Gentrification After Institutional Critique: On Renzo Martens's Institute for Human Activities

— T.J. Demos

The Institute for Human Activities (IHA), founded and directed by Dutch artist Renzo Martens, represents an ambitious five-year project based in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It is both conceptually complex and creatively innovative. In the Congo, the IHA is not just a project for international audiences, it attempts to address the critical and creative interface between, on the one hand, its platform for artistic production in sub-Saharan Africa and, on the other, Western art markets and cultural institutions. While clearly an ‘institution of critique’, the project differs from past models in Western contemporary art, most significantly in not being based in the developed cultural centres of the global North.

The IHA should also be distinguished from the examples of cultural institution-building in the African context, with groups like Huit Facettes (Senegal).

T.J. Demos untangles the provocations, contradictions and apparent good intentions of Renzo Martens’s ‘gentrification programme’ in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

...they don't come to film parties. They come to film misery.
For poverty is their most economically valuable ‘natural resource’, according to Martens. This is explained as the artist is shownas part of a ragtag group of village portraits in taking pictures — the highly prized images of the international media — of ‘raped women’ and ‘starving children’, instead of their usual fare of birthday parties and weddings, for which they earn a pittance. Unfortunately, the institutional cards of the media industry are stacked against such grassroots opportunities, even though in the film. Western photoreporters are shown effectively to practice the same thing. For this reason, Enjoy Poverty remains alternately eye-opening and intolerable: it exchanges the transformative and redemptive potential of artistic intervention for the critical exposure of insurmountable challenges brought on by a neocolonial system of institutional and racial inequality, and it cruelly offers no hope to concerned viewers. While the film insists that art, like photojournalism and humanitarianism, is ultimately a brutal form of capitalist realism, a commercially self-generating enterprise like any other, the IHA appears to abandon that cynicism, making new efforts at positive impact. Of course, this new approach will not be convincing to all. One particular obstacle that the IHA advertises itself — ever controversially — as a ‘gentrification programme’. The IHA intends to creatively appropriate that term, its objective being to deploy the gentrification process in order to attract resources to the ERC, in the same way that impoverished urban areas are apparently revitalised by the creative industry. If this proposal appears unlikely, if not obscene, it is because such terminology and ideas have been heavily criticised and largely discredited in recent years. By identifying with a practice deemed politically offensive by many on the cultural left, and installing it in the unlikely setting of a rural Congolese plantation town, Martens hopes to revisit it for progressive purposes, essentially mobilising its controversial aspect as an avant-garde shock tactic. Martens’s strategy here — in a departure from Enjoy Poverty — operates in a productive way: taking up institutions and economic relations that normally privilege the elite few and redirecting their benefits (including the funding generated from European cultural initiatives) toward the disenfranchised many. In other words, the IHA seeks to reverse-engineer the neoliberal project on a micro-level. This, at least, is the business model; what remains to be seen is whether it will operate as intended in the long run (Martens hopes that the system will be self-financing within the next year). The IHA also targets artistic and cultural institutions, in particular Tate Modern for its sponsorship by Unilever, the Anglo-Dutch multinational consumer goods company now co-headquartered in London and Rotterdam. It is not by coincidence that the IHA initially set up its operations in Boteka, in north-west Congo, on a former Unilever plantation. After the IHA was violently chased away by the land’s current owner, the Canadian company Ferreira, the project resettled in an unfenced location near Kinshasa, at another former Unilever site. In 2013, William Lever — who was later renamed Lord Leverhulme in honour of his wife, Elizabeth, — established a number of plantation settlements in Congo, then under Belgian colonial rule, in order to produce palm oil for European markets and build the corporation that would ultimately become Unilever (following a merger with Dutch company Margarine Unie in 1930). The colony was established through a

veitable genocide during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and subjugated as the personal possession of King Leopold II, with its peoples commandeered into servicing his lucrative rubber industry. Levers’s plantations exploited the virtual slave labour of locals, including the Congolese people. Around the same time, Lever created Port Sunlight near Liverpool, a model company town for his British workforce, which included the Lady Lever Art Gallery at its centre — the use of art in this case amounting to what Martens calls a ‘tiny exception to the status quo, to be seen and savoured by few, but not really changing the rule of production’ for the many, such as those in Congo’s field of operations. As an added intrigue, Martens observes that the Pende were also amongst the African sculptors who inspired the early-twentieth-century ‘primitivist’ avant-garde. Fiecase and Matumie amongst them, who appropriated (or rather exploited) African tribal styles in order to reinvoke Western models of creative transgression, endowing them with an aura of savagery and uncivilised virility.

Like many other former tribal groups, the descendants of the Pende commonly worked today for global extraction industries, running palm oil and cocoa plantations; their impoverishment remains in place in a neocolonial regime of multi-generational servitude that is nearly impossible to escape, and that has historically served art markets and capitalist industry alike. It is precisely this vicious cycle of multinational corporate extraction, global neoliberalism, African patronisation and Congolese social devastation that Martens’s IHA project is intended on disrupting. In settling at a former Unilever site, the IHA has sponsored an artistic workshop and invited locals from the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League — which the IHA helped set up, and which is run by René Nkongo, the former director of Greenpeace Congo — to participate in a different sort of production, one leading toward the making of artistic self-portraits. The process benefits from the coaching of prominent artists from Kinshasa such as Botulata, a former palm-oil plantation worker who was able to escape from the system through his artistic practice. Botulata and Nkongo were also speakers

5 As Martens said recently, “However critical it is in labour conditions in Congo, in the end it only constitutes labour conditions in Boteka. It’s not the same as in New York’s Lower East Side, because that’s where people see it, talk about it, write about it — whether for or against democratically.” quoted in Robert Storr, “Reza Mariss — the artist who wants to gentrify the tropical”, The Guardian, 16 December 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/arts/2014/dec/16/reza-mariss-artistic-gentrification-congo
7 Along the same vein, European leaders of the IHA are the Berlin Biennale, the Mondrian Fund, the Prince Ombredanne Culture Fund, and the China Prize Fund.
8 Email from the artist, 17 June 2015.

12 For more information, see http://www.gallerietwefilmtak.com/filmtak, 20 June 2015.
at the IHA’s Opening Seminar that took place in June of 2013 in Botswana, which brought together a mix of Congolese and international speakers (myself included) to discuss the directions, challenges and potential risks of the IHA initiative over a two-day public workshop. The conference formed part of a developing and currently ongoing 'Critical Curriculum', an introductory arts course for plantation workers, including artistic training, talks and presentations, run by the IHA in conjunction with the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, from which artworks are generated that can be sold on the international art market.

Blending the creative directions of the IHA and the artistic energies of plantation workers such as Mathieu Kasimana, Muboda Kipala, Nonga Bassar and Jérome Mabiala, the first edition of IHA works comprises expressionist-styled self-portrait busts rendered in chocolate to be sold in square, white IHA-designed boxes. Initially sculpted in the clay of the Congo River, these portraits are then, with the agreement of the original artist-labourers, transformed into chocolate reproductions by the IHA through a process of 3D printing, which reconstructs the original authors' pieces in Europe, remaking them in the very material of their everyday plantation labour (objects that would otherwise be too fragile and expensive to ship from the DRG). Some of this chocolate, by an agreement of corporate sponsorship — one that is key to the IHA’s institutional flourishing — has been provided by Callebaut, the Belgian chocolatier that owns its cocoa from West Africa (including from the plantation that is owned by the Groupes Blattner Huyon, whose owner was memorably featured in Enjoy Poverty buying black-and-white photographic prints of his impoverished workers rendered with a classic documentary aura). The collaborative chocolate sculptures are sold in the European and North American art markets, with sales facilitated by the IHA and proceeds returned directly to the original producers, helping them to live beyond the basic subsistence provided by their plantation labour — the generation process completed. It is these objects that were shown recently at the Artes Mundi in Cardiff in 2014, and at KW! Gallery in Berlin and Galerie Fons Welters in Amsterdam in 2015, in shows authored by Martens and the IHA. Indeed, the Amsterdam presentation, 'A New Settlement', was attributed to 'Remo Martens and the Institute for Human Activities',

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While individual inclusions were credited to the Congolese arrangers, an arrangement encoding the very terms of IHA’s institutionalization of genocidal and its division of labour.

What of the unsettling anthropogenic aspect of the chocolate heads, the implication that upon purchasing the sculptures consumers can eat not only African chocolate but also devour the labour and even the very being of their makers? According to Martens, this is nothing new: the West has been feeding on Africa and Africans for centuries, not only relying on commodities for which the sourcing and cultivation of raw materials (cocoa, rubber, coltan, diamonds) pay pitiful salaries — Congolese palm oil plantation workers earn approximately US$8 a day — but also consuming liberal expressions of compassion and guilt in the form of addictive media images. Through this mimetic and interventionist cycle, then, the IHA’s artistic production is directly embedded in the materiality, institutions and sites of the extraction industry. And here is where Martens’s operation finds its key element. According to his analysis of the conventional operating procedures of global contemporary art, an artist from the West (e.g. Richard Mosse, Francis Alÿs or Mark Boulton — figures to whom Martens himself often points) typically develops a critical art project in a now-Western developing country, attempting to bring

16 In my presentation “Toward a New Institutional Critique,” I explored the problematic in a recent, then quite trendy in the art world, of “material labour,” particularly in cultures, I argued, when considered in relation to generating plantation labour practices in the DRG. I also called on the IHA to address Africa’s participation in all levels of its organization so as to avoid the dangers of perpetuating new forms of colonial relations in its implementations. The IHA is currently preparing a publication that will include this and other texts from the seminar.
A NEW SETTLEMENT IN THE CONGO

Inauguration of Centre de la Société des Tabacs Congolais

First Settlement: Ihuka

Jointly created by OneHeart and the Foundation for the Environment and Peace

Cocoa and goods of plantation at the Congo

A NEW SETTLEMENT IN THE CONGO

AMSTERDAM COCOA WAREHOUSE

Institute for Human Activities
Infographics, designed by Mehdi Arnaee, 2015.

Gratitude to the artists:
KOW, BeLike;
Galerie Post Wallonie, Amsterdam; and
The Box, Los Angeles
forms of representation and participation to the underprivileged, socially repressed and economically excluded, yet the final product of that work is generally exhibited, circulated, discussed and sold in the art markets, gallery institutions and magazines of the developed countries of the North. Martens’s IHA challenges this logic in two ways: it reverses this flow, which otherwise drives and exemplifies the inequalities of global neoliberalism, and it unifies the origin of artistic production and intervention with the destination of profit.

The elements of this intervention can be seen in IHA’s developing activities, including its exhibition program in collaboration with the Van Abbe Museum, whereby the IHA presents works from the Eindhoven based collection in the DRC — for example, pieces by Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham.16 (Tino Sehgal allegedly declined the invitation, explaining to Martens he only works for ‘affluent people’.) In other words, museum-quality works by well-established and respected artists — Nauman has been a featured artist in Tate Modern’s Unlever Series — are being presented in the Congo, thereby returning (however briefly) the cultural gains of colonial and now neoliberal industry to the former and current location of resource extraction and plantation labour. As Martens points out, Unlever pays plantation workers a mere US$240 annually while sponsoring one of the world’s most visible contemporary art series. Look at where the surplus money that Unlever spends on subsidizing these art exhibits comes from,” he explains. “It comes from people working on the plantations.” Why not redirect that surplus to the benefit of it? In addition to such exhibitions, the IHA conference programme aims to foster dialogue with the existing practices of a further range of Congolese intellectuals, writers and scientists — among them Lubumbashi- and Brussels-based photographer Sammy Baloji, Kimbasa-based dancer and choreographer Faustin Linyekula, Lubumbashi based artist and author Patrick Modiano and Kimbasa musician Béron de la Raie — in order to generate critical discourse in the IHA’s local context.

Speaking as a participant in the IHA’s Opening Seminar, I discovered that, far from some kind of neocolonial carnival or bad-faith, cynical artistic game — which is sometimes how Martens’s provocative project is (mis)understood — the programme represented a serious discussion featuring Congolese intellectuals, activists and artists (including Botsalala, Ngobi and the professor Jereme Emulien Mumbanza mwana Bwesigye) and their European counterparts (including Marcus Steinweg and Nina Möhrenmann, in person, and Eva Weinrich and Richard Florida, by satellite connection).17

16 This is clearly articulated by Martens in ‘Instituut voor Humanitaire Artefacten: Renee Martens in conversation with H. Derrin’, p. 65.
17 In this regard, Martens’s project participates in the recent strategy of exhibiting European collections’ archives of unstable Western Europe, such as Rachel de Joode’s 2011 Project in a Hall at the Pompidou, which brought Rode de Commune (1971) by Düsseldorf’s La Rette Artheutique, and the 2011 Biennale of Art, in Flanders, ‘Return to Resistance’, which featured ‘the Chunh, which brought Rode de Commune (1971) by Düsseldorf’s La Rette Artheutique, and the 2011 Biennale of Art, in Flanders, ‘Return to Resistance’, which featured the Chunh.
18 Email from the artist, 19 June 2015.
20 Floris was an exceptional case as the sole advocate of creative class and liberal, free-market thinking. He aimed to divert such capitalist interests toward others by proposing to apply criteria of Florida’s principles to a global context, the economy in the specific context of the Third World. Part of the plan appears to test his Polytechnic University (including his so-called ‘the model’ for stimulating new urbanization: Talent (highly talented) and community (high population), technology (technological infrastructure necessary to support an entrepreneurial culture). For a critique of Floris’s position, see Martha Stayer, Culture Class and Cultural Urbanism, Plan, 17, July 2013, available at http://www.jfflora.com/journal/more-class-artstownby-urbanization-part-4/, and Culture Class Art, Culture Urbanism, Part 19, July 2013, available at http://www.jfflora.com/journal/more-class-artstownby-urbanization-part-4/ (both last accessed on 13 July 2015).
its proceedings, the seminar addressed the challenges of promoting contemporary art in rural Congo, confronted the difficult-to-overcome, institutionalised socio-economic inequalities that exist within that context (contra Florida); and considered the potential dangers of repeating colonial hierarchies between privileged Westerners and disenfranchised African subjects when it comes to such institution building. Of course, were it to fail into such a familiar rut, then clearly the IHA would be a failure.

While the project is still in its early days, its achievements are already impressive, even if it has yet to fulfill its ultimate ambition: to progressively reshuffle the cards of art’s symbolic, cultural and economic capital. As Martens claims, “We can sell these chocolate sculptures for £40 a piece, they cost maybe £2 or £3 — so £37 profit.” Currently the IHA markets these artworks through galleries; it hopes eventually to sell its products through department stores, where the price per pound of chocolate, worth approximately US$2.5 to plantation workers, might soar when transformed into an art object. ‘People in Congo export a lot. They export cocoa, for instance, but cocoa doesn’t speak. If you add emotions, all of a sudden it does speak, and as soon as it starts speaking, it’s worth a lot more money”, explains Martens. “You add feelings and emotions to chocolate and you get a 7,000 per cent surplus.”

(A recent diagram by Metahaven, commissioned by the IHA, maps out this circulation in a helpful flow chart.)

Yes, in the end, it’s not quite so simple. (Is it ever?) The IHA adds into the ingredients of its products its own cultural capital, generating artistic publicity via press releases and coverage in both the mainstream media and art publications, including The Guardian, CNN and e-flux announcements (and even here, in this Aftershock essay). The IHA exploits this publicity for its own self-reproduction, establishing visibility and credibility through association with internationally recognised writers and public intellectuals, as well as through organising exhibitions and public events, and drawing on the marketable buzz of Martens’s own reputation. The IHA mixes that cultural capital into the production of chocolate sculptures, at the same time cultivating further publicity — and most importantly, funding — for its own activities, to the benefit of all its worker-collaborators.

While the contract is meant to be advantageous to both sides, Martens’s conceptual direction clearly distinguishes itself from Congolese sculptural work — the labour of grand ideas differentiated from manual craft.

(Here, too, there is an aspect of critical mimicry: Martens’s own masterminding of the IHA project places him in the role of the exceptional (white, European, male) subject, overseeing his poor, black African) workers as beneficent facilitator of their own liberation, thereby re-enslaving in part the very unequal hierarchy and traditional identities of the plantation system. It’s not surprising that his project’s slipperiness — wherein mimicry risks sliding into repetition — engenders confusion between his intentions and the complex ironies of his performance. This situation occurs when Martens is cast as a ‘missionary’ of state imperialism, an apologiser for old-fashioned gentrification and a pretender who speaks for ‘the entirety of exploited peoples of the Congo’, yet articulated without any awareness of the antithetical elements or representational criticality of Martens’s artistic form of political theatre. In fact, such a situation speaks to a central tension within the IHA — namely between its over-identification with destructive ideologies (gentrification, neocolonialism, etc.) and its plans to improve the local situation. These contradictory aspects cannot easily be separated; just as it would be inaccurate to read the project as a straightforwardly ‘humanitarian’ endeavour, it seems inadequate to write it off on the basis of its obscene over-identifications. The IHA’s artistic achievement, perhaps, lies in forcing these tendencies to coexist.

If the IHA does indeed repeat a colonial relationship, it would seem that it could be overcome only if the exchange generated by the IHA were a two-way street. This would entail surpassing its current division of conceptual and manual labour and relinquishing the fixation on Martens’s own character, perhaps in the formation of a post-Martens IHA as has long been the plan. At the same time, the double-blind logic of the project hints at the long-term likelihood of such a resolution; after all, it remains both a gentrification programme and a modelling of institutional critique (even if it renews both of these terms). Until transformation transcends critique, however, it seems impossible to create an arrangement where both sides work to the benefit of an equal distribution — of agency as much as rewards, conceptual invention as much as manual production — giving way to the creation of a positive, postcolonial form of local, even at the microscopic scale of the IHA. The IHA has made progress, most of all in revealing how acute forms of global economic disparity are reproduced in certain critical art practices and in the arrangements of institutional sponsorship, reproducing hierarchies between populations that remain locked in trans-generational colonial-style servitude and others that enjoy the exploitative benefits that derive from that situation. Its work, however, is far from done.

21 See http://www.humanactivity.org (last accessed on 10 June 2015).
22 L. Saffarin, ‘Reza Martens — the artist who wants to geographical jungle’, op. cit.
23 D. Currin, ‘The artistic role of the warlord that wants to change the world with chocolate heads’, op. cit.

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