

Toward a New Institutional Critique: A Conversation with Renzo Martens

[T.J. Demos, *Atlantica*, 2012](#)

T.J. Demos (TJD): Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty has been quite controversial in that it has inspired anger in some viewers. Why do you think it has done so? In my experience of discussing the film with different people, I've found that there are those who doubt the critical value of the project, or see it as cynical or an act of bad faith, is if it had been made for reasons of opportunism, spectacle, or shock notoriety. How do you respond to such criticism and resistance?

Renzo Martens (RM): I think the film breaks one clear rule: that audiences should be exempt from the pain that half the world's population experiences on a daily basis. We can watch it, but we should not be made part of it. Or if it should happen that a work reveals our part in it anyway, through some economic or political systems that we support or benefit from, then we are exempt from the pain, because it is assumed that, since we are willing to watch the piece, we are contributors to the critical mass that will, one day, undo the harm. This rule therefore paints an inaccurate picture of reality, and of the audience's relationship to it. We either don't see the pain, or we're made to think that we're part of its solution. Episode 3 is so tailored that watching it makes you complicit with its production. Obviously that's not fun, and some viewers think I'm out there to try to trick them. Episode 3 deals with pain, but then doesn't offer the audience a way out. Watching it does not, in one way or another, resolve it. And that's quite a shock to many people.

TJD: How does the film make viewers "complicit with its production"? In my view, the film makes an important connection between, on the one hand, horrific images of suffering and poverty, and on the other, the international financial mechanisms (like the World Bank) and humanitarian organizations (like Doctors without Borders) which reproduce that poverty. The relation cannot help but implicate Western viewers who benefit from this international arrangement. Is that what you mean?

RM: What the film shows is how making this film is in itself a process analogous to making chocolate, coffee, coltan, or gold. The power equation between those who consume and those who supply the raw material in those industries is the same, regardless of what specific product is produced. We see how Congolese photographers are driven to produce the very images of poverty that we see every day in newspapers or on TV. We see at what cost these images are made. And we see many Congolese who are willing to pay this cost. They desperately want to be part of our gaze, of our production processes. They want part of the pie, their pie, really, that is being squandered by others in front of their very eyes. Episode 3 thus reveals at what cost this film is made, and watching it offers no redemption.

TJD: But can't the viewer still see those institutions as beyond their control, and consequently wash their hands of the entire business? If you are not out to try to trick the viewer, then what are you trying to do?

RM: The film is unpleasant, and some people feel tricked, just by its sheer objectivity. So the pain, as I called it earlier, is not something outside of the act of watching, something external to our gaze. The film copies, in itself, existing modes of production, and unfolds them for all of us to see and feel. That's how the film reveals reality, through making its inner policies tangible.

TJD: Of course, to produce a sense of "empathy" with its represented victims is still an important goal for documentary practice. For instance, in her recent New York Times bestselling book, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, the liberal journalist professor and author Susie Linfield writes that without "empathy... the politics of human rights devolve into abstraction, romantic foolishness, and cruelty,"⁽¹⁾ and she finds the ability to foster empathy to be among photography's greatest powers. Obviously Episode 3 departs from this conventional documentary strategy, in part by focusing on the complicity of photographers in the image economy of exploitation and spectacle. How does the film "make you complicit with production" in a way that's different from conventional documentary approaches and their production of empathy?

RM: Maybe the foremost tool is that I stage myself as a complex character, as an average white man, and, while walking around in the Congo, really as an ambassador of a regime. When you see me visit local farmers, I do what the regime does; I offer some small-time help, which really only serves my own purposes. I don't ask for so much, I seem to know exactly what they need. It's devastating; you then see these Congolese photographers, for example, invest in what could be a way out. And the film shows that it all fails. What I tried to make is a document that doesn't explain what exploitation means, but makes one feel what it is. And then, within this setup, certain people turn against the exploiter. Rightly so. It's important to stress that everything I say or do represents the careful reproduction of ruling policies. How do you think that it's possible that millions have no primary healthcare, no schooling, and yet keep investing in earning our sympathy? That certainly isn't the result of receiving a lot of empathy from our side, is it? To employ empathy as a tool to gain access and make images of the devastation that comes out of a lack of empathy may inspire some kind of proximity, but at the same time it covers up so much. In such empathetic images the problem is automatically somewhere else, certainly not in the friendly witness nor, by extension, in the witness's audiences who can look along with him. Empathy produces a total travesty if it doesn't unravel the nature of the outsider's presence. What the world calls for is something else, a deeper empathy I'd say.

TJD: Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the film is the representation of the black body, particularly of the Congolese body that is most vulnerable — the child's. At one point the film shows the death of a sick girl in an ill-equipped medical clinic, and in another scene a Congolese man reveals to the camera the suffering sick body and sore anus of his young sleepless daughter. How can such depictions be justified? Is this a case where even the last remaining dignity of an impoverished and dying human being is taken away by a debasing artistic portrayal? How do you validate or explain on ethical, political, or humanitarian grounds the exposure of a horror whose reality is a catastrophic failure? Is this exposure of bare life — a life stripped of political rights and humanitarian protections — also an unacceptable reproduction of bare life, no matter what your intentions?

RM: The conditions of these children are actually justified all the time. It's called the market, or African corruption, or pre-modern belief systems. Whatever the reason, we thrive on it. I think it's unfair for audiences to want to have it both ways: cheap labor on the one hand, and on the other to be exempt from any confrontation with the results — malnourished and dying children, their parents feeling entirely helpless — on the grounds that the representation of such lives would be immoral. Morality then serves profitability. I doubt, by the way, that the same critics ever write letters to their newspaper photo editors when they show pictures of "Hunger in the Horn of Africa," or whatever other crises are presented. These images are extremely well-known, to the degree that they've become clichés. Now, how can I problematize the fact that children are maltreated, that their starvation is used in discourses that benefit many, but that don't benefit these children? How do I do that if the facts that, yes, they die, and yes, they are black, yes, they are malnourished, yes, their parents are so desperate, and no, no one is showing up to offer help, are all off limits? In order to make viewing less painful, should we forget these facts first? The question really is what we want art to do. Is it to offer little exceptions to the status quo? Can it suffice to show our morals, to undo wrongs or depict them in morally right ways? In my mind, depicting immorality, racism, exploitation, as if they were phenomena outside of our lives, as if they existed only on the other side of our lenses, relieves us, but it also relieves such a depiction of any claim on reality. I think that if art limits itself to the morally acceptable, it conveniently obscures the production processes that pay for our lifestyles.

TJD: I suppose a film like Vik Muniz's *Wasteland*, 2010, is a good example of how art might be made to service the disenfranchised, and thereby offer a "little exception to the status quo"? For the film, the Brazilian artist recreated famous artistic masterpieces out of the trash from a dump near Rio de Janeiro with the help of freelance landfill workers, who then benefited economically from the sales of Muniz's photographs in the London art market. The result is that we as viewers believe that art can make a difference. In this case, are the workers not better off? Is Muniz's project valid if he can help even a small number of people?

RM: Although I've not seen it, it's great these people are able to make a living, all of a sudden, thanks to the art world. That's something to applaud Muniz for. But art really isn't about making a living, is it? It's about the truthful rendition of the real. And there, indeed, it offers a highly visible exception to the status quo, to be consumed not by landfill workers in Brazil, but by people in London who,

themselves, already live the happy exception. In the end, we make these pieces so that beauty can fill our minds, whereas economic segregation, as we all know, is what keeps on paying the bills.

TJD: So when such immorality, racism, and exploitation are shown by an artwork to exist inside our lives, then there's a risk of questioning or doubting art's claim to represent hope, and the exposure of art's illusions can be threatening to people. However, I would count myself among those who nevertheless still believe in the potential of artistic practice to generate a creative imagination and critical selfreflexivity which can contribute to the formation of a better world. Do you disagree with that ambition in general?

RM: Oh no, not at all, I'm all for critical self-reflexivity! And yes, I believe that it will make for a better world. If I tried to do one thing, it was to make a piece that would openly, and in all earnestness, disclose the terms and conditions of its own production. So I'm really standing in a long tradition of artists who have come to terms with the materiality, and even the institutions, through which the artwork is created. I have good hopes that this project will generate knowledge that may reach far beyond the arts. I remember Okwui Enwezor, to whom I owe a lot (my work would surely not have been possible without his Documenta 11), declaring in a public talk in Amsterdam that he was "thrilled by Episode 3's audacity, but was even more affected by its illiteracy." In his mind, Episode 3 misrepresented the agency that Africans have. He was part of a committee that awarded a well-deserved prize, sponsored by the Dutch government and named after a Dutch royal, to a Congolese photographer, Sammy Baloji, for his powerful, socially critical work. Here we were, in a big glass building, celebrating diversity and African agency, all the while overlooking Europe's biggest cocoa port, relentlessly importing cocoa eked out from the poorest people in the world. Yet, according to Mr. Enwezor, Episode 3 was misrepresenting our relationship to Africa? Can we suffice with theological discourses, poetry, and critical interventions, and still believe that we are not implicated in what happens everywhere, all the time? Is bare life something for poor black children alone to deal with, or can we be bothered to be naked in front of it, too?

TJD: In this sense, are you proposing a new form of institutional critique, one that is geopolitical and transnational, and mixed with a performative dimension that demonstrates a general social and economic complicity?

RM: That would be a good way of putting it. I really admire Hans Haacke, and Jean-Luc Godard, and the installations that Dan Graham made in the 1970s. They're all about revealing the position of the viewer, and the author, and art, in relation to the space they inhabit. Even if I see myself in that tradition, I'm not so much interested in my relation to a white-cube gallery space. I think that by now the world and its interrelations is our canvas.

TJ: Speaking of artistic precedents, how do you see your work differing from or resonating with precedents such as the work and writings of Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Susan Sontag, which have criticized documentary practice and its liberalempathic model?

RM: Well, in her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag almost literally pinpointed what I have taken as the task for myself to overcome: "So far as we feel sympathy," Sontag writes, "we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a consideration of how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways that we prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only the initial spark." (2) So maybe, in my films, I'm like one of Rosler's figures who appear in her photo-montage series, *Bringing the War Home*, the ones to whom the war has been brought home. I play out what it is to be the spectator. In Rosler's collages, you see the equation in a picture; in my films, we're made part of it, I play out its reception. I think I did something like what she did then, or what Sontag writes about—that is, I showed what it takes to form one sing unified world.

RM: The film indeed embraces its inconsequentiality. It's quite novel, I think, and not facile or cynical in the least. The piece is a precise seismograph; it quite accurately takes responsibility for the modes of

production the medium is entrenched in. I think of *When Faith Moves Mountains*, by Francis Alÿs, now, as it's a piece that wears its inconsequentiality on its sleeve too, and that's very convincing in a way. But then, I tried something else. I think his piece does not really confront viewers with the cost of that inconsequentiality. Certainly art lovers don't suffer under it, they adore it for its qualities as a vanitas. But if they aren't the ones who pay the price, could it be that those who do pay it are the millions of Peruvians or Filipinos or Ivoirians who want things to progress in reality, not just in an art piece where it beautifully fails? I hope my piece shows this cost of art's inconsequentiality, and, in the same line, the cost of beauty. I think it generates some knowledge about all these other production processes, cocoa or petrol for example, about our relations to power and beauty, about what role we assign to art, about how seriously we want art to inform us, and about what it is that we expect from art. No one ever has asked me for any precise information about these plantations, for instance, about where they are or in what candy bars the labor of these starvelings ends up. What generated anger wasn't the fact that people starve and are drained of their resources. Projecting *Enjoy Poverty* in the night over one such cocoa field in the Congo was a pretty accurate prediction of the results that the film's audiences would reserve for these workers: zero. The piece pre-emptively embraced its reception. That's what angers people: the fact that they see what it is to be part of zero reaction, and that watching this film, which is indeed quite an ordeal, makes them part of that zero, not of a better world. But really, what I show is the price that we pay, and that we ask others to pay, for privilege, for art.

TJD: For an artwork to “pre-emptively embrace its reception” presents certain risks, as viewers don’t normally want to be told in advance what exact outcomes a piece may or may not have. A lot of us are in this for ethical and political reasons, even if our hopes for art’s effectiveness are modest. But, as with the recent uprisings in North Africa, and the Occupy movement that has spread across the world, we do have historical examples where visual culture can make a difference politically and socially, and where art is not without effect. Is it not fatalistic to insist on the ineffectual result of a work, rather than seeing it as a site of open potentiality?

RM: Of course, if I didn’t believe in art’s effect, I definitely would not make a film like this. I think it’s quite useful to construct a test case in which the effects of a piece on reality are measured. And it’s quite useful to find out what happens if the piece, for the sake of the argument, preemptively embraces the fact that it will change nothing. Quite a number of people saw what they had not seen before — neither in Africa, nor in art, nor in themselves.

TJD: Which plantation did you work with? And which candy bars result from the labors you depict?

RM: Ha ha ha! Good question! By now I’ve lived so long with no one ever asking, that I’ve based the necessary next steps on it. You can generate a little exception by asking, but I like to deal with the fact that, up till now, no one has asked. Suffice it to say that it’s a wonderful chocolate of a very high quality.

TJD: Is there a factor of “political enabling” in showing the inconsequentiality of conventional documentary practice? If so, do we need to be taught this lesson? Aren’t the problems and limits of documentary evident enough for us already?

RM: Indeed! There is that factor. It generates knowledge about what our role in this world is. I definitely strive to push beyond this, let’s say, structural analysis of art’s role, and to design more self-conscious ways (more self-conscious than depiction or intervention — with a camera ready to highlight the intervention) for art to deal with the real. For true criticality, and true transgression, and for love, too, one needs some insight into how one functions, before making a claim on any outside phenomena. That’s what I try to do.

TJD: “Love” isn’t an emotion or quality I would immediately associate with *Enjoy Poverty*, and it’s not a term that’s commonly embraced within art discourse. One writer and theorist who does employ the term is Kaja Silverman, who, in her 2010 Artforum interview with George Baker suggests that one “gift of love” is to allow others to “appear” in a way that is “affirmative.” Yet one could say just the opposite occurs in *Enjoy Poverty*. Do you agree with such a definition, and how do you see love more specifically as operating in your work?

RM: I can only hope to recognize love if I feel it, certainly not to define it... but I don't do the opposite of Silverman's definition. I think many of the Congolese in Episode 3 are portrayed as if they are trying — and trying hard — to go along with me for a while. Yet it's equally visible that they have their own thoughts about my proposals and just wait me out. I think that's quite an honest rendering of their attitude towards me, or towards any outsider coming in with some quaint new plan. In fact, if I compare these reactions to the eager beneficiaries depicted in any NGO propaganda, or to thoughtful participants in collaborative art pieces, I actually think that a lot of the critique one may formulate against this film is organized within the film itself. That's why critics actually get to see how the local photographers become disappointed, or how the poor father shows his child to the camera in total desperation. I think all this paints a pretty accurate portrait of the power relations that prevail in this world. I honestly think that it's good that these aspects come out in the open, against my own interest, in a way, because they define so many lives, and yes, I think that this is an act of love, love overcoming vanity, in fact.

TJ: I recently saw the remarkable film *The Vampires of Poverty* by Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, which they shot in 1978, in Cali and Bogotá, Colombia. It's a mock documentary that satirizes artistic practice, in which an unseen camera records the two artists making a film about poverty. They are seen going about their quest to find street kids, prostitutes, insane and homeless people, and at one point they stage a contrived scene of a destitute family —portrayed by actors— in front of a broken-down shanty. The film is internally critical about the filmmakers' own status as "vampires" of poverty, acknowledging that the documentary will be screened only in more developed countries, and as if to preempt criticism they include interventions by bystanders who take the filmmakers to task for exploiting their misery.

RM: If the makers of *The Vampires of Poverty* ironize their presence and agenda constantly, I maybe tried to dig deeper, to the limits of irony, to the point where irony isn't so funny anymore, when it all turns out to be bitterly real. Take Henri Storck and Joris Ivens's 1933 film *Misery in the Borinage*, for example. When it was made, it was a real propagator for action and change. I'm as earnest as they were... It's just that today it doesn't suffice to show suffering the way Storck and Ivens did, because all of these images are very much part of the status quo, and they have become yet one more commodity.

TJD: What can we look forward to in your next project?

RM: More and more I'm starting to wonder, where does this, let's call it "critical interventionist art," have the biggest impact? In its loci of depicted interventions, or in its places of display and reception? I mean, certainly the diggers in Alÿs's piece had more impact at WIELS in Brussels and in art galleries in Chelsea, in terms of economic turnover, than in Peru. And certainly this is true for Episode 3, too. So if art has this power to accumulate capital and opportunity in its places of reception, rather than in its places of intervention, then surely it is of paramount importance to figure out how its power to gentrify can be turned into a critical and progressive tool in the very site of poverty. That's what I'm working on now.

TJD: And will that return you to the Congo?

RM: Well, yes. I know some places where the accumulation of capital and critical awareness about art's mandate in this world are potentially very productive...

(1) Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Adiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xv. On page 129, she cites Hannah Arendt, who called compassion a "co-suffering" which produces a "community of interest with the oppressed and exploited." See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 85. For a critique of empathy in relation to Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty see T.J. Demos, "Poverty Pornography, Humanitarianism, and Neoliberal Globalization: Notes on Some Paradoxes in Contemporary Art," *Stedelijk BureauNewsletter* 121 (April 2011).

(2) Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 102.