



## Enjoy Poverty: Disclosing the Political Impasse of Contemporary Art

Renzo Martens

in conversation with Niels Van Tomme

**Niels Van Tomme:** In *Episode III*, 2008, you travel to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country devastated by civil wars and humanitarian stalemate. You reveal how the Congolese don't profit from the global circulation of media images taken of the situation by foreign photographers and cameramen. As such, the locals don't have access to their most profitable export product—images of poverty. How did you set forth to reveal this injustice?

**Renzo Martens:** In a way, the question you are asking says it all. It all started with the idea that I had to make a film that would reveal the power differential between those who are watching it and the individuals who are depicted in it. I wanted to make that particular relationship visible. Obviously, I couldn't just go out and film the people who are being filmed. One of the ideas was to set up some kind of emancipatory program within the film, which would allow the subjects being filmed to benefit from it. And so I looked for the best setting to execute that experiment. It seemed to me that the Congo would be perfect. It has a long and well-documented history of extraction of natural resources by outsiders paired



with the local population's lack of information about the economic value of these natural assets. The very idea that the images of poverty constitute a highly profitable export product and that the poor—the suppliers of imagery as raw material, that is, the ones who allow themselves to be filmed and photographed—don't get anything valuable in return, is the starting point of the film. Of course, the film, or the project in the film, doesn't solve the problem; it just discloses it, making visible the power structures that have led to the emergence of this phenomenon—and pretty much all portrayals of the poor by the rich.

**NVT:** In previous conversations, we've talked about the fact that you consider *Episode III*—or *Enjoy Poverty*, as it is also known—as an autonomous work of art that doesn't comment on an external reality. There seems to be a productive contradiction at work here, in the sense that it's almost impossible to separate the images you're watching from the reality they depict—the exploitation of poverty as a commodity. How should we understand the artwork's autonomy in this specific context?

**EM:** Well, there's a rich tradition of art that deals with its own modes of representation, rather than with whatever it may be representing. I think that's where autonomy comes in. I don't think something is autonomous just because it doesn't refer to the outside world, like a Robert Rauschenberg painting, a white canvas, hung on a white wall, in a white gallery. I mean, that's a very valid gesture of course, and I love that work, but I think something can also become autonomous if it somehow folds back onto itself, if the piece somehow becomes accountable for its own existence in the world. And that's something that is often lacking in contemporary art's documentary practices. The position of the piece vis-à-vis what it is depicting is often not included into the equation. I've somehow tried to make a work of art that shows something in the world by virtue of dealing with its own mode of production and representation. The piece investigates itself, and in a way it's precisely this self-referential quality that makes the world visible.

**NVT:** At first, the film received fierce critiques and shocked reactions. As time goes by, however, an interesting discourse is developing around it. Do you think that most people can't see that self-referential quality because of the harsh reality that is depicted?







**RM:** Well, it seems to me that people rarely use art's potential to engage with what is actually at stake in the political claims of art. Over time, however, some people have started to embrace this piece for its truthfulness and accuracy.

**NVT:** In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2002, Susan Sontag claims that documentary's tendency to create sympathy for victims produces an "imaginary proximity" to those who are suffering.<sup>1</sup> This lets spectators disregard their own responsibility, the ways in which they actively take part in the circumstances that produce the very conditions of violence. Might the spectators' unawareness of their own complicity be the reason why *Episode III* depicts such an unconventional approach to suffering, one in which the maker and its viewers are equally implicated?

**RM:** Sure. What makes the piece difficult to accept for some people is that it is not only the viewer who is put under scrutiny, but also the artist and the constructs we maintain to see art. No matter how socially committed art is—or how much it shows the victims or the evil people responsible for wars—art itself is granted this neutral space, a space that doesn't need to be investigated. So, art can scrutinize oil companies in Africa, while not taking into account that we all collectively fly to shows and biennials to see these pieces on jets fuelled by the exact same oil companies. I'm not saying we should all walk there from now on, or shouldn't make this kind of politically engaged art, but I think I like the artwork somehow to present an understanding of its own role in the world. If the work needs the exhibition space to be radical, or if its political claims evaporate when you discuss it at a bar, I guess the work is just... I somehow tried to create a piece that embraces its own terms and conditions—the fact that its claims will evaporate at the bar. Even if it means that it ultimately embraces its own in consequentiality.

**NVT:** Some parts of the film are very hard to watch, such as the scene where you show the African photographers how to capture the suffering of a dying child in the most aesthetic way. The scene's ambiguity lies in the fact that you're doing this to give agency to the local photographers, who are normally excluded from this kind of image-making. How consciously were you thinking about crossing ethical barriers while making the film?

**RM:** Within the film it's truly the proper thing to do. These local photographers live in a village near Rwanda. It's a war zone, with both lots of mines and abundant natural resources. Every three months or so, gangs of mostly Rwandan soldiers invade the village, stealing, pillaging, and raping its inhabitants. In their wake, photographers—mostly Western—earn a living by flying in to take pictures of this suffering. Local photographers live in that village. Between the war periods, they make pictures of weddings and birthday parties, earning a net profit of one dollar per month. When war breaks, they hide in the bushes. So, obviously, they're in the wrong business. I just try to teach them some of the basic laws of capitalism: create the most added value possible, using the natural resources you have at your disposal.

It creates a really complicated situation: if it's immoral for local photographers to make a profit from such pictures, then it's immoral for any news journalist too. But, if it's not immoral for some of them, that is, if we consider news photography to be a normal practice, then we can actually see that as a whole, the situation is totally immoral. In the film, the audience is led to a position of active complicity in the situation it depicts, from which there's no escape.

For us, art lovers, there is no outside position, no place from which to comment freely on a situation without being part of it. For them, the locals, there is no outside either, there's no food in the evening, however hard they try. The

OPPOSITE + ABOVE: Association des Photographes de Kanyabayonga, production photo from *Episode III*, 2007 (courtesy of the artists, Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, and Wilkinson Gallery, London)



piece makes you an integral part of that equation. It faces its inconsequentiality in the light of these terrible discrepancies in the world. That's what makes it radical, and hard to watch, at times.

**NVT:** It seems to me that this isn't really a gesture to change anything fundamental about the situation, but merely a way to make its hopelessness visible. While teaching local photographers, you also quite literally appropriate the visual clichés of colonialism, such as the Stanley hat and the blackboard. It's the white man arrogantly teaching the African people how to take hold of their poverty. Isn't the truly critical dimension of the film the fact that it realizes from the onset that its own emancipatory project is bound to fail?



**RM:** Indeed, it replicates colonial practices. But it also tackles very contemporary practices too. I follow the very same logic as the World Bank: if you're poor, it must be that you make the wrong choices, have the wrong business models, and don't relate to the reality of the market. I copy that attitude; I don't criticize it. Since I'm financed by the very same types of institutions—and, as I stated earlier, the piece's critical value expires at the bar—such critique would not produce a lot of insight in what art can or cannot do. As a matter of fact, it would not be very critical at all.



**NVT:** Previously you've mentioned Belgian philosopher Frank Vanderveire's argument about how art is always "a medium's reflection on itself," which is always "historically stratified." In that sense, it's revealing to think about the role of film and photography in processes of colonization, the exploitation of poverty, and the ways in which these media have historically been a liability to truth and moral judgment. Isn't that tension between autonomy and complicity already inscribed in the media you're working with?

**RM:** Sure, it is. I just try to take responsibility for it, because it's productive to embody such dualities. The film doesn't want to comment on them, but actually wants to be them. It generates knowledge about the medium, about autonomy and complicity, and possibly also about the outside world in which it operates.

**NVT:** While watching your film, it becomes clear that some very specific characteristics of the documentary genre—such as satire, reenactment, and appropriation—are increasingly linked to fashionable genres within contemporary art. How can the appropriation of the language of documentary filmmaking inform the field of contemporary art?

**RM:** There's a rich tradition of art dealing with its own modes of representation. It's probably one of the only kinds of knowledge production whose prime subject is its own operation. Contrary to most of the films that are shown in documentary festivals, art has the ability to somehow become reality itself and not just a representation of something outside it. This surely has led to art that may seem inert—an academic game of self-doubling. But, this very same quality, and the artistic strategies that are constantly developed to enact it, can become extremely productive in dismantling the outside world. It's by virtue of dealing with itself that the work of art can deal with the world. So, I don't see a duality between autonomy and reference to an external reality.

In the field of contemporary art too, many films merely represent outside phenomena. The artist does not seem to feel the need to put the piece itself—its very existence—at stake in its claims to represent something outside itself. At times, a whole other realm, beyond rhetoric, becomes active. I admire this very much. If art does not enter this realm, it fails to use all its potential.

**NVT:** I'm wondering if those aren't characteristics of any critical position one adopts towards a specific field of knowledge, whether we're talking about art, cinema, philosophy or science?

**RM:** Maybe. Still, art has this particular place: it has attained total auto-referentiality and at the same time total immersion with the world, the physical world—not a world of words, images or ideas. Art uses its own existence to dismantle the world. This possibility is just very exciting.

**NVT:** *Episode III* is also a fierce critique of contemporary art's claims for political and social change. But, if these claims aren't valuable any longer, is there still hope left for art? What should the field of contemporary art—not as an autonomous realm but as a discursive field situated within society—entail, then?

**RM:** I'm glad you've read it as such, as a critique of these claims, a critique of what the film itself displays. But I made the film because I believe in art, and in its discursive role in society, even if this means embracing its uselessness, vanity, and ambiguity. I think the piece deals with its own limits; that's the place where new knowledge is generated. And, that's something I don't see happening anywhere else than in art.

**NVT:** You aimed very high with *Episode III*, and I'm curious about your next moves. Are you currently working on a new project? Will you complete *Episode II*, the unrealized chapter of this cycle?

**RM:** I'm working on a few new films, indeed. One of them is *Episode II*, the middle of a triptych—a medieval altarpiece, in a way. The outer panels, *Episode I*, 2003, and *Episode III*, show earthly narratives. They somehow deal with the image itself, and its aspirations, like democracy and transparency. They tackle how in reality the production and consumption of images mostly add to confusion, and not to truth or beauty. In the middle panel, I hope to somehow create a fountain that sprinkles its love and clarity over the two outer panels, and thus changes them on a cellular level. That may take another ten or fifteen years, though.

#### NOTES

1. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002, 102.
2. Frank Vande Veire, "Blind Autoreflexivity. Dirk Braeckman's Light on Photography," *A-Prior* (July/August 1999): 37-53. <http://www.kunstonline.info/levelone/php/biblios/bibliopage.php?id=9977&chapter=about>, accessed August 9, 2010.

Niels Van Tomme is a curator, researcher, art critic, and frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. The Director of Arts and Media at Provisions Learning Project in Washington, DC, he lives in New York City. His independently curated exhibitions have been shown internationally.