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RENZO MARTENS / IHA EXHIBITION 2015

The Institute for Human Activities (IHA), which Dutch artist Renzo Martens directs, presents recent sculptural work by the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs des Plantations Congolaises (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League). Once upon a time, the expressive energy of Congolese sculpture inspired the European avant-garde. A lively trade in these artifacts scattered them throughout the world's museum collections, while the colonial occupation of the Congo more than a century ago brought local artistic production to a halt. Since 2012, IHA has worked to establish an artists' colony near a former Unilever plantation in the rainforest 500 miles east of Kinshasa. Subsistence farmers and plantation workers have begun to create self-portraits. Seven new sculptures they created in January 2015 had their public premiere at KOW.

It seems, so far, as if no artistic critique of living and working conditions in the Congo changes those conditions. On the contrary, such art is apt to reinforce global inequality: poverty and exploitation provide the raw material for a critical cultural production that ultimately generates jobs and profits in metropolitan cities like London and Berlin rather than in Kinshasa, let alone on the remote plantations. Martens's widely discussed film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, which was shot in the Congo between 2004 and 2008, showcased this mechanism – and yet also fed into it. With their new initiative, Martens and IHA now examine whether this mechanism can be turned on its head. Can artistic critique yield its economic and social benefits in the places it discusses; places where these benefits – money and self-determination – are urgently needed? IHA's art center is the point of origin for a new generation of artists and an aesthetic production in which plantation workers give lasting form to their feelings and their critique of the circumstances in which they live, reviving repressed cultural traditions and reliving them through present-day conditions.

The cooperation between the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League and the Institute for Human Activities aims to foster local economic diversification while also bringing the resulting works of art to the attention of audiences worldwide; IHA will coordinate their international distribution. Digital scans of the original clay sculptures created this January were transmitted to Amsterdam, the world's largest port of transshipment for cocoa, where a 3D printer produced replicas of the originals. Chocolatiers then manufactured Belgian chocolate casts from this secondary prototype. Some of the raw cocoa that went into the chocolate came from plantations near the Congolese settlement; besides palm oil and rubber, cocoa constitutes the only connection between world markets and these workers, their only medium of global communication. Where a pound of cocoa beans usually represents a value of approximately US\$0.25 to these workers, who earn monthly wages of around \$20, the same pound of cocoa fetches hundreds of times as much if emotions are added and the chocolate is inscribed into the art market.

The work on the plantations is not enough to live on, and so the workers now make a living by engaging critically with the work on the plantation. The Plantation Workers Art League collects profits from the sculptures' sale and use them to supplement the artists' incomes and improve the local infrastructure. In addition to the editions offered by KOW, IHA distributes two unlimited multiples for €39.95. Concurrently with our exhibition, Martens and IHA had set up a project space at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, where they built new partnerships as well as held talks and public events to flesh out the initiative's discursive framework. KW, which grew out of a similar cultural producers' initiative within the Berlin context, was a great place to focus resources and debates and harness them for developing the Congolese project. KOW's presentation of the work of Renzo Martens, who originally built his reputation on conceptual films, was the sixth chapter of KOW's *One Year Of Filmmakers* exhibition series.



Renzo Martens / IHA

Djonga Mulungu Bismar (Member of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League), undisclosed location, DR Congo, 2015

Jérémie Mabiala working on The Art Collector, Institute of Human Activities, undisclosed location, DR Congo, 2015

At the chocolatier's workshop, 2015



Renzo Martens / IHA

Exhibition view, KOW, 2015

The sculptures of the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs des Plantations Congolaises (CATPC, Congolese Plantation Workers Art League) were created in workshops supervised by Michel Ekeba, Eléonore Hedio, and Mega Mingiedi Tunga. The three artists from Kinshasa shared their technical expertise with the plantation workers technical and, perhaps more importantly, taught them basic concepts of the art of sculpture. The workshop participants jointly selected the loam sculptures to be scanned and then reproduced and displayed in Europe. These statues and busts are made of solid Belgian chocolate. Some of the titles are hard to render in English, and the versions that appear here were translated first from Kikongo into French and then into English. Conversely, the participants in the workshops had to come up with adequate words to match some English and French terms. For example, Mathieu Kasiana, who remembers some virtually forgotten words of Kikongo, used the term "Fiofio"—a person who brings new ideas into the world—to render "concept."



Renzo Martens / IHA

Exhibition view, KOW, 2015

Jérémie Mabilia Massamba
(Member of the Congolese Plantation
Workers Art League), undisclosed
location, DR Congo, 2015



Renzo Martens / IHA

Thomas Leba working on A Lucky Day,
Institute of Human Activities,
undisclosed location, DR Congo, 2015

Exhibition view, KOW, 2015

Poisonous Miracle
by Thomas Leba

The elongated composition holds the sculpture's upper and lower parts together in a scene of dynamic distance. A scaly animal has sunk its teeth into a woman's left foot; her eyes and mouth bespeak her pain and alarm. Her long arms reach for the animal. Her left leg is covered in blisters or pocks. Foliage crowded around her body indicates dense vegetation. The sculpture renders an allegorical scene: a grandmother, it is said, was bitten by a chameleon in the forest and subsequently found to be possessed by evil. Blisters sprang up on her skin but later miraculously transmuted into flowers. The story emblemizes the moment when an earlier generation first came into contact with money, introduced to the Congo by Belgian colonizers. Money and capitalism adapt to each new environment like the chameleon and spread like the poison in its bite, taking possession of the human being and her body. Will they eventually bear magnificent blossoms? Thomas Leba's work frames a profound and perhaps traumatic experience of transformation, but remains silent on whether the denouement will be happy or catastrophic.



Renzo Martens / IHA

Thomas Leba
Poisonous Miracle, 2015
Chocolate
139 x 57 x 86 cm

A Lucky Day
by Thomas Leba and Daniel Manenga

A delicate female figure is captured in mid-step, her facial features expressing an onslaught of conflicting emotions. She carries the severed head of an animal in her arms, and her right hand holds a knife. She is Sona, one of Thomas Leba and Daniel Manenga's ancestors. The two creators of this five-foot, three-inch-tall statue have modeled a character of legend. In the early nineteenth century, Sona, after taking a bath in the river, is said to have slain a doe – an animal regarded as sacred – to feed her family. She died a few days later, after foretelling that her descendants would never go hungry thanks to the magical powers of the animal they had eaten. The existential tension of what happened only moments ago – she killed to live – seems to have seized the entire figure. Meanwhile, her sure stride and the clear gaze with which she meets the world indicate that she is looking to the future. For Leba, the figure also embodies another story. His father blessed him with the promise that Leba's traps would never be empty for as long as he would bring him the heads of the animals he caught. Presenting a prey's head to one's father and the feet to an uncle is believed to bring good luck. *A Lucky Day* is a work of optimism, confronting the struggle for survival with humility and confidence.



Renzo Martens / IHA

Thomas Leba & Daniel Manenga
A Lucky Day, 2015
Chocolate
162 x 56 x 74 cm

How My Grandfather Survived
by Cedrick Tamasala

A big man and a small one: the big one wears a wise man's long beard and gown as well as a long garment whose fabric falls in the flowing folds of ancient classical sculpture around his feet. He gazes at us with impassive serenity. Above his ears, his thick hair is massed in two little mounds, like a second pair of ears or little devil's horns. In a paternal gesture, he rests his left hand on the other man's shoulder. Slightly bending his knees, his smaller companion has brought his right hand to his chest as though to swear an oath. Their free hands hold a large open book. The smaller man seems to be drinking in the message of the scripture – "Blessed are the poor." His eyes are closed, and his emotions agitate his entire body. His most striking feature is his outsize, contorted mouth. The two figures' middle fingers touch gently and almost tenderly. Cedrick Tamasala has sculpted the story of his grandfather. A Belgian missionary rescued him from poverty and enabled him to get a European-style education. The grandfather became alienated from his native culture – which the clergyman actively helped to destroy.



Renzo Martens / IHA

Cedrick Tamasala
How my Grandfather survived, 2015
Chocolate
38 x 21 x 24 cm

The Art Collector
by Djonga Bismar and Jérémie Mabiala

A man sits on a box to which he appears to be shackled. Bald, dressed in a suit and wearing glasses, he sticks out his tongue. His posture reveals that he is defiantly trying to hide his realization that he is in a tight spot. Djonga Bismar and Jérémie Mabiala, who created this statue together, say it shows a man rich in money and possessions who faces a choice: whether to share his wealth – an option symbolized by the vines and flowers that twine around him – or keep it to himself, as suggested by the snake stretching out its own tongue. "The work appeals to everyone who has the necessary means to buy our sculptures and help us get ahead. Hello everybody!" Bismar and Mabiala have titled their work *The Financier / Sponsor / Shareholder / Capitalist / Art Patron*. We have simplified their title.



Renzo Martens / IHA

Jérémie Mabiala & Djonga Bismar
The Art Collector, 2015
Chocolate
120 x 62 x 65 cm

Man is what the head is

Self-portrait by Mathieu Kasiama

Working on the plantation, Mathieu Kasiama earns 20 to 30 dollars a month for his family of six. His first major statue represents his grandfather, while the second one shows a plantation worker who suffers from cancer. Kasiama used the first money he made as an artist to pay the hospital bill for a surgery his wife had undergone and buy a radio for his family. "When I first took part in the workshops," he says, "I didn't take the whole thing too seriously. I saw it as an opportunity to make some money, because I have many mouths to feed. But I spent a lot of time by myself with deep thoughts. Now art enables me to express these thoughts. I hope this project will continue, because man is what the head is."



Renzo Martens / IHA

Mathieu Kasiama
A man is what the head is, 2015
Chocolate
30 x 28 x 32 cm

The Visionary

Self-portrait by Djonga Bismar

In the beginning Djonga Bismar didn't see the point. Only gradually, he says, did he come to see the value of what he was doing. When he became CAPTC's representative and people heard that his sculptures would be presented in Europe, they became envious. Bismar saw the workshops as a chance to learn something that might make his life easier. If he had to stop now, he says, he would feel like he hadn't achieved anything. Bismar created the statue *The Spirit of Palm Oil* (2014) and collaborated on *The Art Collector* (2014). His works reflect joy as well as sorrow.



Renzo Martens / IHA

Djonga Bismar
The Visionary, 2015
Chocolate
33 x 26 x 30 cm

Previous Sculptures

First set of self-portraits, 2014

During a first series of workshops on IHA's settlement in the Congo, plantation workers had made self portraits that were exhibited at the KW Institute for Contemporary concurrently with KOW's exhibition. At KW, Renzo Martens and IHA set up a public office and used the institutional infrastructure to raise additional funds and discuss the conditions of the project. To this end, KW and IHA initiated a number of semi-public and public debates under the title *The Matter Of Critique*.



Renzo Martens / IHA

KW Institute for Contemporary Art,
Berlin, 2015



Renzo Martens / IHA

Mubuku Kipala
Self Portrait without Clothes, 2014
Chocolate
62 x 90 x 70 cm

Exhibition view KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2015



Renzo Martens / IHA

Djonga Bismar
The Spirit of Palm Oil, 2014
Chocolate
91 x 42,5 x 41 cm



Renzo Martens / IHA

Manenga Kibwila
Self Portrait, 2014
Chocolate
34 x 35 x 32 cm

Djonga Bismar
Self Portrait, 2014
Chocolate
33 x 31 x 34 cm



Das von Renzo Martens geleitete Institute for Human Activities (IHA) präsentiert neueste Skulpturen des Cercle d'art des Travailleurs des Plantations Congolaises (Congolesische Plantation Workers Art League). Einst beflügelte die Ausdruckskraft kongolesischer Skulpturen die europäische Avantgarde. Regier Handel verteilte sie auf Museumssammlungen weltweit, während gleichzeitig die künstlerische Produktion vor Ort im Kongo mit der kolonialen Besatzung vor über hundert Jahren endete. Nun initiiert IHA seit 2012 eine Künstlerkolonie 800 Kilometer östlich von Kinshasa, nahe einer ehemaligen Unilever-Plantage im Regenwald. Subsistenzbauern und Plantagenarbeiter haben begonnen, hier künstlerisch zu arbeiten. Sieben Plastiken, die im Januar 2015 entstanden, wurden erstmals bei KOW gezeigt.

Künstlerische Kritik an den Lebens- und Arbeitsbedingungen im Kongo ändert an diesen Bedingungen nichts. Die globale Ungleichheit wird im Gegenteil noch einmal zementiert, wo Armut und Ausbeutung den Rohstoff für eine kritische Kulturproduktion liefern, die letztlich Jobs und Profite in Metropolen wie London und Berlin generiert, nicht in Kinshasa oder gar auf den entlegenen Plantagen. Renzo Martens weithin diskutierter Film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, der 2004 bis 2008 im Kongo entstand, führte diesen Mechanismus exemplarisch vor – und entsprach ihm doch selbst. Mit ihrer Initiative fragen Martens und IHA nun, ob er sich umkehren lässt. Kann künstlerische Kritik ihre ökonomischen und sozialen Effekte an den Orten entfalten, über die sie spricht, und an denen diese Effekte, Geld und Selbstbestimmung, dringend gebraucht werden? IHA's Kunstzentrum ist der Ursprungsort einer neuen Künstlergeneration und ihrer ästhetischen Produktion, in der die lokale Bevölkerung ihre Gefühle und die Kritik an ihren Lebensumständen ins Werk setzt und dabei unterdrückte kulturelle Traditionen wieder aufgreift und weiterentwickelt.

Die Kooperation zwischen der Congolesische Plantation Workers Art League und dem Institute for Human Activities zielt auf eine nachhaltige Entwicklung vor Ort und zugleich auf eine internationale Rezeption und Distribution der entstehenden Werke, die das IHA koordiniert. Die im Januar entstandenen Plastiken wurden aus Tonerde gefertigt, eingescannt und aus den digitalen Datensätzen in Amsterdam, dem größten Kakao-Umschlaghafen der Welt, von einem 3D-Drucker reproduziert. Abgüsse dieser zweiten Urform wurden von Chocolatiers in Belgischer Schokolade gefertigt. Der Rohstoff für diese Schokolade stammt unter anderem aus den umliegenden Plantagen im Kongo und ist neben Palmöl und Kautschuk die einzige Verbindungslinie zwischen dem Weltmarkt und den Arbeitern, ihr einziges Medium der globalen Kommunikation. Entspricht ein Kilo-gramm Kakaobohnen für sie üblicherweise einem Wert von etwa 50 Cent – bei einem Monatseinkommen von rund 20 Euro – repräsentiert das gleiche Kilo einen um viele tausend Prozent höheren Wert auf dem Kunstmarkt.

Renzo Martens /
Institute for Human Activities
A Lucky Day

Exhibition at KOW
May 2–Jul 26, 2015

Text and design: Alexander Koch
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Editing: Kimberly Bradley
Photos: Ladislav Zajac, Alexander Koch

Von der Plantagenarbeit können sie nicht leben, also leben sie nun von der kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit Plantagenarbeit. Gewinne aus dem Verkauf der Skulpturen gehen an die Plantation Workers Art League und ändern Einkommen und Infrastruktur vor Ort. Neben den Editionen, die KOW anbietet, vertreibt IHA zwei unlimitierte Multiples zum Preis von 39,95€. Zeitgleich mit unserer Ausstellung eröffneten Renzo Martens und IHA einen Projektraum in den KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Hier wurden Partnerschaften geknüpft und Gelder eingeworben, zahlreiche Gespräche und öffentliche Veranstaltungen steckten den diskursiven Rahmen der Initiative ab. KW, einst selbst aus dem Engagement von KulturproduzentInnen entstanden, konnte Ressourcen und Diskussionen bündeln und für die Projektentwicklung im Kongo nutzbar machen. KOW zeigte Renzo Martens, bislang als konzeptueller Filmemacher bekannt, als sechstes Kapitel der Ausstellungsreihe *One Year Of Filmmakers*.

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