a day during the exhibition "Experiencias 68" at the Instituto Di Tella. The father, mother and their child were paid to sit on a plinth throughout the opening hours and the performance was accompanied by a label which reads: "Luis Ricardo Rodríguez, a professional die-caster, is earning twice his usual wages for just staying on show with his wife and son." (Bishop 2012, 113) By replacing sculptures with real human bodies, Bony elevated an everyday family to the dignity of exemplary representation, but also left them to the scrutiny of a primarily middle-class audience. His attempt is considered a condensation of Masotta's happening which "consolidates a narrative of performance-based work in '60s Argentina as one of adopting particularly aggressive strategies of reification, frequently played out in relation to class." (Bishop 2012, 117)

These canonical early examples of Latin American participatory art somehow facilitate the analysis of Ferly's project by means of a comparison. Dictatorship and a stubborn social division of classes which were once typical of Argentina were never alienated from Haiti in its modern history either. All the artworks occurred in a relatively loose political environment: while Argentina entered into a period of severe dictatorship later in the 1970s, Haiti has just recovered partial democracy in the 1990s - both countries faced the exigency to arouse the awareness of the community and their participation before extraneous powers. In Haiti's case, the community not only has to strive for recovery, but also need to cooperate with international forces. The participatory art of Argentina in the 1960s was informed by both European philosophy and its social reality and this is how Ferly organized her project *Revolution* as well. (Image 7-9) The artist received her education of fine arts in France and United Kingdom and owns full knowledge of the world of contemporary art. She deliberately avoided press photographs, TV, and Internet images to refute the voyeuristic type of gaze. As a symbol, she inherited Joseph Beuys's innovation in arriving at the plinth blindfolded, thus leaving herself impressionable by the reality. (Image 8) The selection of place was also emblematic: Champ-de-Mars is right in the heart of Port-au-Prince, opposite to the main square where a huge amount of homeless people were living under simply constructed tents. The flags of other UN member

states printed on these tents grasp the viewers' attention immediately. (Artist Joelle Ferly's performance in Haiti 2011)

Just like Masotta and Bony, Ferly's *Revolution* is also activated by a great external pressure that she felt for Haitian people. In this particular case, the major part of this pressure originates from the omnipresent gaze suddenly projected on this Caribbean country. This "voyeuristic" gaze is clearly not transparent because what is exposed under the spotlight is not only the disaster and recovery, but also poverty, chaos, epidemics, ineffectiveness of government, concession, performativity, and many more topics that should have been unveiled by international mass media long before if their responsibility as pressmen covered that. The fact that this participatory artwork was presented by a foreign artist also reflects how traditionally exchanges between Haiti and European art were very limited. However, from the comparison, it is also conspicuous that the primary target of Ferly is not the social stratum of Haiti. She did not intend to set up two irreconcilable classes as Masotta and Bony did, and this feature has to do with the community as the core of modern life of Haiti.

When reviewing her work, Ferly said that it would also have been possible for her to come to Haiti with an international aid program member or staff. Obviously, this option would have been technically more helpful because after all, standing 24 hours on a plinth would not yield any material benefit to the reconstruction. (Artist Joelle Ferly's performance in Haiti 2011) At first glance, the performance would even seem like a notorious propaganda when being embedded into an environment full of homeless people and debris. One may ask if this piece of art is really close to the political urgency of the time, or if it is productive after all: it may be argued that the formation of a temporary community by *Revolution* does not have such a crucial and accordingly revolutionary meaning since it somehow precludes the deeper and more fundamental problems faced by Haitian people: their right as citizens, the country as sovereignty, etc. However, it cannot be denied that cultural expression which comes after disaster is not less valuable than material assistance, because it enhances the morale of the people, which may further turn into positive effects. "Whether laments, prayers or songs of woe, ritual meals or the donning of funerary garments, it is the only way we can give meaning to the awful, and go on living without descending into total despair or madness." (Kurin 2011, 20) Ferly's work inherits the characteristics of the pioneer Argentinian participatory art in the 1960s: it brings art closer to everyday life and it has made the issue of participation increasingly inextricable from the political commitment. The works create an active subject, which gaze at the artist rather than merely being gazed at by the international press. The audience is free to comprehend the artwork as he or she likes: whether the artist incarnates a god to be worshiped or an ordinary person who proves an impossible mission (standing for 24 consecutive hours) feasible so that everyone could imitate. Either way, the audience could take the artwork as a starting point to determine their own social and political reality. As such, it could be observed that the artwork has democratized the production of meaning and aroused the public awareness of collective responsibility. (Bishop 2006, 10-7) The value of Ferly's

artwork is mainly a spiritual one, and this value roots precisely from another important aspect of Haitian modern life: its religious ceremony.

What was called Vodou religion in Haiti is “a variety of practices from diverse nations in Africa (including the Dahomean, the Yoruba, and the Kongo) in forced conversation with the Catholicism of the colonial masters” (McAlister 2002, 10) and forms the basis of the worldview of Haitian people. The interconnectedness of the agricultural society and the Vodou in Haiti has somehow made this religion more communal. Its practices are frequently realized in the unit of community, but the concept seems much broader than that of a parish in Christianity. These communities are not only geographically divided, but their association is also strengthened by a shared belief of a more specific god. In the Rara ceremony for example, a family or a community are sometimes informed by the *Iwa* (the spirit) that a parade should be formed and this *Iwa* is the god that the community usually serves. Because the conversion to a certain god is eventually confirmed by signals (such as bad luck or illness), it is plausible that the same productive community also believes in the same god. (McAlister 2002, 35) What is notable in Ferly’s performance is that she wore white shirt and trousers. Although the artist has not explained this choice, it does remind viewers of Haitian people’s dressing in a Vodou ceremony, very possibly that of a purification (cleansing bath), where followers in white from head to toe rinse their body under the waterfall. Some details that Ferly later recalled prove that the performance succeeded in provoking the audience’s reverence towards Vodou gods. A number of people stood with her as if she were a saint, others started commenting whether she was a spirit, a zombie or a god to be venerated. (Artist Joelle Ferly's performance in Haiti 2011)

The participation here is thus a politicized working process, because Vodou is generally considered the religion of the poor people in Haiti. (McAlister 2002) The audience of this piece of work would experience the transcendental, as if living in close communion of the saints. The young photographer, Josué Azor, who served as the journalist in Ferly’s performance, created an individual set of images which faithfully reproduces the whole process of a Vodou which he titled *Project Vodou*. (Image 10-14) All the people who appear in this series are dressed in white gown. The ceremony starts with the sacrifice of a chicken, (Image 10) where the followers wore either empathetic or deploring expressions. The executioner, with blood tainting his gown, looks both serious and surprising calm, holding a cigarette in her hand. (Image 11) This framing highlights how important the ceremony may be for a Haitian community. The artist does not give up any chance to boast the love, fraternity, and the interconnectedness which the large group of people possess: a younger woman extends her hand to an elderly a hand helping her to walk up across the rubble. (Image 12) In another photo, participants are tidying each other’s gown before the ceremony starts. Two women are photographed holding hands as a symbol of sisterhood in another picture. The devotees gather under a enormous tree beside the river in Image 13, where the composition of the photo reminds spectators of the paintings of Laurent Casimir - it thus offers an idea of how photographs could be “abstract” and how paintings could be “documentary”. Image 14, for example, eventually shows the objective of this



gathering, a participant is cleansing himself in the brook dressing the white gown. The media of art that Gabara encapsulates in her theory could also be broadened, such as in the case of Haiti. While the camera does prove to be an excellent device to fully register modernity and every aspect of it, the lens is not always superior to human eyes. Simply reproducing such a communal activity with photography is already a politicized effort, as Azor explains in the introduction part of his website *Rev Ayiti*: it is a reproduction of Haitian people's deep desire to contribute to a better Haiti and "a different perspective on Haiti by drawing on our inspiring history, our rich culture, and our profound sense of community." In the end, Azor concludes the introduction by asking the readers to join him to a journey which combs through Haiti's modernism. (Azor 2014)

The choice of photography as the medium here contributes to an epistemology of knowing from seeing, especially when the camera is mastered by a Haitian artist, rather than an ethnographer, an anthropologist, or a tourist. So instead of scholars coming to Haiti to gather "first-hand" information, Azor offers people with it, representing the knowledge which belongs to him and his community. The images are deductively more neutrally informative than those captured by foreign scholars who may not even believe in Vodou religion themselves. Apart from the exactitude, the camera, especially in a time when all images are digitalized, could also extend their lens more frequently towards particular subjects marked by race and gender. (Gabara 2008) Vodou, as mentioned above, is considered a religion of the poor black and Azor's works portray this community minutely. Both women and men appear in his photos, which is opposed to the traditional way in which Vodou priests, usually men, are given more attention than women. This attempt could be read as a celebration of the marginal under the category of relational art and is in harmony with what Bourriaud (1998) proposes as an adventurous thinking, since new materials are provided by the artist and the knowledge about Vodou religion shall be renovated to some degree by *Project Vodou*. Despite being modern in these senses, Azor's photos are radically different from Constructivism, New Vision, New Objectivity and other modernist photographic styles. This reflects how the ethos of community in Haiti works as an example to decenter modernism from Europe and the United States. Popular culture has played a vital role in forming the mediatory function of the ethos of modernism because it tends to respond to the oppressive social conditions of modernity in the Americas. In Haiti, the popular culture is the culture of Vodou religion. It merges ethics (the rituals, the resistance) and aesthetics (the clothing, the decoration, the life in community), as well as form and content. (Gabara 2004)

## **Conclusion**

The ethos of Haiti in relation to modernism could be defined as the ethos of community. The community is not only a form of organization in social life, but penetrates in every aspect of Haitian modern life, from its economy, politics to religion. The ethos of community is reflected in Haitian art from the 1930s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some artworks, such as that of Duffaut and Casimir is based mainly

on the communities formed in Haiti's social and economic life, while Ferly and Azor's projects faithfully represent, indirectly suggest, or actively create communities in the political and religious life of Haiti. No matter for its contemporaneity or for a dialectic response to colonialism, the ethos of community should be considered parallel to the ethos or spirit of other modernisms in Latin America, such as the Mexican muralism, Brazilian "cannibalism", and so on.

The theory of the ethos of modernism in Latin America works towards the formation of community in several ways. As stated in the introduction, what all Latin American countries have in common is the history of colonialism. Modern art, by provoking ethical self-questioning through experiments with forms, participates in what Mário de Andrade terms as "critical nationalism". This politics liberates Latin America from the shackles of colonialism, but did not impose a uniform modernism to all the countries in this region. The first definition of ethos helps us imagine ethics as the social location of work, which includes dwelling together, building community, and being responsible to the others with whom one shares the space. In reality, the location is mostly delimited by the actual boundary of lands and the locale and the people who occupy them are bound by this ethics. (Gabara 2008) If we combine this view with Bourriaud's (1998) proposal of reading the "modern" as a taste for aesthetic experience and adventurous thinking, then community-based art clearly executes a counter effect on solidifying modernism as well because the relational aesthetics indeed makes clear a new taste of art and it impulses people into rethinking what the artworks they see actually mean. In Duffaut's artworks, a lively spirit hangs over Haitian people despite the toughness of life. And in Ferly's performance, nobody knows how many people would start reflecting on what the artist wanted to transmit to them. For example, is there a way that they could invert the direction of the gaze and take initiative in governing their own nation? Bourriaud's proposal also partly answers the question of Clark. "Other modernisms" do not have to be defined by a series of Western modernist values such as positivism, the pursuit of science, the gaining of knowledge through seeing, the industrialization and mechanization of life, etc. However, this still makes the question more complicated: without an ultimate truth, it is not reproachable to say that we have never been modern at all. Modernism could be confined to the history of one singular country or several countries that share the origin of their civilizations, but it is still hard to affirm the modernism on a global level.

As mentioned above, several existing works trace the starting point of Haitian contemporary art to the creation of the Saint Soleil in the early 1970s. Although the idea itself to ask peasants to pick up the brush seems like a revolutionary participatory project, the art of the Saint Soleil School nevertheless remains within the community-based framework regulated by popular beliefs. (Poupeye 1998, 88) (Prézeau-Stephenson and Douglas 2008) Their artworks still focus mainly on Vodou motifs and as a transitional art movement; the role of the Saint Soleil School is more of an inheritance rather than a reform. However, it is also true that the School marked a deviation in the form of organization of Haitian artists. From the 1930s to the 1970s, though an artist's personal merit and skills are accredited, they continued to work attached to different groups and communities: the Centre d'Art, the

Foyer des Arts Plastiques, with Saint Soleil being the end of this flow. From then on, Haitian artists started to work more on individual levels. But the negative effect of the individualization is eminent, as mentioned by Barbara Prézeau-Stephenson, (2008) a Haitian artist who works also as an artist and curator. The current form of organization of Haitian artists has made them more vulnerable and impressionable to the international market which profits mainly with Vodou art. What worsens the development of art in Haiti is the political chaos. In 2004, the bicentenary of its independence, armed gangs destroyed and burnt the artworks exhibited in the temporary Independence Museum. Terribly struck by this spectacle, Haitian artists begin to reunite in pursuit of a collective effort. This is still not a clear answer of what constitutes the contemporaneity or postmodernism in Haiti or whether there will be other theories on “multiple contemporaneities” in the future, yet the ethos of modernism of Haiti, and the ethos of modernism of Latin America at least confirm that there are alternative ways of narrating the history of art, which may be helpful in the account of the contemporary art of Haiti.

## Appendices

### 1. Illustration



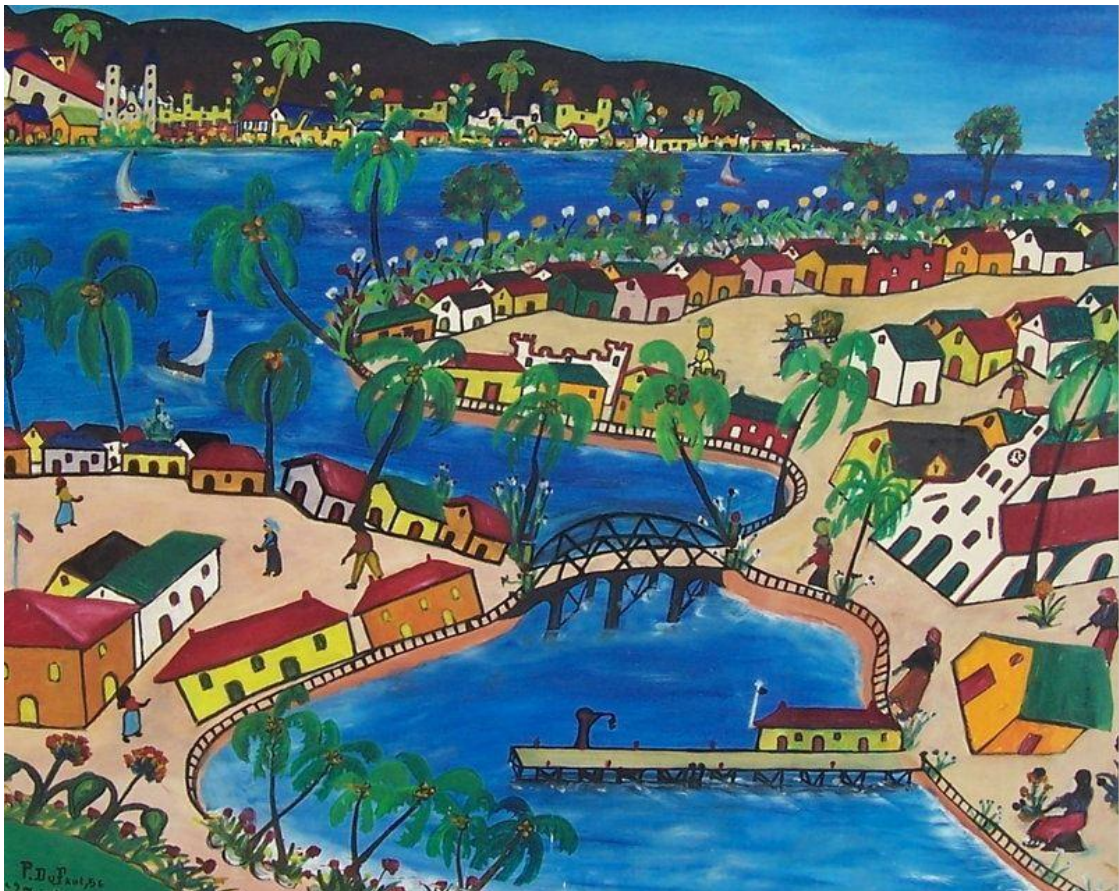
1. Préfète Duffaut. *Harbor*. 1956. *Arte del Pueblo*.

<http://haitian.artedelpueblo.com/items/1200229/en1store.html>





2. Préfète Duffaut. *Imaginary City*. 1991. *Masterpieces of Haitian Art*



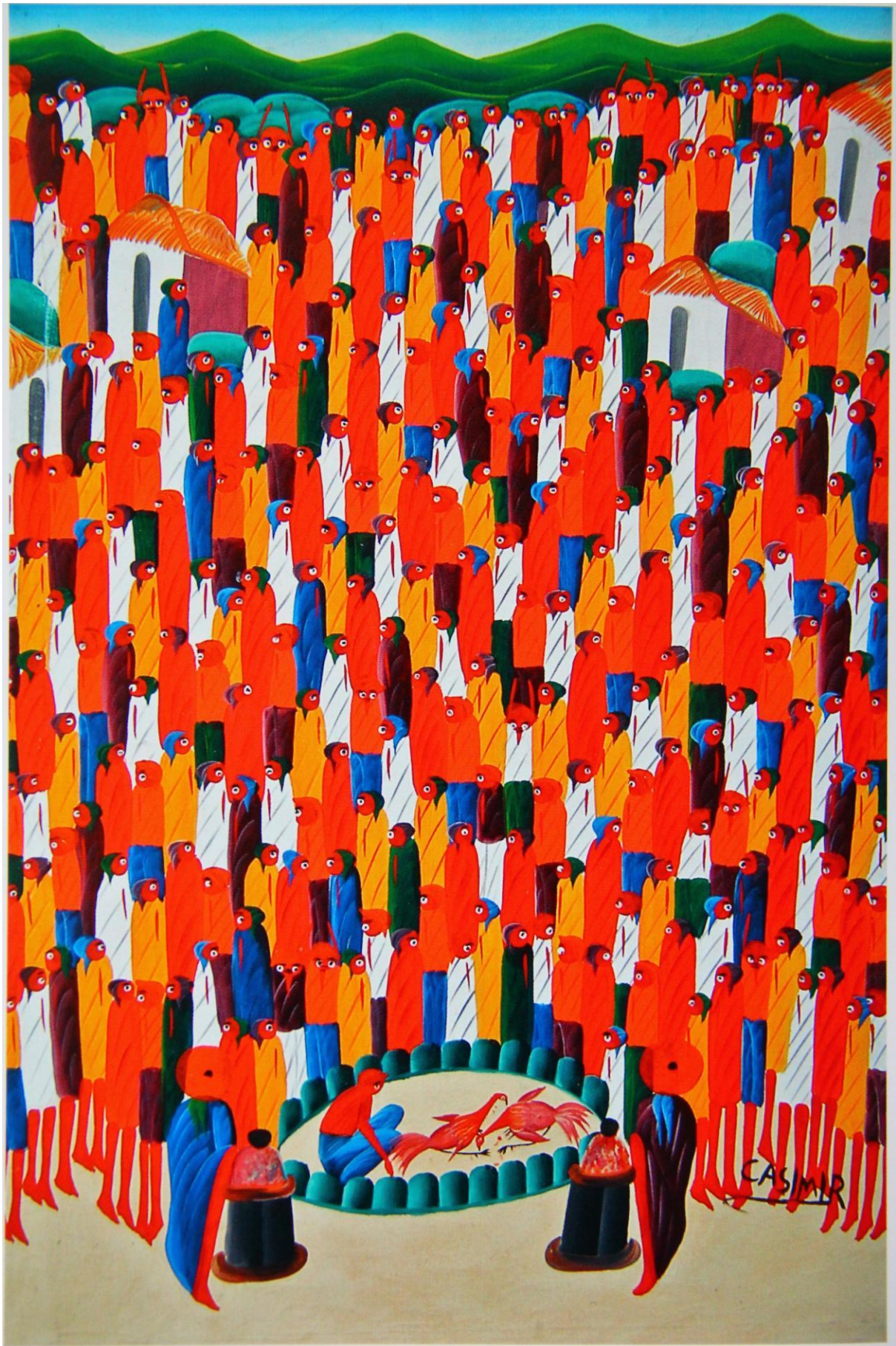
3. Préfète Duffaut. *Harbor*. Early 1956. *Arte del Pueblo*.

<http://haitian.artedelpueblo.com/items/752213/en1store.html>









5. Laurent Casimir. *Cockfighting*. Mid-1970s. *Masterpieces of Haitian Art*





6. Laurent Casimir. *Crowded Market*. 1972. *Milwaukee Art Museum*.

<http://collection.mam.org/details.php?id=1729>



7. Joëlle Ferly. *Revolution*. 2011 (Photo: Josué Azor). *L'Artocarpe*.

[http://www.artocarpe.net/Performance-de-Joelle-Ferly-a-Port-au-Prince-Artist-Joelle-Ferly-s-performance-in-Haiti\\_a48.html](http://www.artocarpe.net/Performance-de-Joelle-Ferly-a-Port-au-Prince-Artist-Joelle-Ferly-s-performance-in-Haiti_a48.html) (accessed May 30, 2014).





8. Joëlle Ferly. *Revolution*. 2011 (Photo: unknown). *L'Artocarpe*.

[http://www.artocarpe.net/Performance-de-Joelle-Ferly-a-Port-au-Prince-Artist-Joelle-Ferly-s-performance-in-Haiti\\_a48.html](http://www.artocarpe.net/Performance-de-Joelle-Ferly-a-Port-au-Prince-Artist-Joelle-Ferly-s-performance-in-Haiti_a48.html) (accessed May 30, 2014).



9. Joëlle Ferly. *Revolution*. 2011 (Photo: Josué Azor). *L'Artocarpe*.

[http://www.artocarpe.net/Performance-de-Joelle-Ferly-a-Port-au-Prince-Artist-Joelle-Ferly-s-performance-in-Haiti\\_a48.html](http://www.artocarpe.net/Performance-de-Joelle-Ferly-a-Port-au-Prince-Artist-Joelle-Ferly-s-performance-in-Haiti_a48.html) (accessed May 30, 2014).



10. Josué Azor. *Project Vodou*. Unknown. Rev Ayiti.  
<http://www.revayiti.com/#mi=1&pt=0&pi=2&p=-1&a=0&at=0>

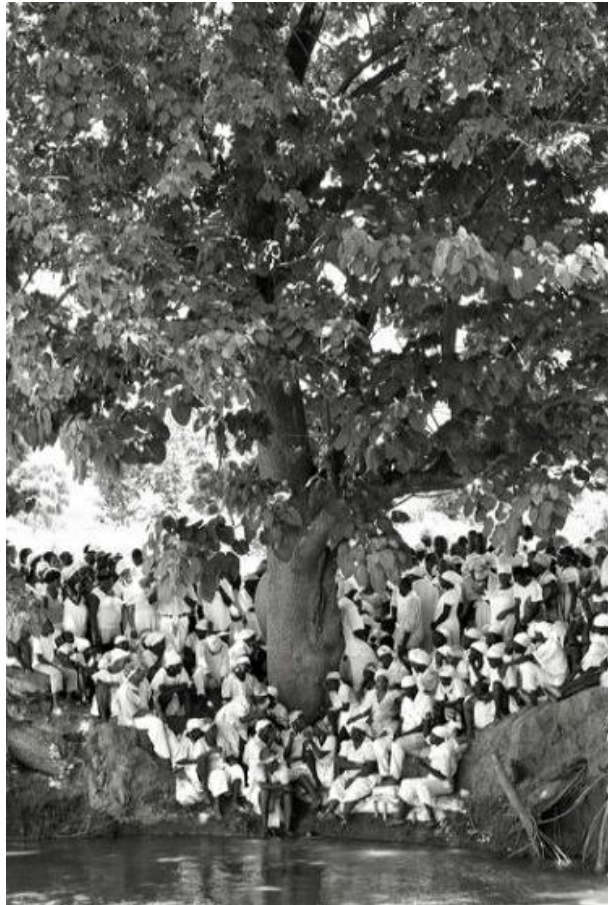


11. Josué Azor. *Project Vodou*. Unknown. Rev Ayiti.  
<http://www.revayiti.com/#mi=1&pt=0&pi=2&p=-1&a=0&at=0>



12. Josué Azor. *Project Vodou*. Unknown. Rev Ayiti.  
<http://www.revayiti.com/#mi=1&pt=0&pi=2&p=-1&a=0&at=0>





13. Josué Azor. *Project Vodou*. Unknown. Rev Ayiti.  
<http://www.revayiti.com/#mi=1&pt=0&pi=2&p=-1&a=0&at=0>



14. Josué Azor. *Project Vodou*. Unknown. Rev Ayiti.  
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