

ArtReview



Welcome to Berlin

Renzo Martens

How the Dutch provocateur launched an independent cultural economy with plantation workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo

by J.J. Charlesworth



above The Institute for Human Activities's new conference centre in exile, undisclosed location, DR Congo, 2014

facing page Emery Muhamba working on a self portrait, Institute for Human Activities, DR Congo, 2014



A few years ago, I was talking with some Indian artists, who were active on what could be called the ‘international biennial circuit’. Out of curiosity, I asked them if, since the cost of living and production costs were lower in India than in Europe or America, they expected to get paid less by Western biennials than their Western peers. They looked surprised and affronted by the question, answering – quite rightly – that no, they didn’t.

It’s not surprising that they took the question the wrong way. Who the hell was this white British art critic guy to ask an Indian artist about whether they should accept to work for less than their peers in the wealthier economies? Yet while they were right to expect equality within the economic circuits of the global artworld, the bigger underlying reality of the question – that of global economic disparity and how this intersects with the cultural economy contemporary art now inhabits – can’t simply be wished away. Because wherever they exist in the world, artists (when they start to become successful) are usually part of the class of better-off ‘cultural workers’. And in an artworld that operates across distant economic centres, in which money circulates internationally, contemporary art cannot help but to dramatise the stark differences between wealthy and poor economies, as well as between the fortunes of ‘creative workers’ and those low-paid wage-earners everywhere across the world.

Nowhere are economic inequalities more stark, perhaps, than in Africa, and that old conversation with the Indian artists comes to mind as I listen to the Dutch artist Renzo Martens, describing himself as a ‘slightly overweight, middle-class, middle-aged, European white guy’ to a conference audience in Cardiff in January, held during the Artes Mundi prize exhibition for which Martens had been short-listed. With a strangely shifting mix of missionary-man visionary conviction, TED-talk professionalism and art-critical impassivity, he’s steadily working through the unsettling, snare-like logic of his artistic interventions in the Democratic Republic of Congo: the 2009 film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, and the most recent developments of his five-year project there, the Institute for Human Activities.

The white man missionary, come, this time, not with the message of God, but instead with the creed of capitalist self-improvement

In a nutshell (there are many long essays written on Martens’s film already, most of them worth reading), *Episode III* follows the artist as he travels the towns and backwaters of the DRC, in his mission to encourage poor Congolese plantation workers to ‘exploit’ their own suffering and disadvantage by becoming photojournalists; to become commercial image-makers of their own experience of malnutrition, disease and conflict in their country. After all, concludes Martens, local Congolese photographers can only earn so much by photographing weddings or doing portraits, since their clients are also local. By comparison, the white, Western journalists who profit from selling their images of African poverty back to the wealthy Western media earn a packet. So why not try to get a piece of that action?

On the surface, there is something faintly disturbing about Martens’s bizarre recreation of the white man missionary, come, this time, not with the message of God, but instead with the creed of capitalist self-improvement (not least because Martens somehow resembles a less crazed

version of Klaus Kinski, in his signature roles in *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, 1972, or *Fitzcarraldo*, 1982, Werner Herzog’s epic assaults on European colonial hubris and delusion). It seems wilfully cruel and provocative: but why? Maybe because it forces us to face the uncomfortable question of the balance of economic power that continues to condemn many Africans to a life of subsistence labour and grinding poverty, somehow regardless of the countless millions in aid, and the thousands of aid workers and NGOs that have come to Africa to do ‘good work’. If, on the surface, *Episode III*, seems unsettlingly cruel, it’s perhaps because it makes literal, for the Western viewer, the ambiguous realities of the rich North’s unequal relationship to the poor South, while disrupting the one-sided view we would prefer to maintain of ‘our’ benevolence; we’re on the side of aid and economic assistance, but we tend to avoid the harder questions of the global economy’s abandonment of poor countries, and of the riches that wealthy economies derive from often abject exploitation, often in mining and agriculture. The wealthy world likes to give with one hand, but usually takes with the other.



But while there's a political, perhaps even moral side to Martens's work in addressing such inequality, there is a parallel aspect to it that complicates it, since Martens implicates not simply Western audiences in general, but also the particular audience of Western contemporary art. And within this, he turns a harsh light onto the question of 'critical' art, seeing that art's claim to operate critically on questions of social and political reality tends, paradoxically, to absolve it of a responsibility to examine the grounds from which it operates. Martens has consistently argued that what are deemed to be 'critical' art practices are critical only inasmuch as they bring our attention to their object of criticism, rather than expose their own relationship to their object to critical scrutiny. So in a 2010 interview with *Art Papers*, he observed that 'something that is often missing in contemporary art's documentary practices... [is that] the position of the piece vis à vis what it's depicting is often not included into the equation.'

To deal with this problem means, for Martens, to position himself and his work in an ever-more-explicit articulation of the connections and relationships between art, culture and economics. To which end, in 2012, Martens established the Institute for Human Activities, an organisation-cum-art project whose aim is to highlight the distance between socially minded 'critical' art's object of attention and the site of its reception. As the Institute's mission statement puts it, 'art may expose the need for change in Nigeria or Peru, but in the end it brings opportunity, improved living conditions, and real-estate value to Berlin-Mitte or the Lower East Side.'

Here, Martens's sardonic take on the pretensions of critical art alights on the reality of cultural 'gentrification' – the transformation of post-industrial neighbourhoods in say, New York, London or Berlin, by successive waves of 'creative' people and activities – artists, designers, galleries and so on – in which art and culture is promoted by political interests because, as the IHA suggests, '[politicians and businessmen] know art will make their cities more competitive in the battle for attention, high net-worth individuals, and capital investment.'

To turn this on its head, to expose what Martens refers to as art's 'Terms and Conditions', the IHA set out on its own 'gentrification programme', by establishing itself on a tract of land in a palm oil

plantation formerly owned by Unilever in the DRC, 800km from Kinshasa. In June 2012, Martens's Institute hosted a seminar on gentrification, inviting international curators, activists and theorists to present their ideas to an audience of local plantation workers. (Richard Florida, the go-to theorist of gentrification since his controversial 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, gave a Q&A by video link.) The idea, as with *Episode III*'s take on the global economy of photojournalism, was to drag the economic opportunity of gentrification from its wealthy Western, service-economy centres into the low-wage economy of the Congo – aiming to turn poorly paid plantation workers into potentially better paid cultural workers.

A year later, the Institute was forced off the plantation by its owners, Feronia Inc, the Canada-based palm oil company which had bought the plantation from Unilever in 2009. Undeterred, Martens has re-established the Institute at an undisclosed location, this time buying the land for the Institute's site. And with it, Martens has pushed on with his 'gentrification programme'. At its new location the IHA has begun to deliver its 'critical curriculum', in which local palm oil workers have attended lectures and screenings on contemporary art (a lecture on the history of the white cube by Dutch critic Laurens Otto, screenings of video works by Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari and Dan Graham). Importantly, the Institute hosted the inaugural meeting of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League (CPWAL) and began a sculpture workshop, out of which members of the league have developed and produced sculptural self-portraits.

Which brings us to now. Those sculptures, digitally scanned, transmitted and turned into moulds back in Europe, are now being reproduced, in chocolate supplied by Belgian chocolate producer Barry Callebaut, for sale by the IHA (chocolate that in fact comes from the cocoa plantations for which some of the members of the Art League also work). All the proceeds return to the plantation workers who, as the IHA wryly puts it, are making the transition, 'from lowly paid plantation labor into more lucrative post-Fordist affective labor.'

As Martens points out, currently one of those workers is lucky if they can earn £13 in a month. In Cardiff, the IHA was selling the chocolate sculptures for £39.95, roughly the equivalent of three months' pay.

Jan Willem of the Dutch pastry team
contemplating the work of Mbuku Kipala,
Netherlands, 2014



Martens is preparing for exhibitions of the sculptures and the IHA's activities at Berlin's KOW and at Amsterdam's Galerie Fons Welters, while organising an 'office' which will fundraise for and promote the IHA at Kunst-Werke in Berlin. Martens explains that the goal is to increase sales of the sculptures to a level at which their production becomes self-sustaining, and their producers might finally swap grinding toil for a more comfortable existence ('finishing a day in the studio to relax with a cold beer', as he wistfully puts it), becoming equal participants in the global creative economy. Whether this is a realistic business model is a serious question here, and if it were merely a matter of Martens 'fronting' such a product then the relationship between artists of the CPWAL and Martens, and the unequal distribution of 'cultural capital', would be contentious. In the history of socially engaged artistic practice, divisions between the 'professional' artist and those they seek to engage from outside of the official art system often produce tensions – I'm thinking, for example, of American Tim Rollins and his many years of work with his group K.O.S., whose collective reading of literature results in a studio practice of painting that sells in galleries.

But perhaps Martens's approach most resembles – albeit on a very different footing – that of American Theaster Gates, whose shrewd manipulation of the gallery system and its market feeds directly back into his ambitious and multiple community-based initiatives in his hometown of Chicago. Gates, also shortlisted for Artes Mundi, was the winner of the £40,000 prize, gleefully messing up the formality of the award ceremony by splitting the prize money with his peers. Martens funnelled his share back to the artists of the CPWAL.

Converting cultural capital into non-artworld resources, what Gates and Martens share is a rethinking of the critical approach to the institutions and economics of the artworld. Rather than simply produce a 'critical' art product which will eventually be reabsorbed into the artworld's increasingly accommodating circuits, here the resources generated are redirected into other activities, and visibly so. The IHA's 'critical curriculum' seeks not only to develop its collaborators' understanding of the workings of the contemporary artworld, but conversely, as Martens argues, to open up the artworld to the knowledge and experience – of globalisation,

of precarity, of poverty – of those who would have previously not had a voice within its ambit. Here, the artwork, rather than merely criticise the limitations and complicities of its institutional context from within – as with so much of the art associated with 'institutional critique', from Hans Haacke to Andrea Fraser – reverses the direction of critical art's relationship to its subject, exposing the artworld's privileged site to the workings of the global commodity economy on which the immaterial labour of all 'cultural workers' is based: no lattes without Brazilian coffee growers, no laptops without Chinese assembly-line workers.

Yet what is perhaps most radical about Martens's project is its optimism. Unlike international aid, which expends itself with little to show in terms of raising the living standards of those in the global South, and unlike fairtrade, which prides itself merely in paying a bit more to wage-labourers who nevertheless stay wage-labourers, Martens's position demands far more, namely the transformation of commodity labour into cultural, service-sector, 'immaterial' labour; and not through some slow process of gradual amelioration but through the sudden, stark, short-circuiting of critical art's subject with its object: to turn workers from the objects of Western exploitation or Western pity into the subjects of 'affective labour', and the makers of culture. If many over here, in the Western 'critical' artworld, bemoan the commodification of cultural work in the post-industrial landscape of cognitive capital, maybe they should ask themselves if they would swap their working day for a day pressing palm oil, for £13 a month. No? Then maybe it's time to buy a sculpture by the artists of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League. They're made from cocoa, but the special ingredient, Martens suggests, might be a blend of 'feeling and critical thinking'. And since that's what we, in the artworld are selling to each other anyway, maybe it's time that closed market opened up. **ar**

Renzo Martens / Institute for Human Activities
is on view at KOW, Berlin, 2 May – 25 July, and
Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, 2 May – 6 June.

Renzo Martens: The Matter Of Critique is
at Kunst-Werke, Berlin, 2 May – 7 June

Artes Mundi 6 (installation view,
National Museum Wales, Cardiff), 2014

all images Courtesy Institute for Human Activities