Jana Braziel, *Riding with Death: Vodou Art and Urban Ecology in the Streets of Port-au-Prince*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. 260 pp. (Cloth US\$65.00)

Haitian art has been locked in a *danse macabre* with its own history, certainly since the flourishing of what art historians call “the Haitian Renaissance” after World War II. Since then this equation has remained constant: the worse the circumstances, the more astonishing the art—especially since the earthquake of 2010, when Port-au-Prince was nearly leveled, and a group of “Resistance Artists” (*Atis Rezistans*) living in a postindustrial scrap heap off the Grand Rue, the city’s main drag (think *Mad Max*), responded by making art out of the detritus. This dialectic between the amply documented precariousness of Haitian life and the “creative productions” of the self-styled Atis Rezisans is Jana Braziel’s thesis. About their sculptures, Braziel waxes poetic, “The Grand Rue artists rhizomically fuse bone to fabric, weld steel to manifold, hammer nail to wood ... and meld rubber to rope. Sculptures grafted from refuse and recycled materials articulate raw postindustrial grunge” (p. 30). What follows is a rhapsody of neologisms: junkyard bricolage; radical primitivist postmodern; machinic urbanism; urban art machines; alter-modern; ghetto chic; and, most portentously, “Gede fusion aesthetics”—Gede being the Vodou divinity of Death and Sexuality who presides over the ruined city, inspiring both the Atis Rezistans and Braziel’s flamboyant metaphors.

A sense of romantic dystopia pervades the book, “The Grand Rue collective is a Vodou spiritual reservoir and a desiring-machine that propels creative productions in the city of Port-au-Prince” (p. 26). But in what sense do these artists constitute a collective? They are mainly in competition with one another, one of their most creative, Guyodo, having branched off from his former colleagues, exhibiting his sculptures in a chic gallery in (relatively) bourgeois Pétionville. In contemplating these Grand Rue sculptures, Braziel discerns the salvation of the city. “Port-au-Princians see ... their ‘small place’ position in the worlds defined by late transnational capitalism ... yet they also see (through artistic prisms), how that ‘small place’ is not a prison but a place of artistic re-creation and metamorphosis” (p. 40). It’s not clear how she arrives at such judgments. In reality there is almost no market for Grand Rue art in Haiti. Instead, the Atis Rezistans produce for an audience that does not (and may never) exist, except in hip London or New York apartments, or in the odd European museum.

The greatest showcase for Grand Rue art continues to be the *soi-disant* Ghetto Biennale, a “‘Salon des Refusés for the 21st Century’ [which] exhibited postprimitivist, altermodern, mechinic and urban environmental arts” (p. 142), cocurated by Leah Gordon, the celebrated English videographer and doyenne

of Haitian arts, and her partner André Eugène, sculptor and patriarch of the Grand Rue artists. Since 2009, the Biennale has invited Euro-American artists to the Grand Rue, “to conceptually experiment with the intersections of art and trash and to produce ecologically engaged and environmentally inspired artworks” (p. 143). The result of this fusion of (mostly) white visiting artist-wannabes and Atis Rezistans is an oddly bifurcated affair. “The overwhelming majority of the Haitian artists participating in the 2009 Ghetto Biennale ... remained divided ... by the demarcations of cultural (and financial) capital from the visiting artists and scholars ... who arrived and departed on American Airlines, Air France, or even Insel Air flights with time to travel and money to burn” (p. 155). In other words, Haitians want an opportunity to sell their art, and the visitors want to have fun. This is the phenomenon folklorists describe as “Playing Indians,” recalling those not-so-halcyon days when the average Kwakiutl family was persuaded to incorporate a cultural anthropologist eager to learn the art of totem-pole carving.

Such First- and Third-World abrasions may also result in “Jungle Fever” (Spike Lee, 1991). In her postscript, “The Art of Sex,” Braziel writes, “Within the Grand Rue collective key sculptors are men; the international artists with whom they are romantically partnered ... are typically white women from the US and Britain ... but there are myriad sexual encounters across multiple lines ... Queer sexual traffic, even tourism, occurs” (p. 170). From this perspective, the Grand Rue *granfalloon* more closely resembles Burning Man than Biennale. Braziel ends with this *cri de coeur*: “Rebel cities [like Port-au-Prince] reject the feral capitalist order divined by the global likes of the World Bank ... Port-au-Princians will be the ones to ... collectively reimagine ... and, ultimately, reconstruct [their city]” (p. 216). Perhaps. But the danger in this sort of prognosis is the impulse to romanticize the world’s slums—the pernicious impulse so vibrantly on display when Rem Koolhaas (*OMA AMO*, 2007) gushes over the creative chaos of Lagos or the kind of visitor’s insouciance mocked by Naipaul in *Guerrillas* (1975). Professors replaying Koolhaas are no less delusional than those who replay Indians.

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