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Interview with Renzo Martens by Frances Guerin

January 2009 - Renzo Martens' *Episode III - Enjoy Poverty*, the second of a triptych on images of poverty, war and historical devastation as commodities, is currently screening at Wilkinson Gallery in London. ArtSlant's writer, Frances Guerin, talked to him by telephone about this work and other projects. The following interview came from those discussions.



"The World is a Spectator's Paradise"

- Renzo Martens

Frances Guerin: Why do you choose to exhibit your films in art galleries as opposed to screening them in cinemas, for example, on the festival circuit?

Renzo Martens: *Episode III* was chosen as the opening film at the International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam in November 2008. So it's not true that my films are not projected in film festivals. But yes, *Episode III* was exhibited in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and is now in a gallery in London. This is because the film is art. There are many connections to documentary film, but for me, *Episode III* is art.

FG: Can you talk a bit about how and why you define the film as art?

RM: Painting and sculpture from the 16th century on has been committed to exploring the relationship between the viewer and the image. There is a long tradition of works in which this relationship is the subject of the image. A work such as Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) directly represents this very relationship as the subject of the image. It is about power relations as they exist in reality and how that reality is only ever mediated by representation. I see and understand my film as being involved in this project of engagement of the spectator. It's not a window onto the world, it's not fully self-contained or self-referential, and neither is the image a representation of something outside of itself. Rather, my film takes up certain strategies that are apparent in the history of painting in order to draw attention to the power relations between the viewer and the viewed. Strategies such as satire, re-enactment, appropriation place the film within this history of art. This is why it is art.

FG: Episode III has been called an "Action Art Project". What is the art here? Is it your film? The education of the Congolese people? The photographs you educate and help them to make?

RM: The film is a performance of the discourses of the white man (Renzo Martens) taking responsibility for everything we in the West are and do. I reproduce as a performance the dominant discourse of what happens when the West, in the form of journalists, NGOs, MSF, go into countries like the Congo and exploit poverty as

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a way of perpetuating their own dominance. They perpetuate this dominance, thus the poverty of the Africans, through the sale of images.

Within this performance there are two Renzo Martens' in the film: First there is Renzo Martens the artist and second Renzo Martens the consumer. The two Renzos interact with each other to produce the duplicity communicated by the film: I am both the observer and the perpetrator of the African's exploitation. I can never be the savior or the emancipator because I am defined by the structures and institutions that exploit in the first place. I can't even pretend that my presence would liberate - even though I lay bare the power relations of the image of poverty within the market economy. The one with the camera will always exploit because of the power relations inherent to taking, distributing and selling images.

FG: So, when you teach the local photographers to photograph the suffering of their own people, they too assume the power through ownership of someone else's image?

RM: Yes, but it's better that they proliferate the problem than I do. Because at least when they sell the photographs, the money they make is more likely to trickle down to their own people. Unlike the profits from the same images taken by Western photographers - which will go nowhere near the source of the problems.

FG: Who funded Episode III?

RM: The film was funded by the Dutch Foundation for the Visual Arts, National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development, a Dutch think tank devoted to these issues. It received other institutional funding, from the Netherlands and Belgium. So you see, it is completely enabled by the institutional and financial structures of North Western Europe. It's not possible to explore the relations of poverty and exploitation of the third world without the same structures that oppress in the first place.

FG: Episode I and Episode III sit so comfortably together, and in many ways, make sense as a pair. What happens in Episode II, and how does it fit together with Episode I and Episode III?

RM: The three films together will form a triptych. They will form three discrete sculptures that I envision will be set up like an altarpiece in the gallery space. In keeping with this form, *Episode I* and *Episode III* are the side panels, representing earthly narratives. The centerpiece will focus on divine love, just as does the traditional altarpiece. It will represent a conversation between two people the topic of which will be love. As such it will offer a deeper solution to the consciousness of exploitation raised in *Episode I* and *Episode III*, a consciousness I do not believe is limited to war and poverty, but is all around us.

- Frances Guerin

(Image: Renzo Martens, Episode III, Color video, sound, 88 minutes. Courtesy of the ARTist and Wilkinson Gallery, London)

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