Investigating the economic value of one of the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s most lucrative exports (namely, poverty), Renzo Martens’ provocative film Episode III: Enjoy Poverty (2008) remains a landmark intervention into debates about contemporary art’s relationship to exploitative economies. Throughout Critique in Practice, contributors explore the work’s legacy and how it relates to the politics of representation, uses of the documentary form, art criticism, the deployment of humanitarian aid, the impact of extractive forms of globalized capital, and the neoliberal politics of decolonization. The unconventional representation of acute immiseration throughout Enjoy Poverty generated far-from-resolved disputes about how deprivation is portrayed within Western mainstream media and throughout global cultural institutions. Using a range of approaches, this volume reconsiders that portrayal and how the film’s reception led Martens to found a long-term program, Human Activities.


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Renzo Martens: Tretyakov in the Congo? kãrî’kãchã seid’ou and Jelle Bouwhuis *

The series of conversations between kãrî’kãchã seid’ou and Jelle Bouwhuis that formed this text were held between November and December 2015.
On the memorable day of November 20, 2008, the film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* premiered at the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam and the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA), which I was directing at the time. Thus, from the very start, *Episode III* appeared with an ambiguous status: both as a film installation in an art space and as a documentary film. The premiere of the work at the SMBA—then still an off-site project space of the Stedelijk Museum—followed rapidly after another seminal exhibition that took place in the museum itself: “Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography,” curated by Okwui Enwezor and originally shown at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2006. It traveled to the Stedelijk from June 27 until September 30, 2008. Central to “Snap Judgments” was the rhetorical question: “Can the photographic event of Afro-pessimism be overcome?” In both the exhibition and the accompanying catalog, Enwezor venomously dealt with the stereotypical portrayal of Africa in the global media and Bob Geldof, who he accuses of having revamped his failed rock-star career with Live Aid and Live 8 on the backs of mediagenic Ethiopian famine victims. The simultaneity of Enwezor raising such questions in the Stedelijk Museum and the central motif in *Episode III*, where Martens poses as yet another Geldof (this time to overcome a failed love relationship), is striking.

In general, the images and attitudes brought to us by both Enwezor and Martens confronted the team of SMBA with the challenges of postcolonialism and globalization, the complexity of positionality in a world that seems transparent, open, and accessible, and a general lack of non-stereotypical knowledge concerning Africa. Naturally, as might be expected from the neoliberal current in the Western art institutional world, we framed this as a new curiosity, for which we devised a fundable project called “Project ’1975’.” It is through this framework that

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1. Alongside the projected film, Martens’ exhibition at the SMBA featured three examples of the photographs produced by the Congolese photographers who appear in the film. These photographers are Aniceth Kapakasi Kasereka, Gideon Kihokolo Mbasa, Faustin Mukewa Katembo, and Huberd Mumbere Muenyenwa from the Association de Photographes de Kanyabayonga. The images were taken following Martens’ prompt to photograph the poverty around them in order to make more profit.


3. Ibid., 17.
I met with kaří’kachä seid’ou. kaří’kachä is “ultimately interested in the critique of the systemic domain of Global Capitalism and more importantly, in the affirmation of a possible alternative to it.” Weary of essentialist notions of art, especially “African Art,” kaří’kachä superintends a collectivist practice rooted in critical over-identification and institutional critique. As an artist–pedagogue and critical thinker whose practice casts a shadow on Martens’ projects, kaří’kachä was presented with the uneasy task of critically responding to Episode III: Enjoy Poverty.

Jelle Bouwhuis: You saw the film Enjoy Poverty for the first time only recently. What was your first response after having watched it?

kaří’kachä seid’ou: Incidentally, I knew about Renzo Martens’ ongoing Institute for Human Activities (IHA) reverse-gentrification project—the sequel to Enjoy Poverty—before I watched the latter. For me, the reverse-gentrification project cast some light on Enjoy Poverty like a future which redeems unrealized revolutions of the past. Apropos Nabokov, “the future is but the obsolete in reverse.” Of course, my first impression was that unlike the IHA project, it was an artifact of cynical reason. The titular “Enjoy Poverty” could strike one as an Afropessimist or class-ventriloquist injunction to the Congolese underclass to accept their fate in a neoliberal capitalist status quo. But probably against his intentions, Martens meditates on a familiar political demand popular today among a circle of accelerationists, “The only way out of the horrors of capitalism is the way through it.” This seems a rehash of the good old anti-capitalist logic of “principled opportunism” from Lenin’s schema for the socialization of big banks through Negri’s leitmotif of the multitude to Jameson’s socialist-utopian proposal for a repurposed Wal-Martification. The message at the heart of these schemas is akin to an aphorism in Wagner’s Parsifal, “Only the spear that struck the wound can heal it.” In Enjoy Poverty, Martens’ own attempt to invent an organizational structure congenial to this political demand is the collaborative project with Congolese photographers, which attempts to appropriate the Afropessimist image market of the West. This attempt fails in capitalist estimation but it is a different question whether it fails as a component of filmic practice.

Formally, Martens’ documentary fiction struck me as a crossover between “reportage” (the factographic) and “intervention” (productivist). The film seems to exist between two vanishing points of spectacle and participation. Considering Martens’ conflicting roles as muse and maker or as colonial explorer, humanitarian photographer, and institutional critical artist, I hope I can suggest that he rubs a “Tintin in the Congo” motif against a “Tretyakov in the Congo” avatar. If Tintin is the colonial reporter who is indifferent to the imperialist conditions of his practice, Tretyakov is the productivist artist who intervenes in the production process and dissolves the infrastructure of reportage itself.

JB: I had a strong tendency to take the issues that the film presents as a kind of general “African problem.” Did you as well, or was I simply drawn into the kind of stereotypes of “Africa” that are still ubiquitous in Western Europe?

ks: Well, having some Marxist sympathies, I try not to see these motifs as Africa-specific or Congo-specific but rather capitalist-specific. The capitalist conditions which birth failed states like the DR Congo, Libya, or Syria are already hinted at in Engels’ Anti-Dühring (1878) and even in Marx. Each thinker talks about the imminent withering away of capitalist productive forces. Interestingly, against Engels’ and Marx’s Communist expectations, failed states have become a structural component of global capitalist expansion in regions where there is coltan, oil, diamonds, and so forth. The oxymoronic transformation of imperialist Union Minière to “clean capitalist” multinational Umicore is a good reminder. Presumably, we know enough not to follow the “primitivist” line of thought which psychologizes the issues by simply reducing indicators of objective global phenomena like the Congo crises to “explosion of old ethnic passions.”


*5 This dialectic is at the heart of Walter Benjamin’s “Author as Producer” with Sergei Tretyakov as its “poster boy.” Benjamin references Tretyakov’s distinction between the operating writer (productivist) and the informing writer (factographic). The mission of the operating writer is “not to report” as in symbolic actions “but to struggle”; “not to play the spectator but to intervene actively” in the relations and techniques of production of the time. See: Walter Benjamin, “Author as Producer,” address at the Institute for the study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934, in The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 79–96.
that,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken know that?”

“Poor leadership,” “the greed of tribal warlords,” or something essentially or culturally African. Apropos Lacan, we can understand Western stereotypes about Africa and other ex-colonies as gravestones marking the absence or corpses of populations written off history by a sophisticated capitalistic machinery. In a sense, Enjoy Poverty meditates on the “unconscious” of the seeming capitalist triumph of our times.

**JB:** The film presents us with a deadlock as to the relation of capital vis-à-vis the living conditions and deprivation in central Congo. But it also transfers this deadlock to the realm of art. Capitalism creates a system of art production, appreciation, markets, and institutions and thus denies the deprived from having any position in it. Can you elaborate on this aspect from your point of view, that is, from the College of Art at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), and, in general, the situation with art institutions and art reception in your region?

**ks:** Martens makes this non-coincidence of labor and capital (he prefers “profit”) central to his practice. For him, this deadlock is roughly homologous to the gap between, on the one hand, “places of intervention” in art production where precarious labor is exploited and rewarded symbolically, and, on the other hand, “places of art spectating” where capital is accumulated.

I find the structural gap in this deadlock also repeated as a silent motif of a joke popular among the Slovenian Lacanian School. In Alenka Zupancic’s version, a man who believes that he is a grain of corn is taken to a mental institution, where the doctors do their best finally to convince him that he is not a grain, but a man. No sooner has he left the hospital than he comes back, very scared, claiming that there is a chicken outside the door; and he is afraid that it will eat him. “Dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a grain of seed, but a man.” “Of course I know that,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken know that?”

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**JB:** Would you present the film to your students, and, if so, would there be specific aspects that you would discuss with them?

“**ks:** Yes. The film is about the condition of African artists and, by extension, of the African continent. It is a problem that I encounter in my work, so I use it as a teaching tool. I show it to my students, and we discuss it in class. We talk about the conditions of the cultural slum and how artists are exploited and devalued. It’s a powerful film that really makes students think about the way art is produced and consumed in Africa.”

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**ks:** Referencing this joke, Slavoj Žižek reproaches the Left liberal anti-capitalist whose hyper-activism merely “changes the way we humans talk about commodities” (social relations or what the post-cure patient knows) rather than dare “change the way commodities talk among themselves” (capitalist production forces or what the chicken knows). Martens’ critique of post-documenta 11 “critical art” is similar in spirit to Žižek’s. In Martens’ estimation, politically engaged art today typically changes the way artists and audiences talk about exploitation and inequalities and so forth by showing work to elite audiences while being indifferent to the work’s position within the exploitative processes of production and spectating. This disavowed complicity brings to mind the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah’s mythical Chichidodo bird; the bird that hates excrement with its soul but only feeds on maggots which grow best in the lavatory.

I touched on this subject a bit in our earlier conversation “Silent Parodies” in which I indicated how Ghana’s art institutions had become a “cultural slum” by the turn of the century owing to the rise of neoliberal market logic. Working in the “cultural slum” of KNUST College of Art in Kumasi, my institutional critical response was to go on artistic strike, stop “making art” symbolically and to inaugurate a practice of “making artists.” My political strategy was what I called “ironic overidentification” with the conditions of the cultural slum. Through that, I hoped to transform art from the status of commodity to gift. My way of changing the language of the chicken or confronting the lavatory saw myself in several artistic, curatorial, and non-artistic roles. I formed loose collectives with some young tutors and former students, and also networked with international artists and curators in an ambitious curriculum transformation. After about a decade of this intervention, the College of Art has become an important hub of contemporary art in West Africa. My concern today is for it not to become, in Okwui Enwezor’s phrasing, another “veritable farm system for the art gallery world.”

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Renzo Martens: Tretyakov in the Congo?

kaří’kačá seid’ou

and Jelle Bouwhuis


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*My country Ghana’s own political destiny was tied in various ways to developments in the DR Congo. Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was a keen observer of developments in the Congo. It is possible that neo-colonial control may be exercised by a consortium of financial interests which are not specifically identifiable with any particular State. The control of the Congo by great international financial concerns is a case in point. See: Kwame Nkrumah, Neo-Colonialism; The Last Stage of Imperialism (New York: International Publishers, 1973), x.


need explanation—for example, does its attempt at institutional criticism and the way it explains itself in that sense, also make sense in Kumasi? What would its main lesson be for your students, according to you?

ks: I showed the film to MFA students in Kumasi the moment I had access to it. Already my own off-site and “institutional critical” practice, and the work of some alumni I had mentored overlapped with some aspects of Martens’ practice so it made sense. The film screening somehow coincided with my lessons on political emancipation and the complex relations between authoring, spectatoring, collectivization, and the dissolving of genres in “activist” and participatory practice. I take the film’s main lessons to be its extraordinary plasticity, especially in the extra-artistic roles Martens inaugurate in order to transform documentary filmic practice. The productivist literary practice of Martens’ avatar Tretyakov is exemplary here; among others it had involved, “collecting funds to pay for tractors,” “persuading independent peasants to enter the kolkhoz [collective farming],” “creating wall newspapers, reporting for Moscow newspapers,” and “introducing radio and mobile movie houses.”

JB: What do you regard as positive and what as negative about the work?

ks: In one of its several expressions, the film presents itself as a meta-critique—a liar’s paradox of sorts. It makes visible the possible failure of what gets shown in a gesture reminiscent of Derrida’s “autoimmunity”; a gesture of self-preservation that leads to self-destruction. On the one hand, the film humorously presents itself as being complicit in global capitalist exploitation, and, on the other hand, as an institutional critique of it. It shows itself as one of the Western-engineered exploitative projects that depend on a new “white man’s burden” or humanitarian blackmail; “What you should do is train them, empower them... There are new opportunities... new markets, new products.”

But if the film does not quite get ahead in its

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*10 The alumni I refer to here include Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Ibrahim Mahama, and Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh.

*11 See: Benjamin “Author as Producer,” 81–82.

*12 Ibid, 89.

*13 Ibid.