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## Learning in High Places and the Task of Collectivity

Since 2012, the Davidoff Art Initiative has been promoting Caribbean art and artists through a global program of residencies and cultural activities. The Davidoff Art Residency 2016 curator Natasha Ginwala recalls her journey to Altos de Chavón (Dominican Republic) where the Davidoff Art Residency is located.

Natasha Ginwala is an independent curator, researcher, and writer. She is the 2017 curator of *Contour Biennial 8* in Mechelen (Brussels), and curatorial advisor for documenta 14. She has written on contemporary art and culture in journals such as *The Exhibitionist*, *e-flux*, and *Afterall*, and has contributed to numerous publications.

This text is an edited and shortened version of an essay that first appeared in *Sea Is History: Caribbean Experience in Contemporary Art*, Davidoff Art Initiative Series, published in 2016.

I arrived in Altos de Chavón with a handful of mangoes and avocados, having been informed that, as we were located away from the city, they would serve as my emergency stock. However, I was unprepared for the scale of this complex, which includes an archaeological museum, boutique stores, and an amphitheater. The mountainside school tucked away in this built complex reminded me of my boarding school in western India, atop a range of hills, which was guided by the philosopher of J. Krishnamurti.

In Chavón I met with students to share my curatorial approach along with Lorenzo Benedetti. At the end of our presentations, a student inquired, “What does a curator really *do*?” And while we answered to the best of our ability, I am not entirely sure how convinced we left our audience.

When I delved into the studio work—walls lined with drawing exercises, realist painting, design tasks, and graphic animation—it became clear how material process remained at the core of the artistic training there, and that this, in fact, strengthens the basis for future experimentation and engagement with discourse, perhaps even after school life. These observations gave me a more nuanced reading of the value of the Davidoff Art Initiative residency in collaboration with the art and design school as an osmotic process—a sharing of thoughts within a larger web of practice. And, to consider J. Krishnamurti in an entirely different context, through his constant reminder to encounter ways of unlearning, reflected in his

words, “freedom from the desire for an answer is essential to the understanding of a problem.”

Engel Leonardo’s project *Ranchos, Planchas y Gallinas*, curated by Pablo León de la Barra, was conceived in response to the so-called Venezuela Pavilion. This was designed by architect Alejandro Pietri, who was influenced by the formal sensibility of Frank Lloyd Wright, but composed his structures in a tropical climate. In this case, the pavilion was built for the Fair of Peace and Fraternity of the Free World of 1955. Inside, tin-roofing sheets painted in sunset tones lie diagonally against the built columns, creating a shift in geometric perception and a seduction through the most ubiquitous building material. Ideas around the city, coloniality, and rural modernism are also brought in through this work.

Chickens could be seen roaming in the grounds of this historic pavilion—a reminder of how it was becoming a fossil until local architects and artists such as Engel intervened. We were served rum and fresh coconut water at the opening, accompanied by a live band—all were crucial elements in Engel’s approach, which sets up a bodily response to sites and distills architectonic experience through a sense of everyday choreography. With Laura Castro and Quisqueya Henríquez he has formed a studio collective called Sindicato. The space offers room for dialogue through form—maintaining a shared interest in urbanism, artisanal knowledge, and the repurposing of the modernist built environment,

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Louis Henderson’s studio, Davidoff Art Initiative Studios, Altos de Chavón, La Romana, Dominican Republic

In 2012, under Hans-Kristian Høeysgaard's leadership, Oettinger Davidoff became an Associate Partner of Art Basel for its exhibitions in Basel, Miami Beach, and Hong Kong, and launched the Davidoff Art Initiative in order to document, foster art production, and engage meaningfully the local artistic communities with broader networks in the Caribbean region and the wider world. Its goal is to offer perspectives on the vitality of the visual arts in a region that is still often underrepresented in international publications and exhibitions. The Davidoff Art Initiative's main program is the Davidoff Art Residency organized both in major art capitals worldwide and in the Dominican Republic. The 2016 participants were Michael Linares in Basel, Leasho Johnson in Brooklyn, Fermin Ceballos in Berlin, David Gumbs in Beijing, Natalia Ortega Gamez in Bogotá, as well as Paolo Chiasera, Jimmy Robert, Louis Henderson, and Oscar Santillan in Altos de Chavón. The Davidoff Art Dialogues, the Davidoff Art Grants, and the Davidoff Limited Art Editions—whose 2016 artist was Olivia McGilchrist—complete the initiative.

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marginalized artifacts, as well as the lived rituals of the Dominican Republic. Sindicato also acts as a process lab where performances, temporary displays, and public events can be held. The idea around their collective work is to keep an autonomous and spontaneous realm for ephemeral gestures but also hold exhibitions to reclaim the public domain.

The concluding days of the residency were taken up with preparation for Open Studios, presenting work in progress. There is always the risk of overplanning or becoming reductive on such occasions, but I felt each studio was an honest and lucid entry—composed as if one had been invited to read an entrancing chapter from a novel, and left wanting to go on.

Oscar Santillan creates a parafiction using a map drawn by Columbus and driven by the artist's speculative travels in the Dominican Republic in search of a phantom island called Baneque. In tracing a plane of invisibility at sea, Santillan joins a legacy of recalling elusive islands and explorations that invert the order for discovery and rather chase plausible figments and secrets. A crystallized salt sculpture are the remains of this effort, placed upon a reflective glass that resonates with the roof of the Davidoff Art Studios, while the rest of the room is filled with rumors of what may have come to pass.

Paolo Chiasera's *Ambush #1* "Psychoinstitutions" is a canvas magazine for spatial reading, which also operates as a mode of autocritique. He paints cigars on the surface of this work (alluding to the sponsor of our residency) and invites viewers to join this floor landscape, which appears to offer leisure yet also persists in driving autonomous thinking on the power dynamics at play in cultural institutions.

Jimmy Robert's workshop and collective performance with a group of his students from the Universität der Künste Berlin and from Altos de Chavón—using the on-site amphitheater as a threshold for encounter and disappearance, leaving traces, and folding bodies—appeared as more than a series of snapshots through the live relationships that were built in the process. Titled *Transeúnte*, the project captured a longer trajectory of proximate bodily thinking and, eventually, the arts as a way of covering distance.

In his film *The Sea is History*, Louis Henderson revisits a poem by Derek Walcott, re-staging his words

with sites excavated in filming Santo Domingo's colonial, cultural, and religious topography as "the first capital of the New World." He juxtaposed this with liquid terrain: the hypersaline lake Lago Enriquillo. This lake, bearing its name from Taíno origins and acts of rebellion against the Spaniards—with islands that rise and sink, rare marine species and fossil corals—performs as the carrier of history, a cinepoem. Henderson's film detects this border geography as a zone to forecast possible futures while facing the unstable limits of death and life, and of death-life.

Through journeying around the Caribbean and examining the many surfaces that compose the rigorous and exciting contemporary practices that thrive here, I began to see links in an aesthetics of collectivity, the means by which cultural forces bravely converse with urbanity and class difference, and the informal coexistence of dynamic intergenerational artists across the cities I visited. In charting a loose archipelagic route, I was able to comprehend to a small degree a multi-located, para-institutional engagement in the arts and self-expression—as well as how to achieve what Glissant called a natural rather than a forced poetics in the everyday life of culture.

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Davidoff Art Initiative Studios, Altos de Chavón, La Romana, Dominican Republic

Jimmy Robert *Transeúnte*, 2016 Performance, Amphitheater, Altos de Chavón

