

Dirty Water

Renzo Martens' practice cannot be contained within traditional creative boundaries, nor is it defined purely by creative output. The conversations and activities he facilitates pry and pick at the fabric of the art world and the power structures on which it depends, as **Ric Bower** discovers.

The Institute of Human Activities (IHA), the organisational vehicle through which Renzo Martens works, is in the process of setting up a critical academy of art in a deeply impoverished plantation, formerly owned by chemical giant Unilever, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Believing that genuine altruism is an unattainable ideal, Martens is candid about his own fallibility and cultural limitations, in the the sense of him being just 'another interfering white man'. Being confronted with his practice can therefore be a very uncomfortable experience for a westerner. Martens and his young family are in the process of moving to live on the plantation where he works. I spoke to him, in the very different environment of a central Cardiff hotel, about his Artes Mundi presentation. I began by asking him what similarities there were between the IHA's Gentrification Program - which, simplistically expressed, is Martens' bid to bring 'cappuccino culture' to the DRC - and a stereotypical Western art school.

Renzo Martens: We don't, and couldn't, teach people how to make art. We lay on a critical curriculum for them to work from.

Ric Bower: How many plantation workers are involved with the project?

RM: Those who made the sculptures, on show at National Museum Cardiff, you mean?

RB: Yes.

RM: There was a degree of organic selection; not everyone from the former Unilever plantation felt like sitting around working on clay all day; or they would only do it to get the free meal, not that that was a problem. The important thing was not actually the making of the sculpture but the conversations that occurred in the groups whilst we were together; conversations along the lines of: 'We have been working for Unilever, and, therefore, for global economic markets, for five generations and yet we're still living in mud huts and our kids can't go to school. No one knows about this because the product we offer to the world does not carry this information.'

What spurs the global economy, in a post-industrial society, is no longer the raw commodity, palm oil or cocoa, but how that commodity is packaged. The people that work with us on the plantation have lived through some of the most dramatic societal changes imaginable in the last 100 years. They have changed language, religion, economic and political systems; they have had to change everything about themselves,

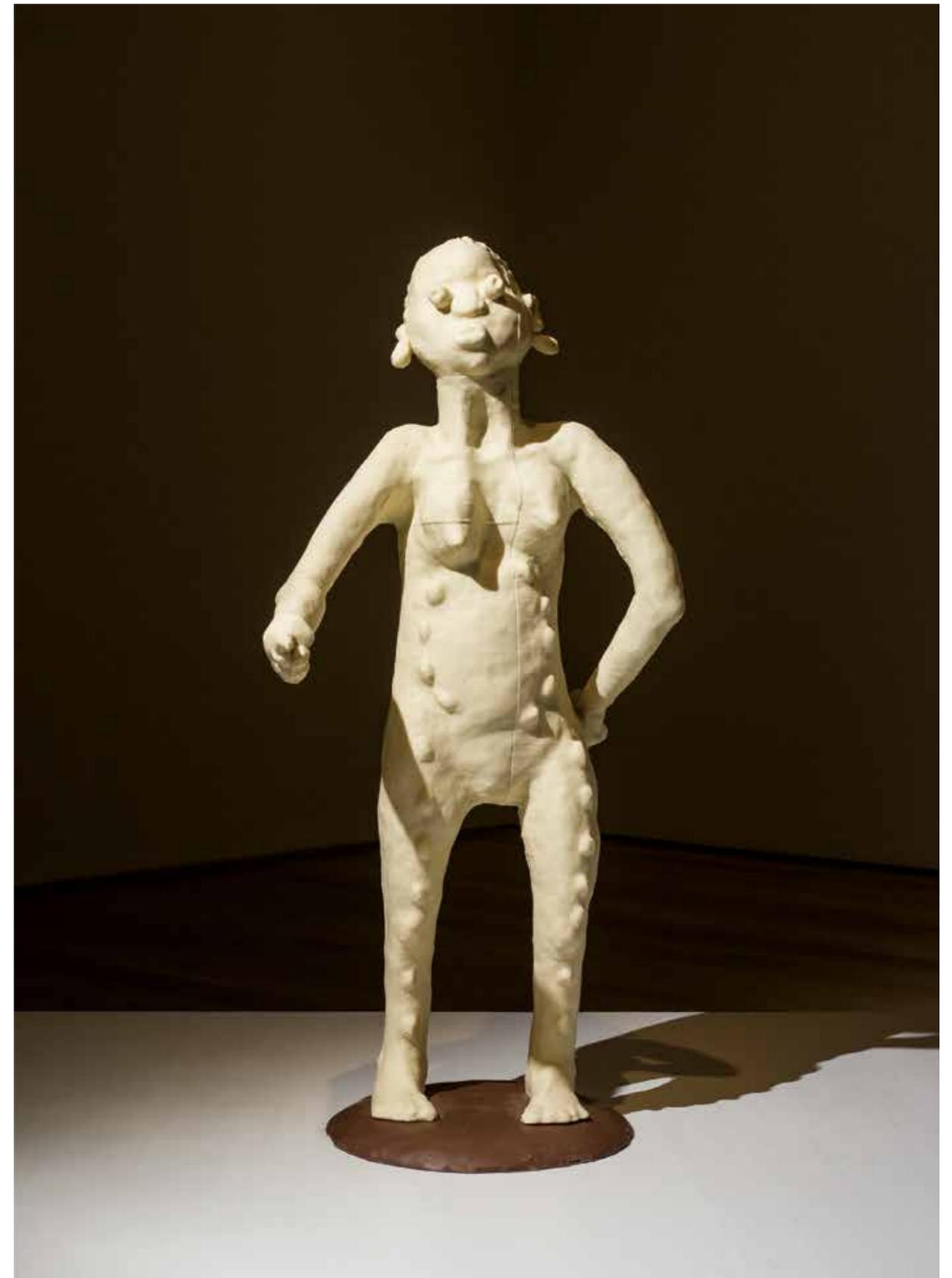
and not by choice but by force. Given then that the rest of the world is now poised on the brink of a period of seismic change, whether because of climate change, war, or an increasingly disenfranchised working class, these people on this plantation are experts. If there is one group of people in the world you want to learn from it is them.

I don't think it is merely a *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* we are presenting through IHA; we are not just saying that these people only need to be freed from the chains of oppression, although that is certainly part of it; we, in the West, also need to be freed from certain oppressions. We then, as socially critical artists, cannot afford to have our criticality managed by real estate developers and politicians who decide when, where, how and for whom criticality will be implemented. So it is for artists to take control...

RB: ...of the structures in which they operate?

RM: Yes. So I can't just make socially critical art. I can't just have exhibitions or run a gallery. I can't just have an art centre, or be a curator. What I need to do, as an artist, is to take ownership and responsibility for capital accumulation through my work.

RB: Is it the case that 'art', as a word, is —→





being overused to the point of redundancy? If instead we were to say 'creative practice', might that potentially broaden the definition to include a wider range of cultural activities?

RM: No, I am an artist, and I see being an artist as being very different from being a creative practitioner. Art is the arena in which matter can examine its own function, role and spirituality. The person who made that advertising poster across the street [gesticulates towards a perfume advertisement in the window of a shop] is certainly a creative practitioner, but it is not art. The advertisement will never consider its own role within culture and function in an even temporarily value-free white cube. That particular image of an attractive woman staring out at us exists only to demand something from us.

RB: If it is re-contextualised in five years time, into a gallery space, then it potentially changes...

RM: Sure, then it could work.

RB: Could the traditional fine/applied art dualism be presenting us with a false dichotomy? Does it perhaps, as in the case of Oliviero Toscani's AIDS images for Benetton, function within both realms?

RM: Yes, some of their campaigns have been terrific, but what we are seeing now is that multinational corporations are speaking the language of individual creative expression. Their engagement is entirely devoid of free thinking though. We found this out first hand at one point on the plantation when we were getting the children to make drawings of their ideal future. A security team burst in and confiscated the drawings; they had had a call from London...

RB: That is shocking...

RM: It is. So what art really needs is true autonomy; in so doing it can justifiably and unashamedly receive funding from anybody.

RB: So then it is defining its own values, so to speak...

RM: It is defining its own terms and conditions. I would happily take money from Unilever because I think autonomy resides in taking ownership of the systems within which we inevitably function. There is no such thing as innocent money from which artists can make innocent work. It is more relevant, politically, for the artist to assume responsibility for the inequalities that inevitably come about as a result of making the work. A number of artists recently boycotted the



19th Sydney Biennial because The Transfield Foundation was one of the sponsors. The Transfield Foundation is associated with Transfield Services who won a \$1.2bn contract to provide welfare and infrastructural services at detention camps on Manus Island and Nauru. As a result of the pressure they withdrew their sponsorship. This was great on one level because it showed the power the artists had and the biennial went ahead without it. There is an irony, though, in that the same artists would have never been able to get to Sydney to show their work if it was not for the global inequalities that companies like Transfield Services are contracted to enforce. So we wash our hands of one thing but we are washing them in dirty water.

RB: What I find particularly challenging about your approach is that it is fundamentally experimental. Do you see risk as essential to the process?

RM: Yes, but the risks are taken for a specific purpose; in this case, to create a setting that is momentarily transparent. And, amongst other things, risk simply makes for much better art.

RM: As an artist, do you assume responsibility for how your work is disseminated on television or YouTube, in particular? How it might be

read through these vehicles is quite different from how it might be read in a gallery setting, for instance.

RM: Of course. The critical art machine has very limited actual reach, even if it claims to be dealing with global issues. This is why I started the Gentrification Programme in the DRC. Art can also play games and lie; sometimes it's even a mystery to the artist who made it. The project I am working on now, enabling the plantation workers to make clay self-portraits, on one level, is very straightforward: it generates money through the art market, which comes directly back to the workers. This will hopefully enable them to discuss the merits of art as social critique whilst they drink their own cappuccinos. We have already had many visiting speakers to the Institute. Urban theorist Richard Florida has lectured; we have also had political activists from Congo; this aspect of what we do we can map out and possibly, even, quantify. But what then actually transpires invariably reaches far beyond our limited imaginings.

RB: You go out of your way, it seems, to upset the sensibilities of the politically correct liberal and yet you are unwilling to discuss your own narrative in relation to your work. Are you concerned that the waters will become just too muddy if you do? →

RM: Yes. If you are a proper liberal then you will really hate my film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, it should be pressing all your buttons. I am, however, happy to acknowledge that I am gaining credibility from the process of making art in this environment.

RB: You allow the chocolate company, who are sponsoring the sculptures for you in the museum, a large area of gallery real estate to display their branding. Usually, when it comes to sponsorship and branding, the artist would seek to minimise its interference with the work.

RM: That's nonsense; I wanted them to make their branding as big as possible. That is how we have the possibility to create a real economy, and be really critical of it, too, by acknowledging and dealing with our economic dependencies.

RB: Is there a line you draw between yourself and your practice?

RM: I don't really know if there is a line, but I try not to talk about myself when discussing the work; this opens up a certain distance between me and the work and also imbues it with some degree of objectivity. The ideas I put forward are, in essence, straightforward, they do not require an artist to execute them - anybody could figure it out. The point is that if socially critical art leads to the development of real estate projects, to gentrification in poor inner cities, then perhaps artists should be the ones taking full responsibility. You can be against it...

RB: ...but it is a relevant position...

RM: ...to back away and pretend it is not happening is just not good enough.

RB: Maybe that is what an artist is then?

RM: A blank canvas responding to the world? Yes.

RB: And you have moved your young family to a plantation in Congo to inhabit the role more completely.

RM: I needed to set up shop there I cannot achieve the things I want to achieve from Brooklyn or Berlin. I want the cappuccinos to be drunk and the conversations conducted on that former Unilever plantation. It is the boiler room of modernism.

RB: It strikes me that you have moved on from

the optimism epitomised by Magnum - a photography agency that, at the beginning at least, believed the photographs they were taking had the capacity to change the world. Instead it would appear to have bitten us on the arse; making images of suffering has now perhaps become counterproductive. Do you have any relationship with the old guard of documentary photographers?

RM: The promise that transparency would somehow lead to equality has not transpired. They believed that if they pictured reality, as they perceived it, and put it in the news it would bring it all closer to us.

RB: So was it a naïve, idealistic dream?

RM: No, I believe in it. My attempt to acknowledge my dependencies is itself an attempt to seek transparency. We are in a situation now where releasing images does not lead to change; it creates a separation. It does not leave the viewer on the same page as the described reality; the reality remains elsewhere. Martha Rosler's series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* already questioned some of these issues a significant time ago, but we need to go much, much further to place our economics and our presence in these other realities. That's what I wanted to do in *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*.

There is a reason why here, in the museum in Cardiff for Artes Mundi, there are only sculptures, self-portraits of plantation labourers. The labourers do not have any passports, they do not have any identity papers, they will never, in their entire lives, set foot on a plane and they will certainly never get a visa for the UK.

A friend of mine, the Congolese artist Sammy Baloji was refused a visa recently, when he had a show at Rivington Place in London, and this is in spite of his considerable fame.

We are all implicated in this; I think so much socially critical art goes wrong, remains sterile, because it does not take into account its own indebtedness to the very economic structures it critiques. I am not saying that we should not therefore make socially critical art; I am saying that it could become more potent if it takes responsibility for its own internal inequalities. It seems, that materially, socially critical art only produces public benefits in the Lower East Side of New York, in certain areas of Berlin or London. It is no coincidence that Unilever underwrote the *Unilever Series* in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern for twelve years, just across the Thames from their headquarters....

RB: There is a point in *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* when you address World Bank officials and declare that poverty is a resource. One of the officials emphatically replies that "Poverty is not a resource but a shared defeat for the international community". It surely can't be a sustainable resource; by definition it destroys itself if it is successful. I am guessing you were just being provocative?

RM: But that is true for any resource, oil, diamonds or even poverty, it will run out.

RB: Gentrification has strong association with class in the English language. It strikes me that what you are doing in your Gentrification Programme goes much deeper and indeed, gentrification might be the wrong word for what you are doing. What you are bringing to these Congolese plantations is in fact soft power.

RM: I just copy and paste what art does, turning it back on itself. I am force-feeding it its own tail. The Congolese are quite used to white tits like me, coming in with some plan or other, whether it is a neon sign or a new school; I am doing little more than observing it all.

RB: How do you, as the programme becomes more established, avoid falling foul of the same issues you are critiquing in other organisations.

RM: We can't. If I wasn't a white middle class guy with access to government funding and the ability to approach large companies to sponsor the show, then there would be no critical art programme in the Congo. It would not happen. All we can do is acknowledge our dependencies. —**CCQ**

Renzo Martens is at:

Art Brussels, Non-Profit Solo Booth

25 April - 27 April 2015

A New Settlement, *Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, 2 May - 6 June 2015*

A Lucky Day, *KOW, Berlin, 2 May - 26 July 2015*

The Matter of Critique, *KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin,*

2 May - 7 June 2015

humanactivities.org
renzomartens.com



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Mbuku Kipala, Self Portrait without Clothes, Renzo Martens and The Institute for Human Activity, 2014, Chocolate, 33 x 30.8 x 33.5 cm
Courtesy Renzo Martens, Institute for Human Activities, Galerie Fons Welters
Photo: Ric Bower

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Small Self Portraits of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League for Sale at Artes Mundi 6, National Museum Wales, with advertising posters for Jan Willem Jansen and Carlo Midiri of the Dutch Pastry Team, Renzo Martens and The Institute for Human Activity
Courtesy Renzo Martens, Institute for Human Activities and Galerie Fons Welters

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Launching Institute of Human Activity's Critical Curriculum, Renzo Martens and The Institute for Human Activity
Courtesy Renzo Martens, Institute for Human Activities and Galerie Fons Welters

p59 (from top)
The New Settlement, Renzo Martens and The Institute for Human Activity
Courtesy Renzo Martens, Institute for Human Activities and Galerie Fons Welters

Emery Muhamba working on Self Portrait, Renzo Martens and The Institute for Human Activity
Courtesy Renzo Martens, Institute for Human Activities and Galerie Fons Welters

Creative Therapy in Former Unilever Commodity Store, Renzo Martens and The Institute for Human Activity
Courtesy Renzo Martens, Institute for Human Activities and Galerie Fons Welters

