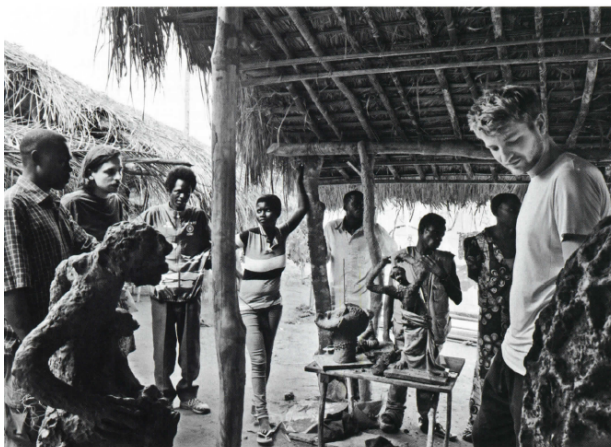


ARTFORUM

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By Claire Bishop





Left: Artists from Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League) meet with Institute for Human Activities staff members Laurens Otto (second from left) and Nicolas Jolly (right), Lusanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo, September 22, 2016. Photo: Leonardo Pongo. Below: OMA, White Cube, Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality, 2017, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rendering.



Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise

SCULPTURECENTER, NEW YORK

Claire Bishop

IT'S A COLD JANUARY AFTERNOON at SculptureCenter in Queens, New York, and a lineup of top-notch intellectuals are arrayed before a small audience. Their task is to make sense of an exhibition of work by the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, or CATPC), brought here by Dutch artist Renzo Martens: twelve chocolate sculptures, a handful of drawings, and an enigmatic forty-one-minute video. No one on the panel can really come to grips with the project. Anthropologist Michael Taussig avoids the issue by discussing preplantation agriculture in Colombia in the 1970s. Photo historian Ariella Azoulay connects the history of imperialist looting to the foundations of modern art. Art historian David Joselit tentatively contextualizes Martens's project as "infrastructural con-

struction" (rather than institutional critique) but doesn't arrive at a definitive critical judgment. Simon Gikandi, a professor of English and African American studies at Princeton University, argues that Martens has managed to entirely rethink art's commodity status. When the time comes for questions, we've been bombarded with so much information that there is mostly silence. My head hurts. Rather than feeling clearer about Martens's project, I feel even more confused.

For better or worse, intellectual paralysis seems to be the dominant response to Martens's collaboration with CATPC and its closely related organization, the Institute for Human Activities (IHA), which has consumed all his energies since 2012. His previous works—the controversial video essays *Episode I*, 2003, and *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2008—fall into recognizable genres of documentary provocation. In the former, the artist goes to war-torn Grozny and asks Chechnyan women whether they find him attractive; in the latter, he encourages Congolese photographers to exploit their poverty as an economic resource by selling distressing images. With CATPC, Martens moves beyond representation to direct intervention. IHA now owns fifty acres of land near the town of Lusanga, which the workers use as a base for their agricultural and artistic activities. This would seem to make IHA the landlord and—given that the institute was cofounded by Martens and fellow artists Jacob Koster and Delphine Hesters, all Caucasian Europeans—the latest in a long line of white exploiters plundering the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Disarmingly, Martens would not disagree with this observation.

Throughout the panel discussion, Martens used the term *reverse gentrification* as shorthand for his much-reiterated point that the money circulating around contemporary art tends to stay in the centers of the global art

market, rather than flowing back to the sites that occasionally form the subject matter of this art. IHA seeks to change that, returning profits to peripheral economies. In this case, the beneficiaries are the farmers of Lusanga, who were previously living at subsistence level, but who now have a second identity as professional artists. Their clay sculptures are 3-D-scanned, sent to Amsterdam, 3-D-printed, and cast in chocolate; the works are then exhibited and sold, with editions running five thousand dollars and up and small portrait heads selling for forty-two dollars. The revenue is put to a variety of purposes, primarily to fund the development of ecologically responsible agroforestry techniques on the former plantation. Importantly, however, Martens intends CATPC to profit not just from the sale of these objects (too basic!) but from the *critique* around these objects—hence this starry lineup at SculptureCenter, the fourth panel in an itinerant series called "The Matter of Critique." Being the focus of attention from eminent critics and academics generates cultural prestige, and thus perhaps funding, although Martens suggests that the workers also benefit from these debates because their labor now produces surplus value.

Martens is working with Rem Koolhaas's blue-chip architecture firm OMA to design a museum and a conference center built on IHA land, and has received funding from numerous cultural organizations and academic partners. Martens claims this is a "repatriation of the white cube" and speaks persuasively of wanting to "reconnect" the gallery and the plantation, because these two institutions have long existed in disavowed symbiosis. The Lady Lever Art Gallery in Liverpool was founded on profits from the sale of palm oil used to make soap; the Tate Gallery in London was established on the riches of the sugarcane trade; the Museum Ludwig in Cologne artwashed revenue from the production of chocolate, also derived from palm



From left: OMA's Conference Center for Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality under construction, Democratic Republic of the Congo, September 23, 2016. Photo: Leonardo Pongo. Thomas Leiba, *Poisonous Miracle*, 2015, chocolate, 54 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 33 1/2". View of "Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise" (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League), 2017. Photo: Kyle Knodell.



oil; the list could go on. The contemporary art world continues to exploit Africa by relying on corporate patrons with interests on the continent—from 2000 to 2012, for instance, Tate Modern's Turbine Hall commissions were funded by Unilever, which continues to hold plantations in the Congo. Artists who make *engagé* videos or photographs practice a more direct form of expropriation.

Martens is the first to acknowledge the paradoxical "inclusivity and violence" of his project, which he frames as an exercise in institutional critique: exposing the art world's contradictions and hypocrisies, its fondness for displaying conscientious art in institutions that benefit from modern-day slavery and other injustices. At the same time, he clearly wants to have a positive impact on the

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area and the lives of CATPC's artist-workers. But can he have it both ways? Can ethically troubling overidentification with neocolonial corporate capitalism productively operate in tandem with ethically reassuring social engagement, or do these two contradictory impulses neutralize each other?

This double-dealing leads to the heart of the confusion around CATPC. While the project certainly unsettles the pieties of liberal art audiences, if you remove Martens's inflammatory rhetoric, the whole endeavor basically functions as a socioeconomic experiment or new type of NGO (albeit one difficult to analyze due to lack of financial transparency). The resulting project has all the usual problems of social practice. In art that is intended to move beyond representation and actually impact a situation, how is efficacy to be measured?

The track record of similar projects is somewhat mixed. IHA invites comparison to other long-term art initiatives that have merged the international art world with rural non-Western locations, such as The Land, an experimental farm outside Chiang Mai founded in 1998 by Thai artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert, or *Supergas*, 1997, a biogas system in Tanzania established and run by the Danish collective Superflex. The biogas project became a sustainable local energy source, but when I visited the Land in 2006, it was somewhat entropic. On an agricultural level it was a failure, while its quirky architectural pavilions (by Philippe Parreno and other members of the relational-aesthetics set, who also captured the site in various videos) were falling into disarray. The more thought-provoking analogy for IHA, however, might be found in the United States, in the practice of Theaster Gates, who sells assemblages, paintings, and ceramics and uses the money to acquire and renovate buildings on Chicago's South Side (which in turn provide more material for his assemblages). Both Martens and Gates have a slippery relationship to gentrification, but Gates creates work with an immediately recognizable aesthetic that permeates all aspects of his project, lending a visual and conceptual consistency to its various dispersed iterations.

At the moment, by contrast, Martens's Janus-faced project suffers from an aesthetic illegibility. The white cube exists in jarring montage with the plantation (whose inventory thus far is 6,650 cacao plants, 801 oil palms, and 944 fruit trees). This disjunction is powerful, but the chocolate sculptures are another issue: Their production performs global economic networks, yet their appearance is primarily figurative, and does not always serve the cross-generational stories about poverty, exploitation, endurance, and resistance they attempt to convey (one, by Cedrick Tamasala, is titled *How My Grandfather Survived*, 2015). How exactly does their iconography relate to aesthetic production locally and in the Congo more broadly,

past and present, and to Martens's cosmopolitan verbal critique of the art world? What does seem clear is that their meaning as stand-alone sculptures is secondary to their role within networks of economic and cultural capital—a situation exacerbated by their display at SculptureCenter, where they were marooned in a cavernous gallery, with three works inexplicably presented in triplicate.

The Congo is, of course, still haunted by its colonial legacy. This history, including the almost unimaginable atrocities that transpired during Belgian rule, weighs heavily on Martens: "I need to do this, not in spite of being a white man, but because I am a white man, because I am fed by the profits of an imperialist world," he commented in a recent interview. It takes skill for a white European to navigate this history in meaningful terms. Martens attempts to do so by harnessing figurative sculpture to a network critique of art-world economics, but the project can't deliver the punch it seeks to pack, because the artist is fundamentally uninterested in objects. At best, his fusion of institutional critique, social practice, alternative economies, and overidentification is a disturbing and challenging proposition. But without aesthetic mediation, the two models of art that Martens's project activates—IHA's institutional critique, which prevails on the contemporary-art circuit, and CATPC's production of objects—become illegible and confusing when displaced into each other's context. If this tension were manifest on an aesthetic level, and if form were used to convey something about the dialectic of representation and intervention, Martens's mission might be far more viscerally transformative, even inspiring—rather than wearily nagging our conscience. □

The OMA-designed White Cube, part of the Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality, Democratic Republic of the Congo, opened to the public on April 21.

CLAIRE BISHOP IS A PROFESSOR IN THE PH.D. PROGRAM IN ART HISTORY AT THE CUNY GRADUATE CENTER, NEW YORK.