

# Wording Identities: How Can Museums Label Diasporic Artists?

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# Introduction

In 2009, the conference “Tropenmuseum for a Change!” held at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen in the Netherlands (NMVW), now called Wereld Museum, discussed a topic that has been increasingly noticeable: the necessity to adopt new curatorial and collecting practices within museums, in particular those with colonial past such as most ethnographic museums in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Recently, exhibitions like “Our Colonial Inheritance”<sup>2</sup> and “Someone is Getting Rich”<sup>3</sup> at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, bring particular focus to contemporary artists, the first presenting these throughout the exhibition, and the second being an exhibition of only contemporary artists. However, and interestingly, art museums have been including ethnographic objects, a phenomenon recently exemplified by the exhibition “Krishner and Nolde: Expressionism. Colonialism.”<sup>4</sup> at the Stedelijk Museum of modern art in Amsterdam. Therefore, it is very likely to see the same contemporary artists exhibited in both types of museums.

The artist Remy Jungerman is a great example of this new dynamic. At the Stedelijk Museum, this artist is currently displayed in the exhibition “Tomorrow is a Different Day, collection 1980-Now”<sup>5</sup> in a room titled “Breaking the White Frame of the Museum.” The sculpture *Intiands* (figure 1), created in 2015, is made up of vertical and horizontal wooden lines painted with different shades of red. On top of those lines, three squares fall vertically, with in between the first and second, indistinguishable shapes seem to be holding blocks in place, and between the second and third filled jars are doing the same. Other blocks with geometric shapes are placed on the right side of the sculpture, one behind the red lines and the other in the front, showing the depth of the work. An additional text placed next to the exhibited piece gives more specific contextualization by indicating that the work “echoes stories and traditions from Africa and the African diaspora” and that “Winti is a traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Faber, Daan van Dartel, “Introduction,” in *Tropenmuseum for a Change! Present between Past and Future. A Symposium report*, Bulletin 391, (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, June 24, 2022, till 2029, curated by Tropenmuseum.

<sup>3</sup> “Someone is Getting Rich,” Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023, curated by Carrie Pilto & Tropenmuseum.

<sup>4</sup> “Krishner and Nolde: Expressionism. Colonialism.” Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, September 4<sup>th</sup> till December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Curated by Beatrice von Bormann and Dorthe Aegesen.

<sup>5</sup> “Tomorrow is a Different Day, Collection 1980-Now,” Stedelijk Museum, ongoing exhibition curated by the Stedelijk Museum.

Afro-Surinamese religion.”<sup>6</sup> These texts help contextualize and contribute to a the better understanding of what is presented in the piece. The room’s explanatory text further states the following:

In 2003, the artists Remy Jungerman, Michael Tdja and Gillion Grantsaan founded Wakaman, through which they sought to examine the position of artists with a Caribbean Dutch background. Their action was prompted by the continuing indifference within the Dutch art world to art and artists with Surinamese roots.<sup>7</sup>

Though the cultural references are alluded to in the explanatory labels, the focus brought to the piece in this room is directed toward Jungerman’s artistic practice and how this one fits a movement he created with other artists with Surinamese roots.

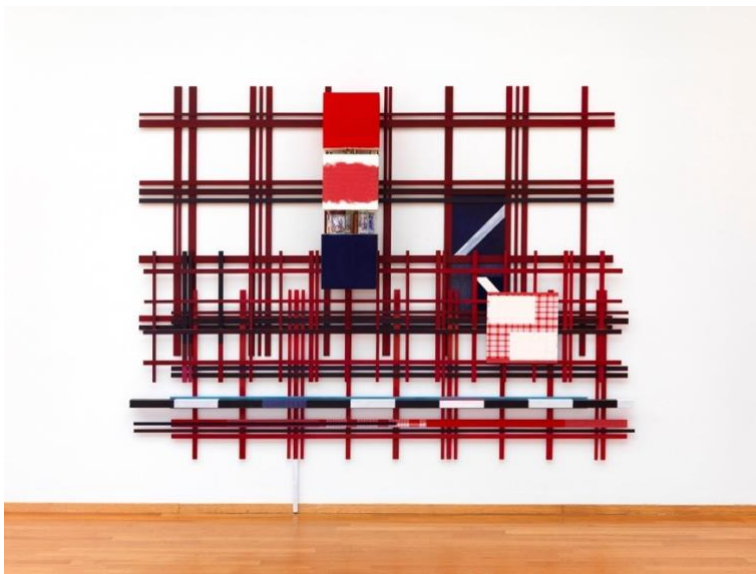


Figure 1: Remy Jungerman, *Intiands*, seen at the Stedelijk Museum within the exhibition “Tomorrow is a Different Day, collection 1980-Now” 2023. Photo from Stedelijk collection.<sup>8</sup>

At the Tropenmuseum, Remy Jungerman’s work, *Bakru* (2007), is presented in the exhibition “Our Colonial Inheritance”<sup>9</sup> (figure 2). Like the former work, blue vertical and horizontal lines, with additional diagonal lines, some of them forming shapes similar to those

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<sup>6</sup> Stedelijk Museum, “Remy Jungerman,” in “Tomorrow is a Different Day, collection 1980-Now,” wall label seen during visit on April 21st, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Stedelijk Museum, “Breaking the White frame of the Museum,” in “Tomorrow is a Different Day, collection 1980-Now,” wall label seen on April 21st, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Stedelijk Museum Collectie, *Remy Jungerman, Intiadas*, 2019.1.0262(1-5), <https://www.stedelijk.nl/nl/collectie/105355-remy-jungerman-initiands>, accessed June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

of a house, are what catches the viewer's attention the most. However, in this work more elements are placed throughout the sculpture. On the left side several glass and ceramic bottles stand on a wooden shelf with a picture of a backyard on the bottom. Another shelf, below the bottles, holds a coconut warped in a golden thread. Next to this shelf, a gnome with a wooden mask holds a small dagger, and next to this one is an image of a frog statue, similar to that placed on house fences, is framed by the wooden blue lines. Some of the lines instead of being painted in blue have a map on them, and others have elements attached to them such as a gray plastic pipe or intertwined fabric. The text accompanying the work mentions that the artist's "artistic idiom combines Winti rituals, Maroon motifs and elements drawn from European modern art."<sup>10</sup> Overall, this text dives deeper into the cultural signification of each element of the art piece, particularly those representatives of the syncretized Afro-Surinamese culture.



Figure 2: Remy Jungerman, *Bakru*, 2007, Wereld Museum Collection, (AM-701-2a). Photo from Wereld Museum collection.<sup>11</sup>

Although the text at the Stedelijk Museum mentions the artist's cultural background, as cultural and racial readings are the arguments displayed by the room, the scope of this museum is centered on the aesthetic and art historical value of the work. Therefore, the texts in this room offer a reading that allows visitors to focus on how the artist's cultural background is visually explored in the work, without giving more details or insights about the

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<sup>10</sup> Tropenmuseum, "Bakru," wall label seen during visit on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Collectie*, <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/e7063982-f0c5-4ae0-ab28-e01578390645>, accessed June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



culture. This information advises the aesthetic reading of the work, which contrasts with the way the Tropenmuseum contextualizes the work. Furthermore, the contemporary art museum mentions the artist's Surinamese background implicitly, weaving this on in the text, also opposing the Tropenmuseum label, where the factual entry states this explicitly. These two formats only inform of the artist's Surinamese roots without specifying how far the artist's Surinamese ancestry goes. It only benefits the context of the room as it aims at showing diversity in the museum.

The Tropenmuseum label follows a more classical format stating: the artist's name, year of birth (year of death if applicable), title, national background, year of creation, material, collection number. In this case presenting the information as such: "Remy Jungerman (1959-); Bakru; Suriname/Netherlands; 2007; wood, textile, paper, plastic, botanic materials (coconut); AM-701-2a."<sup>12</sup> The Stedelijk Museum instead labels with the following information: the artist's name, year of birth (year of death if applicable), title, year of creation, materials, and acquisition information. Here presenting Jungerman's work as: "Remy Jungerman (1959)/ INTIADS, 2015/painted wood, cotton textile, kaolin and glass jars/ acquired with the generous support of the Mondrian Fund and Stedelijk circle, 2019."<sup>13</sup>

Even if the artist's cultural background and national identity are still mentioned and associated with his name, this is not done as explicitly as the Tropenmuseum. Not including the artist's cultural background in the factual entry of the work means that if the text contextualizing the piece did not mention where the artist comes from, this information would be eluded. The acknowledgement of an artist's cultural or national background depends on whether or not the curators want to make a claim about this one, and if they wish to write an explanatory text for the work. In the case of the Stedelijk exhibition, Jungerman's creation supports the claim that the artist's practice fits into a movement within art production to contrast the "indifference within the Dutch art world to art and artists with Surinamese roots."<sup>14</sup> A distinction is made by these two labels differentiating the association of cultural background to the artist, as done by the Tropenmuseum, and to the artwork, as done by the Stedelijk Museum.

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<sup>12</sup> Tropenmuseum, "Bakru."

<sup>13</sup> Stedelijk Museum, "Tomorrow is a Different Day, collection 1980-Now," wall label seen during visit April 21st, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Stedelijk Museum, "Breaking the White frame of the Museum," wall label seen on April 21st, 2023.

This comparison sheds light on the crucial role played by labels in the way content is presented to visitors in today's museums. In some cases, these texts contextualize the works "instructing" the visitor on how to interpret and think about what they are experiencing. In this example, the Stedelijk Museum, on the one hand, pushes visitors to approach the artworks presented, paying close attention to how the artists in this room contrast with the European artists presented in the previously visited rooms of the museum. Although each work, and artist, is not labeled with their specific nationalities and cultural backgrounds might not be further developed in the label's argument the title given to the room "Breaking the White Frame of the Museum" points to making artists' identities the main argument studied in the works.

This confrontation further demonstrates the different ways labeling can be practiced by museal institutions. Museums present different texts. Within an exhibition, a visitor first reads the title, then they are presented with the introductory text, and as they walk through the space, descriptive texts help distinguish different sections. In this thesis, my focus is directed towards the smallest piece of text in the exhibition, the one associated to the exhibited object or artwork, which is denominated as the label. This one, depending on the exhibition, can vary in size: a shorter label can be called a factual label, it states the necessary information to identify the work; whereas a longer label in addition to the factual information, has an elaborated text that gives context to the visitor about the piece and helps its interpretation and study.

As shown with Remy Jungerman's example, labels can significantly change depending on the museum. This is true, especially regarding its format, since museums, visitors, and artists have been progressively contesting this way of labeling. This has resulted in the usage of new and different formats for factual entries. During my research, I have identified four different formats in which factual labels, accompanying art pieces within ethnographic and art museums, present nationalities.

The first one, that I designate as the "classical" one, includes: Artist name, date and place of Birth, date and place of death (if applicable), the title of the work, the year the work was created, materials, dimensions and if it was donated or purchased through a donation (see figure 3). Regarding the artist's nationalities, these also change depending on the institution and sometimes depending on the room in which the work is shown. Some of these labels have solely the country in which the artist was born, and others choose to be more specific by

stating the city the artist was born. The city can sometimes be accompanied by the country or the state (See figures 4 and 5).



Figure 3: Label for Edouard Duval Carrié, *Cascade and Hummingbird—After Martin Johnson Heade*, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, “Our Colonial Inheritance exhibition.”<sup>15</sup> Photograph taken by the author on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022.

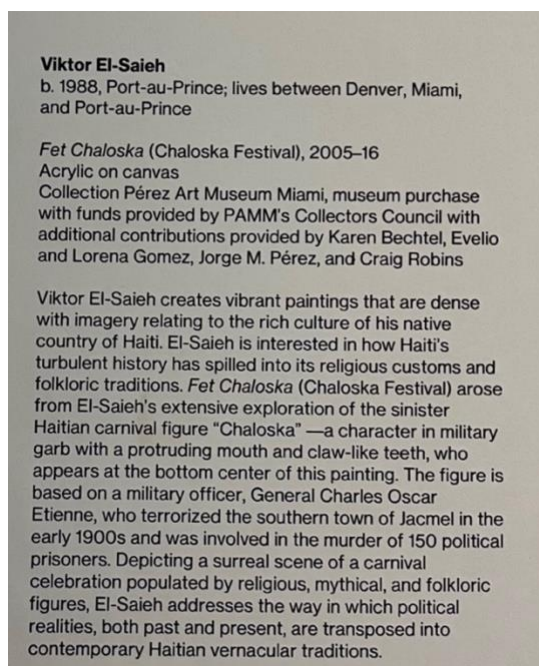


Figure 4: Label for Viktor El-Saieh, *Fet Chaloska*, permanent display of the Pérez Art Museum in Miami collection, March 9, 2023. Photograph taken by the author.

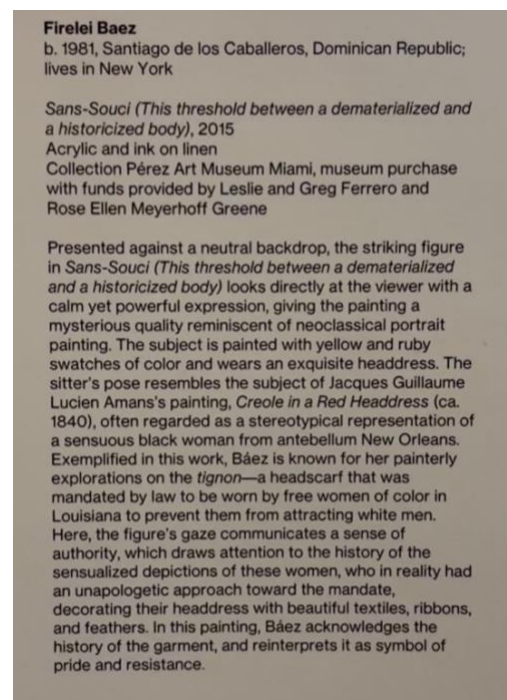


Figure 5: Label for Firelei Baez, *Sans-Souci (This threshold between a dematerialized and historic body)*, permanent display of the Pérez Art Museum in Miami collection, March 9, 2023. Photograph taken by the author.

<sup>15</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

The second type of label is more specific, as, in addition to stating where the artist was born, it also chooses to state where the artist resides or where they resided before their death. What is interesting is if they do not mention where the artist resided, and they died in the same city they were born, some museums repeat the city with the date of death. This format can sometimes be used to allude to the artist having moved during their life (figure 6).

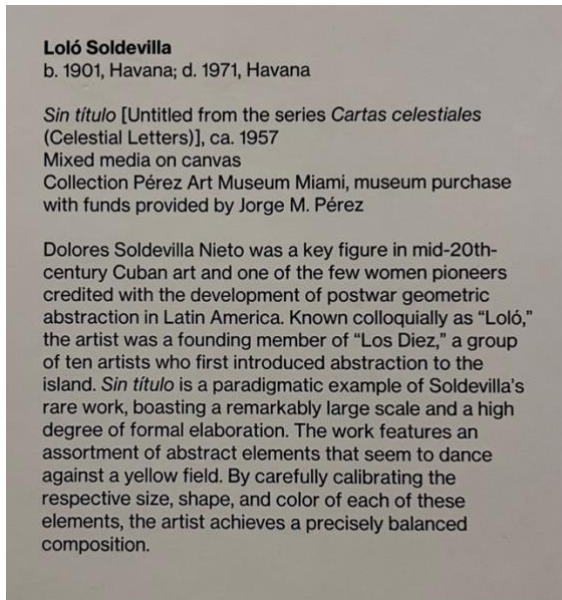


Figure 6: Label for Loló Soldevilla, *Sin Título* [Untitled from the series *Cartas celestiales* (Celestial Letters)], permanent display of the Pérez Art Museum in Miami collection, March 9, 2023. Photograph taken by the author.

Other labels omit to state where the artist was born, but instead, they inform the visitor where they reside or where the artwork was produced. However, this is not often accompanied by “produced in” or “resides,” which can be confusing (figure 7).

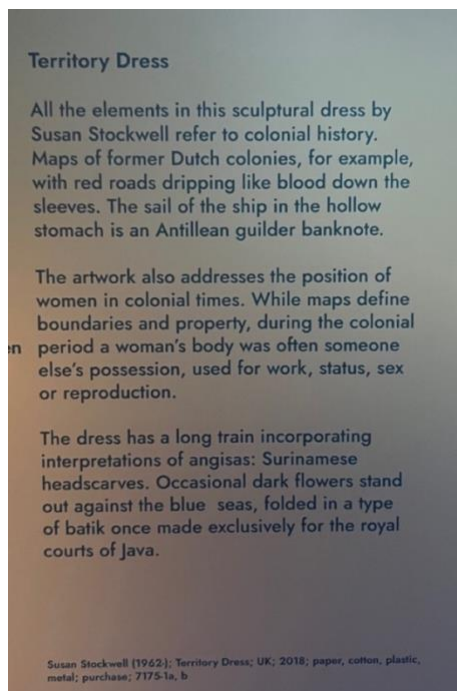


Figure 7: Label for Susan Stockwell, *Territory Dress*, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, “Our Colonial Inheritance exhibition.”<sup>16</sup> Photo taken by the author on September 4th, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

Finally, some labels do not mention where the artist was born, where they died, or where they reside, as exemplified by the Stedelijk Museum label created for the aforementioned piece (figure 8). This information might be mentioned in the longer text accompanying the work, but only if the museum considers this to be valuable information for the artwork, meaning it is very subjective.

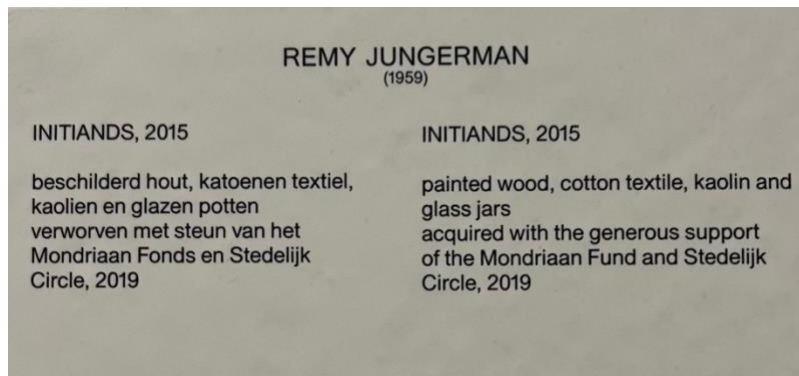


Figure 8: Label for Remy Jungerman, *Intiands*, permanent exhibition “Tomorrow is a Different Day, collection 1980-Now” Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023. Photo taken by author.

Place of birth, and national/cultural identity, are the information more likely to change depending on the label created by an institution. Aside from disclosing how an object was acquired, this information is the one thing that each labeling format can differentiate itself with. In particular, when it comes to artists whose nationalities are more complicated to define, this information becomes more delicate to handle as bluntly as a label does. Such complications would particularly impact artists with a diasporic background. Given that they are representatives of two different locations while at the same time not being considered a complete representation of each individual country, it can be considered a more ambiguous and complex identity. This contrasts with the seeming simplicity of labeling an artist who was born and still resides in the same location. Sociologist Stuart Hall explains the diasporic condition perfectly during his talk in 2009 titled “Modernity and its Others: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-War History of the Black Diaspora Arts.”<sup>17</sup> He elaborates that the second moment in the diasporic black arts in the UK, which he argues was by the 1970s, was “haunted by diasporic questions of identity and belonging. ‘Who are we?’ Where do we come from?’

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<sup>17</sup> Stuart Hall, “Modernity and its Others: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-War History of the Black Diaspora Arts,” conference transcribed by Isabella Taylor in *Liberation begins in the Imagination*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2021), 48-63.

‘Where do we belong?’” This identity constantly feels out of place, and one could even go as far as assuming that it could entail a rejecting experience coming the different locations they partly belong to.<sup>18</sup> It has hence become particularly sensitive to define, especially in the context of a globalized world trying its best not to offend or create assumptions about others.

Therefore, the central question this thesis aims to answer is why and how do museums choose the information on labels?

### *State of the art*

Following the civil rights movement that demanded equal treatment for non-white populations, more specifically for the African American population in the US, museums progressively changed their practices.<sup>19</sup> During the late 1960s and onwards, these institutions started creating exhibitions where black artists could be placed front stage. Such exhibitions would be “Contemporary Black Artists in America”<sup>20</sup> at the Whitney Museum, and “Harlem on My Mind”<sup>21</sup> at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), both in the US. In both these situations, the ethnic label of the artists’ identities was used to create the entire exhibition, making the show’s argument an exploration of black art in the US, therefore separating it from the other artistic productions in the country. These exhibitions were not met without contestations as in 1969, after public protests, the “Black Artists in America” symposium was organized by the MET.<sup>22</sup> This event gathered artists Romare Bearden, Sam Gilliam, Jr., Richard Hunt, Jacob Lawrence, Tom Lloyd, William Williams, and Hale Woodruff to engage in a discussion based on the exhibition at the MET. This symposium started by elaborating on the lack of recognition for the black artist, by the general public and, up to then, institutions. Tom Lloyd, who was extremely vocal throughout the symposium, expressed that “many black artists can’t support themselves through their art,”<sup>23</sup> resulting in the black artist being

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall, “Modernity and its Others: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-War History of the Black Diaspora Arts,” 57.

<sup>19</sup> Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, at the Whitney Museum, in New York, from April 6<sup>th</sup> till May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1971, curated by Robert Doty.

<sup>21</sup> “*Harlem on My Mind*”: *The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1969, curated by Allon Schoener.

<sup>22</sup> “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (1969): 245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3258415>.

<sup>23</sup> Tom Lloyd “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” 245.

unknown in their community. William Williams then insisted that a distinction must be done between black identities: that of Black *men* and Black *artists*, as they are “different questions and somehow they seem to be thrown together as one that can be answered with some simple statement.”<sup>24</sup> This is where the conversation shifts toward the complexity of being labeled as a black artist. As Lloyd defines this artistic “genre,” it is not about the form but who the creator is; it is black art because the artist is black.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, according to this artist, there is a need for his ethnicity to be stated as part of their artwork because it is the primary way through which he can speak to his community.

The label of black artist, as explored during the symposium becomes a problem for some and a solution for others. Lloyd’s definition of a black artist clashes with that of Lawrence as the second contests saying: “I think you are an artist who happens to be black, but you’re not a black artist. See, that’s the difference,” to which Lloyd responds: “No I am a black artist who has refused to be conditioned.”<sup>26</sup> For Lawrence, this label confines the artist into the identity’s expectations and what these mean in their societal context. For others, like Tom Lloyd, this label helps them reach their community and define their work in this communal sociological context. This means that stating this separation helps them promote black art.<sup>27</sup> The main takeaway from this symposium was, first the argument that a label renders the reading of art sociological, and second, and most importantly, the sheer difficulty of defining an identity.

A similar discussion was generated during the “Latin American Artist and their Identity” symposium at the University of Austin, Texas, in 1975.<sup>28</sup> This symposium lasted three days and gathered professionals in the world of Latin American arts, such as critics, scholars, and artists, to discuss what it means to be a Latin American artist. It also brought a particular focus on dealing with this identity in a Western country like the United States. Similar to the previous event, this symposium also discussed the difficulty of defining what exactly is Latin American art. Rita de Belejer stated that the problem resides in the difficulties of describing it outside of the ideological propositions of its desirability or its

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<sup>24</sup> William Williams, “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” 246.

<sup>25</sup> Tom Lloyd “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” 249.

<sup>26</sup> Tom Lloyd, “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” 251.

<sup>27</sup> “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” 254.

<sup>28</sup> *El Artista Latinoamericano y su Identidad*, edited by Damian Bayón, Colección Estudios, (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1977).

instability.<sup>29</sup> Some, like Barbara Duncan, argued that Latin American artistic language informs the cultural experience like a kaleidoscope, a mosaic, of the Latin American region has produced a ‘composition’ of artistic expression that is particular to this region.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, artists such as Jaime Concha, insist that what makes Latin American art is more so the shape it takes than its content.<sup>31</sup> The search to explain what defines the artistic category during this symposium is humorously summarized by Emir Rodríguez Monegal when he states: “we are fatally Latin Americans. One of the characteristics of Latin Americans is questioning what a Latin American is. Why? Because this search for identity has been imposed from the outside.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, like the “Black Artists in America” symposium, there is a surmounting difficulty in defining what is non-white Western-Eruoamerican art. Even if institutions try to define what it is, they seem unable to find a definition, given that artists are themselves in the same position.

The symposium further explored what it means for their practice and definition of identity to migrate. Fernando de Szyszlo spoke about the value of exiled artists. He argued that by going abroad to cities such as Paris or New York, they were able to develop and create an abundant cultural framework different from that of their origin.<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline Barnitz follows a similar thought when she uses Santiago Cardenas as an example of how his time in the US influenced his work due to the contacts he created and the experience he had during those years. However, even with those influences, his work is not comparable to what artists from the US were creating then.<sup>34</sup> Arguably, one could understand this explanation as Barnitz

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<sup>29</sup> Rita de Belejer “El problema reside en las dificultades para describirlo fuera de las propuestas ideológicas de su deseabilidad o de su inestabilidad.” *El Artista Latinoamericano y su Identidad*, Colección Estudios, (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1977), 81.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Duncan “La experiencia cultural colectiva en el caleidoscopio, el mosaico, de la región latinoamericana, ha producido un original “compuesto” de la expresión artística que solo podía emerger de esa zona como una combinación de logros estéticos en el campo de la plástica.” , *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Jaime Concha “Forma en el sentido de la apropiación de un territorio cultural que podemos definir como latinoamericano.” *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal “Somos fatalmente latinoamericanos. Una de las características del latinoamericano es preguntarse que es un latinoamericano. ¿Por qué? Porque nos han impuesto desde afuera esa búsqueda de la identidad.” *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Fernando de Szyszlo “es el fundirse en los problemas, identificarse en las búsquedas, las preocupaciones, los experimentos, en desarrollar un lenguaje válido dentro de los parámetros en que trabajan los artistas de las grandes capitales, antes Paris ahora Nueva York. Este camino cuando es asumido totalmente es tan válido como cualquier otro: la historia del arte abunda en ejemplos de exiliados que se desarrollan y realizan en un marco cultural distinto al de su origen.” *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Jacqueline Barnitz “Tomemos, por ejemplo, el caso del colobiano Santiago Cardenas, que trabajo en los E.E.U.U. tres años y, por supuesto, sufrió la influencia de la gente con la que estuvo en contacto, Sin embargo, lo que esta haciendo ahora no tiene nada que ver con lo que los norteamericanos hacían entonces.” *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 53.



saying that while Cardenas' migration was crucial to the development of his work and style, which originated in his home country, his practice is still distinguishable from US American artists due to where he came from. Aracy Amaral later explained that even when an artist leaves their country of origin, in a sense, they do not entirely leave their culture since often these artists end up creating networks with people from the same region they come from. He argues that these diasporic artists end up segregating themselves and creating a Latin American ghetto in which natal traditions are preserved.<sup>35</sup> Although the artists who emigrated received much attention from international institutions and scholars, Jose Luis Cuevas points to the crucial role played by the artists who decided to stay and further develop what he calls purely Latin American art.<sup>36</sup>

One of these conversations ended on the topic of the local contribution. Ruffino Tamayo pleads that because art is a universal language (something that today is very much contested) and can be understood by anyone, it becomes the artist's responsibility to bring a local contribution to the practice.<sup>37</sup> In the context of this research, this becomes a fascinating argument since, according to Tamayo, the national label seen visually becomes the artist's responsibility.

As exemplified by the list of different labeling practices, what happened in the 1970s continues today; identity is still something museums are challenged by, particularly with the use of language.<sup>38</sup> Publications on the importance of museum texts have already been circulating for many years. These writings develop different techniques for creating labels, pointing to how to engage with the visitor, what type of information should be on a label and the different ways of formatting these texts. As an example, one can take the book by Beverly

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<sup>35</sup> Aracy Amaral "en esta opción que hace el artista también se revela el aspecto latinoamericano porque el artista se reúne en grupos y , entonces, como resultado de esa segregación del *ghetto* que ocurre en el exterior, se produce también una preservación de sus tradiciones natales." [15] *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Jose Luis Cuevas *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 50. This sense of purity will later in this thesis be questioned through a brief study of Homi Bhabha.

<sup>37</sup> Ruffino Tamayo "El arte es universal, es un lenguaje que puede ser entendido en todos los rincones de la tierra y al que nosotros tenemos la obligación de hacer un aporte, que es el aporte *local*, de donde somos nosotros." *El Artista Latinoamericano Y Su Identidad*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Publications on this subject can be seen with: Cecilia Lazzarotti, *The Language of Museum Communication: A Diachronic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57149-6>. Helen De Silva Joyce, ed. *Language at Work: Analysing Language Use in Work, Education, Medical and Museum Contexts*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016). Beverly Serrel, "Behind it All: A Big Idea," in *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach*, 2Nd print ed. (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 1998). Louise Ravelli, *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks*, (Taylor and Francis Group, 2006). And *Words Matter, An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, National Museum of World Cultures (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, 2018).

Serrell, *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach*, where the author maintains that “good labels are guided by a strong, cohesive exhibit plan—a theme, story, or communication goal—that sets the tone and limits the content.”<sup>39</sup> Throughout his publication, the author develops a guideline of the different categories of labels explaining the type of information that goes on each in order to reach the audience with the information displayed.

Other texts, such as *Museum Texts: Communication Framework* by Louise Ravelli, take a more linguistic approach by focusing on museum’s texts—labels, explanatory texts brochures, and catalog descriptions—for their “intrinsic contribution to the communication agenda” of the institution.<sup>40</sup> The author approaches the development of her book in three ways “organizational, interactional, and representational meanings.”<sup>41</sup> As explored in this introduction, this thesis will primarily focus on labels’ value and representational capacities for artists’ identities, which Ravelli does not explore. She only points to the capacity museum texts have to “create a dominant framework of understanding” and how this “framework is not universally shared”<sup>42</sup> as “even within *one* exhibition, the ‘same’ subject matter might be approached in a number of different ways.”<sup>43</sup> Ravelli is here defending the importance labels represent for the understanding of an exhibition’s framework, and argument.

Other research on museum labels has been conducted using eye-tracking technologies. For example, the MET used this technology on visitors of the Austrian Gallery Belvedere after rearranging the rooms.<sup>44</sup> They aimed to study how much time visitors spent reading labels and artworks and what might draw their attention more. Even if these books and studies are quite telling of the impact labels have on the readings of works, how important they are to create a communicative exchange between the museum and visitor, and how little importance some visitors pay to these texts, they do not explore what this thesis focuses on: the impact certain words may have, demonstrating how this topic is a more recent issue.

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<sup>39</sup> Beverly Serrel, “Behind it All: A Big Idea,” in *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach*, 2Nd print ed. (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Louise Ravelli, “Introduction,” in *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks*, Taylor and Francis Group, 2006, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Louise Ravelli, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>42</sup> Louise Ravelli, “Representing the Word Through Language: Using language to portray, interpret and construct,” in *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks*, (Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 112

<sup>43</sup> Ravelli, “Representing the Word Through Language,” 114.

<sup>44</sup> Reitstätter, L., Brinkmann, H., Santini T., Specker, E., Dare Z., Bakondi, F., Miscená, A., Kasneci, E., Leder, H., Rosenberg, R. “The display makes a difference: A mobile eye tracking study on the perception of art before and after a museum’s rearrangement,” in *Journal of Eye Movement Research*, 2020, 13(2):6.

The book published by the now called Wereld Museum, but then still called Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW), titled *Words Matter, An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*,<sup>45</sup> demonstrates how current interpretations of certain words have pushed the replacement for more politically correct choices. This book compiles a series of small texts written by curators and researchers in which they talk about moments in which they witnessed their own and others' poor word choices in their writing of exhibitions. For example, Robin Lelijveld brings attention to a label created during the "Afterlives of Slavery"<sup>46</sup> exhibition, questioning whether or not he should have mentioned the subject's skin color in the exhibition text, after a visitor censored this word with a chewing gum.<sup>47</sup> The book later creates a glossary of terms explaining the controversy these words may have and suggesting a different word choice. Compared to the previous writings, this more recent book speaks to the current state of label-making practices.

In June 2023, The British Art Network Research Group held a conference titled "What do we do with labels?" organized in collaboration with the research group Race, Empire and the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>48</sup> Art historians from different fields explored the issue of labels in the museum, with a particular focus on the explanatory or interpretative text in which an artwork can be further explained. Paralleling with *Words Matter, An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, their main concerns were focused on the information that goes in these texts, that is, how to discuss racial issues presented by the figures or by the artist and their historic time period at the moment of creating their work. Their approach to this issue was more directed towards the content of the work, and the historical period in which these pieces were created than about the discussion of an artist's identity. Today each word choice can be severely questioned, especially when it comes to the identity of a subject, whether it is someone who is no longer alive, or a living artist. This is the field this thesis aims to contribute to. Not only that of contemporary art history but also museum studies, collections and exhibition management, and the broader debate of representing people not belonging to the white Western-Euroamerican canon. By doing so,

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<sup>45</sup> *Words Matter, An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> "Afterlives of Slavery," Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, until May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021, curated by Tropenmuseum.

<sup>47</sup> Robin Lelijveld, "Should I mention his skin color," in *Words Matter, An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, (NMVW: 2018), 87-86.

<sup>48</sup> "What do we do with Labels?" Conference held on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023, by The British Art Network Research Group.

this research inevitably contributes to the broader debate of decolonizing the museum, the exhibition space, and the collecting system used by institutions today.<sup>49</sup>

### *Methodology*

This thesis focuses on the reasoning behind label creation for the exhibition space. Therefore, this research will bring attention to the constellation of different labeling practices for Caribbean diasporic artists in the context of Western countries. It is conducted through personal museum and institutional visits, such as the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), the Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam), The Caterijne Convent (Utrecht), basis voor actuele kunst (Utrecht), Framer Framed (Amsterdam), El Museo del Barrio (New York), The Pérez Art Museum in Miami (Miami), among others that did not make it into the thesis, in which the focus was directed toward the label instead of the artwork. These labels are presented unsigned in the exhibition space, entailing that authorship is often given to the museum as a broad entity. For more detailed information and a clearer understanding of who is writing these texts, these visits were accompanied by studying the exhibition's corresponding catalogs or booklets. This allows me to propose a reflection of the different practices within the same museum and across different institutions to find the reasoning behind the creation of each practice.

The case study of El Museo del Barrio in New York is informed by the fact that it is an institution founded by and for a community to house and promote their artistic expression. Additionally, the Boricua<sup>50</sup> and, more specifically, the Nuyorican (New York Puerto Rican) population, create the perfect case study for this thesis, given that their diasporic status brings

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<sup>49</sup> Such processes can be seen through: The symposium by ICOFOM, by their publication *Defining the Museum of the 21st century*, with Universidad Nacional de Avellaneda – UNDAV, Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro – UNIRIO and University of St Andrews, held in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and St Andrews, respectively, in November 2017, ed. by Bruno Brulon Soares, Karen Brown, Olga Nator; Black Graham. 2021. *Museums and the Challenge of Change: Old Institutions in a New World*. London; New York: Routledge; Stam, D. 1993. *The Informed Muse: The Implications of "The New Museology" for Museum Practice.* *Museum Management and Curatorship*. 12, pp.267–283; Abungu George Okello. 2021. *The Question of Restitution and Return* in (Post) Colonialism and Cultural Heritage, *Humboldt Forum*: 99-117; Abungu George Okello. 2019. *Museums: Geopolitics, Decolonisation, Globalisation and Migration*, *Museum International*, 71:1-2, pp. 62-71; Coombes E. Annie and Philips B. Ruth (eds.). 2022. *Museum Transformations: Decolonization and Democratization*, Wiley, Blackwell; *Decolonizing Art History*, by *Association for Art History*, February 2020.

<sup>50</sup> This thesis is about naming identities; I consciously choose to talk about the Puerto Rican population through their real name Boricua and not the one born out of colonization. Boricua is derived from the Taino name for Puerto Rico, Borinquén.

more complexities to their labeling in museum spaces. Including this museum in my argumentation allows me to develop two opposing sides of the discussion, which will be mediated through my third chapter.

The development of the argument will, therefore, primarily concentrate on the museum and its curators rather than the visitors. This is why, informed by the first two chapters, I will end my argument by suggesting a new labeling practice considering the practical issues and questions explored during the meeting I organized as part of my internship at the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC).<sup>51</sup> This center is part of the Wereld Museum organization and is headed by the organization's director of content, Prof. Dr. Wayne Modest. During this meeting, I invited Modest, Wendeline Flores, curator of Caribbean and Suriname, Sarah Johnson, curator of North Africa and the Middle East, Daan van Dartel, curator of fashion and popular culture, Erna Lilje, curator of indigenous knowledge and material culture, among research associates from the RCMC: Ilaria Obata, Carine Zaayman, Esme Schoutens, and finally Utrecht University professor, and soon to be research director at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia Dr. Alison Boyd.

### *Structure*

My argument will be divided into three chapters. The first will focus on museums that do not label artists. It will explore why these museums choose not to include nationality or cultural background in their wall labels. I will focus on museums in the Netherlands who adhere to this, or similar, practices, and explore the different reasons for this choice.

The second chapter will dive into why museums may want to label, using as my case study, the foundation of the Museo del Barrio in New York in 1969. During this chapter, I will delve into the importance of the local contribution of art in identity-based practices and which are the arguments for having identity stated on a label as a way to inform the visitor on how to read the work.

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<sup>51</sup> Olombi Bois, Alison Boyd, Wendeline Flores, Sarah Johnson, Erna Lilje, Wayne Modest, Ilaria Obata, Esme Schoutens, and Carine Zaayman (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum," Research Center for Material Culture, Boerhave Building, Leiden.

Finally, my last chapter will instead examine the need to change the approach to labeling object and artworks. During this section, I argue that due to the complexity of identity, its labeling, and its definition, there is a need to create a new approach to artworks created by artists representative of cultures other than Western white-Euromerican. For this chapter, I will bring attention to a meeting held with curators from the Wereld Museum in which the future of this practice was discussed, using as an example the artist Jocelyn Gardner, shown in two different exhibitions of this institution.

# Chapter 1

## Removing Labels for the Integration of Diversity

Since the 1970s and through the ongoing processes of decolonizing museums,<sup>52</sup> there has been a conscious choice from certain institutions not to display or explicitly discuss the artist's cultural identity in their labeling practices. Globalized societies are characterized by a cultural exchange that is not new, as this exchange, whether through migration (forced for some due to slavery and other kinds of human trafficking, and for others informed by the search for better opportunities), produce (spices, plants...), or objects, has been happening for centuries. Homi Bhabha, in the introduction of his book *The Location of Culture*, elaborates on the complexity that entails the “imagined” concepts of “hybridity” and “purity” by Western, meaning Western-European or American, scholarship.<sup>53</sup> He argues against “hybridity and “purity” as cultural approaches by pointing to the impossibility and imaginary aspect of these, as originating from a colonial thought. Bhabha further states that these concepts arise from:

The production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority.[...] It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but replicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of the power.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Such processes can be seen through: The symposium by ICOFOM, by their publication *Defining the Museum of the 21st century*, with Universidad Nacional de Avellaneda – UNDAV, Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro – UNIRIO and University of St Andrews, held in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and St Andrews, respectively, in November 2017, ed. by Bruno Brulon Soares, Karen Brown, Olga Nazor; Black Graham. 2021. *Museums and the Challenge of Change: Old Institutions in a New World*. London; New York: Routledge; Stam, D. 1993. *The Informed Muse: The Implications of "The New Museology" for Museum Practice.* *Museum Management and Curatorship*. 12, pp.267–283; Abungu George Okello. 2021. *The Question of Restitution and Return* in (Post) Colonialism and Cultural Heritage, *Humboldt Forum*: 99-117; Abungu George Okello. 2019. *Museums: Geopolitics, Decolonisation, Globalisation and Migration*, *Museum International*, 71:1-2, pp. 62-71; Coombes E. Annie and Philips B. Ruth (eds.). 2022. *Museum Transformations: Decolonization and Democratization*, Wiley, Blackwell; *Decolonizing Art History*, by *Association for Art History*, February 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Introduction,” in *The Location of Culture*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1994), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” in *The Location of Culture*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1994), 112.

This opposition becomes particularly complex regarding artists from a diaspora, where questions of purity and authenticity become blurrier as generations succeed.

This issue is reinforced by the differential treatment of artists who belong to what can be alluded to as “ethnic minorities” given that, historically, these identities have been thought to need more precision and description contrasting their white counterparts.<sup>55</sup> Eddie Chambers develops this argument in his essay “The Difficulty of *Naming* White Things,” through his distinction: “It seems to me that there were things, and there were black things.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, white is universal, whereas anything other than that identity is not, and thus, it needs to be precised. While Chambers writes about black identity, the same can be said about artists belonging to the focus of this thesis: Caribbean diasporic artists.

The action of no longer displaying national information on museum labels, as these imply a cultural reading of the artistic work, comes in response to the argument against concepts of purity and hybridity, as well as the differential treatment of artists belonging to the Western canon, and those who do not. Additionally, the practice of not mentioning artist’s cultural or national background can be considered a response to the academic need for new methodologies in the field of art history, fitting the aforementioned decolonizing processes of institutions, their exhibitions, and collections.

This concern was explored in the 2022 issue of the art criticism journal *October* titled “A Questionnaire on Global Methods,”<sup>57</sup> in which scholars call for, and propose solutions to decolonize the field of art history. In particular, they draw several critiques on the Eurocentric aspects still in use to approach what is also wrongfully called “global arts.” For instance, Zainab Bahari, a professor at Columbia University, defends that this field is “not yet decentered or denaturalized [from] modern European definition of art and aesthetics or sufficiently addressed historical and political contexts.”<sup>58</sup> She further uses as examples museum collections originated from objects acquired during the “height of imperialist expansion of distant lands” and their ongoing failure to “address provenance, histories of looking and geopolitics.”<sup>59</sup> Other scholars such as, art historian Darby English, present that

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<sup>55</sup> A biased category, given that in this sense, white means white Western-European and white American.

<sup>56</sup> Eddie Chambers, “The Difficulty of *Naming* White Things,” in *Small Axe*, Volume 16, Number 2, July 2012 (No. 38), 186.

<sup>57</sup> “A Questionnaire on Global Methods,” in *October* 2022, vol. 180, ed. George Baker and David Joselit.

<sup>58</sup> Zainab Bahari, A Questionnaire on Global Methods. *October* 2022; (180), 73

doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/octo\\_a\\_00453](https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00453), 5.

<sup>59</sup> Zainab Bahari, 6.



one way to decenter these global methods is by no longer labeling the artists. This way taking away what has been used to differentiate them to white Western-Euroamerican artists.

The effect of what Eddie Chambers, and the propositions explored by scholars in the *October* publication, were pointed out by Darby English over a decade ago in his book *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Similarly to Chambers, English uses black artists as an example for his argument, yet, the same can be said about artists from the Caribbean community, as their identity is also overly labeled. He suggested that the tension between the artist's identity and the exhibition space is one of the leading causes of the differential treatment between white and black artists. He points to the problematic role labels play, which has today resulted in museums choosing not to display such national and cultural information in their labeling practices. Often this is done by those concerned with current debates on representation and discrimination in the exhibition space. This solution has become one of the easiest to appease the demands of some artists and visitors, asking not to have this type of information shown. Several arguments can be drawn from this decision which will be developed throughout this chapter.

### *The label as a limitation*

One effect labels can have on the interpretations of exhibited works is limiting this reading to the framework the text represents. This becomes especially restrictive when national or cultural information is stated, which entails that the work is limited to a reading based in where the artist is from. Darby English in his book develops this reasoning by elaborating on how the visitor can seal the work they are seeing through their understanding of this identity. The work becomes a representation of the artist's background, resulting in disregarding any other aspect the piece and or the maker might be exploring. English demonstrates that the ethnic or racial label as it has been assigned in the U.S., has “a tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to [in his argument] black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character.”<sup>60</sup> This statement would mean that once a work is associated with the artist's ethnic background, this one comes to replace all meaning the artist might have wanted to represent instead.

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<sup>60</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 6.

Therefore, the label has an isolation effect on the artist and the artwork. As English characterizes it, it separates “black realities from the spaces whose purity would conserve by doing so.”<sup>61</sup> He further stresses the importance of highlighting other *categories* occupied by the artists in addition to their race since they often want to explore other subjectivities and hence, bringing importance to displacing “race from its central location in our interpretation of this work.”<sup>62</sup>

The cultural reading influences the interpretation of artworks. It highly contrasts with the approach given to works created by white Western-European or US American artists. This is why institutions such as the Stedelijk Museum, and Framer Framed, an independent art space in Amsterdam who defines themselves as “a platform for contemporary art, visual culture, and critical theory & practice,”<sup>63</sup> to name a few, are no longer including national and cultural background on factual labels. Rather, if and when deemed necessary, this information is mentioned in the contextual label, or in the exhibition catalogues.

The premise of the exhibition “When Things are Beings” at the Stedelijk Museum<sup>64</sup> was to highlight the stories objects can tell and the life objects can have. On their website, the description of the exhibition explains that “some projects in the exhibition refer to a spiritual world, while others conjoin complex and layered histories between people from different generations and different places in the world.”<sup>65</sup> As expected by the exhibition’s premise, its focus was the art works. Therefore, when it came to wall texts and labels, the interpretation and contextualization was focused on a social and art historical reading of the artworks.

The artwork titled *Messengers of the Sun* by Antonio Jose Guzman and Iva Jankovic (figure 9) reflects these dynamics. This piece has two parts, one being the object displayed in the exhibition and the other being the performance that was shown after the opening, both being the result of an ongoing collaboration between the two artists. The installation presents different pieces of textile with different patterns stitched together, one of them shaping into a kimono. The description of the work, both in the exhibition catalog, with contributions by

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<sup>61</sup> English, 8.

<sup>62</sup> English, 11-12.

<sup>63</sup> *Framer Framed*, “About Framer Framed,” <https://framerframed.nl/en/over-ons>, accessed June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> “When Things are Beings,” Stedelijk Museum, November 2022-April 2023, curated by Amanda Pinatih and Britte Sloothaak, with the help of intern Jasmijn Mol.

<sup>65</sup> *Stedelijk Museum, Exhibitions*, “When Things Are Beings,” <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/when-things-are-beings>, accessed May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

Mira Asriningtyas, Jasmijn Mol, Amanda Pinatih, and Britte Sloothaak,<sup>66</sup> and the text accompanying the work in the exhibition, created by the exhibition’s curators, describe the artwork by elaborating on the different cultural allusions made through the work and the performance. Most of these cultural elements trace back to the transatlantic slave trade, making clear reference to the Black Atlantic interaction (Western Africa and the Americas). The catalogue described the different syncretized<sup>67</sup> elements of the piece such as “Afrimono, kimono-style garment that is worn during the performance,”<sup>68</sup> and the “Indian Ajrakh block printing technique” combined with the “Japanese Boro stitching” to create the installation.<sup>69</sup> The text further elaborates on the embroidered scriptures taking inspiration from gris-gris, charms believed to protect from evil spirits brought to the Americas during the slave trade, but originated in West African Islamic traditions.<sup>70</sup>



Figure 9: Installation *Messenger of the Sun*, Antonio Jose Guzman, and Iva Jankovic, in exhibition “When Things Are Beings,” 2022-2023, Stedelijk Museum, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Photograph taken by author.

These texts put into conversation the different cultural elements alluded to in the artwork: the black Atlantic, Japanese traditional garments, Afro-Caribbean cultures through

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<sup>66</sup> *When Things are Beings*, ed. Gwen Parry, (Stedelijk Museum, 2022).

<sup>67</sup> Different cultures merged into one representation.

<sup>68</sup> *When Things are Beings*, ed. Gwen Parry, (Stedelijk Museum, 2022), 86.

<sup>69</sup> *When Things are Beings*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> *When Things are Beings*, 86.

the ritual. However, there is no description or reference to the artists' cultural background, who in fact both have a "hyphenated" nationalities. Antonio Jose Guzman is Dutch-Panamanian, born in Panama, and Iva Jankovic is Dutch-Yugoslavian, born in Serbia.

On the one hand, the work is about the transatlantic history of the slave trade and forceful cultural exchange slavery enticed.<sup>71</sup> While condemning this, the cultural syncretism, and transcultural ability of former colonized countries such as Panama and Serbia, is celebrated. Instead of exhibiting the work as a representation of the artists' cultural backgrounds, the choice of not mentioning their nationalities helps highlight what the piece really represents. Whilst denouncing slavery, there is a particular focus on celebrating the syncretism and transculturation that was born out of this cultural exchange and inhuman behavior and violence. The reason for this labeling choice can be understood through what Darby English defends when explaining that the reading an object through the identity the artist represents, seals this one in the identity's representational space.<sup>72</sup> Meaning that in such situation, the national information described on the label would allow the perception of the work, to be replaced by the visitor's conception of these identities.<sup>73</sup> This would result in the projection of meaning, instead of allowing this one to be generated through the analysis of the piece in conjunction with the text.<sup>74</sup> If the work were to be read only through the artist's nationalities, it would overlook the global argument produced by the artist by alluding to different syncretized cultures.

On the other hand, this exhibition was created within the Municipal Arts Acquisitions project.<sup>75</sup> For this project, a selection of artists is chosen and given a curatorial framework through which they create a piece. After the opening, the museum will choose a number of works to be acquired for their collection, the studied work in this thesis being one of the chosen pieces of after the exhibition. The goal of this show is not only to judge which works the museum is interested in acquiring but also which works the visitors seem to appreciate

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<sup>71</sup> For references on Dutch transatlantic slave trade see: Postma, Johannes, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Page, Willie F. *The Dutch Triangle: The Netherlands and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1621-1664*, Studies in African American History and Culture, (New York: Garland, 1997); or Prime Minister Mark Rutte "Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte about the role of the Netherlands in the history of slavery" December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, at the National archives in the Hague.

<sup>72</sup> English, 31.

<sup>73</sup> English, 34.

<sup>74</sup> English, 75.

<sup>75</sup> *Stedelijk Museum*, "Announcement of Works Acquired From the Exhibition When Things Are Beings," January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/news/announcement-works-acquired-exhibition-when-things-are-beings>, accessed July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

more. When looking at the piece in the context of the exhibition, one can argue that English points to something essential for these one's interpretations. Since the focus was placed on the objects instead of the artists and their backgrounds, making this information available for every work would have sealed them into a reading based on the artists' identities, instead of allowing the visitor to appreciate the objects for what they are. The context is highly based on the objects rather than the artist and their art historical value. Something that, in the case of this year's selection, is heightened by the theme chosen for the project.

By choosing this labeling practice, the museum gives agency back to the artists. This translates into nationality not being the immediate approach through which the work is read, even though it might have played a role in creating the piece. Something fitting for English's reasoning as it becomes a way for "restituting the subject to 'relationship to self' and 'performances of self' in which race informs but does not determine aesthetics and politics."<sup>76</sup> As the museum is not approaching the art pieces through that perspective, it becomes the viewer's choice to reflect on whether or not they might want to know where the artists come from, and independently research this information.

### *The Sociological Reading of an Artist*

During the "Black Artists in America Symposium" hosted by the MET in 1969, a debate sparked between artists William Williams, Sam Gilliam, Jacob Lawrence, and Tom Lloyd, arguing that by using black art as a genre, making an identity a label through which an artwork is read, gives it a political and thus sociological value and approach.<sup>77</sup> This argument joins English's one when he defends that "questions of culture are subject but visualizing or representing race/identity is not an end."<sup>78</sup> Having this information available results in a displacement of race as a "central location for our interpretation of the work," which further results in a dismissal of what he calls the "multiple categories [artists] occupy."<sup>79</sup> He further explains that placing race as a central reading of a work brings a "speculative historical analysis of the category's attainment of an authority with which it would articulate the black

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<sup>76</sup> English, 42.

<sup>77</sup> "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," 256.

<sup>78</sup> English, 11-12.

<sup>79</sup> English 11-12.

artist's project before she, and it, have the chance to speak for themselves."<sup>80</sup> Meaning that the social categorization in which a label places an artwork will take away the artist's agency to speak for their work. This further results in an isolation of art created by artists who do not belong to the white Western-Euroamerican cannon.<sup>81</sup>

This reading comes to unacknowledge the complexity of a person's identity. First, because race and identity are not defined by geographies, as art historian Jennifer A. González explains, nation "is not a stable concept with a stable location or a clearly defined subject-citizen."<sup>82</sup> And second, because "race discourse," in all its historical complexity, is not reducible to visuality,"<sup>83</sup> entailing that this reading overlooks other aspects the artist might be a representative of in their subjectivity.

As demonstrated by the mentioned scholars, the argument of an aesthetic practice's history is justified by a sense of integration, in which, notions of art outside of the Western-Euroamerican canon are interpreted as distinct forms of expression determined by this practice's history. As English characterizes it, integrationism "justifies itself by acknowledging that there now exists a history of aesthetic practice which is all the harder to reckon with the more one allows notions of 'African American art as a distinct form of expression' to determine it."<sup>84</sup> The author affirms that "We simply cannot *see* black artist's work until we throw it into relief against the transformations it undergoes in our inevitably social involvement with it."<sup>85</sup> This argument alludes to the need to state a sociological difference to understand how these practices are distinct and how they are related to the canon to which it is compared to.<sup>86</sup>

These comparative methods, as Jonathan Hay sustains, create an illusion of "multiple modernities,"<sup>87</sup> something that, in a way, is explored by González. The art historian affirms

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<sup>80</sup> English, 28.

<sup>81</sup> English further touches on the sense of purity in this argument by saying that "Without question, a great deal of black art's apparent necessity can be explained by reference to racism's ceaselessly inventive way of isolating black art's realities from the spaces whose purity would conserve by doing so." English, 8.

<sup>82</sup> Jennifer A. González, "Introduction," in *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press., 2008), 2.

<sup>83</sup> Jennifer A. González, 5.

<sup>84</sup> "Integrationism, which justifies itself by acknowledging that there now exists a history of aesthetic practice which is all the harder to reckon with the more one allows notions of 'African American art as a distinct form of expression' to determine it." English 19.

<sup>85</sup> English, 20.

<sup>86</sup> English, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Jonathan Hay, "A Questionnaire on Global Methods," in *October* 2022; (180), doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/octo\\_a\\_00453](https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00453), 53.

that through these techniques, the human body becomes itself a form of material evidence of social and historical events.”<sup>88</sup> She then further emphasizes that:

Objects come to stand in for subjects not merely in the form of the commodity fetish, but as part of a larger system of material and image culture that circulates as a prosthesis of race discourse through practices of collection, exchange, and exhibition.<sup>89</sup>

Therefore, this identity is reduced to a visual representation, which is reduced to the artist’s identity, meaning their societal status by inhabiting this identity.

These issues trace back to scholarly methodologies used to approach what is commonly, and wrongfully called, non-Western art. Eddie Chambers elaborated in his piece that the reason why this approach is still in use is “simply because, those academics and researchers, from James Porter onwards, who have studied and presented material on African American artists, have tended to do so in ways that have quarantined or isolated subjects from the concurrent wider art practice.”<sup>90</sup> He argues that this stems from a decontextualization based on the artist’s ethnicities which have “served to marginalize black artist rather than challenge their marginalization.”<sup>91</sup> The argument seeking a change in methodologies, here stressed by Chambers, is also explored by English as he defends that multiplicities still have place in current methodologies.<sup>92</sup>

In this context, what the Wereldmuseum has done with their labels is quite interesting. As an ethnographic institution, part of the Wereld Museum organization, it focuses its displays on exploring representations of world cultures. In the exhibition “Hair Power,”<sup>93</sup> (2022-2023) curated by Zinah Autar, Melissa Chotoe, Jente Diepstraten, Halil Kaya, Emma Liebrand, Miryam Mejhed, Zinath Niluka, Eunice Weerwind the label created for Yelaine Rodriguez’s work stands out from more traditional labels in this type of museums (figure 10). Her piece is titled *Afro Sagrada Familia* and presents two photographs printed on textile (figure 11). One of them shows a woman in front of a gray floral background. The figure is

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<sup>88</sup> González, 5.

<sup>89</sup> González, 5.

<sup>90</sup> Chambers, 188.

<sup>91</sup> Chambers, 188.

<sup>92</sup> English 11-12.

<sup>93</sup> “Hair Power,” Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam, on display until May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, curated by Zinah Autar, Melissa Chotoe, Jente Diepstraten, Halil Kaya, Emma Liebrand, Miryam Mejhed, Zinath Niluka, Eunice Weerwind

wearing a blue ruffled top and a sort of blue shall held by her arms at her waist level. Her hair is decorated with white flowers, and with her right hand she holds a shell. The other photograph presents a man who stands in front of a floral bush. He is holding the same shall as the woman and wears a maroon button-up shirt. His hands pose crossed in front of his abdomen area, and his locs fall over his shoulders reaching below his right wrist. Both figures have very calm gazes looking straight at the viewer, in a sense projecting a certain spiritual calmness.

**Afro Sagrada Familia**  
 These photographs, printed on fabrics and adorned with cowrie shells, evil eye pendants, and metallic vintage trimming, honour the African roots of Quisqueya, contemporary Dominican Republic.

Jordano's photograph demonstrates cross-cultural references where locs allude to Rastafarian spirituality commonly found in Jamaica – lending itself as a political act of rebellion against conformity. It challenges the Dominican Republic's 'good hair' ideologies. Similarly, Yaisa's flower-embellished Afro commemorates Black beauty and operates as a symbolic political gesture and a renunciation of Eurocentric beauty standards.

Afro Sagrada Familia (Afro Sacred Family) is an ongoing series that plays on the large unfinished nineteenth-century Roman Catholic minor basilica in Barcelona and serves as commentary on the complicated relationship between the colonized Dominican Republic and the coloniser Spain.

Yelaine Rodriguez (1990); 'Jordano' and 'Yaisa' from the ongoing series 'Afro Sagrada Familia'; United States of America; 2021-2022; photography, print on textile. Loan

Figure 10: Label for Yelaine Rodriguez, *Afro-Sagrada Familia*'s, in exhibition “Hair Power” 2022-2023, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Photograph taken by author.



Figure 11: Images form series *Afro-Sagrada Familia*, here *Yaisa* (2021), and *Jordano* (2022), respectively, by Yelaine Rodriguez.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Yelaine Rodriguez, “Afro-Sagrada Familia,” <https://www.yelainenyc.com/works/afrosagrada>, accessed May 25th, 2023.



The explanatory text accolated to the work, which is placed right above the factual information, elaborates on how the work fits in the exhibition's scope. It describes the photographs as honoring the "African Roots of Quisqueya, contemporary Dominican Republic,"<sup>95</sup> and explains the work's different allusions to Afro-Caribbean culture. Nevertheless, neither the factual or contextual label mention where the artist is from; instead, it only specifies "United States of America; 2021-2022,"<sup>96</sup> indicating when and where the work was created. The label does not explicitly mention the artist's national or cultural identity. It is only by doing personal research that visitors can find out that Yelaine Rodriguez is Afro-Dominican. The longer text explains the origins of the different elements constituting the piece, and how these fit into the exhibition's overarching theme; it does not, however, state that the artist is speaking from her culture, which also avoids giving her a diasporic status. From a perspective informed by Darby English's thoughts, I could argue that, especially given the context in which this work is exhibited—the ethnographic museum—the artist's identity is not stated because it would otherwise promote a sociological reading of the work. In the discursive space created by the exhibition, which focused in an exploration of hair as a cultural and personal communication and expression tool, the work could then be seen and read as an exploration of hair by a diasporic artist originally from the Dominican Republic, instead of solely an exploration of hair. Choosing to not elaborate on the artist's background allows the piece to be read through the different symbols included in the piece. The label avoids sealing the photographs into a reductive representational space and approach it through a sociological reading of how Dominican hair practices may look like. This would be even more detrimental to the interpretation of the work since, as the label explains, the artist is also referencing other Caribbean hair practices that challenge European beauty standards.

Another exhibition that avoided mentioning nationality or cultural background on museum labels is "Charg/ng Myths, On/Trade/Off"<sup>97</sup> at Framer framed in Amsterdam by the artist and research collective On-Trade-Off, made up of artists, and artist-researchers from the democratic Republic of Congo and Belgium. The traveling exhibition explores and criticizes the lithium mining in Manono, a town and territory in the Democratic Republic of

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<sup>95</sup> Wereld Museum Rotterdam, *Afro Sagrada Familia*, in "Hair Power" exhibition text, seen on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Wereld Museum Rotterdam, *Afro Sagrada Familia*.

<sup>97</sup> "Charg/ing Myths, On/Trade/Off," Framer Framed, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, curated by Framer Framed and Ils Huygens.

Congo. While walking through the exhibition, aside from the introductory text in the entrance, the only available texts seen throughout the space are those placed in order to identify the works with the artist's name and the work's title. Framer Framed presented no explanations to what the works represent or where the artists are from in their space. Instead, this information is only available with the purchase of the catalog or by taking the free audio-guide. This means that when looking at the art works, if the visitor chooses not to have these sources, they can create their own interpretations of the pieces.

Furthermore, the catalog hardly ever mentions where the artists are from.<sup>98</sup> For some artists, the text alludes to where they are based or where they took their inspiration to create the work. Yet, aside from a two-artist collaboration, none have their nationality or cultural background stated in their biography or work description. In this exhibition diasporic identities are no exception. If an artist has a diasporic status, it will only be alluded to if the catalog mentions where they are based, this way only contextualizing where the artist lives, alluding to migration but not saying where from. A choice that is very thought-provoking since it is an exhibition by an artist collective with members from different countries, and poignantly in this case, very different realities. What is even more interesting is that the argument presented by the exhibition bases itself on a geographic location and community. Meaning that all the artworks presented are about mines in the city and community of Manono in Lumbumbashi.

An exhibition such as this one, is created not only to raise awareness on the repercussions of this industry in the Manono region and the rest of world, but also show our, meaning the privileged consumer's, implicated role in this destruction. Though it can be argued that labels are important for the interpretation of these pieces since, as aforementioned, the artists have different national backgrounds; having this information on all labels would harm the exhibition's argument. Their goal was to demonstrate the local and global problems and repercussions of the mining industry in Manono. Having this information would have overly complexify the reading of the works since, if the artist is from DRC, then they are speaking from experience, and thus, the work becomes biographical. However, if the artist is from Europe, the agency for speaking about this topic would be put

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<sup>98</sup> *Charg/in Myths, On/Trade/Off*, ed. by Ils Huygens, Jean Medina, Josien Pieterse, Ebisse Wakjira, Stefan Wharton and Participating artist, (Amsterdam: Framer Framed, 2023).

into question, and or the reasons why an external entity is interested in this topic could overshadow the activist endeavors the work might have.

### *OVERRULING STEREOTYPES*

As explored in the introduction, ethnicity became a label because it started as a resistance movement. Yet, the problem seems directed more toward the label's influencing a unidimensional reading, resulting in ethnicity being the only element considered when interpreting an artwork. This argument is supported by English's statement that "Black aesthetics and the black arts movement extended sharp views on the black artist's responsibility to black culture, encouraging artists to make 'their own history.'"<sup>99</sup> Through further exploration of the art historian's publication, one of the main arguments he sustains is how a reading based on an artist's ethnicity is stereotyped by the assumptions and expectations visitors have of this identity. Mainly because single narratives overpower the possibility of an identity inhabiting what Darby English calls "multiple meanings" of a cultural identity, a claim alluded to earlier.<sup>100</sup> These multiple meanings point to the diverse categories that a person can inhabit and can be representative of, which shows the reductionist capacity single labels can have.

Both Darby English and poet Hanif Abduraquib in his book *A Little Devil in America*,<sup>101</sup> explore the shaping of these stereotypes into a script in which lifestyle is "performed."<sup>102</sup> In his book, Abduraquib explores the meaning of the script by discussing the ways in which our society is conditioned to think of what it means to talk, dress, and in general, acting white, black, or any other ethnicity.<sup>103</sup> English characterizes this phenomenon as the epidermalization of the individual, and explains that it "insinuates itself in these looking situations partly as an effect of an archived knowledge concerning 'artists whose skins are black' which construes such artistic subject as representative by default and duty."<sup>104</sup> This representation and reading results in "a speculative historical analysis of the

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<sup>99</sup> English, 64.

<sup>100</sup> English, 17.

<sup>101</sup> Hanif Abduraquib, *A Little Devil in America*, (Penguin Books Random House: U.K., 2021).

<sup>102</sup> English, 85.

<sup>103</sup> Hanif Abduraquib, "On the Certain and Uncertain Movement of Limbs," in *A Little Devil in America*, (Penguin Books Random House: U.K., 2021), 88

<sup>104</sup> English, 45.

category's attainment of an authority with which it would articulate the black artist's project before she, and it, have the chance to speak for themselves."<sup>105</sup> This argument represents a different ability of labels to be limiting for an artist and their practice reducing them to a stereotypical depiction of their cultural background.

This phenomenon's downside is that meaning is projected instead of understood. Entailing that stereotypes based on the ethnicity of the makers come to inform the reading of the work even when this was not part of the artists' intentions. This argument is also explored by González as she defends that objects can also "be epidermalized."<sup>106</sup> The scholar further elaborates stating that these "come to stand in for subjects not merely in the form of commodity fetish, but as part of a larger system of material and image culture that circulates as a prosthesis of race discourse through practices of collection, exchange and exhibition."<sup>107</sup> An argument sustained by art historian Anneka Lenssen when she explains that the "mind perceives only mental images (representations) of material objects, not the objects themselves."<sup>108</sup> According to these scholars, race, and ethnicity become the only way through which an object is read when this information is available.

By choosing not to label artists' identities in the exhibition space, museums and institutions are aiming to avoid stereotypes to overpower the reading and value of an artist and their work. This reason can be illustrated when looking at the "Ultradependent Public School"<sup>109</sup> exhibition at *basis voor actuele kunst* (BAK) in Utrecht, an art space that similarly to *Framer Framed*, defines itself as a platform "for theoretically-informed, politically-driven art and experimental research."<sup>110</sup> This exhibition explored schools' curriculums and questions what should and should not be taught in elementary education. The exhibition consists of a grouping of 127 artists, most of whom are European artists, some living in the Netherlands. The space only has an introductory text in the entrance, and each piece has a label with a reference number, the artist's name, the title of the work and materials used for its creation. A free booklet was available at the entrance where more detailed information about the exhibition, the artists, the artworks, and the workshops (which were part of the

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<sup>105</sup> English, 28.

<sup>106</sup> González, 5.

<sup>107</sup> González, 5.

<sup>108</sup> Anneka Lenssen, "A Questionnaire on Global Methods," in *October* 2022; (180), 73  
doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/octo\\_a\\_00453](https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00453), 34.

<sup>109</sup> "Ultradependent Public school," BAK, 1<sup>st</sup> April- 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023.

<sup>110</sup> "About," BAK, accessed June 7<sup>th</sup> 2023. <https://www.bakonline.org/over-ons/>.

exhibition) were further explored.<sup>111</sup> The numbers on the exhibition wall refer to the contextualizing texts in the booklet which explain the creative process, what the work is supposed to be criticizing, what the work is trying to argue, and so forth. In this booklet, only a few artists had their nationalities or cultural backgrounds written. If this information was mentioned, it was done quickly and by the end of the text. Such was the case of Glenda Martinus, where for her work *G.U.T.S.* (figure 12). Her work presented a series of Microsoft Word paintings, depicting different things on each, ranging from fruits, ships, battles, factories, and even abstract shapes. The booklet explained that her contribution to the exhibition was informed by her work as a computer and secretarial skills teacher in Curaçao, St. Marteen, and the Netherlands.<sup>112</sup> However, it is not until the end of this writing that the text stated she is native to Curaçao. Martinus is an exception in this book let since, for instance, in the case of Francisca Khamis Giacoman and Maria Jurado Rico, both artists from Latin America (the first Chilean-Palestinian based in Amsterdam, and the other from Colombia), neither of their national or cultural information is part of their descriptive.<sup>113</sup>



Figure 12: Glenda Martinus, *G.U.T.S.* in exhibition “Ultradependent Publicschool” 2023, BAK Utrecht May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Photograph taken by author.

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<sup>111</sup> Claara Balaguer, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Matia Hlavajova, et.al. *Ultradependent Public School*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, ed. Aidan Wall, (BAK: Utrecht, 2023).

<sup>112</sup> Claara Balaguer, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Matia Hlavajova, et.al. *Ultradependent Public School*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, ed. Aidan Wall, 20-21.

<sup>113</sup> *Ultradependent Public School*, 27.

In the context of this chapter, this exhibition is intriguing. Although it is a collection of artists from many places in the world, only a few have their identity spoken about in a text that most visitors will either not take or not read entirely, which is why my focus is on the exhibition space. Aside from having no contextualization of the work, this space does not emphasize the international aspect of the artists presented in it. This entails that the reading of the works within this exhibition would primarily be a personal one.

Like “Char/ing Myths,”<sup>114</sup> it is interesting to think about the possible effect having artist’s nationalities could have had in the reading of the works and the exhibition. The show focuses on a global concern, implicitly bringing a colonial criticism of education systems around the world for its inability to teach what really matters in human society. It is an exhibition about what humans need to learn and how education across the globe fails to do so. Therefore, there is a transparent universal approach to the exhibition’s theme. If the works were to have national or cultural information associated to them and the artists, it would automatically remove the universal aspect of the exhibition. The pieces exhibited would become a representation and criticism of the artists’ native countries’ school systems. Consequently, it would specifically influence the reading of works by artists from non-Western-Euroamerican countries by creating a comparative reading between what they are criticizing and, for example, the educational experience in Europe, resulting in *othering* these artists and their works. This situation originates from allowing stereotypes to inform the reading of works, as González argues, “is as much about the construction of oneself, as it is about creating distance.”<sup>115</sup> If this situation had been the practice BAK had chosen to create labels, the exhibition’s argument would have been compromised, and the works, as well as the exhibition would have been read and perceived by the visitor in a way that would further perpetuate what artistic spaces like BAK are trying to change.

### *Choosing for Profit*

One aspect that has yet to be discussed in this chapter that comes as a secondary effect to labels, particularly when choosing which artists to exhibit or sell, is the potential for

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<sup>114</sup> “Charg/ing Myths, On/Trade/Off,” Framer Framed, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023, June 4<sup>th</sup> 2023, curated by Framer Framed and Ils Huygens.

<sup>115</sup> González, 12.

national or cultural labels to ensure marketability. This effect can work both ways; either the work is sold because the artist belongs to the white Western-Euroamerican canon, or it is sold because they do not belong to this canon and thus are representative of a minority. Both of these, in their own ways, are representatives of racist and reductionist mentalities, and exhibitions from the 1970s are the best examples, such as “Black Artists in America” at the Whitney, “Harlem on my mind” at the MET, “Primitivism in 20th-century Art” at the MoMA,<sup>116</sup> and “Magiciens de la Terre” at the Centre Pompidou.<sup>117</sup>

In the case of diasporic artists, whose national identities are hyphenated, choosing which nationality to present an artist with, or for them to make that choice, can be informed by what is more marketable, what is more, appealing to audiences. During the conversation I hosted during my internship at the RCMC in which I presented my research, different experiences lived and seen by curators around the question of choosing identities were discussed. This issue was first introduced by the curator of North Africa and the Middle East, Sarah Johnson, who, throughout the conversation, criticized the non-labeling nationalities practice as a type of fake neutrality.<sup>118</sup> She further pointed to a known French-Algerian artist’s decision to, after his celebrity, only be referred as an Algerian artist, a choice she, and others at the time, argued was informed by what was more marketable.<sup>119</sup> Her critique goes both ways, the artist choosing to label himself with the Algerian nationality to sell better, and museums choosing not to display national labels to seem more inclusive and marketable as they can appeal to a broader audience.

In a similar vein, Wayne Modest mentioned the inclusion of British painters Peter Doig and Chris Ofili in the exhibition by the Tate, “Life Between the Islands.”<sup>120</sup> Even if both artists are based in the Caribbean, they are of British nationality. Their country of residence allowed them to be included in the show.<sup>121</sup> This inclusion brought the inquiry into the discussion of whether or not these artists could be considered Caribbean or

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<sup>116</sup> “Primitivism in 20th-century Art,” Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1984, to January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1985, curated by William Rubin.

<sup>117</sup> “Magiciens de la Terre,” Centre Pompidou, May 18th to August 14th, 1989, curated by Jean Hubert-Martin.

<sup>118</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, sme Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

<sup>119</sup> Olombi Bois, Alison Boyd, Wendeline Flores, Sarah Johnson, Erna Lilje, Wayne Modest, Ilaria Obata, Esme Schoutens, and Carine Zaaayman (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum,” Research Center for Material Culture, Boerhave Building, Leiden.

<sup>120</sup> “Life Between the Islands,” Tate Modern, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, to April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2022, curated by Alberta Whittle.

<sup>121</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, sme Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

representatives of Caribbean art practices even though their only affiliation to that region is their residence, as their families are still in the UK. Another example the scholar brought up was Victor Sonna's inclusion in the Dakar Biennale.<sup>122</sup> This artist was born in Yaoundé, Cameroon, but has been living in the Netherlands for around 20 years; according to Modest the artist has been Dutch for almost as long.<sup>123</sup> While the biography published on Sonna's website mentions that his work is about his in-between status, between Cameroon and the Netherlands,<sup>124</sup> his participation in the Dakar Biennale in 2022 was as a representative of Cameroon. Modest's argument was to point out how Sonna used his Cameroonian roots to enter the biennale since this organization is only interested in that part of his identity.

Artist Yinka Shonibare and film director Steve McQueen were both mentioned later in the conversation, exemplifying the other way this choice can benefit artists.<sup>125</sup> Shonibare and McQueen were brought up in this discussion for their presentation of their name with the association of MBE, a Member of the British Empire. Shonibare is the son of two Nigerian parents, and after his birth, they went back to Nigeria, where the artist stayed for 17 years before returning to Britain at 17 years old. McQueen, on the other hand, both his parents are of Caribbean descent, Grenadian and Trinidadian. Like Victor Sonna, these artists also live in an in-between. The three of them belong to their corresponding diasporas in European countries, but their choices of representation are different. This shows the complicated position that labels impose on artists with hyphenated identities, where they must constantly choose how they want to be represented.

The country of residence became a point of criticism during the discussion. Even when some artists choose not to have their country of birth stated, their country of residence often figures on labels, such as the case of Kingsley Ogwara and his work *Sounds of Joy* exhibited at the Caterijne Convent for the "Gospel" exhibition.<sup>126</sup> Though the factual entry of the label does not state his residence, the contextualizing text mentions that Ogwara lives and resides in Luxemburg. During the discussion, Wayne Modest claimed that to some

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<sup>122</sup> *Biennale de Dakar*, "SONNA, Victor – CM – Expo IN" <https://biennaledakar.org/2022/05/09/sonna-victor-cm-expo-in/>, accessed July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

<sup>123</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, sme Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

<sup>124</sup> Victor Sonna, "About," *Victor Sonna*, <http://victorsonna.com/site/index2.php?tag=about>, accessed June 15th, 2023.

<sup>125</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, sme Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

<sup>126</sup> *Gospel: Music Journey of Spirit and Hope*, at Museum Caterijne Convent, from September 30th, 2022, to April 10th, 2023, curated by Shirma Rouse.



artists, mentioning where they reside becomes more important than mentioning where they are from, as this fits into a claim of cosmopolitanism.<sup>127</sup> Johnson later suggested this assertion as being similar to a global competition, as it means that saying Luxemburg or Paris has more weight than saying Kinshasa or Kingston.<sup>128</sup>

Using identity as a marketing strategy is not only done by artists. Institutions also have often prided themselves on how broad their collections can be. Carine Zaayman pointed this out during the conversation, but it can also be seen in different institutions' mission statements.<sup>129</sup> For example, the "Who We Are" page of the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam, mentions that they have around 750 hires "with all kinds of different backgrounds"<sup>130</sup>. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), in New York, affirms that they present over "5000 years of art from around the world,"<sup>131</sup> or even more explicitly, the Centre Pompidou in Paris states that their goal since the beginning of the millennial is to highlight "the globalisation of art and the growing number of contemporary scenes, reaching out to former East European countries, the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America and, more recently, South Asia and China, as well as Western Africa and South Africa."<sup>132</sup> Another very straightforward example would be the Wereld Museum where upon accessing the home page for their online collection, a world map shows how many objects they collect from each region of the world (Figure 13).<sup>133</sup> Taking away the national label associated to an artist's name, takes away the possibility for the institution to make that nationality profitable for themselves.

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<sup>127</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, sme Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

<sup>128</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, sme Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

<sup>129</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

<sup>130</sup> *Rijksmuseum*, "Who we are," <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/about-us/who-we-are>, accessed June 7th, 2023.

<sup>131</sup> *MET Museum* "About the Museum," <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met>, accessed June 7th, 2023.

<sup>132</sup> *Centre Pompidou*, "Who Are We," <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/the-centre-pompidou/who-are-we> accessed June 7th, 2023.

<sup>133</sup> *Wereld Culturen Collections*, "Home," <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/49572f68-fa3c-4846-8247-43baef37d788>, accessed June 7th, 2023.

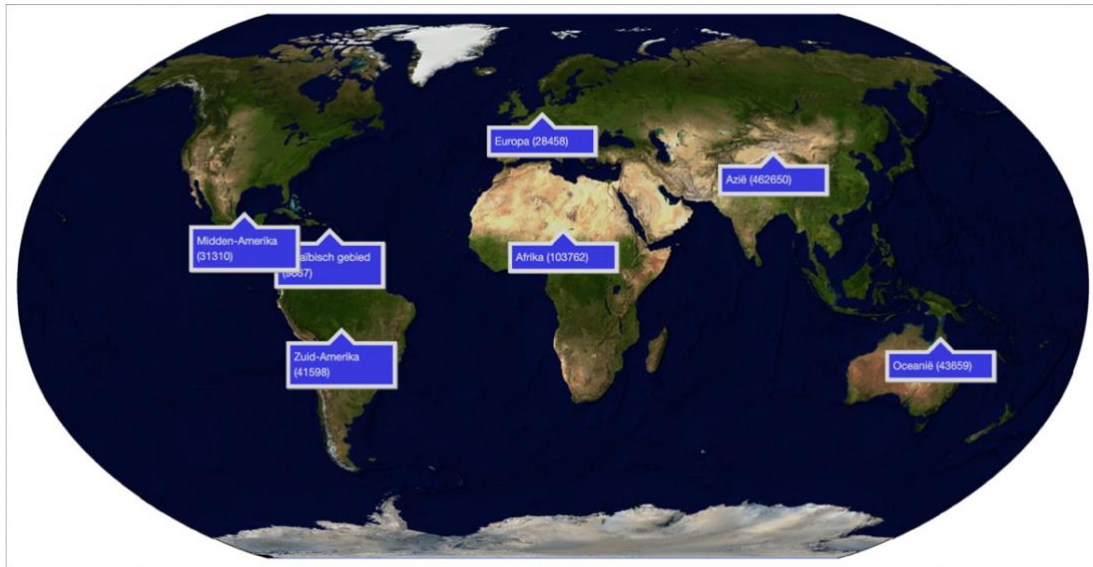


Figure 13: World map with text indicating how many objects the Wereld Museum Collection has from each region. Image taken from Wereld Culturen Collection’s website.<sup>134</sup>

An overarching critique can be drawn from the different ways identity can be used as a marketing strategy. Artists’ usage of this one can be seen as profiting from their identity due to how consumers react to their origins. However, the fact that this strategy works becomes more so a critique towards the buyer of the work than of the artist, since the maker’s origins informed the purchase more than the content of the piece. This marketing structure highlights the value of stereotypes over genuine representations of identity or genuine representations of individual narratives explored by artists.

Removing the national or cultural identity of an artist and their residence allows them to not have to choose how they want to be represented. This is particularly interesting for artists with hyphenated identities, such as Victor Sonna, or artists who reside outside their country or city of birth, such as Cris Ofily and Peter Doig. Carine Zaayman, during the discussion, argued that one of the reasons artists refuse to have this nationality stated in their biography could also be seen as a refusal to adopt external structures imposed onto them by colonial structures.<sup>135</sup> This alludes to countries whose identities were created during colonization through the imposition of a national name by European countries, such as Puerto

<sup>134</sup> *Wereld Culturen Collections*, “Home,” <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/49572f68-fa3c-4846-8247-43baef37d788>.

<sup>135</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

Rico or Rhodesia for Zimbabwe. While this does not apply to every artist opposing to be labeled through their nationality, for those to whom this quest does apply, this identity can become alien to the artist. Refusing these structures entails a detachment from the colonizer's-imposed structure.

### *Space As Label*

The eye tracking study conducted by the MET, mentioned in the introduction, revealed that attention to labels depends on the length of the text.<sup>136</sup> According to their results, a longer text, in which contextualizing information about the work they are seeing is developed, grasps the viewers' attention more than a shorter, entry.<sup>137</sup> The factual entry of a text to the average visitor can play a minor role in the exhibition space. The study further revealed that the attention to these labels and the art works depended in the way the pieces were exhibited.<sup>138</sup> Still, this study concluded that the time spent reading these texts averaged significantly less than the time spent studying the work.<sup>139</sup> Even if, at first glance, the label may seem to play a minor role in the exhibition space, as unlike the object exhibited it is not the center of attention, this thesis has thus far shown how this text facilitates the communication between the museum and the visitor.

The label is, in fact, ubiquitous in exhibition spaces as it is everywhere, not limited to a small text next to the artwork. A label can also influence the reading of a space. On a macro-level, the museum first and foremost, holds an external label, which informs the visitor of the type of institution they will be entering. In whatever type of museum, that be ethnographic museum, a Western contemporary museum, an archeology museum, an Italian Renaissance art museum, a historic site, an independent art space etc. These external labels predetermine the content visitors will study or "consume" upon entering the space, and the approach the reading of these objects will take. Implicitly, the label manifests itself in the expectations visitors might have when entering the museum. The external label will

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<sup>136</sup> "The Display Makes a Difference: A Mobile Eye Tracking Study on the Perception of Art Before and After a Museum's Rearrangement.," *Journal of Eye Movement Research*, Vol. 13 N°2 (2020) doi: 10.16910/jemr.13.2.6.

<sup>137</sup> Reitsätter, Brinkmann, Santini, et. al. "The Display makes a difference."

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

anticipate the type of approach visitors should engage with when approaching the exhibited objects, for example an ethnographic approach to an artwork shown in an ethnographic museum, instead of an aesthetic or art historical one if the work is exhibited in an art institution.

Both museums based in Amsterdam, the Stedelijk Museum and the Tropenmuseum, have works by Dutch-Surinamese artist Remy Jungerman. Though both institutions mention the exploration of Afro-Surinamese rituals while echoing Mondrian lines, they expand on these aspects very differently, this way finding their own balance between the ethnographic, aesthetic, and art historical values of the pieces (figure 14 and 15). As demonstrated in the introduction, this example shows how the external label will influence the creation of internal labels in museums, exhibitions, and their distinct rooms, each presenting an overarching argument informed by the type of label the building holds. The discursive space created among these different museums changes, and so does the treatment of the objects internally.

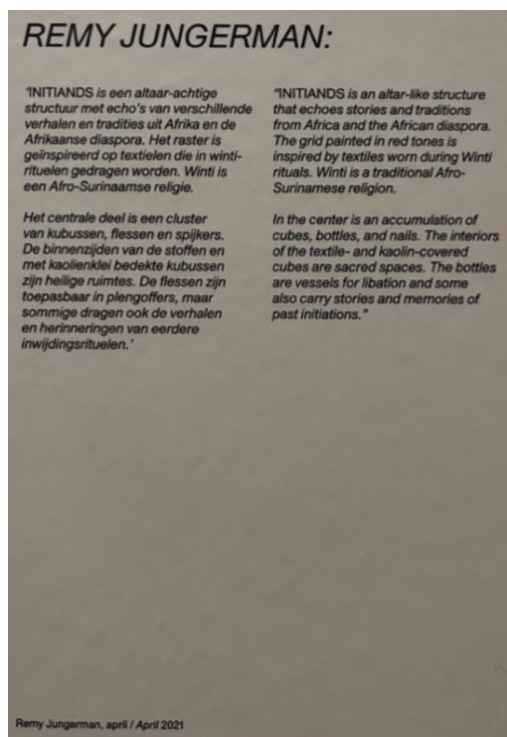


Figure 14: Label for Remy Jungerman, in exhibition “Tomorrow is a Different Day, collection 1980-Now” Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023. Photo taken by author.

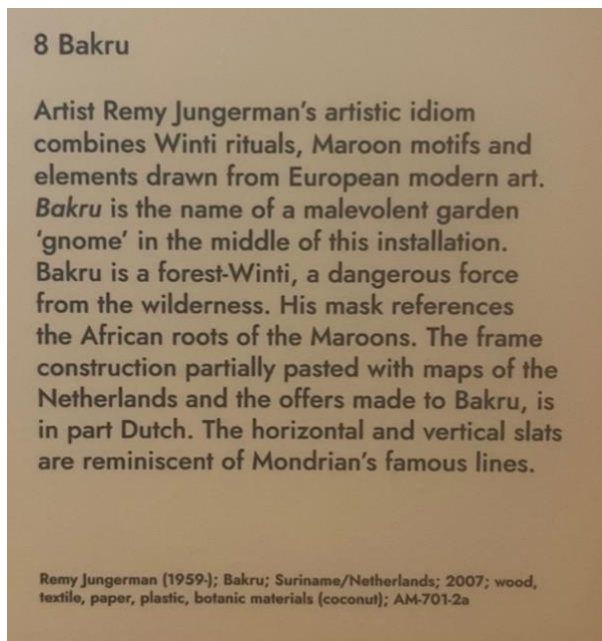


Figure 15: Label for Remy Jungerman, *Bakru*, in exhibition “Our Colonial Inheritance,”<sup>140</sup> 2022-2029, Tropenmuseum Amsterdam, April 14th, 2023. Photograph taken by author.

The outcome of clear external labels is that visitors need less contextualizing information in the exhibition spaces as the museum already allows a specific approach. In art museums, one could assume that the identity and cultural background of the makers becomes a secondary focus. In contrast, an ethnographic museum would lean more towards culture end ethnos being of primary importance.

On occasion, cultural identity can inform these types of labels. As aforementioned, an entire institution can be created from a national or geographical label, and the same can be true for ethnicity or culture. Nonetheless, this section focuses on how space can become a label informed by identity, and how this influences the creation of more specific labels in the room.

Labeling a space can also be done internally through the different exhibition rooms. A perfect example of this would be where the work by Remy Jungerman is exhibited in the permanent collection display of the Stedelijk Museum. The wall text in this room has the title “Breaking the White Frame of the Museum” and further explains that this space focuses on the display of Afro-diasporic heritage in Dutch art.<sup>141</sup> This is why this physical section

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<sup>140</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

<sup>141</sup> “Tomorrow is a Different Day, Collection 1980-Now,” Stedelijk Museum.

represents works by Remy Jungerman, Michael Tedja, Gillion Grantsaan (founders of Wakaman), Marcel Pinas, Iris Kensmil, Patricia Kaersenhout, and Charl Landvreugd. The title and the approach stated in this text informs the visitor that what they will be seeing in this space is an artistic expression by non-white diasporic artists. There are two issues visible with this room. First, the title indicates a need to exhibit artists from different cultural backgrounds other than white. The result is only showing one among the many different diasporic communities in the Netherlands; suggesting that the white frame is only broken by Surinamese artists. Those from other former Dutch colonies or representing the wave of international artists today based in the Netherlands, something shown with the “Ultradependent Public School”<sup>142</sup> and “When Objects are Beings,”<sup>143</sup> are thus not considered as breaking the white frame of museums. Second, would be that although artist’s nationalities are not mentioned in the artworks’ labels, this detail still informs the reading of the exhibited works due to the room in which the artists are presented.

Having this information on the art piece’s labels could be considered overly-labeling since the room already accomplishes that role. The space is an excellent example of how racial gazing done through a nationality or ethnic label can seal an artwork in a “representational space.”<sup>144</sup> It additionally comes to show how even if a label might not display the artist’s cultural or national identity, the space in which the work is displayed can fulfill that role as much as the label does.

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<sup>142</sup>“Ultradependent Public school,” BAK, 1<sup>st</sup> April- 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023.

<sup>143</sup> “When Things are Beings,” Stedelijk Museum, November 2022-April 2023, curated by Amanda Pinatih and Britte Sloothaak, with the help of intern Jasmijn Mol.

<sup>144</sup> English, 31.

## Chapter 2

### United Through Difference by the Label

Some museums continue to have labels that inform the visitor about artists' nationalities. Countering the museums mentioned in the last chapter, other curatorial practices choose to have this information on factual labels and in some cases, further exploring this one in the longer interpretative texts. In order to better understand this choice, I propose to turn to the ambiguous identity of Boricuas, and more importantly, their museum representation in the US mainland territory.

To grasp Boricua's complex identity, and perspective better, it is important to mention the US imperialistic presence in their territory, as well as their complex economic and political relation which has impacted the island's and the nationality's demographic. Borinquén is not an independent island, since 1898 it has held the status of "unincorporated territory" to the United States after the Spain's defeat during the Spanish American war.<sup>145</sup> This status means that even if the US government controls the island, it is not part of its territory. Although Boricuas have US American citizenship and thus can travel to the mainland without a visa or green card, they can only vote for party primary elections and their island governor since they have their own constitution, but cannot vote during US presidential elections.<sup>146</sup> In addition to their political status, arguably similar to that of a colony, the ease they have to travel to the US has resulted in a very particular population. As explained by the Latin American Institute at UCLA, by 2018, 64% of Boricuas were living in mainland US contrasting to the remaining 34% still based on the island.<sup>147</sup> The Wikipedia article about Boricua population additionally states that despite their population being of nine million, six millions of those belongs to the Boricua diaspora.<sup>148</sup> This information is further sustained by the most recent census which showed that 3,221,789 people live in the island,

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<sup>145</sup> Rachel Lewis, "Is Puerto Rico Part of the U.S? Here's What to Know," *Time*, September 26, 2017. <https://time.com/4957011/is-puerto-rico-part-of-us/>.

<sup>146</sup> Lewis, "Is Puerto Rico Part of the U.S? Here's What to Know."

<sup>147</sup> César J. Ayala, "Puerto Rico and its Diaspora," *UCLA Latin American Institute*, October 27, 2021. <https://www.international.ucla.edu/lai/article/248568>

<sup>148</sup> *Wikipedia*, "Puerto Ricans," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto\\_Ricans#cite\\_note-pop-2018-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Ricans#cite_note-pop-2018-1). This page was last edited on 14 May 2023.

with 98,8% identifying as Hispanic or Latino.<sup>149</sup> As can be seen, the Boricua population is primarily present in the US (5.771.813 in 2020).<sup>150</sup> One of the states where this diaspora has been most historically present would be New York.<sup>151</sup> Since the 1930s waves of migration between the islands, from Borinquén to Manhattan, have been arriving. This helped the creation and establishment of Spanish Harlem as a neighborhood located in East Harlem and created a new diasporic identity, that of the Nuyorican.<sup>152</sup> Understanding Borinquén's political situation reveals why its population is largely diasporic, which explains the creation of strong Boricua communities in the US, particularly that of Nuyoricans, and how this political situation is seen translated in their artistic practices.

This migration has led to the creation of a community with its own artistic expression, which, though politically and economically part of the US, it has historically gone unnoticed, this way presenting a clear distinction between the different ethnicities in the country. As discussed by Adriana Zavala during the "Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium" hosted by El Museo del Barrio on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2022,<sup>153</sup> artistic expression by Latinx in the U.S, in particular when it comes to Boricuas in this country, is often judged as a foreign, non-citizen, and violent, as this culture is deemed "antithetical to the Anglo-Saxon core of the U.S."<sup>154</sup> The scholar further sustains that the way the US portrays art created by an artist who identifies as Latin American is always "either Latin or American, never the hybrid."<sup>155</sup> She later also quotes Olga Ulloa Herrera when she claims that Latinx art has always existed in "unexpected" places: "Latina/o/x artists aren't operating in a vacuum but within the same structures... as other American artists."<sup>156</sup> Zavala, in her argument, demonstrates the overall lack of visibility given to the Latinx community, in particular when it comes to their art history and expression in the US. Her argument is especially poignant when it comes to an identity such as the Boricua given the inescapable ambiguity this one represents. Despite being part of the US government, they are not considered part of that

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<sup>149</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts, Puerto Rico," <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/PR>, accessed May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>150</sup> Ayala, "Puerto Rico and its Diaspora."

<sup>151</sup> Library of Congress, "In Spanish Harlem," accessed May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/puerto-rican-cuban/in-spanish-harlem/>.

<sup>152</sup> Counterpoints , 2010, Vol. 366, Nuyoricanics: Organic Intellectualism, the Search for Racial Identity, and Nuyorican Thought (2010). 61.

<sup>153</sup> *EL Museo del Barrio*, "Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium," October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL4LJC2LXp4&ab\\_channel=ElMuseodelBarrio](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL4LJC2LXp4&ab_channel=ElMuseodelBarrio).

<sup>154</sup> Adriana Zavala, "Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium," *EL Museo del Barrio*, 27:00 minutes. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL4LJC2LXp4&ab\\_channel=ElMuseodelBarrio](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL4LJC2LXp4&ab_channel=ElMuseodelBarrio).

<sup>155</sup> Zavala, "Identity Reimagined," 39:00 minutes.

<sup>156</sup> Zavala, "Identity Reimagined," 54:45 minutes.



nationality, resulting in the inability to participate in the most defining action as citizens, voting. This chapter will focus on how the noticeable presence of a diasporic identity such as the Boricua led to the creation of a diasporic identity, that of the Nuyorican, and more importantly, how this new diasporic identity sparked the creation of identity-based institutions for their community.

### *An Institution Born from a Label*

Given the significant Boricua population in Manhattan, it was only a matter of time before the reaffirmation of their diasporic presence through the creation of cultural institutions would take place. Remarkably, after the civil rights movement, urban and monetary investments started to be planned for the creation of spaces for this diasporic community. Such would be the case of El Museo del Barrio. In 1969, District 4 asked artist-educator, Rafael Montañez Ortiz, to use funds from the Community Education Center for a cultural education project. What at first hand started as a need for a curriculum on Boricua history, culture, folklore, and art, ended up resulting in El Museo del Barrio, initially located in the P.S. 125 classroom at 425 West 123<sup>rd</sup> Street.<sup>157</sup> In the article “The Artist and the Community,” Montañez Ortiz explains that he saw this creation as a solution to the community’s need for “a powerful cultural institution that would reveal its past; affirm and guide its present [critically, and with respect]; and inspire its future, with integrity and intellectual authority.”<sup>158</sup> The founder further expresses that “after all, it [,creating a museum,] was the solution of the economically and politically empowered upper and middle classes in affirmation of their cultural identity, when they founded the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim, the Metropolitan Museum and the Whitney Museum.”<sup>159</sup> Hence, creating an institution informed by the identity of the community in which it is located was no different. His argument is further emphasized as he explains that after the civil rights movement, “the euro-centric cultural biases in the administrating, collecting and exhibiting of these major museums began to respond slowly, attempting to

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<sup>157</sup> Zavala, “Identity Reimagined,” 54 minutes.

<sup>158</sup> Rafael Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” in *Voces y visiones : Highlights from El Museo del Barrios permanent collection : El Museo del Barrio 1969-2004*, (New York, NY : El Museo del Barrio, 2003), 15.

<sup>159</sup> Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” 14.

correct the existing biases.”<sup>160</sup> As elaborated in the introduction of this thesis, the end of the 1960s beginning of 1970s brought new narratives and discursive spaces to already existing institutions. This is why the creation of a museum solely focusing on the exploration of topics bigger museums have, in the past, failed to show, and by then was stumbling to do so, becomes very relevant.

El Museo del Barrio was founded by someone from the community for the community. As stated by the artist, the community he loyally identifies with was “the Puerto Rican underclass” since he comes from “a typical disenfranchised, underclass Puerto Rican-American family.”<sup>161</sup> The museum was created for an audience he belongs to, as his goal was to create an institution “more welcoming to Latin artists than New York’s established temples of fine art.”<sup>162</sup> The founder believed creating a museum was more pressing than a curriculum because of the accessibility this project presented. Instead of spreading the Boricua and Nuyorican culture to a few by creating a curriculum, the museum brings access to many. He explains that:

Just as every neighborhood had its library, I believed that every neighborhood should have its community museum that speaks to the culture and cultural history of that community: addressing the past, the present, and most importantly, the future developments of culture.<sup>163</sup>

Hence, the institution was created not only for educational purposes but also to create a tighter sense of community by highlighting their common aspects while simultaneously exploring the identity’s visual representations. This ambition developed in a research conducted by the founder to uncover the different ways Boricua and Nuyorican culture can be shown. Montañez Ortiz focused on studying and developing the community’s past and present culture and art to create an institutional scope that combined both fine and folk art.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” 15.

<sup>161</sup> Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” 12.

<sup>162</sup> Mark A. Stein, “A Defiant Exhibit by an Artist, at a Museum He Helped Create,” in *The New York Times*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/arts/design/raphael-montanez-ortiz-el-museo-del-barrio.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” 15.

<sup>164</sup> It is important to note that the distinction between fine and folk art by the 70s was important. However, today, this differentiation is less clear, and it is something that this chapter will later touch on when talking about the newer exhibitions of El Museo del Barrio. Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” 15.

The creation of a museum such as El Museo del Barrio was informed by the label of diasporic Boricua artists. As explained earlier, the exploration of Boricua and Nuyoricana culture is outstanding due to the ambiguity of their political, social, and economic status affiliated with the US. As remarked by Serda Ariyel Yalkin, El Museo del Barrio represented the “translocality of Puerto Rican diaspora, a de-territorialized identity formed outside the sovereignty and the idea of a nation-state,” and it further helped imagine the “community it continually makes and remakes.”<sup>165</sup> Although the arguments she presented in describing this diasporic community can be applied to any other, the particularity of Boricuas is that two-thirds of their national identity is diasporic. This demographic makes clear why community-based institutions where the exploration of culture is emphasized are built, entailing that this community’s label informs the creation and functioning of the institution. Montañez Ortiz clearly stated that “we need all museums. We need every type of museum possible” and that El Museo del Barrio was created “to help Puerto Ricans in New York develop a sense of pride in their community,” this way further exploring the different shades of Boricua and Nuyoricana identity has in its spectrum through the usage of labels.<sup>166</sup>

This chapter opposes the previous one. Here I will explore the different ways visitors, institutions, and artists benefit from having a national or cultural identity affiliated with the works of art. Although an ocean away from the last chapter’s study cases, El Museo del Barrio becomes a great example of the other side of the labeling argument. The institution was not only created to explore the different visual representations of a specific identity, but it also explores an identity that is sociologically difficult to define. Moving this argument to the US additionally demonstrates independent institutions’ distinct practices within what we call “Western” countries. On the one hand, the studied Dutch independent institutions refuse labels of all kind, and on the other, this Nuyoricana institution takes advantage of identity labels to explore and communicate with particular communities.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Serda Ariyel Yalkin, “Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium,” *EL Museo del Barrio*, 1:40:00.

<sup>166</sup> Mark A. Stein, “A Defiant Exhibit by an Artist, at a Museum He Helped Create,” *New York Times*, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/arts/design/raphael-montanez-ortiz-el-museo-del-barrio.html>.

<sup>167</sup> Other examples of such institutions include the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, the MACLA in San Jose, and The Perez Art Museum in Miami.

*What roles does the label play in El Museo del Barrio?*

- A Claim for Space

The label can benefit the museum in many ways. In the case of El Museo del Barrio, one of the ways the cultural and identity label is used is by claiming space. This argument parallels Adriana Zavala's reasoning that "identity has been one strategy whereby our communities in the plural have claimed space both within and beyond the mainstream."<sup>168</sup> From this reading, due to identity being the basis from which El Museo del Barrio was built, it created a physical space dedicated to exploring a specific identity. The label claims a space to be seen, studied, and appreciated through its different artistic and folkloric expressions. In a more general manner, the assertion of space by a label in a museum is made on the walls. In the case of El Museo del Barrio, this was clear for Montañez Ortiz as he wanted people from the community "to come out at the end of a museum visit with a sense that we were on the wall. And we belong in the world because what's on the wall is a reflection of the world."<sup>169</sup> In a way functioning as a reassurance of their presence in the world, but more specifically in a city that often seemed to overlook them.

During its commencement, the museum took different shapes; one of the most remarkable ones in this context would be the portable museum. In 1972 a mobile unit from El Museo del Barrio would transport exhibitions, objects, slide presentations to elementary schools, colleges and community festivals where people could see these mobile exhibitions and identify with the different representations of the Nuyorican identity.<sup>170</sup> A similar thing was done by En Foco<sup>171</sup> and Taller Boricua,<sup>172</sup> both artistic organizations created by Nuyoricans to teach and promote photography and print making in the community, by showing these productions through their street exhibitions. This resulted in the spread of visual practices in this community, as well creating awareness and publicity for the museum. More importantly, this project became a more significant reassertion of space than a static museum would. By moving through the neighborhood, and going to different educational institutions, the pride in this identity is spread as something worth seeing. It further allows the community to become acquainted with how they engage with artistic practices, something

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<sup>168</sup> Zavala, "Identity Reimagined," 26:50 min.

<sup>169</sup> Stein, "A Defiant Exhibit by an Artist, at a Museum He Helped Create."

<sup>170</sup> Ariyel Yalkin, "Identity Reimagined," 1:40:00.

<sup>171</sup> En Foco, founded in 1974, Bronx, New York.

<sup>172</sup> Taller Boricua, founded in 1969, East Harlem, New York.

that often is overshadowed by claims of fine art done by museums such as the MET, MoMA, Whitney, etc. This project spread visual practices by Boricua and Nuyorican identity, clearly relating the two. The effect of this project gave agency to the people behind it, artists and the museum, but also its “visitors,” who in this case were people walking around the neighborhood, most of them belonging to the Nuyorican community.

In this context, the claim for space is political. By creating this mobile unit, El Museo del Barrio not only created publicity for their institution but also pointed to a gap within the community. The label presented by the establishment of the institution and the portable museum emphasizes that this did not exist in the past. It points to the need for more representation in the community and in the overall art scene of New York by being deemed new and innovative.

The appropriation of space can be physical, but it can also be intellectual. What was more critical for Montañez Ortiz, as he is an artist-educator, was using the museum as an educational tool. El Museo, as well as the mobile unit project, pointed to educational institutions failure to teach about Boricua and Nuyorican heritage. It showed the insufficiency of an educational program where on the one hand, people from a community are unable to learn about their history and folklore, and, on the other, the overall US American educational system dismisses the Boricua community when they are still legally considered US American citizens. This function is how Montañez Ortiz defines a museum; he states:

I believe a museum must impart the intellectual tool and the cognitive science it must employ itself while deciphering art and culture. Culture and art are part and parcel of this question and its answer. El Museo del Barrio must contribute to this discussion.<sup>173</sup>

In this citation, one understands that the museum’s purpose is to educate and, through this action, teach and share how to interact with culture and art.

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<sup>173</sup> Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” 16.

- Unity Through Difference

Another way El Museo del Barrio exemplifies the usage of a national or cultural emphasis on labels is that, by displaying this information, differences can create unity. This argument presents the most considerable opposition to that explored in the previous chapter informed by Darby English's scholarship, as it shows the same effect of reading a label but from a different perspective. Iris Marion Young discusses this argument in her book *Justice and Politics of Difference*.<sup>174</sup> Through her publication, she wants to "show how such denial of difference contributes to social group oppression, and to argue for a politics that recognizes rather than represses difference."<sup>175</sup> This reasoning opposes the universal treatment of artists as "the politics of difference sometimes implies overriding a principle of equal treatment with the principle that group differences should be acknowledged in public policy."<sup>176</sup> Instead of an approach demanding the equal treatment and reading of artists and their practice developed by English, Young implies an approach focused on highlighting differences, for these to coexist equitably. For the author, these differences are a way to recognize groups' rights to "promote their full participation" or, in other words, give them agency.<sup>177</sup> Similarly, an argument developed by Ilaria Obata and Erna Lilje during the meeting hosted during my internship, was that identity labels, help create a closeness with the artist and with the works.<sup>178</sup> According to Obata, this information can help increase relationality or visibility, and this can be a teaching experience about other cultures and realities, this way creating a relation between the artist and the viewer through the culture displayed in the work.<sup>179</sup>

Rinaldo Walcott develops a similar reasoning in his book *Genres of Human*, in which he explains that "the struggle to think about cultural differences outside of conceptions of multiculturalism is a significant denial of our present order of knowledge and modes of being

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<sup>174</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and Politics of Difference*, (Princeton Paperbacks, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>175</sup> Iris Marion Young, "Introduction," *Justice and Politics of Difference*, (Princeton Paperbacks, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>176</sup> Young, "Introduction," 11.

<sup>177</sup> Young, 11.

<sup>178</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

<sup>179</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

human.”<sup>180</sup> He further suggests that this multiculturalism can “produce genres of the human for which our only hope of an engagement beyond those categories is to ethically recognize them as meaningful to all.”<sup>181</sup> Through difference, through these different “genres” of humanity, unity can be created, and thus, they can both coexist and prosper. Walcott further discusses how the Caribbean basin becomes a perfect example for this argument, as it is a location where differences have been “pitted against each other, or at least in tension with each other.”<sup>182</sup> Nonetheless, these differences are still “living intimately with each other and sharing across those differences have produced ‘new’ modes of being human in the region.”<sup>183</sup> Given the study case chosen for this chapter, Walcott’s arguments become an essential tool to unravel how the Boricua identity and El Museo del Barrio can both benefit from a reading such as this scholar’s.

The author does not fail to mention and acknowledge, in his writing the risks that this approach entails, which are similar to English’s preoccupations. Walcott explains that this sharing of culture and identities is “not necessarily utopic or egalitarian; in fact much of it recalls the brutality of previous encounters.”<sup>184</sup> This way pointing to cosmopolitanism and differences actually coming from the caste system created during colonization. Even so, the reasoning that a different perspective must be taken as “much of it also speaks to the politicality of life and the stakes of living lives in which claims to and from identity sometimes do matter and matter powerfully in terms of questions of ethics and justice,”<sup>185</sup> leads his overall argument.

These arguments tie closely to that of mutual respect. By respecting differences without racist biases, different cultures and practices can thrive. Their argument points to a hopeful mentality in which instead of hiding differences to avoid judgment, these should be highlighted to promote education, resulting in respect for others. A goal El Museo del Barrio accomplishes first through its exhibition approach. Susana Temkin, curator of El Museo del Barrio, explains that the museum’s goal is not for parents to stop creating objects from their culture because they are now part of a museum, but instead, by exhibiting these objects,

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<sup>180</sup> Rinaldo Walcott, “Genres of Human: Multiculturalism, Cosmo-politics and the Caribbean Basiin,” *Silvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed by Katherine McKittrick (Duke University press, 2015) 193.

<sup>181</sup> Walcott, “Genres of Human,” 193.

<sup>182</sup> Walcott, “Genres of Human,” 197.

<sup>183</sup> Walcott, “Genres of Human,” 197.

<sup>184</sup> Walcott, “Genres of Human,” 197.

<sup>185</sup> Walcott, “Genres of Human,” 197-198.

“make our children aware of the history and present significance of Puerto Rican aesthetic.”<sup>186</sup> Hence, bringing value to their origins.

This goal is further accomplished through their labeling practice within the institution. Although I am unable to speak of the labeling practice from the initial years of the museum, today, every label associated with a work of art articulates where the artist was born and where they reside, even if this means repeating the same city twice (such is the case of Mislal: b. 1989, New York, New York; lives and works in New York).<sup>187</sup> This is true for significant changes in residence between different countries (such would be the case of Cielo Félix-Hernández: b. 1998, Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico; lives in New York),<sup>188</sup> as well as moving within the U.S. (such would be the case of Amarise Carreras: b.1995 Queens, New York; lives between New York and Richmond, Virginia).<sup>189</sup> These labels become an example of the institution’s interest in showing the difference. The particularity of each artist’s background is explained and informs the reading of the works, demonstrating how the argument explored by the exhibition ties in with identity-based artistic practices.

In her talk, Susana Temkin stated that identity is part of everything, which closely resonates with what El Museo del Barrio stands for. Temkin reached that conclusion by arguing that “the utilization of our products as part of our lives is in direct conflict with the aesthetics which promote the glorification of art by setting it up in a far-off pedestal. It would be unfortunate if our parents stopped producing needlework for their young in order that the object be treasured and isolated in museums.”<sup>190</sup> The curator defends how culture can manifest through everyday objects and that the museum’s goal is not to showcase these objects to glorify practices in an *othering* manner. Montañez Ortiz emphasized that he wanted the institution “to be more than a stuffy museum — want it to be a working thing that will give folk culture as much value as fine culture.”<sup>191</sup> Meaning that much of the museum’s scope is not to distinguish folk and fine art, but instead to explore the different ways cultural identity can be seen. A goal further emphasized when the founder stated:

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<sup>186</sup> Susana V. Temkin, “Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium,” *EL Museo del Barrio*,

<sup>187</sup> Wall Label, “Mislal,” in *El Museo Del Barrio*, seen on March 12th, 2023.

<sup>188</sup> Wall Label, “Cielo Félix-Hernández,” in *El Museo Del Barrio*, seen on March 12th, 2023.

<sup>189</sup> Wall Label, “Amarise Carreras,” in *El Museo Del Barrio*, seen on March 12th, 2023.

<sup>190</sup> Temkin, “Identity Reimagined.”

<sup>191</sup> Grace Glueck, “Barrio Museum: Hope si, Home no,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1970.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1970/07/30/archives/barrio-museum-hope-si-home-no.html>.



What we want are the folk tales of the elders, the music played and the poetry read at festive occasions, the games, the food. Our aim is not to deal with high Puerto Rican culture, in its European derivations, but with the culture of the folk. There's a tendency to overlook our powerful African and Indian roots.<sup>192</sup>

He additionally explained that the museum came to be a tool to fill the “needs of Puerto Ricans for a cultural identity.”<sup>193</sup> This fulfillment is done through the exploration of “natural history, anthropology, culture, and art of Puerto Rican people, and that joined it to the world of Latino/a art as well as the larger world of artists.”<sup>194</sup> Under the direction of Montañez Ortiz, there seemed to be a highlighted value to bridging the differences between the anthropological, hence folk, inheritance to artistic practices. The director continuously expressed that by uniting the two readings that an anthropological and artistic approach can create, culture and art can proliferate. His argument demonstrated the importance of everyday mindless traditions and the recognition of these as forms of cultural and artistic expression.

Both Elaine Castillo and poet Hanif Abdurauqib exemplify this reading through cultural and ethical labels in their publications, *How to Read Now* and *A Little Devil in America*, respectively. Although less academic, these two books explore how everyday happenings, such as the pronunciation of a name, or a performance by Beyoncé, both have a deeper and more critical reading, in which silent histories of oppression and racism can come forth. Castillo, through her writing, maintains that this critical reading becomes a form of ethical and civic act and, similarly to Abdurauqib, demonstrating through their everyday examples that part of our identity is present in all our behaviors.<sup>195</sup>

It is necessary to point out Castillo's emphasis that this critical reading does not diminish artistic quality as there are two (or more) readings to everything, a superficial and a deeper one.<sup>196</sup> She suggests that one must engage with a work (art, book, even author) *and* the historical realities of its time since both are “not mutually exclusive,” they instead are “mutually formative.”<sup>197</sup> The author sheds light onto universalism's dystopic character by arguing that this deeper reading completes rather than complements the work.

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<sup>192</sup> Glueck, *Barrio Museum: Hope si, Home no.*

<sup>193</sup> Glueck, *Barrio Museum: Hope si, Home no.*

<sup>194</sup> Montañez Ortiz, “The Artist and the Community,” 12-13.

<sup>195</sup> Elaine Castillo, *How to Read Now*, (New York: Viking Press, 2022), 33.

<sup>196</sup> Castillo, *How to Read Now*, 232.

<sup>197</sup> Castillo, 37.

Abduraquib further suggests that, even though universalism seems ideal, there is no way of outrunning some type of subjectivity, as racial identification is present everywhere.<sup>198</sup> The poet expresses that being black in the US can mean being invisible until desired,<sup>199</sup> and their worth shifting depending on who is doing the looking.<sup>200</sup> Nonetheless, he still proves through his writing that racial and ethnic background informs people's existence. A critical reading paying close attention to certain things can acknowledge these differences in a way that gives people their agency back and control in their script.<sup>201</sup>

As explored in this chapter, Montañez Ortiz wanted the Nuyorican and Boricua communities to feel identified through museum's scope and exhibitions. As he affirms that "El Museo is located in, and served, on historically underclass community."<sup>202</sup> Collaborating and, more recently, displaying the work of the photographic collective En Foco, in the exhibition *En Foco: The New York Puerto Rican Experience, 1973-1974*,<sup>203</sup> is one of the ways this goal is most explicitly achieved. This collaboration and those made with the print-making collective, Taller Boricua, contributed to the community's education by teaching and displaying their practices. Photography comes to be a crucial medium to illustrate the argument that identity is omnipresent given that it played an essential part in the representation of this diasporic experience between the 1970s and 1980s as emphasized by Serda Ariyel Yalkin.<sup>204</sup> Due to it being a medium deemed to represent the most objective reality, photography can play a leading role in demonstrating not only that culture is everywhere, but also that art is present in culture. Bringing it to a museum, essentially validates that the Nuyorican experience had as much value and importance as any other. Everyday life then arrived to the exhibition walls, and the use of the label to claim space also served the rendition of cultural customs into art, this way reaffirming the Nuyorican presence.

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<sup>198</sup> Hanif Abdurraqib, *A Little Devil in America*, (Dublin: Allen Lane, Penguin Random House, 2021).

<sup>199</sup> Hanif Abdurraqib, "Mouvement II: Suspending Disbelief," in *A Little Devil in America*, 66.

<sup>200</sup> Hanif Abdurraqib, "Mouvement III: On Matters of Country/Provenance," in *A Little Devil in America*, 169

<sup>201</sup> The script is how an identity must be "performed," something explored during the first chapter as this performance is highly based on the expectation of stereotypes in ethnic minorities.

<sup>202</sup> Montañez Ortiz, "The Artist and the Community," 16.

<sup>203</sup> "En Foco: The New York Puerto Rican Experience, 1973-1974," El Museo del Barrio, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021, to February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022, curated by Rodrigo Moura and Susana Temkin.

<sup>204</sup> Yalkin, "Identity Reimagined."

- The Universal Remains Global

Following Darby English's argument, if labels do not figure in the exhibition space, the artwork and the artist can be universal. Hence the art and the artist can fit better into a globalized context as its particularity and singularity, in relation to the cultural background of the maker, is taken away. However, scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott and Okwui Enwezor argue the opposite. According to this school of thought, through an explicit display of singularity, the culture behind the objects presented is valued, and thus, this singularity can be accepted globally. This argument continues the same path as the previous one, demonstrating that unity can be created through difference, and this unity can be a global one.

In this context, the concept of cosmopolitanism, figuring in Walcott's argument and briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter can be quite fitting to explore. The author starts by quoting Seyla Benhabib, who defines this concept as such:

For some ... an attitude of enlightened morality that does not place 'love of country' ahead of 'love of mankind'...for others, cosmopolitanism signifies hybridity, fluidity, and recognizing the fractured and internally driven character of human selves and citizens, whose complex aspirations cannot be circumscribed by national fantasies and primordial communities.<sup>205</sup>

Nevertheless, this concept has its intricacies, given its rootedness in the distinction between the west and the rest. As the author explains, cosmopolitanism is very much entangled with internationalism, which is "a rubric that places the West in the position of achieving internationalism at the expense of the rest, who are not ushered into a higher order of Man."<sup>206</sup> By describing how other scholars define cosmopolitanism, Walcott unravels the complexity of this concept's intentions as, while highlighting cultural diversity, it does so through an entanglement of Western colonialist perspectives. He explains that the complications behind cosmopolitanism are "the terms under which European modernity continues to shape all of humanity."<sup>207</sup> This translates into it stemming from an "assumed uncomplicatedness of belonging, identity, and nation becomes the grounds of regulation,

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<sup>205</sup> Seyla Benhabib, Jeremy Waldron, Bonnie Honig, Will Kymlicka, and Robert Post, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, (The Berkeley Tanner Lectures. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17–18.

<sup>206</sup> Walcott, 196.

<sup>207</sup> Walcott, 196-197.

containment, and refusal.”<sup>208</sup> This means that when cosmopolitanism is not practiced well, questions and judgments of identity overpower a reading done through a Western European perspective, paralleling English’s argument. Walcott, therefore, pleads that the conceptual use of cosmopolitanism must be done by acknowledging that these differences were created by “an already deeply racialized modernity.”<sup>209</sup> The usage of cosmopolitanism does not come as a solution to racist practices; the argument of unity through difference is rooted in colonial and racist origins. Even so, the author’s usage of this concept shows a way to live with these differences through acceptance.

In a similar vein Okwui Enwezor, a renowned curator who in 2015 curated the 56th Venice Biennale, also develops an argument around the global aspect of identity-based curatorial practices. He explained that the creation of “the new in the context of decolonized representation” comes from the acceptance and development of the new “—relations of cultures and histories, practices and processes rationalization and transformation, transculturation and assimilation, exchanges and moments of multiple dwelling—”<sup>210</sup> and the persistence of artists to remain associated to their identities, cultural and national. Here, the curator is speaking of the relationality created between the new and the old, and how these two contradictory approaches inform artistic creation for some artists. This means that even when an artist speaks of topics deeply contemporary and explores modern forms, most remain loyal to a discourse deeply rooted in their cultural and national background. Later in his essay, he argues that

The development of new multilateral networks of knowledge production—activities that place themselves strategically at the intersection of disciplines and transnational audiences—has obviated the traditional circuits of institutionalized production and reception.<sup>211</sup>

Through this argument, Enwezor highlights transculturation’s effects on the development of culture. This effect, he later explains, is something that a museum or any exhibition space

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<sup>208</sup> Walcott, 196-197.

<sup>209</sup> Walcott, 197.

<sup>210</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” *Research in African Literatures*, Winter, 2003, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Indiana University Press, 2003) 71.

<sup>211</sup> Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation,” 73.

cannot deny or disassociate themselves from, as they are informed by this cultural entanglement.<sup>212</sup>

Both these scholars, although warning on the complexities of the global as an idea, given the colonial and racist origins these approaches may have, emphasize that the display of identity-based practices when done correctly, can benefit the argument that unity can be created through difference. For this study case, I argue that El Museo del Barrio benefits from this goal. On the one hand, the museum allows the Nuyorican community to feel identified with what is displayed. On the other, the space becomes a way to show the world Nuyorican artistic practices' value. As explained by Montañez Ortiz,

It's not like they need to see a gallery that only has Latino art[...], but they do need to come out at the end of a museum visit with a sense that we are on the wall. And we belong in the world because what's on the wall is a reflection of the world.<sup>213</sup>

Montañez Ortiz emphasizes the importance of identity-based practices for visitors to connect with what they see. He also points to the global value Boricua and Nuyorican art practices have for people outside of that culture. Seeing different narratives, serves to educate visitors on the diversity of world cultures, and I argue, can result in an acceptance and coexistence of differences.

During the speech *Discours sur la Négritude* in 1987, pronounced at the Florida International University,<sup>214</sup> Amé Césaire famously discussed a similar argument. The writer suggested that his concept of "Negritude,"<sup>215</sup> through representing an uprising against European reductionism, is an example of universalism with a strong particularism.<sup>216</sup> Therefore, universal can also mean allowing differences to thrive, something that in contemporary pop culture can be seen with Boricua reggaetonero<sup>217</sup> Bad Bunny. Though Latinx artists have had their place in (predominantly) US American music charts, to the point of organizing and celebrating the Latin Grammy awards, it is interesting to mention today's popular Latinx music's, and particularly Bad Bunny's, rise in the past years among non-

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<sup>212</sup> Enwenzor, 76.

<sup>213</sup> Stein, A "Defiant Exhibit by an Artist, at a Museum He Helped Create."

<sup>214</sup> Amé Césaire, *Discours sur la Négritude*, Florida International University, 1987.

<sup>215</sup> First explored in Césaire Aimé, A. James Arnold, and Clayton Eshleman in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* 1939.

<sup>216</sup> Césaire, *Discours sur la Négritude*.

<sup>217</sup> Reggaeton singer.

Spanish-spoken music listeners. The Boricua artist, since 2020, has been gaining increasingly more attention among Spotify listeners, music streaming platform, which has resulted in the reggaetonero being the first Latino headliner in 2023's US music festival Coachella.<sup>218</sup> Some attribute his appeal to the public persona through which he presents himself by challenging traditional ideas of masculinity. Yet, his music practice and the overall transmitted message continue to be profoundly Latin American, and more specifically Boricua.<sup>219</sup> While experimenting with sound and different music genres acutely related to Latinx music production,<sup>220</sup> his lyrics, particularly those from his last album *Un Verano Sin Ti* (A Summer Without You), allude to life in Borinquén. Some songs, notably *El Apagón* (The Blackout), raise concerns lived by the islanders, such as power shuts, potholes, and the harmful tourism industry. The artist also discusses these same complicated topics during his numerous sold-out shows worldwide. His popularity demonstrates that despite his practice being very particular, meaning that only a few can understand the meaning behind some of his lyrics, he is still able to be a global hit and, in a certain sense, universal. His “Boricuanness” has not prevented his celebrity even though it has informed his practice. Bad Bunny continues to receive global recognition, which allows him to share his particularism and give it universal value.

Césaire points, and almost a century later, Bad Bunny testifies, that the world is constituted by overlapping universals, or as English puts it, multiple categories. In this case, Boricua is one of the universals inhabited by the artist, even if others cannot relate. Embracing a particular universality additionally gives it educational value, as by sharing his Boricua background, Bad Bunny is able to share and spread awareness about life on his island.

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<sup>218</sup>Edwin Flores and Associated Press, “Bad Bunny, Blackpink make history as first Latino and Asian Coachella headliners,” in *NBC News*, January 11, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/bad-bunny-first-latino-artist-headline-coachella-rcna65325>, accessed June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>219</sup> Natalie Cure, “The Bad Bunny Effect: How the Puerto Rican Artist is Making History — and Why You Should Care,” in *Slice*, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.slice.ca/the-bad-bunny-effect-how-the-puerto-rican-artist-is-making-history/>, accessed June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>220</sup> Cure, “The Bad Bunny Effect.”

## *How is the Label Informing El Museo del Barrio Today?*

After discussing different ways in which El Museo del Barrio can benefit from the display of labels, this section will now explore how this practice contributes to a larger discourse on community representation. As previously mentioned, the usage of national and cultural labels and the display of this one as explicitly, can risk how visitors will understand the text since the reception of this message is not controllable. As English emphasized, stereotypes can be projected, thus creating expectations from an artwork basing their reading on the display of national or cultural background. Enwenzor and Walcott point to a similar risk due to the origins of what are today considered global or cosmopolitan methods. The first author pointed to this risk by citing Benjamin Buchloh,<sup>221</sup> who sustained that “when art emphasizing national identity attempts to enter the international distribution system, the most worn out historical and geopolitical clichés have to be employed.”<sup>222</sup> The second does so with his critique of the return of cosmopolitanism. Walcott seeks to create a reading and critique of this concept basing himself on the Caribbean basin due to the similar reading this one has to that of creolization. He further suggests that by

Locating the Caribbean within and against discourses of European Enlightenment modernity, I seek to articulate a cosmopolitical ethics of reading and interpretation that troubles contemporary articulations of cosmopolitanism that position it as fundamentally opposed to discourses of multiculturalism and a multicultural.<sup>223</sup>

Both authors explore the complexity of current art historical methods’ global thrive. They point to the ways these methodologies have fed racist and othering discourse but also show how scholarship can also grow and benefit from such globalizing goals when the approach is done correctly.

In the case of El Museo del Barrio, the use of the label is justified by the aforementioned arguments that it allows identity, which is present everywhere, to claim space, and through this assertion unity can be created while still being global. All these arguments can be encompassed in one overall reason that ties this institution to its labeling

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<sup>221</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” in *October* 16 (1981),39-68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778374>.

<sup>222</sup> Buchloh. “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting.” 64.

<sup>223</sup> Walcott, 186.

practice. Clear labels alluding to where an artist was born and where they are based help develop the construction of a larger spectrum of identities within the same identity.

The use of labels comes in response to the struggles artists endured between the 1960s and 1970s. Although focusing on Borinquén, Melissa M. Ramos argued in the “Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium” that during those years, the “Puerto Rican school was defined as dealing with Puerto Rican issues through figurative art.”<sup>224</sup> This meant that any aesthetic different from figurative art was not approached as it being Boricua art. A judgment that mainly touched the community’s vanguard artists. To emphasize her argument, she quotes Carlos Irizarry and Domingo Lopez de Victoria, both Boricua vanguard painters interviewed by Ernesto Jaime Ruiz de la Mata. The first artist explained: “We were highly criticized, though, by the general public and some artists, for doing art that was not ‘Puerto Rican,’”<sup>225</sup> and the second further highlighted: “We are being labeled non-Puerto Ricans because of our non-figurative art, shaped canvases, hard edge painting style and constructions.”<sup>226</sup> Both artists cited by Borges demonstrate that when the museum was created, there was a restricted idea of what was Boricua and Nuyorican art. Furthermore, this idea came to be a stereotype for the art produced by this community, even when it did not fully represent the extent of their artistic practices. As the art historian eloquently puts it, it is “Preposterous to assume that working with a certain aesthetic, language, makes you less or more Puerto Rican.”<sup>227</sup> She later defended how avant-garde was, in a sense, considered national alienation, as Boricua’s experience was reduced to that of coloniality, and no other reading was allowed.

This phenomenon perfectly exemplifies what English, Walcott, Enwenzor, and Buchloh were pointing toward; how stereotypes dominate a reading; not allowing an artist to still keep their identity while exploring other aesthetics and subjects. Borges later cites art history professor Miriam Basilio when she claims that “in the field of art history, an equation is often made between Puerto Rican art and issues of ‘identity’ assuming that this should be the primary, if not the defining trait of art produced by Puerto Rican artists.”<sup>228</sup> Furthermore, the critique of those years goes as far as indicating the dismissal of the Boricua diaspora,

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<sup>224</sup> Melissa M. Ramos Borges, “Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium,” *EL Museo del Barrio*, 2:10:00.

<sup>225</sup> Ramos Borges, “Identity Reimagined,” 2:10:00.

<sup>226</sup> Ramos Borges, 2:10:00.

<sup>227</sup> Ramos Borges, 2:16:00.

<sup>228</sup> Ramos Borges, 2:16:00.



given that the “only valid Puerto Rican experience was that of those living in the archipelago, and those that produced artworks pointing out its social problems.”<sup>229</sup> The label of Boricua art was reduced to ready-made expectations, very much informed by stereotypes. Borges explained that the artistic scene for these artists during those years was reduced to a figurative representation of their identity through a critique of colonialism. Although this subject became the stereotype associated to Boricua art for a reason, as many artists did explore this criticism as part of their activist practices, it becomes a reduction of an entire community to this visual and aesthetic category and overlooks the possibility of different practices. This is something that white-Western-Euromerican artists have not encountered since the coexistence of multiple artistic movements is studied and emphasized in the field of art history (notably that of Dada, Surrealism, and Bauhaus, among others). Still, as exemplified by Ramos, this was denied for artistic movements not belonging to the western-Euroamerican canon.

The shift towards representing vanguard artistic practices was mostly done after the millennial, with the exhibitions such as “Arte ≠ Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas.”<sup>230</sup> Nevertheless, one could argue that collaborations and exhibitions with organizations like En Foco and Taller Boricua became the ways the museum started to progressively change the narrative of the time. By creating an institution informed by the label, open to collaborating with contemporary artists, and by an artist who himself did not adhere to this aesthetic stereotype, El Museo del Barrio started developing the spectrum for artistic representations for Boricua and Nuyorican artists. Overall, it provided a visual range of the different ways this community could look like. Visitors belonging to the community could feel identified with what they were seeing on the walls, and others could see the different ways an identity can be represented as. Their response to stereotypes being projected on to Boricua artists was not to take away the label, but through it teach and expose the identity’s complexity that goes beyond the expected stereotyped representation.

The museum’s initial goal remains, now with a broader scope as exhibitions and the overall collection held by the museum focus on more than just Boricua and Nuyorican artists. Its mission statement, while making Borinquén stand out; now also brings focus to Latin

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<sup>229</sup> Ramos Borges, 2:17:00.

<sup>230</sup> “Arte ≠ Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas,” El Museo del Barrio, January 30<sup>th</sup> to June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008, curated by Deborah Cullen.

American and Caribbean artistic production, particularly those residing in the US Exhibitions such as “Estamos Bien—La Trienal 20/21”<sup>231</sup> and the recently opened “Something Beautiful: Reframing la Colección,”<sup>232</sup> both exemplify how the museum remains an institution placing the spotlight on a diasporic community and on educating the wider audience as well as the community on how Latinx identity can look like. Therefore, demonstrating the capacities an identity and national label can have in today’s contemporary context.

I bring the first exhibition into this discussion because it was “the museum’s first national large-scale survey of Latinx contemporary art featuring more than 40 artists from across the United States and Puerto Rico.”<sup>233</sup> The exhibition was initially meant to open during the fall of 2020. However, due to the pandemic, it had to be postponed, which also explains the title of the show, meaning “We are okay.” They further explain that

the works in the exhibition address issues of race and identity politics, gentrification and displacement, climate change, as well as the particular effects of the global pandemic on Latinx and other BIPOC populations.<sup>234</sup>

The show created a survey of the different narratives found within the Latinx community in the U.S. as well as that of artists in Borinquén. The label presented by the museum through their exhibitions and labeling practices remain working for the same goal: the spread of education and agency for the Latinx communities in the U.S. and the Caribbean.

The second exhibition is even more fitting for this context as it speaks to the collecting practices of the institution itself, and proposes a new way of examining the artists and artworks they hold. The museum explains that “the exhibition will present approximately 500 artworks, including new acquisitions and artist commissions, through rotating displays over the course of one year.”<sup>235</sup> They further enumerate the exhibition’s different sections, demonstrating a transhistorical approach and showing the wide range of topics and geographies the exhibition brings focus to. Such sections are:

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<sup>231</sup> “Estamos Bien—La Trienal 20/21,” El Museo del Barrio, March 13th to September 26, 2021, curated by Rodrigo Moura, Susanna V. Temkin, and Elia Alba.

<sup>232</sup> “Something Beautiful: Reframing la Colección,” El Museo del Barrio, May 19th, 2023, to March 10th, 2024, curated by Rodrigo Moura, Susanna V. Temkin, and Lee Sessions.

<sup>233</sup> El Museo del Barrio, “Estamos Bien,” <https://www.elmuseo.org/exhibition/estamos-bien-la-trienal-20-21/>, accessed May 20th, 2023.

<sup>234</sup> “Estamos Bien.”

<sup>235</sup> El Museo del Barrio, “Something Beautiful: reframing la Colección,” <https://www.elmuseo.org/exhibition/something-beautiful-reframing-la-coleccion/> accessed May 20th, 2023.

**Ocama Aracoel:** Taíno spirits and forms and their influence on the Nuyorican art movement; **Cosmic Visions:** Indigenous and non-indigenous artists evoking Amerindian languages, landscapes, and other cultural references; **First Impressions:** Focusing on early acquisitions and the graphic portfolio in Puerto Rican printmaking; **El Barrio:** Different facets of life in East Harlem and other Barrios in New York, especially around the stoop, the sidewalk, and the bodega; **The Street Transforms:** Artists' and activists' interventions in public space; **Pathos, Hope, Glory:** Transhistorical portraits and self portraits of artists reflecting the diversity of the Latinx experience; **Clothed/Unclothed:** Artworks that explore, exaggerate, and deconstruct what it means to be male, female, neither, or both; and **Abstraccionistas:** The protagonism of women in abstract art, matrilinear traditions, opticalities and the framing of reality through abstraction.<sup>236</sup>

They additionally include rotating artist spotlights, varying from being born or residing in New York and Borinquén. Interestingly, the ethnological or anthropological content here is presented through the question of how these representations are rendered symbols of identity, given that what is studied is the way these were seen in the Nuyorican art movement. Therefore, focusing on only the labeling practice of this exhibition is not enough. Not only is this practice easily demonstrated as the website provides this information—explicitly stating the artist's cultural background—but also because the overall exhibition is all about the different ways Boricua and Latinx diasporic identity can be seen represented in artistic practices.

On the occasion of announcing the reframing of the permanent collection, an online symposium was held hosted by the curators, and authors of this exhibition, Rodrigo Moura, chief curator; Susanna V. Temkin, curator; and Lee Sessions, permanent Collection Associate Curator. The symposium gathered many scholars and experts on the artistic representations of Boricua artists from the Caribbean Islands and its diaspora, whose presentations have been cited throughout the chapter. At the start of these discussions, Rodrigo Moura explains that the goal of this exhibition was to create “a renewed curatorial interest in reevaluating the collection,” which would open a “new path of a new generation of museum-goers.”<sup>237</sup> This

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<sup>236</sup>El Museo del Barrio, “Something Beautiful: reframing la Colección.”

<sup>237</sup> Rodrigo Moura, “Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium,” *EL Museo del Barrio*, 1:50-2:00 min

entails serving the museum to create or reaffirm its identity as an institution which explains the title of the symposium “Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium.”

Moura further elaborates that this *rebranding* comes in “a moment when institutions around the world reconsider collecting practices in light of colonial ties.” He continues saying that:

It comes as no surprise to notice El Museo del Barrio’s pioneering role as an institution deeply rooted in Community, artistic vision and anti-colonization anti-racist values, with these thoughts in mind, we have embarked in a new exciting and thought-provoking recategorization of our holdings seeking to advance scholarship in the field Puerto Rican, Latinx, Caribbean, and Latin American art in U.S.<sup>238</sup>

The action taken by the museum, is in a way relaunching the same goals and mission statement once done in 1969. To do so, curators brought new artists working with topics relevant to more recent and contemporary discussions, while at the same time retracing the history of the museum as a way to highlight the role played by the institution in the past.

One interpretation of this exhibition is the institution’s reimagination and reframing while still holding its original identity. The institution’s scope is the same, and it is presented as such by exhibiting artists and topics from Borinquén, Latin America, and their diasporas in the US, as well as having the title of this exhibition clearly being a result of *Spanglish*. Furthermore, discussions that had not been part of the museum in the past, such as the Latinx and queer community, which are products of our contemporary society, and have been part of the narrative presented by the museum in more recent years, are now part of the rebranding of El Museo del Barrio.

El Museo del Barrio is an excellent example of how an institution was created from a label and how this one continues to be the basis for the arguments presented through the museum’s different exhibitions. Not only did the label bring visibility to an overlooked community, but it also encouraged the study of this one to uncover the spectrum of artistic practices explored and authored by Boricuas and Nuyoricans. The enlarging of the scope, and thus the museum’s label, to also focus on Latinx and Latin Americans in the U.S. speaks to

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<sup>238</sup> Rodrigo Moura, “Identity Reimagined: Reframing la Colección Symposium,” *EL Museo del Barrio*, 2:30 min

the diversity of this community in the U.S., specifically in New York. It also presents an argument alluding to a similar history, a sort of unity or comradery with the different Latinx diaspora and heritage. By enlarging the scope, and speaking about Equatorian, Argentinean, Colombian or Chilean culture, a museum that was originally meant to explore Boricua and Nuyorican culture, shows that there is an overarching argument that unites these different cultures and geographies under a similar scope.

## Chapter 3

### The Contextual Label

Thus far, I have explored the different sides of the question of labeling diasporic contemporary artists with their nationality in museums' exhibition spaces. The complexity of this issue, I suggest, demands a new approach, as neither the first nor second chapter's arguments allow a complete answer to the question.

In this section, I turn to a more practice-based analysis in order to formulate recommendations for museums. This chapter explores a new solution to the opposing dual responses from institutions explored up to now, that of a contextual label. To do so, I bring the reader back to the Netherlands, more specifically to the Wereld Museum. This organization has different museums, in different locations, each with a distinct exhibition approach and scope. Due to the collection's and the institutions' colonial histories, the organization often has to deal with the public's contestation.

To illustrate this argument, I first turn to the works by Jocelyn Gardner presented at the Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam, in the "Hair Power"<sup>239</sup> exhibition (figure 16) and the "Our Colonial Inheritance"<sup>240</sup> exhibition in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (figure 17). Both these museums showcase works from the same series by Gardner, *Creole Portraits III: "bringing down the flowers..."*, created between 2009-2011. These lithographs depict the back of a head with Afro-centric braided hair ending in iron slave collars that the artist explains were used as items of torture for women who had performed abortions.<sup>241</sup> From the collar, flowers taken from the book *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* by Maria Sybilla Merian,<sup>242</sup> a naturalist from the 18th century, grow downward. The naturalist explains in her book that seeds from these flowers were used by enslaved women to perform their abortions "as an act of political resistance against their exploitation as 'breeders' of new slaves and to protest the inhumanity of slavery."<sup>243</sup> Before turning to the way this artist is exhibited in

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<sup>239</sup> "Hair Power," Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, 2022-2023.

<sup>240</sup> "Our Colonial Inheritance," Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

<sup>241</sup> Jocelyn Gardner, "Printmaking/Creole Portraits III," in *Jocelyn Gardner*, <https://www.joscelyngardner.org/creole-portraits-iii> accessed April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>242</sup> Maria Sibylla Merian, *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, Amsterdam, 1705.

<sup>243</sup> Jocelyn Gardner, "Printmaking/Creole Portraits III."

these two different contexts, it is essential to mention that Gardner is a Barbadian artist who now resides in Canada. She clarifies in her biography and artist statement that she is white Creole and recognizes herself as an “‘implicated subject’ in relation to West Indian plantation slavery, owing to her (white Creole) family history in Barbados that dates from the 17th century.”<sup>244</sup>



Figure 16: Joscelyn Gardner, *Poinciana pulcherina*, in exhibition “Hair Power,” 2022-2023, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. Wereld Culturen collection, TM-6496-11.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Joscelyn Gardner, “Statement,” <https://www.joscelyngardner.org/creole-portraits-iii>, accessed April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>245</sup> “Creole Portraits III: ‘bringing down the flowers...’,” Joscelyn Gardner, <https://www.joscelyngardner.org/creole-portraits-iii>, accessed April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



Figure 17: Joscelyn Gardner, *Trichilia trifoliata*, *Manihot flabellifolia*, *Coffea arabica*, in exhibition “Our Colonial Inheritance exhibition,”<sup>246</sup> 2022-2029, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Wereld Culturen Collection, TM-6496-10, TM-6496-5, TM-6496-1.<sup>247</sup>

As aforementioned, the “Hair Power”<sup>248</sup> exhibition at the Wereldmuseum explores different interpretations and usage of hair in our bodies and heads by cultures and people from around the world. Particularly when it comes to the contemporary artworks shown in the exhibition, the focus is on the manifestation of hair power in today’s society and how that is translated into recent political and social struggles. Instead of approaching hair from an ethnic perspective, as it is done for the objects in the exhibition, contemporary artists come to stand for more activist purposes, allowing the exhibition to touch on struggles minorities face today. Such is the case of how Yelaine Rodriguez or Abhinav Anguria, with his portrait of artist Alok Vaid-Menon, are presented in the exhibition. The text accompanying Joscelyn Gardner’s work characterizes her as Caribbean-Canadian, yet, the factual entry only states “Canada; 2009-2011,”<sup>249</sup> thus pointing to where the artist resides. Furthermore, it does not allude to her white Creole background or mention her description of herself as an “implicated subject.”

<sup>246</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

<sup>247</sup> “Creole Portraits III: ‘bringing down the flowers...’,” Joscelyn Gardner.

<sup>248</sup> “Hair Power,” Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, 2022-2023.

<sup>249</sup> *Poinciana pulcherrina*, wall label at Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, seen on January 6th, 2023.



The exhibition “Our Colonial Inheritance”<sup>250</sup> aims to show how colonialism has impacted contemporary society, bringing a particular focus to the Netherlands and its former colonies.<sup>251</sup> It further explores the ways people faced and continue to endure colonialism and its offsprings, racism, and classism.<sup>252</sup> Though the explanatory text next to Gardner’s works only mentions the artist in regards to her usage of Maria Sybilla Merian’s book, the factual label describes her as “Caribbean; Barbados; 2009-2011.”<sup>253</sup> This opposes the way the artist is presented at the Wereldmuseum since there is no mention of her residence or Canadian nationality. Likewise, the artist’s white Creole background or her description as an implicated subject does not figure in this contextualizing text either.

This comparison points towards two things: first, the way an artist describes themselves does not necessarily mean that the museum in which they are exhibited will also describe them as such. Second, the exhibition or space in which an artist may be shown presents distinct arguments. Meaning that the information with which an artist is described will change to fit the exhibition’s argument. These museums present Gardner in two very distinct ways. One exhibition describes her as Caribbean-Canadian, first generalizing her Barbadian identity by only stating her region. Second, from a critical point of view, stating her place of residence could be interpreted as mentioning her privilege of living in a Western country, which is overlooked by the other exhibition by only mentioning her Barbadian background. By solely studying the artist through the way both institutions represent her, the reading of the works and the artist’s general practice is entirely different. In one museum, she is part of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada; in the other, she is still a Barbadian artist.

The different descriptions can be explained by the distinct exhibitions in which the artist is presented. Nevertheless, an overarching approach to the works is common in both exhibitions: the violence towards enslaved women during colonization; demonstrating an unclear but, more importantly, inconsistent labeling practice by an organization. In this case, the inconsistency is seen through two different museums within the same organization. During my research, I saw this same inconsistency within the same museum, where the types of labels would differ throughout the different rooms the exhibition occupied. Still, this

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<sup>250</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

<sup>251</sup> Gardner, “Statement.”

<sup>252</sup> Tropenmuseum, “Now on Display, Our Colonial Inheritance,” in *Tropenmuseum*, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/our-colonial-inheritance#>

<sup>253</sup> *Creole Portrait III: Bringing down the flowers...*, wall label Tropenmuseum, seen on November 29th, 2022.

conclusion becomes particularly poignant with Garnder as both institutions present entirely different readings of the artist's practice. More importantly, this comparison shows that how an artist is read can depend on the context in which they are exhibited. Therefore, the label created for the artist does not have to adhere to either of the two overall arguments explored in the previous chapters; it can instead depend on the context in which their work is presented.

I first iterated this idea during the conversation I hosted at the Research Center for Material Culture.<sup>254</sup> Even if there were strong opinions and for some quite settled, the idea of a contextual label lingered easily. In particular, Wendeline Flores, curator of the Caribbean and Suriname, proved this proposition to be accurate as she held the question throughout the discussion of whether we, as a museum/exhibition, are labeling the art or the artist.<sup>255</sup> Dr. Alison Boyd responded to this argument with surprise as though she agreed, she had not considered separating the two given her art historical background.<sup>256</sup> Boyd explained that her approach to labels was more about how the artist as an individual represents their own perspective through the work. Posing this question is crucial for understanding how labels are created, as it shifts the focus from the artwork to the overall exhibition and allows further questioning regarding why an artwork or object is placed in that space: is it for the artist who created the work, or for what the piece represents. While it is a question that at first hand would be more pertinent for an art museum, as the focus has historically been on artists and artworks, the fact that a curator from an ethnographic museum poses this question validates even more the relevance of the debate questioning how to properly label contemporary artworks and artists. This demonstrates ethnographic museum's interest in exploring artistic practices for their cultural representation and the artist as an individual becoming a spokesperson for contemporary society, as seen with Yelaine Rodriguez in the "Hair Power"<sup>257</sup> exhibition.

Thus far, the practical side of labels has been missing from this thesis' arguments. Questions exploring how these are created and what are curator's struggles when creating these texts have not yet been explored. Though during the presentation I hosted during my

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<sup>254</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> "Hair Power," Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, 2022-2023.

internship, many topics that have already been mentioned throughout this argument were discussed, points and questions coming from the more practical side of this issue arose. One of the first questions coming from Daan van Dartel, popular culture and fashion curator, was that of provenances and the distinction made between national and cultural backgrounds, as well as that of dealing with objects whose makers are not known by the museum. These issues create a significant contrast to that of contemporary artists who are known and whose identity and agency are accorded to them. However, in the case of the Wereld Museum collection, contemporary art works and ethnographic objects are exhibited together, which means that the differential treatment and the different labeling practices are much more noticeable. By the time of this meeting, the curator had been working on the exhibition “Talking Threads,”<sup>258</sup> and explained that she chose many works to be included in the exhibition that the museum had no record of the maker.<sup>259</sup> Her solution was to state that the maker was unknown and use the work’s cultural provenance to replace this information. This sparked the conversation about how to label a work when the artist or maker is unknown. While this is not the central question of this thesis or the presentation, it was interesting to hear about the struggles curators face when dealing with this issue. Wendeline Flores continued the discussion as she had to deal with many objects not having their makers recorded when she curated “Our Colonial Inheritance.”<sup>260</sup> She explained that the issue then was not so much stating where the objects came from but instead how to state that the museum had no interest in knowing who created these when the objects were acquired.<sup>261</sup> To highlight this disinterest, they came up with the sentence “maker not recorded” instead of the typical one, “maker unknown.” Similar suggestions came from van Dartel when she explained that when this was the case in her exhibition, they chose to capitalize the sentence to make clear that someone did the work, and not just an entire culture, but there is no record of this. The visual linguistics of this issue demonstrate that the thought process behind the creation of labels is not minimal and is not so much an automatic action, especially when working around sensitive issues such as unknown makers, colonial depictions, or race in general. Differently to the rest of this thesis, this issue also deals with national or cultural representation as it questions how to render justice to a maker (artist or not) and give them

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<sup>258</sup> “Talking Threads—Embroidery,” Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023, to October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023, curated by Wereld Museum.

<sup>259</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

<sup>260</sup> “Our Colonial Inheritance,” Tropenmuseum, 2022-2029.

<sup>261</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

the necessary agency in their representation. Wendeline Flores stated at the end of her intervention that although stating “maker unknown” seems trivial, it comes from a conscious choice, which relates to my argument that the national cultural information of a contemporary artist’s label should also be a conscious choice.<sup>262</sup>

Throughout the rest of the meeting, the different complexities and practices around the question of labeling a contemporary artist’s nationality were explored, bringing contrasting opinions and concerns. These were part of my intent, as aside from creating a space for provocation between the different attendees, I wanted to spark confusion, to prove that my presentation, and my research, were not going to result in answering the question of whether or not to include national and cultural information on labels. To establish my intentions better, by the end of the presentation, I proposed an exercise; after explaining how Jocelyn Gardner was described differently in the two exhibitions, I presented them with the artist statement and two of her works and asked curators how they would create the contextual label for the exhibition. The response depended on who was arguing; Sarah Johnson argued that if the artist mentioned her national and cultural background in her statement and biography, then it should be no problem that the museum would do the same. Ilaria Obata, suggested making a point about the artist’s white Creole background in the text.<sup>263</sup> However, Both Wendeline Flores and Erna Lilje opposed this suggestion. First, Flores explained that the contextualizing text needs to be as short as 60 words.<sup>264</sup> Elaborating on the artist’s white-Caribbeanness would overextend the text. Then Lilje commented on why Gardner feels the need to mention this as part of her identity, saying that it instead makes it seem as if the artist is apologizing or making a criticism before someone else does.<sup>265</sup> Curators then questioned how much this information would matter when reading her works, opening the way and demonstrating how the presentation of a work depends on the argument the exhibition wants to make.

The content of a label depends on the context in which it is presented. Whether the exhibition focuses on the artist who created the artwork or what the piece represents, whether the artist, the artwork, or both are guided by their national background, among other

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<sup>262</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

<sup>263</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

circumstances, therefore, it is crucial to approach the creation of these texts keeping specific questions in mind, in order for the information to be placed mindfully and, more importantly, for a purpose. The issue classical labeling practices have presented is that, as demonstrated by Daan van Dartel and Sarah Johnson's arguments, the national information displayed by these is often placed without thinking about other ways the visitor could interpret the information within the exhibition space.<sup>266</sup> While this information helps the collection's archive and gives general information about the artwork, there sometimes is no direct connection or relation to the space in which the artwork is placed. I argue that the creation of labels, the information-discerning process upon this creation, needs to have a direct correlation to the exhibition space. This is valid primarily for the factual entry, as the reading problem does not come from the museum (curators, collection managers, archivists, researchers) since they have all the information available to work with the pieces; it instead comes from the visitor.

The visitor comes to the museum to learn, meaning that their reading of the exhibited pieces will depend on the context in which these are shown: the space and the texts. The problem that Darby English and the other scholars mentioned in the first chapter, when arguing against the cultural and ethnic labeling of artists, in a general manner, point to an issue of miscommunication. Like any communication, labels also fit into a communication scheme with a sender, message, and receiver. In this case, the sender is the museum, specifically the curatorial team that works in creating labels and deciding which information and how this information will be placed in the exhibition space. The message is the label and the information this one holds. And the receiver is the visitor who will read and interpret the information on the label. Yet, the reading of these labels by the visitor cannot be controlled, and often the association made by the museum differs from the one made by the visitors. This entails that stereotypes, among other detrimental readings, arise.

The push against labeling or being labeled is due to the text's capacity to be read differently than how it was intended, something that Stuart Hall, in a different context (that of broadcast television), has come to show. Though the action of reading labels is a communicative one, the communication scheme in this case is more complicated because the code used by the sender to read the message is not always be the same as the one used by the

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

receiver, which creates a miscommunication.<sup>267</sup> It has been assumed that there is no need to approach a museum label differently than approaching any other text. However, Western museums' context is highly focused on the global; explorations of other cultures and unfamiliar narratives are often the main focus. The interpretation of these cultures by an outsider cannot be controlled, meaning that the second reading of nationality is not the same depending on who is doing the action because the code through which this word is read does not have the same connotation for everyone. This entails that the interpretation of a work is not universal because the coding used to do so will never be. These nationalities and ethnic backgrounds should be presented as icons, meaning signs that can be understood the same way universally. Yet, because of the differential coding used when reading this information, these are conveyed as symbols that allow for different understandings of the word.

Considering this issue, the practice I propose can help counter the miscommunication effect when reading the information in the exhibition space. The contextual label presents the possibility of labeling an artist or an artwork differently depending on the exhibition and its argument. After the questions, concerns, and confusions that arose during my presentation with curators and researchers, I realized how easy it can be to argue for each side of this, so-far, dual solution problem. Therefore, from the different thoughts and concerns explored in the previous two chapters and this presentation, I here propose a series of questions formatted in a flowchart to aid uncovering the logic behind whether an artist needs to be labeled with their nationality or not, and if so, how to render justice to this textual ethnical representation correctly. These questions all aim to answer if the information needs to be placed in the factual label. It is additionally not solely responding to the question regarding diasporic artists as this labeling approach can be applied to any.

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<sup>267</sup> Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," CCCS selected working papers, Vol. 2 / edited by Ann Gray et al., (Abingdon: University of Birmingham, 2007).

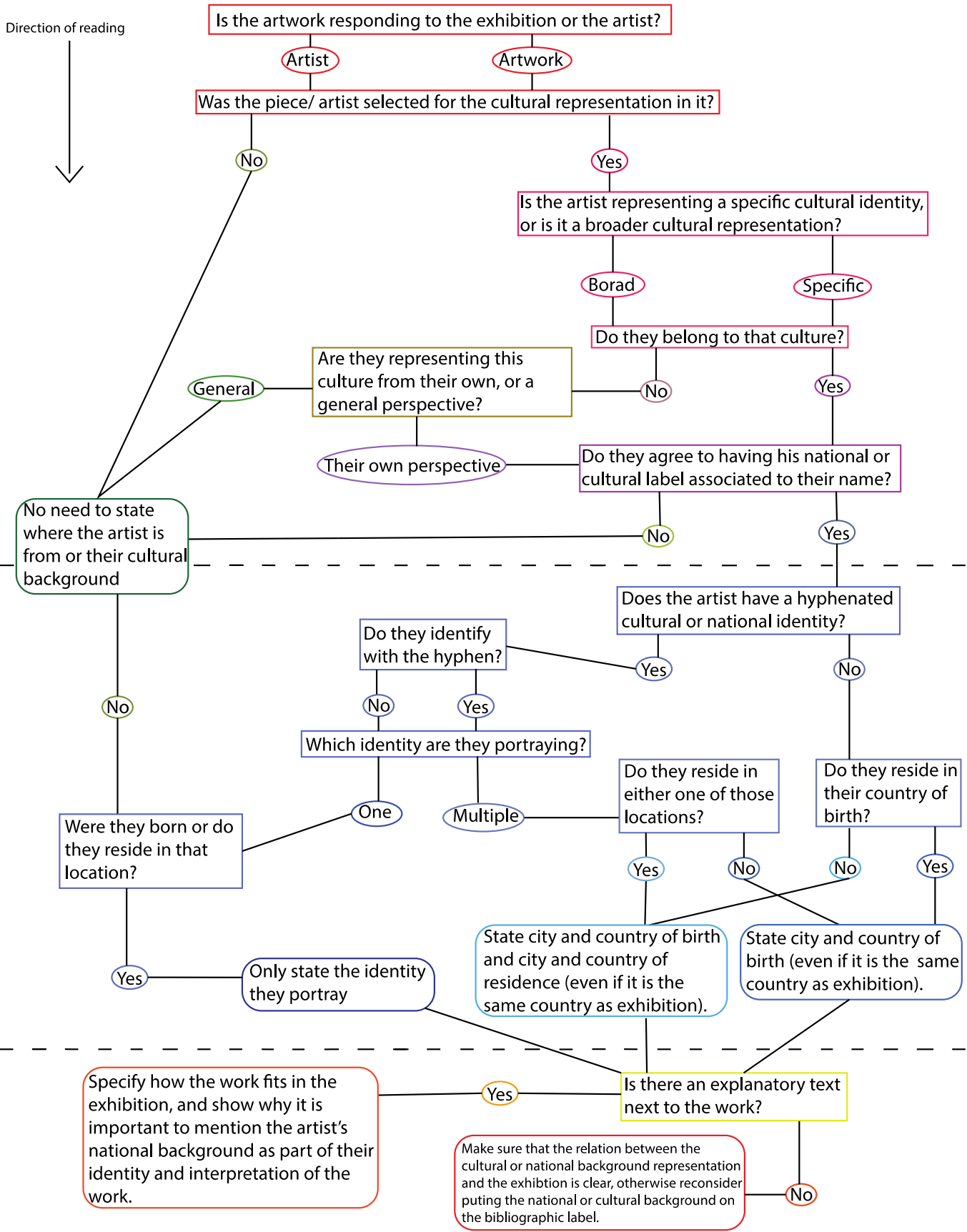


Figure 18: *How to create a contextual label?* Mind-map created by author, 2023.

This chart is here presented as a guide. It helps think about why a work of art might be shown as part of a question or topic explored in a museum. It is conceived as a tool for curators when creating a label for a contemporary artist in an exhibition, no matter the argument or approach. To create a clearer explanation of this chart, I will use Raphael Montañez Ortiz's work *Archeological Find #22: The Aftermath*, created in 1961, (figure 19). This work, often seen hung in a closed exhibition space, presents a destroyed couch by the artist. Springs and foam ooze from the furniture, and the leather and the wooden structure are completely destroyed.



Figure 19: *Archeological Find #22: The Aftermath*, destroyed sofa (wood, cotton, wire, vegetable fiber and glue) on wood backing, Collection of Museo del Barrio, New York.<sup>268</sup>

The chart is divided into three parts (shown by the stroked divisions), each presenting the reasoning and the different steps to create a label. The first section starts by asking if the work was chosen because either the artist or the artwork respond specifically to the exhibition's theme. This is a great opening question because it helps guide the reasoning toward interpreting the work in the space in which it is shown. In this starting point, the question is not directed toward what the artwork represents but more toward the exhibition's scope. The following questions shifts the focus to the artwork's relationality with the space in which it is shown by asking whether the artist or the work, depending on the previous

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<sup>268</sup> Mariana Fernández, "Raphael Montañez Ortiz's Destructivist Proposition," in *Frieze*, <https://www.frieze.com/article/raphael-montanez-ortiz-deconstructivism-manifesto-2022-review>, accessed June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



answer, were chosen for their cultural or national representation or not. Still, in a general manner, bringing attention to the discursive space in which the work is shown, these questions help think through the selection process of the artwork and allow the creation of a clear framework that later on the label will portray. If *Archeological Find #22* was chosen for the object, and the exhibition's scope is to uncover the destructionist movement of the 1960s in the US, then there would be no need to have this artist's national or cultural identity in the label. However, if the work was chosen for the artist, and his and the work's cultural connotation or representation, then the next question needs to inquire about the perspective from which this representation is shown, if it is broad or specific. My understanding of "specific representation" is if the cultural representation is of a particular culture, its customs, and traditions. Though this can apply to many different kinds of cultural perspectives (the representation of a nation or an indigenous community) this question helps think about what the visitor sees in the work. By "broad representation," I mean to point to artistic productions that are not necessarily aiming at accurately representing a culture. These broader cultural representations might inform the creation of the work, but other readings and approaches are more important. In the case of Montañez Ortiz, I could argue that his perspective is broader, as while he is speaking from his indigenous ancestry, there are no specific allusions to an indigenous community in the work. The connection to this ancestry is rather in the concept of the work. If Montañez Ortiz was depicting a broader cultural representation that he did not belong to and was to be doing it from a general perspective, the label should not state his cultural background. The last question asked by this first part is whether or not the artist agrees to be represented through this identity. If the answer is no, this information should not figure in the label. Although one could argue that this should be the first question asked in the chart, the questions I proposed before allow a more explicit framework and positioning of the artwork or the artist in the exhibition space.

The first part of the scheme solves the question of whether or not cultural information should be stated in association with the work, the second part of the chart explores how this information can be stated. The first question brings attention to artists having hyphenated identities. If they do, it is essential to ask whether the artist identifies with the hyphen. If they do not, or if they do, but their work only represents one side of their identity, they should be allowed to be represented only through that side. In the case of Montañez Ortiz, he did identify with the hyphen, and a clear argument for that would be the creation of El Museo del Barrio. In his case, given that his family was the one that emigrated to the US, he is already a

second-generation diaspora. This question can put him in a more uncomfortable position contrasting that of first-generation artists. For example, Jocelyn Gardner was born and lived part of her life in Barbados. Yet it could be contested that by not mentioning her residence in Canada, her privilege of living there is not stated, thus, displaying this information also excludes her from where she comes from. Erna Lilje pointed to this issue when she stated that some artists refuse the hyphen because they want to be seen and included in a narrative of belonging to their roots.<sup>269</sup> Nonetheless, Montañez Ortiz does identify with the hyphen, and depending on the exhibition, his work could portray either both identities or only one. If the exhibition were to be about him or Boricua artistic representations, then his work could be argued only to be representing his Boricua identity, and since he was not born in Borinquén, and stating that he was born in the US is not necessary, there would be no need to mention national information on the label; however, if there is an explanatory text this information should be explored. If the exhibition is about the destructionist movement in the US, the label should mention where the artist was born. Finally, if the exhibition is about Nuyorican artistic expressions, the label should state his city and country of birth and the city and country of residence.

In any of these situations, if there is an explanatory text, this one needs to specify how the piece and the cultural representation fit into the exhibition's overall argument. If there is no explanatory text, even if this information can remain on the label, I argue that it is critical to use this situation to reconsider the type of label chosen to avoid framing the work in one representational space with no context.

Although it seems to overly complicate a task that has been following the same system for decades, it shows the complexity of cultural and national representation in the context of Western museums. The history of othering and allowing stereotypes to inform readings of artworks has long been detrimental for artists who do not belong to the Western canon. Still, removing all identity labels takes away the artist's agency; instead of helping solve the issue of the differentiation between "the west and the rest," it covers up a history of systemic racism that remains unsolved. My proposition of a contextual label can satisfy both existing arguments for this problem as it helps curators consider if the cultural or national information is necessary while at the same time showing them in which context this

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<sup>269</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

information can help the reading and understanding of a piece. This scheme additionally shows the complexities of uncovering how to label a diasporic identity, as the treatment of this one is not only delicate, but it also is much more dependent on the context in which the piece is shown.

Nevertheless, in this situation, it is still essential to wonder what happens when things are not said. This question applies when the label does not mention where the artist comes from and when there is no explanatory text to contextualize the artwork. As aforementioned, there is no controlling how labels will be read. Thus, asking this question allows a moment of reflection to judge whether or not omitting certain details can be detrimental to the artwork, the artist, or the museum. This question arose during the RCMC meeting when arguing whether or not a label should mention that Jocelyn Gardner describes herself as an implicated subject, given her family history.<sup>270</sup> What happens if this information does not figure in association with the work? Can it still be read the same way? Does it change the interpretation of the work? Although very difficult to answer, the idea behind the diagram is to help discern whether or not the exhibition, the context, or the discursive space in which the work is shown demands this information to be displayed or not. Yet, this mind-map can only do so much, as the issue with labels is only the tip of the iceberg regarding identity representation.

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<sup>270</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) “Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum.”

## Conclusion

This research explored how to approach the practice and creation of labels for pieces exhibited in museums. First, I discussed the reasoning behind the argument against labels mentioning an artist's nationality. I demonstrated how they can present a limit to the reading and interpretation of artworks, partly due to stereotypes taking over the visitor's approach to the exhibited piece once this information is displayed. I further explored the ways the space in which the work is exhibited can influence its interpretation, and how artists' nationalities can be used to create a sociological reading of the work and make the piece more marketable. This section brought to the fore labeling practices adhering to a school of thought in which, instead of mentioning an artist's cultural and national identity on the factual label, this information can figure implicitly weaved in the interpretative text when deemed necessary. Though I shared some of the arguments, given the effect these texts can have on the visitor, this chapter anticipated my disagreement with this labeling practice.

Chapter two explored a different approach to labels. Instead of omitting or only mentioning artists' nationalities in an accompanying contextualizing text, I used the creation and the overall mission of El Museo del Barrio in New York to describe the different arguments for the use of labels. This case study also allowed me to approach this issue from a more complex perspective as it is a museum created for the Boricua diaspora, making their artists harder to label. I demonstrated that creating a museum based on an identity, hence labeling the general exhibition space, supports a community's claim of public and institutional space. With this study case I further suggested that the use and display of differences to create unity gives these universal value, which, creates a clear distinction between the first and second chapters.

Finally, the third chapter proposed a different solution. Informed by the questions and concerns raised during a meeting I hosted as part of my internship at the Research Center for Material Culture, with scholars and curators based in the Netherlands, I explored the creation of what I designate as a "contextual label." This labeling practice establishes that to prevent miscommunication between the visitor and the exhibition or the institution, there must be a clear correlation between the object and the space in which it is shown. More importantly, it

asserts that only if this correlation demands the artist's identity to be displayed, the label should do so. Otherwise, this information can be misunderstood by the visitor. This chapter sustained that there is no set way of creating labels because there is no set way of reading an artwork, especially given that texts have a restricted word limit.

While my primary focus was to answer how to create labels for diasporic artists in Western-Euroamerican museums, this research raised new questions to be explored for further research. First, the question of what museums and visitors expect from labels remains to be scrutinized. The difficulty presented by this inquiry is directed toward the fact that museums and visitors can have very different expectations from a text. These differences stem from their distinct positions in the communication model, one being the sender and the other the receptor.

Because the expectations from labels are unclear, the question of whether or not this format, as in the text next to artworks or objects, also requires a research of its own. This thesis focused on the ways to create a label but did not question the usefulness of this format, a doubt raised by Carine Zaayman during the meeting at the RCMC.<sup>271</sup> I later related this doubt to Dr. Alison Boyd's explanation of the reason why Albert C. Barnes decided to remove labels from the objects displayed in the exhibition of his collection. The scholar explained that this was done so the objects could be read as artworks instead of ethnographic pieces. Although a thought-provoking choice in which aesthetic practices can be highlighted, this exhibition method does not help the exploration or education, aside from that of the pieces' aesthetic value. Hence, it would not work for every exhibition or institution. Through this thesis, I argue that a practice such as Albert C. Barnes' can even be more detrimental for identities to coexist since, even if the difference is displayed, a universal approach to these works cannot be guaranteed as there is no way of informing the visitor on how to read the works. Questioning the proper format is not directed towards the order or the type of information displayed on wall labels but instead on the rectangle-shaped text placed next to an object or an artwork.

Furthermore, the artist's identity was and still is very much topical in museal and academic discourses. This issue was presented during the two symposiums, "The Latin

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<sup>271</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

American Artist and their Identity,”<sup>272</sup> and “Black artists in America,”<sup>273</sup> discussed in the introduction. Stuart Hall, in his writing “Modernity and its Others: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-War History of the Black Diaspora Arts,” aims to find a definition of this word by stating that: “identities are the names *we* give to the different ways *we* are positioned and position *ourselves* with the *narratives* of the *past*” (emphasis from the author).<sup>274</sup> While this definition may not apply to all usages of the word “identity,” in the context of this thesis, this sentence can reveal several interpretations. The first element emphasized in the sentence is the pronoun “we” and, overall, the self-referring language such as “ourselves.” This first emphasis opposes the conjugation of “positioned,” yet, they demonstrate Hall’s push against a projected identification. It exposes that identities are often concepts born from within as they are a position given to ourselves, often coming from ourselves. Still, the fact that Hall makes the distinction between “positioned” and “position” shows that these can also be given by people from the outside, which is why it is essential to emphasize the frequent usage of “we” or “our” pronouns. I argue that here Hall suggests that even if identities can be projected onto us, there is a genuine agency and authority that allows *us* to decide how *we* identify and push against having an identity projected onto us coming from another. An additional point that I would like to highlight from this sentence is Hall’s emphasis on identities being positioned through the “narratives of the past.” This detail, though self-explanatory, points to identities being historically based, meaning they are created through narratives and events from history, which now inform how people define or identify themselves. From Hall’s quote and looking back at the different views explored in this thesis, I notice that most arguments explored in the first chapter are based on the past, in particular those concerning the projection of stereotypes onto artists and artworks. Yet, the second chapter shows that while emphasizing past explorations of Boricua and Latinx identities, El Museo del Barrio also explores the construction of new identities. The third chapter, creates a balance between the two; it allows us to find ways for both past and present identities to be explored depending on the exhibition space. Hall’s definition of “identity” allows to better understand the positionality of the contextual label within the issues raised by this thesis.

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<sup>272</sup> *El Artista Latinoamericano y su Identidad*, edited by Damian Bayón, Colección Estudios, (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1977).

<sup>273</sup> “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (1969): 245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3258415>.

<sup>274</sup> Stuart Hall, “Modernity and its Others: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-War History of the Black Diaspora Arts,” in *Liberation begins in the Imagination*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2021),

This thesis also raises the question of authorship behind label-making. Though in an exhibition space the colophon mentions the exhibition's creators, it is never clear who writes the labels. It is also never clear if, in an exhibition, a new label was created for it or if an older label was repurposed as the historiography of the text is not often displayed (or available for research purposes on the museum's websites). From a visitor's perspective, the label is associated with the museum's voice; however, after working in the field, I realized that, depending on the institution, different sectors are responsible for creating these texts. Until now, there is still no way for the visitor to know who is deciding and writing the information that guides the reading of the objects in the exhibition space without talking to museum curators directly.

Raising these questions, along with the different issues presented throughout the development of my argument, demonstrates that the question of how we label contemporary artists, with the particular difficulty presented by diasporic artists, only points to a small problem part of a more significant issue. This was something that Erna Lilje elaborated during the discussion by arguing that, in the case of artists pushing against the label, even if they want to seem universal and want to be included in a canon created by Western-Euroamerican countries, in the end, it is a question of positionality, it is, as she characterizes, "a surface-level" issue.<sup>275</sup> The curator pointed out that this problem does not seem critical in the right direction in the sense that it points to a bigger question, and solving labeling practices does not reach the root of the problem.

In my third chapter, I alluded to this more significant problem: the issue with labels is a communicative one, and the same applies to an artwork's reading and interpretation. Human realities, here seen through artistic creations, are not universal because the coding informing these will never be. In particular, if these are done by artists outside the Western-Euroamerican canon. Although, to some, art can be considered a universal language, when approaching a piece focusing on identity representation, a close-to-proper understanding of it can only be achieved when engaging in a detailed study and analysis of its historical and sociological context. An argument that, in this situation, disproves the usage of universalism. Assuming one could understand another culture by reading about its historical context removes its particularities. It presumes that anyone can relate to the work with a certain

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<sup>275</sup> Modest, Flores, Lilje, Obata, Schoutens, Boyd, Johnson, Zaayman and Bois, (2023) "Labeling Ambiguity, the Contemporary Artist in the Ethnographic Museum."

amount of information. Edouard Glissant argued the contrary when he coined the concept of “Opacity”<sup>276</sup> to highlight that there are elements in cultures that are not meant to be understood by everyone. In his essay *For Opacity*, he states that “only by understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth, he would not have generated on his own. That is within the opacity of his time and place.”<sup>277</sup> He additionally claims that even if opacities are not meant to be understood by everyone, these “can coexist and converge like weaving fabrics. To understand these truly, one must focus on the texture of the weave and not the nature of its components.”<sup>278</sup> Approaches to a universalist methodology, in this context, assume that because every culture is different, each having its corresponding assumptions made and projected by others, they all need to be treated the same, meaning not giving any particular explanations for any of these cultures. Yet, what Glissant proposes in this situation is a change of mentality. If one acknowledges that a complete understanding of a culture that is not our own is not possible, and is aware of that impediment, then being specific about an artist’s identity should not be a problem. The nature and nurture each person holds create their own way of encoding a message given that we all have our own opacities.

There is a difference between a universal treatment and a universal reading. The first implies that every artist should be treated the same, and the second demands the same thing when it comes to reading artistic creations. In this thesis, I want to argue for a universal treatment but against a universal reading. While all artists should be treated the same, the reading of their practices should not be because they are each representative of their own backgrounds. Bringing a universal reading has historically brought a shameful implication of being different from the rest, as was exemplified by the symposiums from 1969 and 1975 studied in the introduction, when in reality, these differences are what Glissant refers to as “opacities.” The more prominent issue is a systemic and educational one, in which it is assumed that information is all one needs to be able to understand the *other*. Even so, the problem remains because those who keep being *othered* are still those outside of the Western-Euroamerican canon. Applying opacities in the context of the universal, similar to the argument presented by Césaire in the second chapter, means allowing cultures to coexist in a framework that allows these opacities or particularisms to remain. Universalism can be

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<sup>276</sup> Edouard Glissant, “*For Opacity*,” in *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990).

<sup>277</sup> Glissant, “*For Opacity*.” 194.

<sup>278</sup> Glissant, “*For Opacity*.” 190.



achieved if cultures can exist side-by-side without being stripped from their opacities, as being human is already universal enough. In the context of the label, it is only then that nationalities can be talked about without having to overly justify mentioning these in relation to the exhibition, that would be the ultimate solution for label making practices.

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