



'If the Museum Is Funded by Exploitative Labor Practices, or Practices That Ruin the Planet, It Remains Only a Health Spa for Art Lovers': Interview with Renzo Martens

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'If the Museum Is Funded by Exploitative Labor Practices, or Practices That Ruin the Planet, It Remains Only a Health Spa for Art Lovers': Interview with Renzo Martens

Sasha Pevak

In 2012, the Dutch artist Renzo Martens founded the Institute for Human Activities¹ (IHA), which, since 2014, he has developed in collaboration with the cooperative *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise*² (CATPC) on a former palm oil plantation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Through the IHA, Martens has sought to analyze global mechanisms of power, resource and value extraction. At present, the impact of 'critical' art,

largely produced and consumed in global cities, remains, in Martens's view, highly limited. The institute has brought the position of plantation workers within global value chains—as well as their place in the history of modern and contemporary art—into sharp focus. Through their activities and artistic practices, Martens and the CATPC seek to revisit the history of the global art system and to intervene in its contemporary structure.

Keywords: art system, critical art, global value chains, inclusivity, inequality, institutional critique, postcolonialism, power and resource, representation, white cube

Sasha Pevak (SP):

You launched the IHA six years after *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)*³ (2009), a documentary road movie, in which you suggested that poverty was one of Congo's principal resources but that, yet again, it was mostly being exploited by the West (Downey and Roelandt 2019). You proposed to the Congolese you met to capitalize on this 'resource' *themselves*, by producing and selling images of poverty to international agencies, rather than leaving it to foreign photographers to do so. In a certain sense, the IHA is thus the continuation of your analysis of global mechanisms of power, the extraction of resources and value, and of the inequalities these generate—but this time in relation to the contemporary art system. Through the IHA you aimed, in your terms, to 'gentrify a palm oil plantation': to reappropriate power and to redistribute the value that would otherwise be extracted. As

a result, local labor is set to benefit from the production of critical art within the globalized art system. Could you tell me more about your transition from an individual gesture in the form of a movie, to the idea of founding a permanent institution in Congo?

Renzo Martens (RM):

It's important to mention that *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* came after a film called *Episode I^a* (2003) (I'm still working on *Episode II*). I made *Episode I* in Chechnya in 2000 and, by and large, it deals with the same questions as *Enjoy Poverty*, making it a part of the future triptych. Both *Episodes I and III* are indeed individual gestures, as you say, but I think they aren't really about me: these films use me, or rather, as the films' director I use myself to represent a global system of power and resources, and the inequalities these generate. In *Episode III*, I appear as a 'symptomatic' white man who goes to Congo, interested yet at the same time not *too* interested. In the end, he discovers that the entire apparatus of journalism, aid, activism, and engaged art that exists, supposedly, to break the system of exploitation, is itself part of the exploitation. Thus, I don't think the film is reducible to an individual gesture: of course, I'm an individual artist and human being, but I try to bring a system into focus that is larger than just myself, the artist Renzo Martens.

Having said all this, after that film I wanted to make it clearer that it really wasn't just about me, as a lot of the attacks directed at *Enjoy Poverty* were aimed at the character Renzo Martens, which is fair enough. Still, I wanted to ensure that in my future works, people would grasp more easily that the focus was directed at institutions and systems of power, rather than at this particular individual. So, I wanted to act and *be* beyond the individual gesture, beyond the individual artist; that's the first reason I founded an institute. Second, I wanted to create a longer-term project that was not about a single artwork, but about something in reality: its end goal was no longer to make a film, nor a sculpture, but to establish a program that would be social, artistic, economic, and ecological, all at once. And third, I sought to reshape how art, economy, and ecology can sit together and, in the end, obtain tangible results. I wanted this project to be not *about* art, but about what art *can do*: if art were organized differently, it could also determine where the economic surplus that is generated by art or investments in the art system would go. I think that artists can take responsibility for what the spinoff of art is. To do so, I needed not to repeat an individual gesture, but to create an institution.

SP:

This issue of *The Garage Journal* is devoted to transitory *parerga* of contemporary art. This term is borrowed from Jacques Derrida's



Figure 1. Renzo Martens, film still from *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008) (courtesy of Human Activities, 2020)

The Truth in Painting (1978) and is understood here as the various structures that frame, filter, and organize art, while at the same time being inseparable from what is framed. In my view, your work in general, and especially the IHA, brings to light the art system's underlying structures and political mechanisms—its hidden *parerga*. In *Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy*, Hito Steyerl (2010) questioned this intertwinement of art and politics. She suggested that 'instead of trying to represent a politics that is always happening elsewhere,' we should look at the field of art as a *space of politics itself*, at its intrinsic condition, as 'art is not outside politics, but politics resides within its production, its distribution, and its reception.' What is your position on this? To what extent do you share Steyerl's position and do you consider it to be relevant to the IHA?

RM:

From the beginning, I had a clear intuition that art that points at politics often fails to address its own politics. Many of the gestures of inclusivity we see in the art world obscure the very vertical power structures within which these gestures function. I remember reading and meticulously studying this text by Steyerl, alongside others she published at the time. I also studied works by many of those she cites in this text, belonging to different waves of institutional critique. There was a lot of commonality between what she wrote and what I was thinking back then; there were also some differences perhaps. What I learned from Steyerl is that indeed a lot of art—and this, of course, was a global move within critical art, then accepted as the dominant framework—would critique economic inequalities, climate change, immaterial labor, and changing labor structures, but its investigations into how the art itself was indebted to these very structures remained limited. The boom of such art probably began in the early 2000s, with Catherine

David's Documenta X and Okwui Enwezor's Documenta XI, both of which had a big impact on me.

In line with Steyerl's critique, it seemed to me that much of what we call 'critical' or 'political' art was a mirage. On the one hand, artists produced videos about labor conditions or climate change and exhibited them at one of these global institutions, like Documenta or the Venice Biennale. On the other hand, the economic structures within which they were embedded were the very opposite of what was proclaimed in the artworks. The 'consumers' of these artworks often belong to social groups that do not suffer much from economic inequality, nor from the repercussions of climate change. They are, not exclusively, but by and large, on the 'winning' side of these phenomena. This 'foreign' audience already lives a beautiful and *exceptional* lifestyle. This consumption of representations of inequalities on their side of the economic divide only amplifies and reinforces class difference. It allows global elites to think of themselves as 'enlightened,' 'concerned,' 'liberal,' and so on. At the same time, none of the benefits of these artworks return to the people or places with which the artist supposedly engages.

There is a connection between the political critique that Steyerl makes, and a very simple economic analysis of where and to whom 'critical' art brings benefits. In my minimal analysis, it mostly brings benefits to already-rich places and to already-rich people. When I read Steyerl's piece in 2010, alongside other texts in the same spirit, they were published by *e-flux journal*, which was based in the Lower East Side in New York City at the time. The Lower East Side was already heavily gentrified, but it was gentrifying even more as it became a global center for critical discourse through *e-flux*. And I thought that it simply was not good enough. A lot of institutional critique, including Steyerl's, risks remaining provincial if it only brings benefits to a very small number of places in the world. What she critiques is the fact that critical art doesn't really do much, but really, in material terms, we can agree that it was a part of the unremitting gentrification of the Lower East Side.

I think this blind spot is not limited to any particular practice, but is, rather, engrained in the history of art. When Hans Haacke made *Shapolsky et al^s* (1971), the work exposed fraudulent slumlords and outrageous rental schemes in the Lower East Side. It became a hugely important piece within the history of institutional critique. A few years ago, I asked Haacke if he had investigated whether his piece had had any impact on rental prices, or evictions—any impact for tenants in the Lower East Side. He had not. He *did* know which museum had the piece in its collection, yet he had not taken an interest in whether or not it had played any role in tenants' lives. And I can understand this: in the '70s, one could still have a real belief in the institution. And so exposing power

imbalances within the institution was a giant leap forward for the artist. The institution could, perhaps, 'cleanse' itself, and was not yet understood as a gentrifying force in and of itself.

But, as I tried to show in *Enjoy Poverty*—and speaking about myself, 40 years later—there is a risk that the artist himself becomes fraudulent, not all too different from slumlords or plantation owners. You extract resources from one part of the globe, whether it's cocoa or injustices, which can and should be critiqued, but then introduce these at the other end of the globe, with scant returns for the 'source' community. That type of art can be extractive. In response, I decided that as an artist, I needed to look into what capital accumulation around art *does*. I set up a *Reverse Gentrification* program on a former Unilever plantation in Congo, in order to understand, to dismantle, and also to reshape what art can be; so that art does not *look at politics* but indeed *becomes a space of politics* itself. In accordance with Steyerl's analyses, politics is within art's production, distribution, and reception. I think that as a serious, critical artist you cannot allow your work to generate capital and visibility only around white cube institutions in the globalized West. You should decide as an artist where your art will distribute its benefits and who will receive them. In my case, I decided this should be one of the plantations which have enormously contributed to the art world.

SP:

Three years ago, you finished the five-year *Reverse Gentrification* program with an event called *The Repatriation of the White Cube*. It was accompanied by the construction, on the spot, in Lusanga, of a physical white cube designed by OMA. It functioned both as an architectural and scenographic element for the exhibition and as a symbol. Could you tell me what has happened in the three years that have elapsed since then?

RM:

The Repatriation of the White Cube was an event that indeed marked the end of the five-year *Reverse Gentrification* program. We opened, symbolically, a white cube, even though at the time it had not yet been completely finished. Now we're in the second five-year program, which we call *The Post-Plantation*. It's important to know that a lot of the land that was taken away from the Congolese by the colonial government was 'redistributed' to Unilever and many other global companies. Now, with the revenues from the sales of their art (largely, but not exclusively, sculptures), the CATPC has been buying back their land. They are transforming the

200 acres they recently acquired into a 'post-plantation': inclusive, ecological, worker-owned gardens. This is a significant achievement, given the historical context: when the plantations were first created, from 1911 onwards, the forests were cut down, and those who lived on the lands were conscripted as forced laborers. The plantations were crucial for the birth of capitalism; a lot has been written on the subject lately, for instance by Anna Tsing (2015). In brief, the plantation reduces every aspect of nature or human behavior to what the investor requires in order to maximize profits. The forests are cut down, so that what remains is controllable and fertile soil. The plantation has no need for the thousands of species present in the rainforest, but only for species that can maximize profits, such as the palms used to produce palm oil. So the forest is turned into a monoculture. It reduces people to their labor; their beliefs, traditions, political and social structures are marginalized or proscribed. With the profits from monocultures, infrastructure, including museums, have been built on the other side of the globe. And by now, some these white cubes have become prestigious spaces for 'inclusivity' and 'diversity,' 'critique' and 'postcoloniality' in art. So, what is at stake here is not only the repatriation of old Congolese art (which surely needs to happen), but also the repatriation of the white cube itself. We are now preparing a film that will tell the story of the emergence of this particular, repatriated white cube. The key person in the film is Matthieu Kasiama, who was once a plantation worker but is now both a museum owner and a landowner.



Figure 2. Construction atelier, Lusanga (2017) (courtesy of Arsène Ijambo /Human Activities, 2020)

SP:

Let's talk more about the white cube, which serves as a bridge, both symbolic and material, between the 'global' art system and the Congolese artists involved in the project. The white cube, one of the *parerga* of contemporary art, is a cornerstone of its ideology. It can be understood as a specific type of space to exhibit art, as an incarnation of a system of values possessing its own history, and as a mythological symbol. The modernist idea of the white cube as a neutral and 'purified' space, in which art could be detached from life, served, for quite a long time, as a dominant and *unquestionable* doctrine for the Western-centric artistic tradition. In 1996, Peter Weibel wrote *Beyond the White Cube*—his title implying a dialogue with *Inside the White Cube* by Brian O'Doherty (written between 1976 and 1981, and published in 1986). In the text, Weibel critiqued the white cube as the product of a universalizing Western modernism, bringing to the fore its role as a place of exclusion. Although the text reflected and predicted the actual reshaping of the landscape of contemporary art in light of feminist, post-colonial, and queer theories, the questions that Weibel raised still seem to be relevant. The manifesto for *Repatriation of the White Cube* states that 'with the establishment of (the Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality, the iconic modernist *White Cube* will be recontextualized in the setting that has historically underwritten its development. In economic terms, plantations have funded not just the building of most European and American infrastructure and industries, but also that of museums and universities.' Which theoretical, practical, and historical foci are of key importance for you in the white cube project?

RM:

I entirely agree with Weibel in the sense that even if you integrate non-white, non-male, non-Christian artists into the white cube, the white cube is still the standard and remains part of the system of exclusion and domination; because the white cube, or whoever runs it, decides what is 'worthwhile.' This occurred to me during the last Documenta. Of course, it was fantastic to see so many people and practices that in any other edition would never have been invited to Documenta— and now they were invited. But at the same time, I wondered whether this edition was not in fact just as exclusionary as any other in the past. Why are people from this exact village or this group invited to Documenta, and not those from the next village, ten or a thousand kilometers further away? Is there any guide explaining how to get invited to Documenta? Of course there isn't. These are largely arbitrary choices taken by a team in Kassel or Athens. For any group that wants to share its vision through art, or through other preferred means, there is very, very

little agency. In this sense, I completely agree with Weibel's critique.

Of course, you could say that the last thing an artist should do is bring that system of exclusion to the Congolese rainforest and to the people there, who obviously have their own art forms. When I decided that I wanted to build a white cube on a plantation, quite a few people thought it was a terrible idea. I remember, for example, Soh Bejeng Ndikung Bonaventure, the director of SAVVY Contemporary, saying, 'Africa doesn't need this.' At the same time, he built an institution in Berlin, which is *de facto* a white cube—a great one, even.

That said, I do understand the critique. But I want to push it further: while some Congolese artists become very famous and exhibit widely in biennials and white cube institutions across the world, what about those who can never make it outside, who are stuck on plantations? It's useful to point out that the place where we built the white cube is not a piece of rainforest that exists outside the realm of capitalism. On the contrary, it's Lusanga, formerly Leverville, one of the very first plantations founded by William Lever. As such, it is a piece of land that lies at the heart of Unilever's plantation empire, and, therefore, was central for all the art funding Lever contributed. This funding helped to build the Lady Lever Gallery in Liverpool, with its exquisite collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, The Leverhulme Trust, with its many research grants for academic institutions, and, of course, The Unilever Series at Tate Modern. It is pertinent to recall that, therefore, many great artists and thinkers, whose work deals with economic and social problems, were indirectly funded by those who work on plantations, who make less than \$20 a month. We can take as an example The Unilever Series at Tate Modern, which was installed between 2000 and 2012. As part of the series, works by artists like Olafur Eliasson, Tino Sehgal, and Ai Weiwei all dealt—magnificently—with economic, social, and political problems.

I'm not looking to critique these artists, nor to install white cubes everywhere, so that everyone would be absorbed into or would conform to the system of exclusion. On the contrary: we bring this apparatus of exclusion to a place like Lusanga, a place that was always excluded from this very apparatus. Then the white cube can finally become *inclusive*. Of course, we can't just have the same artists exhibited in this white cube there. We really have to reinvent what the white cube is, what role it can play, and for whom; that's the task for *The Post-Plantation* over the coming years. What is this white cube? How can it be beneficial for people outside of the art world, and for another type of world?



Figure 3. The Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI), Lusanga (2017) (courtesy of Thomas Nolf. (courtesy of Thomas Nolf /Human Activities, 2020)

SP:

How are institute's production and distribution chains organized? Which places and meanings do natural and symbolic resources assume within them? And could you elaborate on how this impacts the condition of the artists involved in the CATPC?

RM:

For now, the most important resource for CATPC members is their art and their land. They make sculptures in clay, 3D-scan them, and send the digitized version to Amsterdam, where we reproduce them using a mixture of palm oil and cocoa. We first considered exporting these sculptures in their original form, in clay, but it was simply not possible. However, as the capitalist plantation system is very much in place, the transportation of cocoa and palm fat is taken care of by companies like Unilever. The sculptures were then exhibited in New York City and a few other places, where they made around 100,000 euros in profit, which the CATPC decided to use for the acquisition of land. We used cocoa and palm oil because these are the materials that are extracted and produced on plantations in Congo—and are thus the outcome of contemporary, *ongoing* exploitation. Palm oil is a driving force for deforestation worldwide. A recent Human Rights Watch report points to the fact that people still make 18 U.S. dollars per month on plantations in Congo. That is, if one is male. Women make 9 U.S. dollars per month. These are the people who work for large, transnational corporations.

Typically, there is a clear division of labor, in which plantation workers occupy a determined position: they are meant to just work on the plantation, while interesting artists engage with economic inequality, critique it, and publish texts about it. With CATPC, the idea is that plantation workers can advance the critique

themselves: they can make the art. The mission of the artist can also be taken on by plantation workers, and their surplus that way is much bigger; if you produce critical artwork about the plantation work you do, you can make much more money than by just doing that plantation work. So, they can occupy a different position within the same value chain.

Media is, of course, an important resource as well, and I think we should use it much more. The project is not located in New York City, nor in Moscow, Dakar, or Dubai. We're not in Kinshasa and we're even outside of Lusanga; we are in what could be considered the middle of nowhere. Of course, the middle of nowhere is the center of the world. Because that's where the origin of the plantation system is, and thus the origin of the museum. So, we need media to tell the world about it. Not too many people will come to Lusanga, and we don't even want them to, because that's not the point; we're not trying to establish a tourist industry. The goal is for the world to know about the repositioning of the white cube and its implications. So that it can attract capital, and the people can buy back their own land, so that they can set up a bigger post-plantation.

Finally, there is my role. I think I simply felt it needed to be done. If somebody else would have done it, it may have been better. If a Congolese artist would have invented and done it, it may have been better. But as far as I knew, nobody had done it before. So, I had to do it. *The Repatriation of the White Cube* and the *Reverse Gentrification* program are things I invented, but still—these are only conceptual ideas. Meanwhile, the sculptures, the land, and all that is inside the white cube—all that is outside the white cube—these were not made by me at all. So it's a combination of ideas and of different talents. The project is small; there are around 200 people who live off it. There can be many more, but for now we're more like a small avant-garde. The goal for the coming years is to expand *The Post-Plantation*, to become more visible, to buy more land, and then hopefully to influence nearby plantations, or perhaps the World Bank. Because all the plantation corporations operating there are heavily funded by international development banks, and it would be much better if they invested in cooperatives of plantation workers. I think it also can begin to have an influence on the art world. I believe museums need to start to think about showing the work of plantation workers, and to think about reparations.



Figure 4. Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga (2018) (courtesy of Leonard Pongo Pano)



Figure 5. Renzo Martens, film still from *White Cube* (2020) (courtesy of Human Activities, 2020)

SP:

Did you arrive in Congo with a clear idea of how to create the institute? As a white man from a country with a colonial past, how have you dealt with this background while working in Africa? How was your proposal perceived by locals, and did members of the CATPC have some kind of a creative practice before you met them?

RM:

I think I had a very abstract, preconceived plan, but I didn't know how to go about it. The *Reverse Gentrification* program only started to take off when Rene Ngongo, who's now the president of the CATPC, and I joined forces. He was one of the key speakers at

a seminar we held together in 2012. At that moment, he explained how the project had to be done, and then we completely changed the program, introducing the emphasis on land ownership. That was not my idea, nor was *The Post-Plantation*: it was Rene's. Also, I never made any sculptures. When they were exhibited in New York, it was Mathieu Kassama, a key member of the CATPC, who had inaugurated the show. So, it's a collective work, and I think it's very important to state that it's a very horizontal project that aims to escape capitalism—but, in order to get there, it's also a vertical project that uses the structures of capitalism.

The horizontal part is probably clear; we can also sketch out the vertical, top-to-down elements within it. The idea to repatriate the white cube was mine, as a white, male, Western European, middle-class artist. I imagined the project as being not only about postcolonial critique, nor about the creation of an alternative to the enduring plantation regime. I was more focused on art and the global formations of capital, and, of course, some of the most exploited regions in the world are to be found in Congo. I could have also, perhaps, tried the project in Tuva, but I thought that the plantations of Congo were the right place to work on this. As for my colonial legacy, I am indeed not a plantation worker, nor an owner. However, I've tried to use the cards that have been dealt to me as a white, middle-class man from Western Europe.

We began the project in a plantation, from which we were soon expelled by a very harsh corporate regime. The plantation managers in London did not approve of creativity being part of the mix. But in Lusanga, it was easier. The plantation workers didn't formally have an artistic practice, no; but if people are more free, they always make art, I think. We are colonized by Netflix, but people who are not colonized by Netflix make art. So, many of them had some kind of artistic practice. All of this will be seen in the film I mentioned earlier, which will come out soon: *White Cube*. None of the participants went to art school, some couldn't read or write. I think a major role was played by a group of artists from Kinshasa: Kongo Astronauts; by the great artists Eléonore Hellio and Michel Ekeba, and also by Mega Mingiedi. They issued an open call and started workshops there. After a few months, the first sculptures emerged, but also drawings, performances, and many other things. As in any art workshop, you talk about your dreams, your fantasies, the problems that you see in the world, and how you can do something with them. Meanwhile, they've also held many workshops: on filmmaking, on performance, on agriculture, of course—on beehives and fertilizing the soil.



SP:

The presentation of the CATPC's works in Western institutions has changed over time. At the beginning, your name was attached to the exhibitions, but in 2016, the exhibition at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art was entitled, *Congolese Plantation Workers Art League*. The works were signed with the artists' names and were accompanied by narrative explanations they'd written; the sculptures were exhibited on white pedestals, covered with logos of partner institutions. How was this style of presentation developed and what did these various decisions signify?

RM:

I think the show at Middlesbrough was the first, in which my name didn't appear; that was a very important and positive evolution. At Middlesbrough, it was signed with an English translation of the cooperative's name, the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League. The subsequent exhibition was at SculptureCenter in New York City, which used the French name, *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise*—the cooperative's original name in full. So, it was much better. We had wanted to do this previously, but in the beginning, the only way we could get exhibitions was if I presented their work. It was a pragmatic solution, as the CATPC had no track record at the time. But as soon as they established one, we ditched my name. The installation design for Middlesbrough was largely done by the curators, Miguel Amado and Alistair Hudson. The idea of emblazoning the pedestals with logos from support-

Figure 6. Renzo Martens, film still from *White Cube* (2020). CATPC members (from left): Olele Mulela Mabamba, Huguette Kilembi, Mbuku Kimpala, Jeremie Mabilia, Jean Kawata, Irene Kanga, Ced'art Tamasla and Matthieu Kasiama. (courtesy of Human Activities, 2020)

ing institutions was Kolja Reichert's, a journalist from *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The exhibition took place before any of the CATPC members could actually travel outside the country, as it's almost impossible for the Congolese to get a visa. If you're a plantation worker and you earn 200 U.S. dollars a year, you don't have the opportunity to acquire a passport, let alone a visa to visit the U.K. The first time a member of the CATPC traveled abroad was to New York City, in 2017. The show was installed by Ruba Katrib, the chief curator at SculptureCenter at the time. As always, it was a cooperation between curators and artists.



Figure 7. *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise*, installation view from solo exhibition at SculptureCenter, New York City (2017) (courtesy of Joshua Bright)

Figure 8. *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise*, installation view from solo exhibition at SculptureCenter, New York City (2017) (courtesy of Joshua Bright)

SP:

The institute's strategy recalls 'subversive affirmation,' a concept that appeared in the circle of Moscow conceptualists in the U.S.S.R. during the 1980s (Arns and Sasse 2006). A similar idea has been used by Slavoj Žižek (1993), coined as 'over-identification,' in relation to the work of the Slovenian art collective, Laibach (p. 4). In both cases, the term indicates that artistic work overemphasizes a dominant ideology in order to subvert it and produce its 'hidden reverse.' In your case, the IHA looks to analyze and appropriate the contemporary Western-centric paradigm of art, which is both derived and inextricable from the neoliberal system. Your project uses an established frame, though it attempts to alter some of its parameters. Specifically, it does so by raising the surplus value of the CATPC's production, and by generating economic flows and capital *in situ*, in Congo. Where do you draw the, admittedly, fine line between a subversion of existing mechanisms and their replication?

RM:

That question applies particularly to the film *Enjoy Poverty*, after which I was almost crucified on the cross of capitalism (which I'd erected myself). The critiques of my position in the film were harsh, and rightfully so. It is a brutal film. In the case of Laibach, or of other artists who 'over-identify' with the system they critique, their position may, at times, be a relatively easy one—you don't really know what they're thinking. Maybe they hide. Are they anti-fascist or fascist? Who knows? And perhaps they're not clear themselves. Am I anti-capitalist or capitalist? It's hard to say. I do see the enormous costs of capitalism. And I'm willing to be confronted with the costs of being complicit with it. We hardly know a world outside of capitalism. This very conversation that we are now having unfolds with the help of Apple, of service providers, and so on. So, to genuinely think outside of capitalism is indeed difficult. At the same time, although we're using capitalist means, we're also building something else, this 'post-plantation.' We're cementing the very idea that a group of former plantation workers, rather than you or I, can also produce critical art. The white cube is another example. Is it anticolonial to install a white cube in Congo? Or is it colonial, or neocolonial? People will have different opinions. Some will say it's neocolonial, because, as Weibel said, the white cube is a system of exclusion. My take on this is different: by integrating this system of exclusion into the 'post-plantation,' we actually ensure that another group of people can decide who and what is going to be included or excluded. I think that, as an artist, you have a responsibility to decide where capital accumulates and therefore, what gentrification results in and for whom. That's not something you can leave to real estate investors or to businesspeople; artists should decide it.

SP:

What are the IHA's end goals? And those of the local artists? Do you think that the CATPC may attain autonomy in future, and have you considered leaving the project at some point?

RM:

The goal of the Institute for Human Activities is to prove that the artistic critique of economic inequality can redress that inequality. In other words, the goal is to ensure that art doesn't only talk about inequality, while making the rich richer and the poor poorer—it's to act in such a way that inequality disappears. The CATPC has a different goal. They plan to purchase lands with the revenues from their art and to set up 'post-plantations.' I'm not part of the CATPC, but we work together. I don't own any land in Congo, and I don't intend to. I'm a landless artist. So, my goal is purely artistic: to make sure that art is no longer sterile, and to make sure that artists, including myself, take responsibility for what is happening in the world in the name of art.

The CATPC is autonomous. But I need them. I need them because, if I want to prove that art does not have to be sterile and that the relations between the plantations and the museums can be reorganized, I cannot do so without those who are born, work, and live on the plantation. As for the CATPC, they need me a little bit, I guess, because I came up with the idea of the museum. So, now they have the means of production, and hopefully we can continue this collaboration. But if tomorrow they say that they want something else, they can. I don't have any control over the CATPC.

SP:

To what extent does the dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion seem to you still present when it comes to representational politics in contemporary art institutions? Do you see a way of creating a system, in which the frame itself would be subject to collective discussion on equal terms? Or would that be completely utopian?

RM:

Of course, the dichotomy is still very present. That was the case of the last Documenta, as I tried to argue before. It proclaimed 'inclusion,' but I did not read it as an act of inclusion. What we're doing in Congo is different, I hope. It's an experiment, and we don't really know what will come out of it. There are more and more artists trying to do similar things: to make use of capital and ensure that the economic returns of critical art are used strategically. They use capital, even as they try to exit the logic of the capitalist system. Not within art, but in reality.

It's one thing to 'decolonize' the museum, but if museums are funded by predatory institutions, then the 'decolonized' museum is a mirage, a *fata morgana*. If museums are funded by exploitative labor practices, or practices that ruin the planet, then the museum remains only a health spa for art lovers.

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Author's bio

Sasha Pevak is an independent art worker who lives between Paris and Moscow. He is interested in the political nature of art, its infrastructures, and the underlying mechanisms of its system. In a practice that is at once political, sensible, and full of nostalgia, he looks to question the boundaries between research, curatorial, and artistic work, and to integrate a personal dimension by combining individual and collective narratives. He is currently a PhD student at the University of Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis. Pevak has previously collaborated with the National Institute for Art History, le Frac Île-de-France, DOC!, Galerie Poggi, FIAC, Monumenta in Paris, ENSA and La Box in Bourges, EESAB and 40mcube in Brittany, ESADMM and Manifesta 13 in Marseille, HISK in Ghent, and Garage Museum, the International Biennale of Contemporary Art, and CCI Fabrika in Moscow. As of 2017, he has been part of the teaching team of the IESA in Paris, and is currently a visiting lecturer at ENSA Bourges.

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Artist's bio

Renzo Martens studied Political Sciences in Nijmegen and Visual Arts in Ghent and Amsterdam. In his conceptual documentary films, *Episode I* (2003) and *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008), Martens used his position as an artist to highlight the exploitation of underprivileged people by media industries and cultural producers, including Martens himself. In 2010, Martens founded the Institute for Human Activities (IHA). The institute aims to create gentrification effects in the Congolese rain forest through the establishment of an international art center there. IHA collaborates with local plantation workers and seeks to acknowledge the economic mechanisms through which art has the greatest impact on social reality, investigating the possibilities that these offer for local improvement. Renzo Martens became a Yale World Fellow in 2013. He has participated in numerous international exhibitions, including the 19th Biennale of Sydney in 2014, the Moscow Biennale 2013, and the 6th and 7th Berlin Biennales in 2010 and 2012. He lives and works in Amsterdam, Brussels, and Kinshasa.

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