A democracy made of cardboard

Nobody with an understanding of the Haitian political scene believed that the return of President Aristide last October would mean that the struggle for democracy was over. The restoration of the legitimate president was a step forward, but just a step. Six months later, few could have imagined that the balance sheet would make such depressing reading.

With a short or long term perspective, at the level of formal or grassroots democracy—whichever way one looks at it—there is cause for serious concern.

The immediate demands and expectations of Haitians who suffered during the three year coup regime remain unanswered, unfulfilled. Victims of human rights abuses committed by the Haitian military are still awaiting justice. FRAPH members and other pro coup thugs remain at large, and right wing violence is now on the increase again. The economic situation, already dire following UN sanctions, continues to deteriorate.

In this context the outlook for the parliamentary and local elections due in June is far from rosy. On the one hand there is a genuine fear that supporters of the coup regime will use violence to disrupt campaigning and polling. On the other, a daily struggle to eke out a living leaves people with little time or energy for politics.

The low turn out for voter registration indicates a lack of enthusiasm for the elections that may go deeper still. One man told Associated Press, "I voted in 1987 and it ended in blood. My choice for president in 1990 was ousted by the army. What good does voting do?"

He may well ask, for although Aristide is back there is little sign of the programme he was elected to carry out. It's true that Aristide has split the Haitian military into a civilian-controlled police and a much reduced army. But every other principle and point of the 1990 Lavalas election platform appears to have been vetoed by the US advisers and planners who now call the shots.

The themes, 'Justice, Openness and Participation', which heralded a new society to be built by the previously disenfranchised poor majority, are out of place in today's Haiti. Instead UN troops are overseeing a political solution of reconciliation with those who backed the coup, and an economic plan directed by the World Bank, the IMF and the US Agency for International Development.

What future for Haitian democracy when US Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, can openly boast at March's Senate Foreign Affairs Committee meeting, "I assure you, Mr Chairman, even after our exit in February 1996 we will remain in charge by means of USAID and the private sector."
Most of the Caribbean has a rich tradition of art, but none of the islands are as prolific and unique as Haiti. In comparison to its size and population Haiti has an abundance of artists, predominantly painters, but also metalsmiths and voodoo flag makers.

Much of Haitian art has been classified as ‘naïve’ or ‘primitive’ because of a simple, almost childlike style, usually without the use of perspective. Even though the plethora of creativity is considered something of a phenomenon, as well as producing some of the world's best art, Haiti also churns out some of the worst. Streets in Port-au-Prince, central post office and hotel foyer are flooded with bad and indifferent work. These works are mass-produced for the tourist market and are on a par with kitsch souvenirs the world over.

Haiti has supplied some explanation for the rare talent that distinguishes Haiti from the rest of the region the slaves' revolt, which culminated in independence in 1804 isolated Haiti from the rest of the Caribbean and also from an overpowering colonial cultural stranglehold. While the mutineers did have always preferred to aspire to European cultural interests and style, the peasants have been unaffected by any such influences and have retained their African spiritual vision.

The Voodoo link

The major factor that contributes to the singular vision of Haitian art is their inescapable link with Voodoo in everyday life. Before Haitian art was "covered" the artists served the loas (voodoo spirits) and the luminous (spirits) with their talents. Their painted masks decorated the walls of the houngans (voodoo priests) and the elaborate sequin flags were used in the Voodoo ceremonies in the streets of the loas. "It is the special circumstance - the existence of a living source of spiritual inspiration..." which has made the art of Haiti so effective and important," wrote Sheldon Williams in his book "Voodoo and the Art of Haiti".

The concept of marketing the creative art of Haiti was of course imported from the "West". As in schools, college, De Wint Peters began to a certain extent the homage of Haiti to artists as well as the wellbeing of creativity in Haiti. Until his arrival in 1953 some of Haiti's outstanding artists were blacksmiths or decorators, occasionally constructing metalwork or bas-reliefs for the costumes or painting the spirit gods on the doors of local shops. Visual art is an important aspect enhancing everyday life and death and respecting the spirits. Peters was working as a teacher in Port-au-Prince, but was also trained in the arts. He recognised the extraordinary flavour of the primitive and helped the artists to develop their skills by setting up the Centre D'Art.

Hypolite's dreams and visions

Hector Hypolite, considered Haiti’s greatest painter, was discovered by Peters, when he and a friend spotted some paintings on a cafe door while passing through the town of St. Marc. Above the door was a prophetic sign which read ‘La Renaissance’. Finding the artist, they invited him to join them at the Centre D’Art, and soon Hypolite was producing his intense and strange works on canvas.

Hypolite was a hougan and his work was inspired by his dreams and visions. He never lost his allegiance to voodoo during his years of success. Truman Capote wrote, "because he is the most popular of Haiti's primitive painters, Hypolite could afford a running-water house, real beds, electricity; as it is, he lives by lamp, by candle in the Trout de Cochon dumn, and all the neighbours, old wretched coconut-tossed ladies and handsome sailor boys and hunchbacked sander makers, can see into his affairs as he can see into theirs..this is the reason that I find Hypolite admirable, for there is nothing in his art that has been stooped transmuted, he is using what lives within himself, and that is his country’s spiritual history, it’s singing and worship.

Oil drum sculpture

Another artist and soon after, a new art form discovered by De Wint Peters was Georges Lantiss. While driving through Croix-des-Bouquets he was intrigued by strangely fashioned iron crosses protruding from many of the raised tombs in the town cemetery. The author of these works was a local blacksmith and in his small forge Peters persuaded him to try his hand at a free standing cross with a figure bound to it. Once he was free of utilitarian boundaries Lantiss’s imagination and work flourished. Croix-des-Bouquets, one of the recognised centres for most Haitian religious practices (voodoo voodoo), magic (voodoo malanda) and secret societies (sandwel, ebozo, hibitation, voodoo for all the Near 1804 art work. The two master sculptors, Gabriel Bien-Aime and Sergy Jolinmites, were trained by Georges Lantiss, and now their various apprentices are producing new works all forged from recycled oil drums.

The writing’s on the wall

One aspect of art in Haiti which cannot be marketed is the tradition of painting murals with a political content. Most of these murals are usually painted on the property of the subject of primitive genius, so they’re all down there at this moment covering African masks out of malnutrition—and what I mean is, they both never had an African mask in Haiti before Selden Rodman got there.

However, careful eyes of the Haitian artist, such as Peters and Rodman, have tried to be it, it is a story certainly not lacking in exploitation. In the Seventies the vortex of creativity shifted to Selon’s Lunette, where the Saint-Solé artists commune was set up by the Haitian intellectuals, Tiga Garouste and Mande Robar. The artists were all peasants and their paintings, in fitting with tradition, depicted the lives of the peasants. These representations were not in costume or in a Catholic likeness, but were depicted as form and energy. This was the avant-garde of Haitian art. The group included Prosper Pierre Louis, Louisiane S. Floreant, the mother of Stevenson and Ramphias Malory, and Levy Exil. Garouste and Robart wanted the artists to avoid the increasing commercialism of Haitian art, and proclaimed that “true artists do not paint for money”. Whilst Garouste was exposing his theory that artists would be contaminated by receiving just one penny of profit, he was receiving high prices for Saint-Solé’s works on the international market. The commune broke up when the “Coup Sélék”, as they were then called, discovered that their paintings were selling abroad for very large sums of money, yet they were getting nothing. They were exploited for the very ‘naïve’ that made them popular. They moved out, sold to the highest bidder and let the art critics decide whether or not their souls had been stained by making a decent living.

Recovering from the coup

During the coup years life was hard for Haitian artists. Tourism fell to an all time low, which seriously damaged the artists’ livelihoods and due to the embargo materials became scarce. This affected the metal workers of Croix-des-Bouquets dramatically as the oil embargo reduced the import of oil drums so oil. Some began to experiment with scrap metal, and Brems-Aimi began incorporating other bits of scrap metal in his work—car parts and wheels. Some became very rare and in desperate times began using much larger in order to cover ground faster. The flags produced were unattractive but are considered a curiosity as if they are a product of those three hard years.

Now, since Aristeï’s return, life has certainly improved for the artists. Materials are more readily available and the market is picking up again due to an increase in foreign visitors. Whether the artists continue to be exploited for their ‘naïve’, or begin to take their production and distribution into their own hands, relates to a wider question—when will Haitian working people as a whole gain control over their own economic future?
Christian Wisskirchen, who visited Haiti in January, found growing opposition to US economic plans.

President Aristide has returned and UN sanctions have been lifted but the prices of staple foods such as rice, corn and beans are up, the hours of electricity each day are down again, and there is a general deterioration in the economic situation. Many Haitians are asking themselves what has improved apart from a certain decrease in the number of human rights violations.

The international community has been quick to make promises and slow to deliver on them. The government has agreed to the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment plan yet little of the US$900 million that is supposed to flow into Haiti has so far arrived.

Some believe that, since privatisation is at the centre of the plan, the money, rather than being used to build a long-term future for the country, will anyway end up lining the pockets of the rich. According to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) the idea is to "prevent increased concentration of wealth", but—as Ed Vulliamy pointed out in The Observer last October—"quite how the population...are to raise enough money to join a shareholders' democracy is left to the imagination".

It is not surprising that the patience of many poor Haitians is running out. While the majority are suffering, those who supported the coup are still getting richer by aligning themselves with the US-led drive for an export-oriented economy. As far as the few super-rich and their US business friends are concerned, developing Haiti means little more than investing in the Port-au-Prince industrial park.

Haiti's only resource is its people, two-thirds of them peasants, and the fight is on over how it will be used. Those who fought to bring about political change during the 1980s, and who then survived three years of systemic attempts to destroy the nascent self-help structures, are not giving up now.

Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, leader of the largest peasant organisation, the MPP (Peasant Movement of Papaye), is acutely aware of the dangers of US-led structural adjustment. "They want to make Haiti into a vast American market, where Haitians consume American products, where Haitians work for Americans. To do that they have to destroy our food self-sufficiency, combat our own development plans and make us dependent on them...It's a plan for the death of the Haitian people."

Yet Jean-Baptiste exudes confidence, claiming that the MPP was not as hard hit during the coup years as many thought. While the destruction and theft of property damaged the organisation considerably, very few members joined the paramilitaries or fled—thanks to the MPP’s provision of safe houses and other security measures.

Jean-Baptiste believes that they can rebuild quicker than expected, and points out that all the groupmams (small peasant co-operatives) have already resumed work. They will however not be dropping their guard. For example, the location of their offices will not be publicised unnecessarily.

Ignoring the MPP’s concerns, Sarah Clark, deputy director of USAID in Haiti, declares that Haitian and US interests are the same. She believes that this is now Haiti’s "last best shot", because "how many more times will outside powers come in and make this kind of commitment?"

In Mare Rouge, in the north-west, however, even the remotest peasant is doubtful about such commitment. Father Brunet Chersol, who together with the local population has built a clinic, a teacher training centre and a local radio station, is clear that US policies are ignoring local people. The peasants he works with are told of their humiliation at being dependent on a US aid agency for food. They would prefer to get the raw ingredients and cook the food themselves.

The US is using a lot of money to co-opt local leaders and turn them into agents of their ‘development’ plan, but they may once again underestimate the capability of Haitians to subvert these policies. The first round in the development battle has gone to the donor governments who tied the Aristide government to structural adjustment. The next round will feature another player—the Haitian people who are fed up with plans made abroad for the benefit of the “blancs”.

Faudener Simon, a driver for the MPP since 1990, was shot dead in Port-au-Prince on March 1. Chavannes Jean-Baptiste issued the following statement, "Faudener’s death is a blow to MPP, to the popular movement, and to democracy based on participation by the people. This cowardly killing clearly shows that the macoute forces are not participating in reconciliation. On the contrary, they continue to kill, to intimidate, and to block the road to democracy. His killing is a warning to MPP from the forces of death.” Jean-Baptiste called for increased vigilance by democratic community groups.
The Haiti Support Group in collaboration with the October Gallery presents:

Haiti: Photos Paintings Ironworks

27 April—17 June 1995

As well as paintings and ironworks by Haitian artists, the exhibition features photographs of Haiti by twenty international photojournalists, here previewed by The Guardian's Maggie O’Kane

"I was trying to photograph a body of a man who had been shot in the head and dumped on the streets and I felt someone tapping hard on my shoulder. I turned round and there was this old woman trying to sell me a thermos flask."

American photographer Michelle Frankfurter's experience of working in Haiti gives some insight into the brutal and crazy years between 1986 and 1995 when the work for this exhibition was produced.

Since 'Baby Doc' Duvalier's flight into exile in France, there have been thousands of bodies to photograph in the street - the lady with the thermos flask has seen it all before.

The darkness of those years is captured in Alex Webb and Maggie Steber's brooding and saturated cibachromes, and Jerry Berndt's almost surreal reflections of the Haitian condition. But this is also an exhibition about life and sustaining it in a country that has been choking on terror and exhausted by poverty for generations.

There have been times in these years when Haiti's people did get the chance to breathe. The jubilant elections in 1990 when Aristide gained power have been recorded by Minotti Bucco and Marc French, whilst Aristide's strangely subdued return in October 1994 is portrayed in the photographs of a stunned nation pressed up against the bars of the Presidential Palace - not quite believing what they are seeing.

The real celebration of this exhibition is that it is happening. The days when fingers were waved at photographers like Maggie Steber by people who said they would remember her face are over. The sombre photographs reflecting the dark nights when no-one moved after nightfall are also past - for now.

This exhibition is a celebration of life and art. Haiti is still in danger. There are those within the country that wish to see its fragile rebirth into democracy ripped apart. Those are photographs that, hopefully, will never be taken.
During Bishop Romelus of Jérémie's visit to the parish of St Margaret Mary's, Liverpool, in November last year, the Faith and Justice Group accepted a challenge—to raise £4000 to build a house for a woman in the Bishop's diocese. The woman, already the mother of six children, recently gave birth to quads. The group named the project “Our house in Haiti” and approached all sections of the parish to assist.

All parishioners were asked to buy bricks at £5 each and over the next months a variety of fund-raising activities took place: women's and youth groups organised sponsored walks, the Brownies a “Bring and Buy” sale, the local Junior School a no-uniform day, and so on.

So far £9000 has been raised thanks to generous donations and much effort on behalf of participating parishioners. The Faith and Justice Group hope to close the appeal at £10,000. | Contact Veronica McAllister, St Margaret Mary's, Pitch Lane, Liverpool L14 0JG.

As part of the programme
Latin American Saturdays organised by The City Lit and the Latin America Bureau, the Haiti Support Group will host a day school, 'Haiti at the crossroads', on Saturday 20 May. After last year's US intervention and the return of President Aristide, members of the Haiti Support Group will discuss the prospects for genuine democracy and social justice. With video and slides.

The Venue: The City Lit, Stukeley Street, London WC2. Tel: 0171 242 9872
Course: Haiti at the crossroads. (SH1461)
Saturday 20 May 10.30—16.30. Fee £17.50 (£9.25 concessions)

Haiti films


- Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti - Maya Deren's surreal documentary film of Haiti's voodoo rituals and dances. (1951) 1.45pm
- The Man by the Shore (L'Homme sur les quais) - Haitian director Raoul Peck's feature film is hard hitting and intense. The story of the tyrannical oppression of a community acutely conveys the atmosphere of Haiti during the Papa Doc Duvalier dictatorship. (1993) 4.00pm

Tickets: £4.50 (£3.50 concessions) | Contact the Rio Cinema, 103 Kingsland High Street, London E8. Tel: 0171 254 6677
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