

Critique in Practice:  
Renzo Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*

Editor: Anthony Downey  
Associate Editor: Els Roelandt

Investigating the economic value of one of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's most lucrative exports (namely, poverty), Renzo Martens' provocative film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008) remains a landmark intervention into debates about contemporary art's relationship to exploitative economies. Throughout *Critique in Practice*, contributors explore the work's legacy and how it relates to the politics of representation, uses of the documentary form, art criticism, the deployment of humanitarian aid, the impact of extractive forms of globalized capital, and the neoliberal politics of decolonization. The unconventional representation of acute immiseration throughout *Enjoy Poverty* generated far-from-resolved disputes about how deprivation is portrayed within Western mainstream media and throughout global cultural institutions. Using a range of approaches, this volume reconsiders that portrayal and how the film's reception led Martens to found a long-term program, Human Activities.

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This volume is copublished by Human Activities, KASK/School of Arts (Ghent), Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), and Sternberg Press (Berlin). It is supported by Galerie Fons Welters, KASK/School of Arts, Mondriaan Fund, and Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds.



ISBN 978-3-956795-05-3



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SternbergPress

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## PREFACE

Charles Esche, *Without Illusions* 14–19

## INTRODUCTION

Anthony Downey, *An Immodest Proposal: Renzo Martens' Episode III: Enjoy Poverty and the Practice of Critique* 20–37

## PART ONE — RECEPTIONS

Laurens Otto, *Notes on Texts* 42–45

Els Roelandt, *Renzo Martens' Episode III: Analysis of a Film Process in Three Conversations (2008)* 46–55

Dan Fox, *Renzo Martens (2009); Intervention (2016)* 56–61

Paul O'Kane, *Renzo Martens, Episode III (2009); The Latest Laocoon: Reflections on Renzo Martens' Episode III (2016)* 62–75

Frank Vande Veire, *Une bonne nouvelle: Notes on Episode III (2008)* 76–87

Ana Teixeira Pinto, *Love Is Colder Than Death (2010); Intervention (2016)* 88–95

Niels Van Tomme, *Enjoy Poverty: Disclosing the Political Impasse of Contemporary Art (2010)* 96–99

Ruben De Roo, *Immorality as Ethics: Renzo Martens' Enjoy Poverty (2011)* 100–107

Artur Żmijewski, *Artists Come to Create Beauty and Kindness (2012)* 108–119

Nato Thompson, *Ethical Considerations in Public Art (2013)* 120–129

T.J. Demos, *The Haunting: Renzo Martens' Episode III: Enjoy Poverty (2013)* 130–141

Matthias De Groof, <i>Episode III: Enjoy Poverty from a Postcolonial Perspective</i> (2015)	142–151
JJ Charlesworth, Renzo Martens (2015)	152–159
Vivian Zihlerl, Renzo Martens and the Institute for Human Activities’ “A New Settlement” (2015)	160–165
Nikolaus Perneckzy, Intervention (2019)	166–167
Emilia Terracciano, On Cynicism (2019)	168–169
Kyveli Lignou-Tsamantani, Looking Beyond the Distance of the Visible Frame (2019)	170–172
René Ngongo, From <i>Episode III: Enjoy Poverty to the Post-Plantation</i> (2019)	174–176

## PART TWO — CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS

Laurens Otto, Notes on Texts	182–185
kaŕi’kacha seid’ou and Jelle Bouwhuis, Renzo Martens: Tretyakov in the Congo?	186–195
Eva Barois De Caemel, A Natural Disaster	196–205
Kolja Reichert, An Image Looking at Its Own Back: <i>Episode III</i> as a Self-Portrait of the Societal Space of the Viewer	206–213
Anthony Downey, Is There a Right Way to Do Wrong? <i>Enjoy Poverty</i> and the Case Against Ethics	214–235
Pieter Van Bogaert, On the Outside: Exteriority as Condition for Resistance	236–245
Nina Möntmann and Eyal Weizman, Forms of Power and Humanitarianism	246–253

## PART THREE — BEYOND *ENJOY POVERTY*

Laurens Otto, Notes on Texts	258–261
J. A. Koster, The Poverty of Critique: <i>Episode III: Enjoy Poverty</i> and Humanitarianism	262–283
Ariella Aisha Azoulay, The Double Gift Economy	284–295
Gregory Sholette, Privilege as Form: I Have Nothing to Say About Renzo Martens	296–303
Suhail Malik, The Global Value Chain of the White Cube	304–317
Angela Dimitrakaki, Art Without Delusions, Workers Without Food, Modernity Without End	318–327
Renzo Martens, Art for the Post-Plantation	328–331

## END MATTER

<i>Episode III: Enjoy Poverty</i> , Credits	336–337
Xander Karskens, A Brief History of <i>Episode III: Enjoy Poverty</i> in a Collection Context	338–345
Screening List	346–351
Bibliography	352–355
Biographies	356–366
Acknowledgments	368–369
Colophon	370–371

# BEYOND *ENJOY POVERTY*

296/297

Privilege as Form:  
I Have Nothing to Say  
About Renzo Martens  
(But Everything to  
Confess About White,  
Postcolonial, Social  
Practice Art in Our Bare  
Art World)

Gregory Sholette

• COMPONENT •

• STORYLINE •

• MINUTES •

• III. Conclusion  
(shots 421 – 487)

• III. Neon Sign:  
Part 7

• 1.09.21 – 1.12.59

• SHOTS •

• 421 – 443

• CONTENT •

• In village, neon sign.

• FILM STILL •



## I.

What *Enjoy Poverty* makes clear is that the only solution white male artists currently have for the systemic global problems of the world is to make more of them. The only thing they can teach you is to be like them. You must take workshops to be like him, to see like him—only he can teach you how to be like him. And more of him is the solution: The Goal.

—Eunsong Kim \*1

I have everything to confess, and nothing to say about Renzo Martens. Yes, yes, I am being rewarded (modestly) to write about *Meneer* Martens, or at least about his art. But I have nothing to say about the man or about his social practice art. No comments to make about his politics, or his class position, or the way he communicates, thinks, or dresses as a white Dutch person. He and I have never met. We live in different cities, in different nations, and, to date, the only image I have of him, or of his work, comes from online videos and photographs.

This disclosure alone should disqualify me from authoring this text, or from seeking to weigh in on the ethics of his practice as if I am without reproach, me, a white heterosexual man of senior age living in a country dominated by a racist, self-proclaimed nationalist, white leader. And yet, here I go. But first, let me ask you this: What conditions could make a white, postcolonial, social practice aesthetic possible if such an art were to exist? Let us begin by tossing caution to the wind by starting big, really big, with what modern capitalism and its ubiquitous marketization and monetization of our lives has done to art.

## II.

With the extinction of the sacred and the “spiritual,” the deep underlying materiality of all things has finally risen dripping and convulsive into the light of day; and it is clear that culture itself is one of those things whose fundamental materiality is now for us not merely evident but quite inescapable.

—Fredric Jameson \*2

Under conditions of the total planetary financialization of our old, sweet, stubbornly withdrawn art world (was it ever really so?) becomes a no-longer-mystified, no-longer-autonomous, dazzlingly lit art world. Nothing is held back as high culture is subsumed within the capitalist totality (or should we call it a “fractality,” because it is really an inherently fractured whole, or perhaps an “overtotality,” one that blindingly displays its own excessive repetitiveness?). Regardless, I am calling our situation that of “bare art.”

Following philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s term “bare life” that designates the status of a human being deprived of all socially constructed rights and thus reduced to a purely biological entity, “bare art” is a condition in which high culture’s traditional autonomy, mystique, and romance has boiled away leaving behind as bittersweet nostalgia our illusory belief that creative work is inherently antithetical to capitalism because it is not useful labor. We see this “bare art” nakedness most distinctly when a painting, or a cluster of paintings, is transformed into a bundled financial instrument whose investors will never even encounter their prizes “in the flesh.”

Dreadful circumstances, but also useful circumstances.

For the very same processes that give birth to “bare art” cannot help but expose the previously invisible (though always evident in plain sight), social-productive forces that reproduce and maintain contemporary art. In fact, more than merely expose this once hidden cultural engine, much contemporary art now openly celebrates its dependency on value extracted from labor past and present, including wage labor, indentured labor, colonial plantation and slave labor, as well as increasingly the affective- and knowledge-based labor of communicative capitalism. Even major art institutions are getting in on the act including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Tate, Guggenheim, Fondazione Prada, and the Luzon Academy in Shenyang, China. Something known as social practice art has seemingly popped into existence in our “bare art” world, much like a particle emerging from a quantum fluctuation, apparently defying the ironclad laws of conservation of energy.

But social practice art is not magic nor has it had a virgin birth. It is merely the inevitable counterpart of the vacuity associated with “bare art.” And that void is also our own extreme state of cultural claustrophobia.

\*1 Eunsong Kim, “Art & Colonialism: Renzo Martens Part 1,” *CONTEMP+ORARY* (blog), August 11, 2016, <http://contemporary.org/art-colonialism-renzo-martens-part-1/>.

Privilege as Form:  
I Have Nothing to Say  
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Gregory Sholette

\*2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), 67.

Habitually repeated, this void within a void waits to be filed with a joyous future, though all it can call up is the delirious predicaments of an inglorious past: nationalism, xenophobia, patriarchy, a yearning for fixed embodied identities, and of course a return to white supremacy and colonialism if in disguised form. For when all is said and done it is the market *uber alles* whose abstract leveling forces melt all that is solid into thin air, naturalizing what would otherwise be considered a scandal: political regression and social barbarity.

### III.

It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me.  
—Herman Melville\*3

Is there such a thing as a repulsive aesthetic? For Immanuel Kant, this would have been an unthinkable contradiction in terms; still, I recall in the 1990s, a wave of art striving to present to viewers an experience of abjection. Fecal matter, blood, vomit, and other bodily fluids and excretions, occasionally appeared as exhibited works, or these unsavory substances were represented with pigments, dyes, clay, mud, and so on. Abject art, as this was sometimes labeled, may have upset American congressmen who were eager to cut off funding to individual artists from the National Endowment for the Arts anyway, but this intentionally repulsive work still found its way into mainstream institutional collections and exhibitions.

So here is a theory. A hypothesis at best. Given the failure of this tactic to subvert the dominant, bourgeois cultural paradigm is it possible that the next attempt at deconstructing high art involved presenting degrading social situations as consumable cultural commodities? Women tattooed in exchange for drugs, aging holocaust survivors persuaded to reinscribe their fading serial numbers from Nazi death camps, a starving dog chained inside a gallery but just out of reach of water and a bowl of food.\*4 Though the full brutishness of the latter work remains unconfirmed, the argument each project seeks to make is clear enough: radical art today must hold up a mirror to the comfortable, liberal, solicitous contemporary art audience in order to

\*3 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classic Editions, 1999), 185.

\*4 The starving dog as art remains unconfirmed, see: David Mikkelson, "Guillermo Vargas: Dog Starved for Art Exhibit," Snopes website, August 10, 2011, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/starving-dog-art/>.

show them what they already know, but refuse to acknowledge: a secret collective longing to indulge in visual spectacles of abjection and humiliation at the level of automobile crash voyeurism (even J.G. Ballard would be red-faced).

Then there is *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*. Easy enough to insert Martens' film into the same car-crushed basket, though we might rightly ask: What is the value of intellectually celebrating "negative cultural capital," either in the form of a pseudo-documentary, a platform of cynical reasoning, or as the enterprising start for a real/ersatz NGO producing limited-edition and delectable artworks? Perhaps it is precisely because the effect obtained is so self-knowingly rooted in what Nicholas Mirzoeff caustically labels the colonial "right to look"?\*5 If nothing else, we seem to be confronted with an instance of "inverted art branding," one that became impossible after the institutionalization of YBA parlor-game profligacy. Surprisingly, *Enjoy Poverty* is not so much a repudiation of social practice art, but rather a genuine variant of this still-germinating sphere of engagement, one that remains amorphous enough to encapsulate, or at least porous enough not to exclude, that which it would prefer to reject with extreme prejudice on ideological grounds.

In this way, what I call "bare art" allows us to simultaneously reject the periodic bad faith of the neo-avant-garde with its all too frequent closet formalism, while also declaiming against our own cynicism as an "insufferable" though inevitable poetic pleasure. That stated, there is another oddly oblique quiver generated by this type of white, postcolonial, social practice. By offering a sub-zero space of refined negativity and withdrawal, we can still imagine ourselves led through the desert of the "bare art" world like a lost tribe marching to some uncharted mystery destination where the "real" avant-garde has been safely stored like a cultural seed bank waiting for the arrival of a more fertile and destined generation (even if, Moses like, should we ever reach the threshold of this event horizon it would always remain closed off to us as an impassible and opaque barrier on which to project all manner of fantasies). The intimation of exodus is the lure that either cheats us, or raises the stakes when we encounter *Enjoy Poverty*.

Who can unravel such a twisted and tangled knottiness? It is unclean. I hate to reflect upon it. I hate to look on it. But I do long for thee, O Righteousness and Innocence, so beautiful and comely to all virtuous eyes—I long for thee with an insatiable satiety.

—St. Augustine \*6

We locate ourselves in a future where past poets of the Tea Party are praised as today's true vanguard. Though I know of no such poetry that actually exists, this proposed *time yet to come* also lays the groundwork for today's white, postcolonial, social practice art. And with it Jameson's description of postmodernism as "surrealism without the unconscious," gives way to a trauma-less trauma, a compulsive repetition operating machine-like without any reference to underlying trauma, and therefore not really a symptom in any familiar sense.

Our electronic glow-screens play and replay real and fictional reports, lacking the ability to sharply distinguishing between either category, the *is*, and the *isn't*. We find ourselves right at home in a world where armed student's randomly slaughter their peers, mainstream television programs depict zombies eviscerating friends and family, and the leader of the world's heaviest-armed super-power brags about molesting women, claiming that he could walk up to someone in broad daylight, shoot that person, and none of his political supporters would care one way or the other. Despite the clues that trauma is present, there is no trauma, or at least not anything other than the repetitive, everyday visitation of things just as they are, a routine state of upheaval, a trauma-less trauma.

Seeing and confronting the hyper-conspicuous *now*, it seems that time has actually not moved ahead for decades. We are left with the reoccurring abstract value of the commodity in itself, an eternal return of the same, followed by the same, that makes it both possible to *Enjoy Poverty* but also to condemn it at the same time. It also seems that night has fallen, only Minerva's Owl, an endangered species, is nowhere to be seen.

\*6 Saint Augustine, *The Confessions* [397–400 AD], trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 2002), 74.

I really get my hands in the dirt.  
And I smear my own face with it.  
—Renzo Martens \*7

As for you Mr. Martens, but also for you, dear reader, I can only implore that you serve faithfully as my "Big Other," judging the infra-thin gap between this, my openly confessed renunciation, and the presumed virtue of my heartfelt disclosure.

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\*7 Jacob Wick, "A Conversation with Renzo Martens at a Café," *Bad at Sports* (blog), March 21, 2014, <http://badatsports.com/2014/a-conversation-with-renzo-martens-at-a-cafe/>.