



Parents kept their children at home in December following a new spate of kidnapping.

Photo by Leah Gordon

Insecurity's hidden hands

The government has faced its sternest challenge since it took office in early June following a dramatic increase in violent crime and, in particular, a wave of kidnappings for ransom, many of them involving children. Most of these incidents took place in the greater Port-au-Prince area, but news reports from the provinces suggest that the capital's criminal gangs are spreading the scope of their activities.

The actual number of kidnaps is unknown – victims' families often prefer not to notify the authorities and to negotiate directly with the kidnappers. One kidnap-victims' support group estimated that there were more than 100 cases in the Port-au-Prince area during November. The individuals targeted came from across the social spectrum, as highlighted by

two incidents on November 28th: In Carrefour, a run-down suburb of Port-au-Prince, police arrested two kidnappers as they tried to seize two children aged 6 and 7 years old as they were returning from school along the street with their mother. Later that day, on the Frères road, near Pétionville, Fred Joseph, a former finance minister and brother-in-law of the current finance minister, was kidnapped. He was released five days later, following payment of a large ransom.

A deliberate tactic to strike fear in the population and so turn the public against the authorities

The targeting of children took on a new intensity in mid-December when at least two mini-buses carrying children home from schools in the La Plaine suburb of Port-au-Prince were held up by armed men and the occupants abducted. Local media also reported instances of gunmen entering schools to seize children in various parts of the capital. In response, many parents started to keep their children at home, and the majority of the capital's schools closed early for the Christmas holidays as a precautionary measure.

Public concern about the renewed lawlessness was expressed in a variety of ways, ranging from callers to radio talk-shows condemning the ineffectiveness of the police force, to a number of student demonstrations calling for the departure of the UN military mission, the Minustah. Students criticised the Minustah for failing to stamp out violent crime. Leftist groups stated that the foreign troops tolerated crime as a smoke-screen behind which neo-liberal economic policies were being

imposed, while rightist groups said the Minustah was 'soft' on the shanty-town gangs linked to former president Aristide.

Government spokespeople suggested that armed criminals were working at the behest of political forces seeking to undermine the authority of Préal/Alexis administration. Several government supporters commented that the sudden spate of kidnappings of children could not possibly be interpreted as a coincidence of random criminal behaviour, and could only be a deliberate tactic to strike fear in the population and so turn the public against the authorities.

President Préal later voiced a nuanced version of this theory, stating that the crime wave was sponsored by drug-traffickers, who were in turn linked to political elements. In mid-January, on his return from an official trip to Jamaica where the illegal trade in guns and drugs between the two countries was high on the agenda, Préal criticised the US for not doing more to halt the trafficking of drugs through Haiti. ■

Haiti has long been known as home to some of the most creative and innovative artists in the world. Naïve paintings by Haitian artists are now standard features in tourist markets across the Caribbean, while foreign collectors continue to buy up works by the papier-mâché workers of Jacmel, the metal drum sculptors of Croix-des-Bouquets, and the sequin flag designers of Bel Air. Now **LEAH GORDON** unveils the latest art phenomenon to explode in Haiti.

Grand Rue is the main avenue that runs a north-south swathe through downtown Port-au-Prince from La Saline to La Cimetière. It's a broad, anarchic and colour-saturated street. At the southern end of Grand Rue, amongst a labyrinthine warren of back streets is an area that traditionally has produced small handicrafts for the ever-diminishing tourist market. This close-knit community is hemmed in on all sides by the makeshift car repair district, which serves as both graveyard and salvation for the city's increasingly decrepit automobiles.

Haitian artists Celeur, Eugène and Guyodo all grew up in this atmosphere of junkyard make-do, survivalist recycling, and artistic endeavour. Their powerful sculptural collages of engine manifolds, TV sets, wheel hubcaps, skulls, and discarded lumber have transformed the detritus of a failing economy into radical, morbid and phallic sculptures, mainly inspired by the Vodou spirits of the cemetery, Gede, the guardians of the dead and the masters of the phallus. These often-monumental works reference their shared African cultural heritage, Vodou practice and a dystopian, sci-fi view of the future. Their use of readymade components are driven by economic necessity, combined with creative vision and cultural continuity.

Vodou all around

André Eugène is the progenitor of the Grand Rue movement. He was born at the end of the 1950s, two years into the regime of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier. He started out as a house builder, but influenced by the creative energy of his neighbourhood, he started to learn traditional sculpting in wood. "There was always something happening in our neighbourhood – a carnival band practising, many sculptors working, and Vodou all around. This made me begin the life of an artist."

Eugène's work became increasingly influenced by contemporary Haitian artists such as Nasson, who created wood and nail sculptures reminiscent of African fetishes found in anthro-



Guyodo: "Celeur pushed me into becoming an artist, and now it is my whole life".

The Sculpture of Grand Rue

pological museums. Eugène fused the fetish 'sauvage' with an apocalyptic MTV futuristic vision. Much of his work is figurative, using human skulls for heads and imbued with a bold sense of irony, sexuality, and humour. His piece 'Section Chief' – the name of the Duvaliers' brutal, rural henchmen – wears a pink dress split by a three foot long metal penis curving up to the heavens.

Jean Hérald Celeur was born in the same neighbourhood, in the mid sixties, and trained as a sculptor under the guidance of his brother. At first he was involved in the more traditional, touristy end of the market, but gradually, under the influence of Eugène, his work slipped to the dark side. "Since I was young I have been attracted to the dream of becoming a sculptor. At the beginning, my work was very realistic, but over time it grew more subjective. Where I am now, leaves me more space to be imaginative."

Menace, anger, and a dark sexuality

His most powerful piece to date is in the permanent collection of the Frost Art Museum at

Florida International University. The untitled work evokes the horsemen of the Apocalypse – human skulls crown three skeletal equine contraptions made from motorbike chassis, with the central figure thrusting a wooden carved phallus. The piece is bristling with menace, anger, and a dark sexuality evoking the triple tragedies of AIDS, political oppression, and poverty. "My work has social aspects, intellectual aspects, and represents the people's demands for change. I live in the reality that deals with poverty everyday, and this informs my work all the time."

Guyodo was born in the Grand Rue district in the early seventies. He's the bad boy of the trio, rarely smiling and modeling a self-styled, Gede-gangster look with a collection of huge black shades that would put Jackie O. to shame. He has created some of the most monumental works of the trio, huge dense sculptures using the chassis of derelict vehicles. His smaller works use silver paint and colour with a fresh flamboyance unseen in the other artists' work. "Before I started as a sculptor, I was a football



Photo by Leah Gordon.

otors Rue

player. Celeur pushed me into becoming an artist, and now it is my whole life. You have to have strength and maturity to be an artist in Haiti. It is really difficult being an artist in the Third World; you don't get recognised in your own country. Unfortunately, it is only people from very far away who are taking any interest in our work."

● André Eugène, Jean Hérard Celeur, and Frantz Jacques Guyodo are part of the *Atis Rezistans* movement in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. www.atis-rezistans.com

● A Haiti Support Group reception for the artists, Mario Benjamin, Jean Hérard Celeur, André Eugène and Frantz Jacques Guyodo, will take place on Thursday, March 1st, 6pm – 9pm at Four Corners, 121 Roman Road, London E2 0QN (tube station: Bethnal Green). There will be a screening of the short documentary film, 'E.Pluribus Unum' by Maxence Denis, and a presentation by the artists with questions & answers, and refreshments. As there is limited seating, only those who have sent an RSVP by email to Leahgordon@aol.com will be admitted. ■



André Eugène at work on the Freedom! sculpture.

Photo by Leah Gordon

The Freedom! sculpture

The Freedom! sculpture was commissioned by international aid charity, Christian Aid, and the International Slavery Museum, to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the UK. It will be unveiled on 26th February 2007 in Liverpool's Merseyside Maritime Museum, and then will tour the country, taking in London and Bristol, before returning to Liverpool where it will remain on permanent display in the new International Slavery Museum, which opens on 23 August. Haitian artists were commissioned in recognition of the fact that the country had the only successful slave revolt that inspired social justice movements around the world and gave the Abolitionist movement in the UK a major boost.

The Freedom! sculpture, made out of recycled objects such as metal car parts and raw junk found in the slums of the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, was created by young Haitians and sculptors Eugène, Celeur and Guyodo from *Atis Rezistans*, in collaboration with Mario Benjamin, an internationally renowned Haitian artist who has represented his country at Biennials in Venice, São Paulo and Johannesburg.

Mario Benjamin, in the role of Artistic Director for the Freedom! sculpture said, "For me, it was very important to show that slavery has always been part of civilisation. My ambition was that we would create something that is quite universal, that is about suffering, hoping, fighting, what humanity has been about all the time."

Despite the fact that Parliament abolished the slave trade in the UK 200 years ago, global inequalities still exist today. It is no longer legal for people to be traded as commodities. But millions of people in places like Haiti are still forced by poverty to work in unhealthy, dangerous – even life-threatening – conditions.

Although Haiti became the first black republic as a result of the first successful slave revolt, today, because of inappropriate economic policies including unfair terms of trade and the repayment of international loans, most of the population lives in extreme poverty.

To incorporate a sense of what freedom and slavery means to people in Haiti today, the artists held workshops with young people benefiting from the work of APROSIFA, a Christian Aid-supported organisation in Carrefour Feuilles, an area in the Haitian capital rife with gangs and gun crime. The workshops gave the local youth a chance to learn new skills, exercise their imaginations, and glimpse a potential future beyond guns and violence.

Ronald Cadet, one of the young people who collaborated with the artists, felt that working to-

gether with them made him want to help people to see that there was strength in being united. "When people have nothing to do, they are prone to violence."

Another young collaborator, the 23-year-old Nathalie Fanfan, said, "It was a huge new experience. I'm used to seeing sculptures made out of wood and clay. It was a novel thing to use big iron parts. My vision after this project is to keep on learning so that I can become an important citizen who can contribute something in Haiti."

Rose-Anne Auguste, the founder of APROSIFA, said, "When you live in shanty towns you can feel like you have no right to culture. It is sad that Mario Benjamin had to teach these kids to visit museums. Their parents are too busy surviving to take them to museums. But the culture is in their blood. The best art comes from young people living on the edge."

The Freedom! sculpture finally emerged as a figurative work depicting a mass of bodies, their arms akimbo. The shape of the work is special, a truncated metal wedge of faces, bodies and hands, a kind of container-ship of fools. The work was painted with aluminium paint that was then burnt off with blowtorches. This gives the work a burnished uniformity, which distinguishes it from traditional recycled assemblage works.

Celeur hopes the sculpture project will help to counter the negative perceptions of Haiti. "If we can represent Haiti in Liverpool, we hope that we can change the perception of Haiti in the eyes of the British. Beyond the images of poverty or violence, we can represent something positive, because the bad image of Haiti is one of the things that is bringing this country down even further."

Venues for the UK tour of Freedom!

- Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool: 26 Feb – 18 March
- House of Commons, London (to be confirmed): 20 March – 1 April
- London (to be confirmed): 3 April – 19 April
- The Empire & Commonwealth Museum, Bristol: 20 April – 11 June
- Glasgow (to be confirmed): 12 June – 31 July
- International Slavery Museum, Liverpool: 23 August onwards.

The International Slavery Museum opens in Liverpool on 23 August 2007. The museum will feature dynamic and thought-provoking displays about the story of the transatlantic slave trade, addressing issues such as freedom, identity, human rights, reparation claims, racial discrimination and cultural change. www.international-slaverymuseum.org.uk ■

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Campaign news

Solidarity with workers at Coca-Cola subsidiary

Haiti Support Group backs Cap-Haitien bottling plant union

In May 2006, the Batay Ouvriye May First Union Federation and the La Couronne-Northern Branch Labour Union issued a new appeal calling for international solidarity, and denouncing the La Couronne Brewery-Coca-Cola Haiti company. As part of its continuing campaign in support of independent workers' organisations in Haiti, the Haiti Support Group responded to the call, sending letters to the company owner, Raymond Jaar, and to Haitian music star, Wyclef Jean, whose Yele Foundation lists Mr Jaar as one of its sponsors. We also made contact with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), an international federation that has been pressurising Coca-Cola and its subsidiaries to respect workers' rights in various countries.

In early 2006, the unionised workers at this company's branch in the northern city of Cap-Haitien had taken collective action several times to try and force the management to

negotiate. However, not only did the management ignore the work stoppages and legal strikes, but even carried out more dismissals of union members, further antagonising the workforce.

The Haiti Support Group wrote to Jaar and Jean in support of the union's basic demands:

- An increase in wages and an end to the illegal payment of just 50 gourdes a day (little more than US\$1) for unskilled workers at the bottling plant. (The minimum daily wage in Haiti, as set by the government, is 70 gourdes per day.)

"We won't back down! Nor will the brewery management's intimidation make us back off" – La Couronne-Northern Branch Labour Union

- Respect for the legal provisions for holidays and sick leave.
- Payment for overtime.
- The reinstatement of the union leader, Philomé Cémérant, who was dismissed without good reason a few days after the union formed in 2004.

We cannot say with any certainty what impact the Haiti Support Group's intervention had, but, in late December 2006, we received news from the union's leadership informing us that all workers are now paid

more than the minimum daily wage, that loans to workers at the beginning of the school year had been offered by the company, that cold drinking water is now available in the plant, and that the issue of Philomé Cémérant had been resolved in October 2006 when he received severance pay of approximately US\$600.

Despite these moves in the right direction, the union has continued to agitate for the management to provide clean toilets, to install showers, to repair the delivery trucks that keep breaking down, and to pay per diems to deliverymen sent to far-flung areas of the country. Failure to resolve these issues, and the news that the Coca-Cola company headquarters had authorised bonus payments of US\$20 for each worker that the local management had not passed on, prompted a one-day strike on November 24th 2006. A second strike was called off when the government's director of the local Labour Bureau (part of the Ministry of Social Affairs) intervened and promised to mediate. However, on December 4th, when the union executive committee went to see him, he pushed them out of the office, calling them a "bunch of union shit", and saying he would no longer have anything to do with them. The struggle continues.....

Stepping Stones training for women's organisation

At the suggestion of the Haiti Support Group, the Haitian office of the international NGO Plan International has invited the women's organisation, KOFIVIV, to take part in a 'Stepping Stones' training package in gender, HIV, communication and relationship skills to take place in April 2007. As part of its work, KOFIVIV (The Commission of Women Victims for Victims) provides free medical care and counselling for rape survivors, including

testing and treatment for STIs, pre-natal care for women who become pregnant as a result of rape, and medical certificates for survivors, which are important for prosecuting perpetrators in court. KOFIVIV is also involved with counselling potential rapists (young men) in certain areas of Port-au-Prince.
<http://www.steppingstonesfeedback.org/>
<http://www.plan-international.org/wherewework/americas/haiti/>

Haiti advocacy strategy

The Haiti Advocacy Platform Ireland-UK – the grouping of British and Irish development NGOs and solidarity organisations working in Haiti and supporting the Haitian people – has agreed an advocacy strategy focusing on the following three issues:

- Cancellation of Haiti's external debt;
- Respect for the human rights of Haitian migrants and Dominico-Haitians living and working in the Dominican Republic;
- Haiti's integration within the Caribbean region, and common regional issues such as drug-trafficking.