

Renzo Martens

# A Recipe for a New Institute.

A while ago my piece *Episode 3* (2009) came out: the registration of an emancipation programme, that tries to help the Congolese embrace their biggest capital. After 90 minutes of film, the programme falls apart. While the artist leaves the region, a neon sculpture beams 'Enjoy Poverty' over Western owned cocoa plantations where people work for five dollars per month - and later into the museums and exhibition spaces where the piece was subsequently shown.

While an average art biennial offers a myriad of forms of resistance, it also gives the impression that, yes, there's trouble, exploitation, and injustice, but in the pieces we see there's always been an artist around who has run a project, revealed injustices and destitution, and, in one way or another, brought poetry and insight to the world.

However clear it is that something needs to be done, the eagerness with which artists and curators align themselves with revolutionary predecessors, becoming champions in tackling global injustices, may obscure more than it reveals.

Thus, we may see pieces that depict picketers, the plight of refugees or scrutinise Shell's dealings in Nigeria, show it in biennials, for global art audiences to see. And that's great. If however, these very pieces that scrutinise Shell seem unaware of the fact that we all collectively fly to the biennials to see these pieces on jets fuelled by the exact same oil companies, then what exactly is the critical value of such a piece? Is it a surprise that art's political claims evaporates as soon as we hit the bar?

Is art a place outside of reality, outside of knowledge production?

In an article in *Artforum* from 2005, Daniel Birnbaum features the alternative model Rirkrit Tiravanija and his colleagues offer by setting

up *The Land* (1998 – ongoing). He describes how a steady stream of critics and curators visit the project and the artworks Tiravanija and his colleagues have set up there.<sup>1</sup>

The embarrassment with which the critic is guided around contributes to the project's authenticity. And surely, it is beautiful: peasant farmers and international artists working together, sitting in meditation together, building the land together, a model for the world. It's about finding, in a helpful and generous way, new means of being together, beyond the creation of images or objects. It is also about, in Tiravanija's words, a way to destroy capitalism.

If we do not look at what art depicts, but at what it does, and what it needs to get things done, then *The Land* shares a feature with many collaborative projects: the gigantic accumulation of prestige, privilege and capital needed to make this experiment in community actually work. If this project is to go beyond the production of a mere image, and propose any alternative to capitalism, then the poor in this world have to chance. No chance.

It seems art is merely a zone from which outside phenomena can be observed, at no cost to its audiences. Or, as Marta Rosler recently wrote, criticality is acceptable as long as it does not implicate the subject position of the viewer too baldly.<sup>2</sup>

In opening up art as a place to engage with global realities Documenta 10 was tremendous. Its importance cannot be stressed enough. Art proved most powerful in revealing the state of the world. However, as in mainstream media, one wonders if the position of the viewer, still half of the equation in the reception of any artwork, was problematised, or if, in this show, if the world was problematic, but the viewer was neutral. Generally in art, whether through "participatory art" or

'revealed and criticised injustices,' highly visible exceptions to the global status quo are created. As if art, and by extension, its audience, exists outside of the circle of exploitation and violence that it critiques.<sup>3</sup> While, economic segregation and war pay the bills, participation and critique fill our minds. Doing this for a global art audience that, in its own right, already lives the beautiful exception, is not critical. It is make-believe. Illusionism. Trompe l'oeil.

An example of a piece that wears this inconsequentiality on its sleeve, and therefore has a real truthfulness about it, may be Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), Still, in this context, It would be interesting to find out whether the piece allows for any insight into who pays the *cost* of that inconsequentiality. Maybe it's the art audiences seeing the piece. And if it's not, them, could it be the millions of miners, factory workers and day labourers in Peru, Cote d'Ivoire or the Philippines who really want economic justice and societal change?

Of course, if art really affected the regimes that rule reality, it would lose its status apart, the place from which it is allowed to produce criticism at all.

But in the meantime, does critical art, as Susan Sontag said about grueling images of suffering, proclaim our innocence as well as our impotence?<sup>4</sup>

Surely the issue is not either that we should refrain from making pieces that reveal Shell's dealings in Africa, or that we, from now on, should walk to art openings. Art can be radical, if for one thing: as it embraces the fact that its claims will evaporate at the bar. In doing so, art may offer insight into why it fails, and why so many of the systems that art comments on, seem to fail, too.

For this is exactly what is not criticised: the structures we maintain to keep art innocent for its viewers are, surprisingly, or not, the ones that keep refugee policies, Shell in Africa, or labour segregation invisible.

As Hito Steyerl recently observed that art, while it routinely packages injustice and destitution, seems to have a blind spot for its own production and display.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in scrutinising its own modes of production, distribution and reception *while representing the outside world* art may generate knowledge far beyond any depiction.

Jean-luc Godard famously explained that we filmmakers don't control our medium very well. The very act of directing the oppressed into a film, even if that film was to speak out against oppression, would replicate the systems of power that oppress in the first place.<sup>6</sup> What he could do, however, was to speak on his own behalf, and make his position of power, privilege and prestige visible and productive. In his television series *France Tour – Détour Deux Enfants* (1977), Godard offers the whole production budget of the film to a terrified 9 year-old boy. The imbalance between Godard, as a director, and those he directs, is far more instructive in understanding France's class society than anything "critical" he could have allowed anyone to say in his film.

As Mondrian, Klein and Fontana cooked up ways for the artwork to bypass its illusionary stage, to transgress the image, art may take its own complicity and make it productive in understanding the world's complicity. This type of self-referentiality may ultimately speak to Edward Said's appeals for accountability<sup>7</sup>. It can generate knowledge on the way exploitation runs through our veins, our literature, our art, rather than denying it with critical gestures here and there.



The photo of the fresco with trompe l'oeil King David playing the harp in Trumpet and Harp, Church of the Augustinian Canons, Rottenbuch, German. Photo: Rolf Gross



Frescoes in the Camera degli Sposi in the "Palazzo Ducale" in Mantua scene: vault fresco detail



Palazzo Pitti, Firenze (but need to doublecheck this)



Fresco with the apotheosis of St. Ignatius, church of Sant'Ignazio, Rome. Photo: Anthony Majanlahti



Still from Episode III, Renzo Martens, 2009

### Appendix

For all the critics who found it unacceptable that *Enjoy Poverty* sat beaming over one such a desperate Congolese plantation, no single one ever asked me about the exact whereabouts of these plantations in the film. No single critic ever asked me where the labour of these underfed workers ends up – what *was* questioned, was their immaterial labour being filmed, and ending up in this piece.

What was annoying was an art piece's candor embracing – and therefore problematising – its inconsequentiality, its inscription in existing systems of power. Not the exploitation on the plantations. That was readily accepted as part of the ways of this world.

It seems, beaming *Enjoy Poverty* over one desperate African plantation pre-empted the fate the world would reserve for these workers, after seeing this film, quite accurately.

Still from Episode III, Renzo Martens, 2009

For the people living on the plantation, the clairvoyance of the piece may be of little interest. They may well have preferred a worse piece of art, if only it would put food on the table.

Recently, the Institute for Human Activities has been founded to do exactly that: bring food to the table. The art will be great, too.

- 1 Daniel Birnbaum, "The Lay of the Land, and experiment in art and community in Thailand," *Artforum*, Vol. 43, Iss. 10 (New York: Summer 2005), 270, 6.
- 2 Martha Rosler, "Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art "Survive"?" *e flux Journal* nr.12, January 2010.
- 3 Jonathan Griffin, "Atrocity Exhibition," *Tank Magazine*, August 2010, page numbers?
- 4 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003), pages?
- 5 Hito Steyerl, "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Postdemocracy," *e flux Journal* nr 21, December 2010.
- 6 Jean-Luc Godard, interview ORTF French television, 1972.
- 7 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).