

# Renzo Martens:

## On Renzo Martens' Institute for Human Activities

An essay by TJ Demos

The Institute for Human Activities (IHA) represents an ambitious five-year project based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, founded and directed by artist Renzo Martens. Inaugurated during the 7th Berlin Biennial, 2012, and overcoming many initial logistical challenges, its planned five-year period of operation began in 2012 (though owing to a stalled beginning, it will likely continue beyond 2017). More than a purely

local initiative, the IHA represents a critical and creative interface between Western art markets, cultural institutions, museums and exhibition sites, and the formation of a platform for artistic activities, production and reception located in Sub-Saharan Africa, tasked with disrupting historical patterns of colonial inequality mirrored in current relations between North and South in the global art world.

▼ *Jérémie Mabila Massamba* working on Sculpture, IHA, 2014, Courtesy of Institute for Human Activities.



In this regard, the IHA's mode of institutionalization defines a creative act, innovatively modeling the institution as both toolbox of critical conventions drawing from various instantiations of neo-avant-garde practice, and a performative language that animates subjects and enables emancipatory gestures.<sup>1</sup> Yet at the same time, it differs from past models of institutional critique in Western contemporary art, most significantly in that the project is situated in sub-Saharan Africa, and intends to connect that area

<sup>1</sup> For such a definition, see Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* (September 2005).



to global markets, contemporary art's exhibitionary complex, and critical discourse. As such, the IHA supersedes past models of institutional critique that, however much they usefully deconstruct the values and functions of contemporary art's institutions, are otherwise content to operate exclusively in the developed countries of the North, and even more particularly in the privileged spaces of artistic practice in major cities like Berlin, London, and New York.

Similarly, the IHA should be distinguished from the models of artistic institution-building in the African context, with groups like Huit Facettes (Senegal) and Le Groupe Amos (Congo) working to develop workshop-based events and traditional craft production in order to strengthen grassroots communities, confront forms of regional social stratification, and build cultural networks in Africa.<sup>2</sup> While the IHA also shares in certain of these goals—such as promoting community networks and local forms of creativity—it also represents a conceptually experimental project coming from outside the region (although Martens has spent much time in the DRC, he is Dutch and has lived for several years in Brussels). As such, it aims to invent a new artistic model of economic and social re-engineering focused on reversing the flow of capital so that art's economy of production, intervention, and market directly benefits the South.

The IHA also intervenes amongst other types of institutions, among them, Unilever. It is not by coincidence that the IHA has founded its settlement in Boteka, a former Unilever production site. After IHA was violently chased away by the land's current owner, the Canadian company Feronia, IHA resettled in Lusanga (near Kinshasa), the former site

<sup>2</sup> See Okwui Enwezor, "The Production of Social Space as Artwork: Protocols of Community in the Work of Le Groupe Amos and Huit Facettes," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Greg Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); and Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), esp. 96-99.

of Leverville, named after William Lever, who built up the corporation in the early twentieth century that would eventually become the Anglo-Dutch multinational consumer goods company now co-headquartered in London and Rotterdam. In 1911, Lever (later renamed Lord Leverhulme to honor his wife, Elizabeth Hulme) established a number of plantations in the Congo, then under Belgian colonial rule, with Leverville being the first, in order to produce palm oil for European markets.<sup>3</sup> Lever's plantations exploited the slave labor of locals, including the Pende people, then common practice in Belgian Congo, where a veritable genocide occurred during the last quarter of the

nineteenth century when the country was subjugated as personal possession of Belgian King Leopold II and its peoples commandeered into servicing his lucrative rubber industry.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, Lever created Port Sunlight near Liverpool, an ideal company town for his British workforce, including the Lady Lever Museum at its center—the use of art amounting to what Martens calls “a tiny exception to the status quo, to be seen and savored by few, but not really changing the rule of production” for the many, or especially for those in Congo's field of operations.<sup>5</sup> As an added intrigue,

<sup>3</sup> See Jules Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts: Colonial Exploitation in the Congo*, trans. Martin Thom (London: Verso 2008). Also, for comparison, see: Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (London: Icon 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Email communication with the author, June 2014. Also see: “Institute for Human Activities: Renzo Martens in Conversation with T.J. Demos,” *Camera Austria* 120 (2012), 45-52.

▼ *Creative Therapy in Former Unilever Commodity Store*, IHA 2014  
Courtesy of Institute for Human Activities.





▲ *Episode 3*, 2008. Pal, 16:9, color.  
90:00. Courtesy the artist and  
Galerie Fons Welters

Martens points out that the Pende were also amongst the African sculptors who inspired the early twentieth-century “primitivist” avant-garde, who creatively appropriated African tribal styles in order to reinvigorate Western models of creative transgression, endowing them with an aura of “savagery” and uncivilized “virility.” Like many other former tribal groups, the descendents of the Pende commonly work today for global extraction industries on palm oil and cocoa plantations, their impoverishment remaining in place in what might be called a neocolonial condition of multi-generational servitude nearly impossible to escape, which has historically served art markets and capitalist industry alike.<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely this vicious circle of multinational corporate extractivism, global neoliberalism, African pauperization, and Congolese social devastation that Martens’ IHA project is intent on disrupting. First, by settling on the former site of Leverville, the IHA will set up an artistic workshop and invite local plantation workers—drawn from the League of Congolese Plantation Workers, run by René Ngongo, 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 will benefit from the coaching of prominent artists from Kinshasa such as Botalatala (himself a former palm oil plantation worker who was able to escape from the system through his artistic practice). Indeed, Botalatala and Ngongo were also speakers at the inaugural IHA seminar

<sup>6</sup> For more information: [www.palmwatchafrica.org](http://www.palmwatchafrica.org).

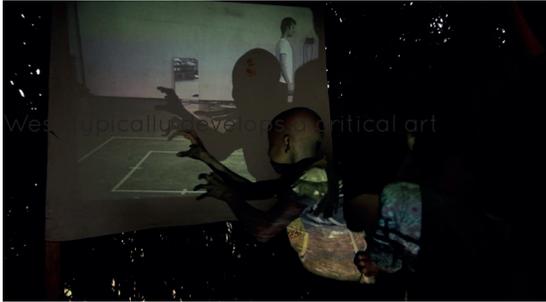
that took place in summer 2012 in Boteka, northwest Congo, drawing together a mix of Congolese and international speakers (myself included) to discuss the directions, challenges, and potential risks of the IHA initiative over a two-day public workshop.<sup>7</sup>

These self-portraits will then, with the agreement of the original artist-laborers, be transformed into chocolate reproductions by the IHA through a process of three-dimensional printing, which will reconstruct the original authors’ pieces and remake them in the very industrial product material of their everyday industry. This chocolate, by an agreement of corporate sponsorship obtained by the IHA—a form of sponsorship that is key to the IHA project’s institutional detournement—will be provided by Callebaut, the Belgian chocolate corporation that obtains its cocoa from West Africa (including from the plantation that is owned by the Elwyn Blattner Groupe, whose owner was memorably featured in Martens’ 2008 film *Enjoy Poverty*). The collaborative chocolate sculptures will then be sold in the European and North American art markets, with sales facilitated by the IHA and proceeds returned directly to the original producers. It is these objects that will also be shown in select exhibitions, including *Artes Mundi*.

Through this mimetic and interventionist cycle, then, artistic production will be directly embedded in the materiality, institutions, and sites of the extraction industry, even while the IHA will supplement that arrangement by attempting to redefine common global arrangements of inequality. And here is where Martens’ intervention finds its key ingredient, following from his critical view of the conventional operating procedures of global contemporary art.<sup>8</sup> According to such a now-familiar scenario, an artist from the

<sup>7</sup> See the IHA website: [www.humanactivities.org/](http://www.humanactivities.org/).

<sup>8</sup> This view correlates as well with recent observations of artists, such as: Hito Steyerl, “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Postdemocracy,” *e-flux* no. 21 (December 2010); Andrea Fraser, “L’1% C’est Moi,” *Texte zur Kunst* (August 2011); and Andrea Fraser, “There’s No Place Like Home,” *The Whitney Biennial 2012* (New York: Whitney Museum, 2012).



◀ Audience Interacting with Bruce Nauman Presentation, IHA 2014  
Courtesy of Institute for Human Activities.

project in a non-Western developing country, attempting to bring forms of representation and participation to the underprivileged, socially repressed, and economically excluded (recent projects of Mark Boulos, Richard Mosse, and Francis Alys come to mind); 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. The ambition of Martens' IHA is twofold: to reverse this flow, one that drives and participates in the inequalities of global neoliberalism; and to unify the origin of production with the destination of profit.<sup>9</sup>

While the term “gentrification” in tandem with Richard Florida’s proposals for urban regeneration have been creatively appropriated by the IHA project, its objective has been to unexpectedly and critically deploy them in the DRC. In some ways, this proposal is obscene, as such terminology and ideas have been largely discredited and heavily criticized in recent years.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Martens’ strategy can be seen as critically imitative: taking up institutions and languages that normally privilege the elite few and attempting to redirect their

benefits (including the funding generated from European cultural initiatives<sup>11</sup>) toward the disenfranchised many, amounting to a mode of reverse engineering the neoliberal project on a micro level. The elements of this intervention can be seen in IHA’s developing program, including its planned exhibition in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum, whereby the IHA will present representative works from the Eindhoven-based collection, such as those of Bruce Naumann and Tino Seghal.<sup>12</sup> In other words, museum-quality works by these artists—all of whom have been supported by Unilever as part of Tate Modern’s Unilever Series—will be presented in the DRC, thereby returning (however briefly) the cultural gains accruing from the legacy of colonial and now neoliberal industry to the former and current location of resource extraction and plantation labour—prefiguring the longer-term goals of the IHA. As well, upcoming IHA conferences hope to include a range of Congolese intellectuals, writers, and scientists, such as Lubumbashi- and Brussels-based photographer Sammy Baloji, Kinshasa-based dancer and choreographer Faustin Linyekula, Lumumbashi-based artist and author Patrick Mudekerezza, and Kinshasa musician Bebson de la Rue, in an effort to generate critical discourse in the IHA’s local context.

Speaking as a participant in the IHA’s inaugural seminar, I discovered that, far from some kind of neo-colonial carnival or

<sup>9</sup> Such is articulated by Martens clearly in my Camera Austria interview.

<sup>10</sup> See Rosalyn Deutsche, and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* no. 31 (Winter 1984); and on Florida, Martha Rosler, “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urnabism, Part I,” *e-flux journal*, no. 21 (December 2010), and Martha Rosler, “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urnabism, Part II,” *e-flux journal*, no. 23 (March 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Among the nonprofit Europe-based funders of the IHA are the Berlin Biennial, the Mondriaan Foundation, the Prince Bernhard Culture Fund, and the Prince Claus Fund.

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Martens’ project participates in the recent energy around exhibiting European collections in zones of conflict outside the European context, such as Khaled Hourani’s “Picasso in Palestine” project, also supported by the Van Abbemuseum, representing the first time a European work of this order has been seen publicly in the Palestinian West Bank. See Sandy Tolan, “Picasso Comes to Palestine,” *Al-Jazeera* (16 Jul 2011), [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

bad-faith, cynical artistic game—which is sometimes how Martens' provocative project is misunderstood—the program represented a serious and inspiring assembly of Congolese intellectuals, activists and artists (including Botalatala, René Ngongo, and the professor Jérôme-Emilien Mumbanza mwa Bawele), and their European counterparts (including Marcus Steinweg, Nina Möntmann, and Eyal Weizman and Richard Florida via Skype). It did so in order to discuss the challenges of promoting contemporary art in rural Congo, confront the difficult-to-overcome, institutionalized socio-economic inequalities that exist within that context, and address the potential dangers of repeating colonial hierarchies between privileged Westerners and disenfranchised African subjects. Of course, were it to fall into such a familiar rut, then clearly the IHA would be a failure.

But what of the potential achievements? These include: developing an inclusive and transformative Congolese project; stimulating economic vitality and social empowerment in alliance with the IHA's local collaborators; and generating deeper North-South connections that benefit Congolese participants and bring critical visibility to the history of colonialism and current neoliberal exploitation, including forms within the global art world? Such objectives define the ambition of the IHA's agenda, which, if successful, would progressively reshuffle the cards of art's symbolic, cultural, and economic capital.



▲ Renzo Martens in conversation with Richard Florida, IHA 2014  
Courtesy of Institute for Human Activities.