

Case Study

The Healing Power of Art: Works of art by Haitian children

Exhibit at the National Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution

June 17, 2010–February 27, 2011

Deborah Stokes

Abstract

After the 2010 Haitian earthquake, the government opened a safe haven for children living in tent compounds to participate in therapeutic art activities and give expression to their terrifying experiences. Ninety-five works by children were shown at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) in the exhibition *The Healing Power of Art: art work by Haitian children after the earthquake*. An area in the gallery was set up to engage the public in drawing and writing messages in response to the young artists' paintings. Five thousand messages were collected and sent to Haiti. Additional outreach included a video conference between the Haitian children and a D.C. public elementary school French club creating peer-to-peer interaction. The exhibition and its collaborative programming cast into relief the convergence of museums and social engagement, as well as the links between art and its ability to foster compassion, connections, and community.

On January 12, 2010, Haiti experienced a 7.0 magnitude earthquake creating a major environmental and humanitarian tragedy. Children witnessed crushing destruction, displacement and death. Recognizing the need to address the psychological trauma of its youngest victims, Plas Timoun¹ was opened in Port au Prince by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Among the therapeutic programs, art activities were offered to the children as a tool to begin expressing their anxieties, fears, and anger. The former

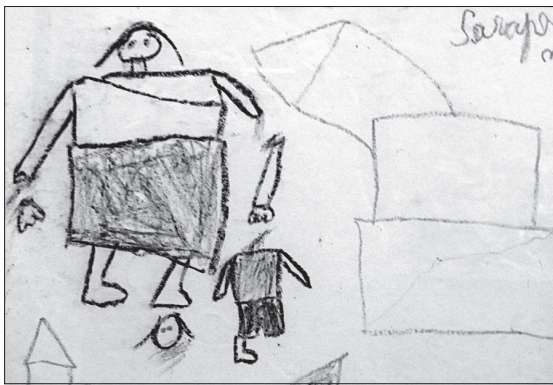
First Lady of Haiti, Elisabeth Preval, presented the NMAfA with ninety-five watercolor paintings created by the children. The resulting exhibition, *The Healing Power of Art: art work by Haitian children after the earthquake*, opened in June 2010.

With the children's paintings as proxies for communicating their horrific experiences in surviving the earthquake, a primary goal was to engage the public as active participants in responding to the art on the walls. Each child's painting was highlighted in a simple, brightly-colored wood frame of warm yellow, deep red, forest green, or dark blue, planting the art firmly within the terrain of a children's space. The inviting appearance of children's naïve expressions made the chaotic events drawn by the children of falling buildings, amputated limbs, bleeding open wounds, corpses of family and friends, tent cities and other horrifying scenes all the more striking, shocking and moving. The images represented a wide spectrum of symbols that fell under three key rubrics: (1) Despair/Pessimism: drawings revealed bursts of negative feeling in a disorganized array of dots, a stomach tied in spiral knots, a blacked-out sun, buildings tumbling into rubble, bodies bleeding and falling into the streets, holding hands with the dead, and severed heads; (2) Rescue/Assistance: depicted emergency transport, e.g., a Red Cross airplane, helicopters, and ambulances; (3) Resilience/Optimism: symbols of hope in the form of colorful flowers, hearts, waving flags and friends holding hands. The range of emotions speaks to the paradox of defenseless children too young to have developed any coping skills, suddenly forced to face extraordinary trauma and loss with the notion of permanency upended. Two videos in the gallery gave dramatic context to the art. *Thirty Five Long Seconds: Haiti's Deadly Earthquake* displayed the power of the earthquake as the National Palace collapsed in real time, caught by the security cameras, and included interviews with former President Rene Preval and other officials. In the other film, Michelle Obama, Jill Biden and Elisabeth Preval tour Plas Timoun with Haitian artist and Cultural Advisor to First Lady Philippe Dodard and are interviewed on site with the participating teachers and children.

To initiate a meaningful encounter for the viewers of the exhibition, several colorful round tables with stools invited visitors to



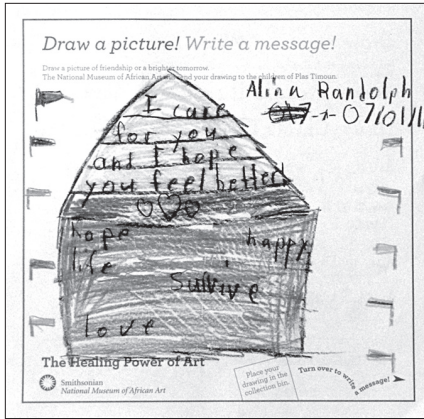
Children's drawings, Plas Timoun, Port au Prince, Haiti. Photos courtesy of Franko Khoury.



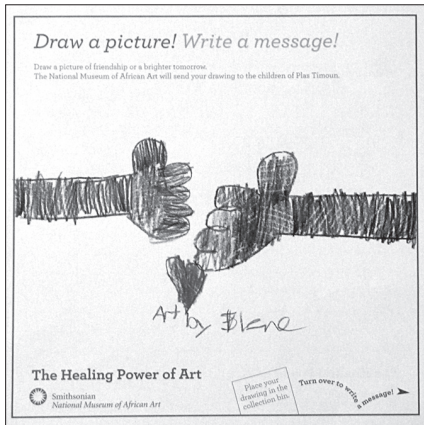
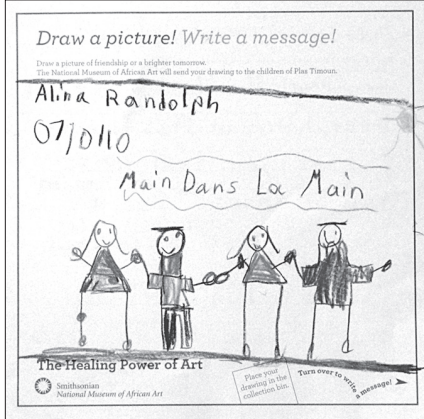
sit together and reflect on the exhibit, talk to their friends, students, families and strangers. At the same time, paper and art supplies were available at each table, and everyone was encouraged to create a personal picture of friendship and a message of hope in response to the children's art. These pictures and messages were collected and sent to the children in Haiti. This supportive setting provided a social environment for visitors to express themselves either verbally or artistically, make personal connections, and build compassion without any predefined expectations. As a result, over five thousand inspiring wishes and drawings were collected for the children at Plas Timoun. These spontaneous, free-choice textual and visual expressions presented a significant database of viewer responses for assessment and study. Many were uploaded to the NMAfA Facebook page.

In November 2010, the exhibit went beyond the museum walls. Working with JoAnne Livingston, Director of International Education at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C., we seized on the chance to underscore the value of interaction through new media. A video-conference was organized between a group of the young artists at Plas Timoun with Philippe Dodard as facilitator in Haiti and an award-winning French club at J.O. Wilson Public Elementary School in D.C. led by Florentino Martinez. Special pre-conference drawings and messages (in French and English) were created by the children of both countries, adding a noteworthy degree of peer-to-peer interaction. New correspondence between the Haitian children and the French club is planned and the exhibition is under consideration for travel to other venues.²

The Healing Power of Art started with a simple request for wall space to exhibit the pictures drawn by young Haitian survivors. Adding real-time videos of the disaster put the trauma experienced by the children into perspective and allowed viewers to understand the scenes depicted in their art work. Adding tables, chairs and art supplies in the gallery to inspire conversations and to send expressions of friendship to Haiti created a larger, more emotional experience for the viewers. Being able to take the exhibit outside the museum walls and see the



Museum visitors create messages of friendship and hope. Photos courtesy of the author.



interaction between the children of Haiti and D.C. was an unexpected but extraordinary experience for everyone involved. The exhibition expanded from a hallway at the museum to communication between visitors and Haiti, used the NMAfA website to include people who could not visit the museum, and, finally, to the video feed with the Haitian children who created the works of art at Plas Timoun.³ *The Healing Power of Art* suggests that there are essential links between the building of a historical record of generation-shaping trauma, the creation and power of art to express it, and the process of establishing cross-cultural community through social engagement.

Notes

1. According to Haitian officials, Plas Timoun, Creole for “The Children’s Place,” was developed by Elisabeth Préval, Philippe Dodard, and a group of psychologists, educators and politicians. Six- to ten-year-old children living in tent compounds and under tarps in the homeless camps scattered across Port au Prince received mental health services, including art and music therapy, and access to sports, food and water. Activities took place in buses donated by the Dominican Republic. The earthquake damaged or destroyed 90 percent of the schools in the Port au Prince area and 40 percent in surrounding areas. Nine hundred children participated in the program and 2,000 were fed daily. America.gov, April 13, 2010.
2. The exhibit is under review for travel to additional venues. Contact the National Museum of African Art.
3. The author traveled to Haiti in April 2011 and delivered the thousands of messages collected during the exhibition.

About the Author

Deborah Stokes is the Curator for Education at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.