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 the Congo (DRC) that is as ethically provocative as it is conceptually complex. Neither a purely local initiative nor one made solely for international audiences, the IHA attempts a 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) and Le Groupe Amos (DRC) working to develop workshop-based collectives and events programming in order to revitalise traditional craft production or advance models of African modernism, strengthen grass-roots communities, overcome regional social stratification and build local cultural networks.1 While the IHA also shares certain of these goals—such as promoting community organisation and stimulating local artistic creativity—it also represents a conceptually experimental project coming from outside the region (although Martens has spent much time in the DRC, he is based in Brussels) and aiming to invent a new transnational and artistic model of economic and social re-engineering: one that aims to reverse the flow of capital so that art’s cycle of production, critical intervention and profitable consumption directly benefits the South.

In this sense, the IHA both develops and appears distinct from the critically mimetic strategy of Martens’s past experiment in the DRC. Epitaphs III: Enjoy Poverty (2006), this film documents the self-implicating performance of Martens in his investigation of the image economy of commercial photographic operating in the conflict zones of Congolese refugee camps, materially deprived plantations and inadequately equipped medical clinics. Shielding variously into the role of the concerned artist, humanitarian photographer and colonial explorer, Martens dramatised the exploitation of poverty by otherwise well-intentioned but nonetheless commercial image-makers (himself included). The film painfully shows the structural barriers confronting the Congolese underclass, particularly those who are stuck performing precarious plantation labour and villagers displaced and brutalised by warfare and deprivation, which prevent them from benefiting economically from the commodified images of their own misery.

---

1. Launched in 2012 during the 7th Berlin Biennale, and overcoming many initial logistical challenges, the IHA will likely continue beyond 2017 owing to a steady beginning and complications with its initial sponsors.  
For poverty is their most economically valuable ‘natural resource’, according to Martens. This is explained as the artist is shown mounting a ragtag group of village photographers in pictures – the highly prized images of the international media of ‘topped women’ and ‘starving children’ – instead of their usual fare of birthday parties and weddings, for which they earn a pitance. Unfortunately, the institutional cards of the media industry are stacked against such crass opportunism, even though the film Western photojournalists are shown effectively to practice the same thing. For this reason, Poverty remains alternately eye-opening and inordinable: it exchanges the transformative and redemptive potential of artistic intervention for the critical exposure of insurmountable challenges brought about by a neocolonial system of institutional and racial inequality, and it cruelly offers no source of 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 is 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 DRC, in the same way that impoverished urban areas are apparently revitalized by the creative industry. If this programme appears unlikely, if not obscene, it’s because such terminology and ideas have been heavily criticised and largely discredited in recent years.4 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 retool it for progressive purposes, essentially mobilising its controversial aspect as an avant-garde shock tactic.

Martens’s strategy here – a departure from Empty Poverty – opens up a productive way of taking institutions and economic relations that normally privilege the elite few and redirecting their benefits (including the funding generated by European cultural initiatives) toward the disenfranchised many. In other words, the IHA seeks to revive genuine, neoliberal projects 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).5

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-hosting the exhibition in London and Rotterdam. It is not by coincidence that the IHA initially funded its settlement in Bokita, 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 Foroniva, the project resettled in an undisclosed location near Kinshasa, at another former Unilever site. In 1991, William Lever – who was later renamed Lord Leverhulme in honour of his wife, Elizabeth Helme – established a number of plantations in the Congo, under Belgian colonial rule, in order to produce palm oil for European markets and add the corporation that would ultimately become Unilever (following a merger with Dutch company Margarine Unie in 1930).6 This colonisation was established through a


6 Cutting generally point out how gentrification generation wealth for developers while entailing the eviction of working-class and race people. See Rudi Phelma and Carla Smits, ‘The Rise and Fall of Gentrification’, Rotterdam, no. 33, Winter 2004, pp. 41–42.

7 Among the non-profit European foundations are the Ha and the Berlin Stattler, the Mezzanine, and the Prince’s Trust, and the Prince’s Trust.

8 Martens, ‘Gent.’


10 For more information, see http://www.whoismartens.com (last accessed on 10 June 2015).


12 For more information, see http://www.whoismartens.com (last accessed on 10 June 2015).

13 Botaalita and Njongo were also speakers

14 Martens and the Institute for Human Activities, The New Settlers, 2010, text, edition, sound, DVD. Grichting the artist; RVG, Berlin; Galerie Franca Winter, Amsterdam; and The Box, Los Angeles


17 For more information, see http://www.whoismartens.com (last accessed on 10 June 2015).

18 The descendants of the Perle commonly work today for global extraction industries, running palm-oil and cocoa plantations; their impoverished remnant is placed in a neocolonial regime of multi-generational servitude that is nearly impossible to escape, and that has historically served as export markets for capitalist-industry alike. It is precisely this vicious cycle of multinational corporate extrackition, global neoliberalism, African pauperisation and Congolese social degradation that Martens’s IHA project is intent on disrupting. In setting 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 Renzo Nijongo, the former director of Greatpeace 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 Botaalita, a former palm-oil plantation worker who was able to escape from the system through his artistic practice. Botaalita and Njongo were also speakers
at the IHA’s Opening Seminar that took place in June of 2013 in Botok, 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 three-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 Kasama, Mubuku Kipala, Divine Ismael and Jérémie Mubala, 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 labours, transformed into chocolate reproductions by the IHA through a process of 3D printing, which reconstructs the original authors’ places 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 DRC). Some of this chocolate, by an agreement of corporate sponsorship—one that is key to the IHA’s institutional alignment—has been provided by Callebaut, the Belgian chocolatier that obtains its cocoa from West Africa (including from the plantation that is owned by the Groupe Blattner Elchim, 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 gentrification process completed. It is these objects that were shown recently at Artes Mundis in Cardiff in 2014, and at KOW Gallery in Berlin and Galerie Fonné Wetzels in Amsterdam in 2015, in shows authored by Martens and the IHA. Indeed, the Amsterdam presentation, ‘A New Sentiment’, was attributed to ‘Remu Martens and the Institute for Human Activities’.

While Enjoy Poverty insists that art, like photojournalism and humanitarianism, is ultimately a brutal form of capitalist realism, the IHA appears to abandon that cynicism.

While individual incursions were credited to the Congolese artists, an arrangement exceeding the very terms of IHA’s institutionalisation of gentrification and its division of labour. What of the unsettling anthropogenic aspect of the chocolate busts, 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 paltry salaries—Congolese palm oil plantation workers earn approximately US$1 a day—but also consuming liberal expressions of compassion and guilt in the form of addictive media images. Through this minor and interventionist cycle, then, the IHA’s artistic production is directly embedded in the materiality, intimations 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 Brusens)—figures to whom Martens himself often points—typically develops a critical art project in a non-Western developing country, attempting to bring...
forms of representation and participation to the underprivileged, socially repressed and economically excluded; yet the focal product of that work is generally exhibited, circulated, discussed and sold in the art markets, galleries and institutions 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 questions the origin of artistic production and the negotiation of profit.16 The elements of this intervention can be seen in IHA's developing activities, including its exhibition programme in collaboration with the Van Abbenmuseum, whereby the IHA presents works from the Eindhoven-based collection in the DRC—such as pieces by Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham.17 (Tina Sehgal) allegedly declined the invitation, explaining to Martens he only works for "affluent people."18 In other words, museum-quality works by well-established and supported artists—such as Nauman has been a featured artist in Tate Modern's Unilever Series—are being presented in the Congo, thereby returning (however briefly) the cultural gains of colonial and post-colonial industry to the former and current location of resource extraction and plantation labour. As Martens points out, Unilever pays plantation workers a meagre US$0.60 annually while sponsoring one of the world's most visible contemporary art events.3 Look where the surplus money that Unilever spends on subsidizing these art exhibits comes from, he explains. It comes from people working on the plantations. So why not let them share in the benefits? 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 Lulembashi and Brussels-based photographer Sanembo Bologo, Kinshasa-based dancer and choreographer Faustin Linyekula, Lubumbashi-based artist and writer Patrick Modukelerwa and Kinshasa-based musician Boveleo de La Vie—in an effort 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 neo-colonial carnival or bad faith, cynical artistic game—which is sometimes how Martens's provocative project is misunderstood—the programme represented a serious discussion featuring Congolese intellectuals, artists and activists (including Bouattala, Ngoy and the professor Jeannine Kilimambuga Mubanza) and their European counterparts (including Marcus Steinweg and Nina Miekevens, in person, and Koyal Wolinski and Richard Florida, by satellite connection).19 In the course of 20 Florida was an exceptional case in the role played by newly emerging middle classes and their identification with the global market. His talk, "The need for a new economy of the arts," was spurred by the new importance of the arts in the global market. Part of the talk presented the philosophy behind the project: the idea of the "global city" as a model for the future. The talk was delivered in English, and was followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience. The talk was broadcast live via satellite, and was also available online. More information can be found on the project's website: http://www.iha-culture.org. The IHA conference programme also featured a panel discussion on "the role of the arts in development," which was moderated by Nina Miekevens and included speakers from around the world. The panel discussion was also broadcast live via satellite, and was also available online. More information can be found on the project's website: http://www.iha-culture.org. The IHA conference programme also featured a panel discussion on "the role of the arts in development," which was moderated by Nina Miekevens and included speakers from around the world. The panel discussion was also broadcast live via satellite, and was also available online. More information can be found on the project's website: http://www.iha-culture.org.
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 (contex Florida); and considered the potential dangers of repositioning colonial hierarchies between privileged Westerners and disempowered African subjects when it comes to such institution building. Of course, were it to fall 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."24 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$6.25 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."25 (A recent diagram by Metahaven, commissioned by the IHA, maps out this circulation in a helpful flow chart.) Yet, 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 Afterall 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 facilitators of their own liberation, thereby re-creating in part the very unequal hierarchy and traditional identities of the plantation system. It's not surprising that his project's slipperiness—wherein mimicry slides into repetition—engenders confusion between his intentions and the complex terrain of his performance. This situation occurs when Martens is cast as a 'missionary' of 'state imperialism,' an apologist 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 satirical elements or representational criticality of Martens's artistic form of political theory. 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' endeavor, it seems inadequate to write it off on the basis of its ambivalence 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 reprising 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-bind 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 reinvigorates 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 reward, conceptual inversion as much as manual production—giving way to the creation of a positive, postcolonial form of life, even at the macroeconomic scale of the IHA. The IHA has made progress, most of all in revealing how barefaced 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 transgenerational colonial-style servitudes and others that enjoy the exploitative benefits that derive from that situation. Its work, however, is far from done.