

# ARTFORUM

## Renzo Martens

WILKINSON GALLERY  
50/58 Vyner Street  
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In his latest work, *Episode III*, 2008, shot in the Democratic Republic of the Congo over a period of two years, Dutch artist Renzo Martens considers western perceptions of Africa. Evoking the historic and ongoing colonialist exploitation of the continent's natural resources, a critical Martens dubs the indirect exchange documented by his film—images of humanitarian crises in return for foreign aid—the “poverty alleviation industry.”

The nearly ninety-minute film screens three times daily in the gallery's second-floor space. On display nearby are a few key artifacts from Martens's Congo tour—three metal trunks and a snapshot mounted on aluminum. The photograph is related to one of the film's key narratives—two young photographers who run a portrait studio in Kayna-Bayonga in eastern Congo. In the film, Martens points out that this pairs earn far less shooting birthday parties and weddings than the international journalists documenting the ravages of war and poverty. Martens accompanies the youth to photograph severely malnourished children at a nearby hospital, where the picture in the gallery was captured. According to the artist, this blurry and slightly overexposed image “is not a representation of poverty, it is poverty.”

Meanwhile, the metal trunks encase neon letters that Martens and his team transport throughout the film. Martens uses the lettering to create a luminous sign reading ENJOY POVERTY—allegedly encouraging the impoverished local communities of central Congo to reappropriate their situation. Attempting to overcome his detached, at times patronizing, role as documentary filmmaker, Martens seems both cynical and sincere as he presents the signage to local audiences. His flawed position heightens viewers' awareness of shortfalls in the production of images, including his own, as well as the heartbreaking limitations of an outsider's empathy.

— Lillian Davies



Renzo Martens, *Episode III*, 2008, still from a color video, 88 minutes.

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