

## Renzo Marten's *Episode 3*

### Analysis of a Film Process in Three conversations

by Els Roelandt

#### I

Last summer, during my trip to Kassel for Documenta 12, I spoke with the young Dutch artist, Renzo Martens (b. 1973), who was barely known to me. To be specific, I had already met Martens, at another point in the summer's so-called 'Grand Tour'.

Martens and I had shared a small apartment in Venice with some other colleagues and artists. I saw very little of him. As the only man in the group, he kept conspicuously to himself. He was quiet, ironing his shirts or practicing yoga. He barely spoke and impressed me as one of the most detached individuals I had ever met. Ultimately, thanks to our—coincidentally concurrent—visits to Documenta 12, we only really began a conversation somewhere near Duisburg, on the drive from Kassel back to Brussels.

While Valérie Mannaerts, the Brussels and New York-based artist, with whom A Prior had previously worked, sat concentrated at the steering wheel, manoeuvring our trajectory amongst German luxury cars, Martens and I reviewed the more memorable work that we had seen at the summer's rare convergence of international art events. Knowing that Martens had spent quite a lot of time in Africa, I spoke to him with some conviction about the recent photographs by the South African artist, Guy Tillim (b. Johannesburg, 1962). In 2006, during the run-up to the presidential elections in Congo, Tillim produced a beautiful series of colour photographs.<sup>1</sup> He was one of several artists from the African continent invited by Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack to participate in the 'world exhibition' that is Documenta. Some were even present, in traditional costume, at the press conference and opening days of the exhibition.

"Tillim's work is strong," was how I phrased it to Martens. "His images are taken at just the right moment, with a real eye for details in the images that can become symbols. He also has a good sense of staging, using vantage points that ensure that the whole atmosphere is present—the feeling for the environment of the subject that he wants to photograph. You have, as it were, a sense that you were there." (Months later, I would see those images anew, now through the lens of Martens' film camera).

Yes, Martens agreed, they are beautiful photographs, “Tillim is a very good photographer,” he said dryly. “His pictures of the centre of Kinshasa during the elections, with burning propaganda, screaming crowds, the broad back and high neck of Jean-Pierre Bemba (one of the presidential candidates), a statue of Patrice Lumumba (erected by Bemba’s rival, the current Congolese President, Laurent Kabila) as a revolutionary figure in the midst of the seething masses and equally militant Congolese, the presence of the UN one day before the elections, etc., are all very attractive, lifelike and intriguingly presented.”

When Martens told me that he had been at exactly the same locations at exactly the same time, filming them for his new film, *Episode 3*, it surprised me. Kinshasa is a very big city, and those moments leading up to the election took place over a period of time. Opportunities would have been legion and subjects or varying perspectives in the thousands. Martens told me something that I might in fact have thought of myself, namely that most of the photographers (and journalists) in Africa move in the wake of government organizations. They move around together, a bit like a horde of bloodsuckers writhing and sucking until they leave their prey behind, spent. Give or take a few meters, their action radius is usually exactly the same: matching the security regulations laid out by the NGO’s.

“Most of the photographers,” Martens explained, “take few risks. More often than not—at least on this trip—I belong to that group as well. We travel in the shadow of the NGOs, Doctors Without Borders or Unicef. So we all get to see more or less the same things. Unicef leads us to places where food is being distributed, Doctors Without Borders show us how they care for the sick and, next to the UN convoys, you can usually experience something political or violent. That way, the security people ensure that the work of the NGOs is seen by the West, that their logos are photographed and that Westerners are convinced of their good deeds. Funnily enough, it is only these activities that benefit from press coverage. In other long-term programs—exploitation of natural resources, starvation on Western-owned plantations and the launches of rebellions, assassinations and coups—the Westerners involved hardly get any media coverage. The NGOs, for example, get barrels of money thanks to the images that photographers generate of mortally sick or malnourished children, money that they use, among other things, to expand their projects... If I ask local Africans what they would really like to do professionally, I often get the answer that they want to work for an NGO, because in their country, NGO workers live a rich life in comfortable houses.”

“In fact,” continued Martens, “I find it a very hypocritical situation. Not because

journalists and photographers would be just a gang of profiteers exploiting others' poverty by turning it into attractive or impressive images and making piles of money, but because none of the profits that these images generate return to the people that deliver the raw material: the poor allowing themselves to be filmed. This makes the exploitation of filmed and photographed poverty a perfect double (analogy) for rubber, coltan or slave labour. The economical value of these phenomena is denied to the local population, and consequently, they get hardly anything in return. The poor are never involved in getting anything back from the exploitation of their poverty, they have no ownership over it, they are mostly not even aware of the fact that their willingness to be photographed brings in huge amounts of money for the NGO's".

Martens is right, I think. But isn't it true that someone has to show the misery, write about it, film and photograph it, make it known in the West? The demand and need for knowledge and news strikes me as legitimate. Information and knowledge about poverty and injustice are the first step to any possible solution. Such legitimacy of course has ethical limits, and these limits are precisely what Martens, as an artist, wants to focus on in his own investigation.

## II

Intrigued by that first conversation, a few months later, I visited Renzo Martens at his home in Brussels. The point of departure for our meeting was to talk about Martens' work, the object of his engagement and its nature. Before I visited him, I watched one of his earlier films, *Episode 1*, filmed in Chechnya, where Martens had travelled in 2003. The project had been described for the press with some provocation: *Episode 1* Renzo Martens (2003, 45', video) "Renzo Martens pushes his way into Chechnya—alone, illegal and carrying a Hi8 camera. He takes the role of the ubiquitous, yet forever undefined, television viewer whose attention everyone is fighting for. Against a background of ruins and bombings, he does not ask refugees, UN employees and rebels how they feel. Those stories are already known. They already play a role. Instead, he asks them how they think he feels.

The film consequently forms a metaphor for today's media image economy. At the same time, there he stands, with his camera, recording. The film is not about some external phenomenon, but about the conditions of its own existence. This is the film debut of Renzo Martens."2

The fact that A Prior Magazine would be working with Renzo Martens had meanwhile reached the Brussels art scene. The reactions were unanimous: it would be fascinating but controversial. “Either you love it or you hate it,” was the response that I heard most often. I have to admit that I was not overcome by either of those feelings on watching Martens’ first film, *Episode 1*. The film intrigued me, but from a specific perspective.

I was curious about this artist’s personal engagement, his motivation, about why he made this kind of film, in which he seems to put himself in the spotlight. Why in heaven’s name was he adopting such a fragile and untenable position? Were his motives purely ethical? Could they be called political, or were they purely artistic, and as such, at liberty to disregard any ethical issues? Or was his conviction a combination of the two perspectives, fuelled by a belief that art can save the world? Can Martens’ position be compared to that of 19th-century French realistic painters—such as Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet, for example?

This comparison is prompted by Courbet’s famous painting, *L’Atelier du Peintre*, painted in 1855, one of the canonical paintings in the history of modern art. In it, Courbet himself assumed centre position and, with this in mind, he divided the canvas into two parts. To his right, he portrayed his financial supporters, friends, fellow artists, art lovers and so on. In the centre of the canvas, he painted himself, while the space to his left was reserved for what Courbet referred to as, “the other world of the trivial life, the people, misery, poverty, wealth, the exploited, the exploiters, people who live on death...”<sup>3</sup> Courbet believed strongly in the revolutionary potential of the arts, hence in the political power of art, and in so doing, he saw himself playing a central role as a saviour for art and a saviour for society. In painting works like *L’Atelier du Peintre*, Courbet was clearly inspired by Proudhon’s *Philosophie du Progrès* (published in 1853), in which Proudhon called on all of society’s intellectuals “to recommence our social and intellectual education” and to ultimately be guided by science, rather than letting themselves depend completely on the hand of fate. Basing his ideas on Proudhon’s convictions, Courbet was convinced that art was a better means of resolving conflict than war. His art would save the world.

What is noteworthy in this comparison is that, in speaking about his work (and to a certain degree in the work itself), Martens makes a comparable division and likewise sets himself at the centre. On the one hand, there are the poor, the exploited (those being photographed by journalists and photographers), and on the other hand, the photographers and the journalists themselves, the NGOs, art collectors, galleries, business executives and financial backers.

Renzo Martens himself stands amongst them, filming himself as both a part of the events and as an investigator of those events. Nowhere is Martens completely clear about his own position, or so it has appeared in our conversations. He often feels himself a voyeur, or someone participating in the exploitation of the poor. At other times, he sees himself as an outsider, or indeed, he is motivated by an extreme, personal involvement with the victims and is truly trying to help. In each case, by putting the issue of his own position at the heart of the entire filmmaking process, Martens is clearly asking one of the most important philosophical questions in contemporary art, which is whether resistance and criticism are possible in the arts and whether or not there is even such a thing as engaged or committed art.

Jacques Rancière, the French philosopher, has written extensively on these questions. In each case, Rancière has spoken categorically against this notion of 'engaged' art. "It can be said that an artist is committed as a person, and possibly that he is committed by his writings, his paintings, his films, which contribute to a certain type of political struggle. An artist can be committed, but what does it mean to say that his art is committed? Commitment is not a category of art. This does not mean that art is apolitical. It means that aesthetics has its own politics, or its own meta-politics."<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, according to Rancière, the core of the problematic relationship between art and politics is "that there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics. (...) They intermix in any case; politics has its aesthetics and aesthetics has its politics. But there is no formula for an appropriate correlation."<sup>5</sup> In other words, depending on the time or situation in which one finds oneself, a work of art can be read and interpreted differently and therefore be seen to be political to a greater or lesser degree.

Taking Rancière's position into account, I no longer focused simply on whether or not Martens' work was committed. But what of the man, I asked myself; what are his objectives? What does he expect of his work and is his belief in the political persuasion of the arts cut-and-dried? Or is he just out to unmask? Does he just want to show us a series of mechanisms? In conversation with fellow artist Paul Chan, the American, Martha Rosler, was concerned with the same issue. "...Artists have a messianic streak. When you go to art school, ... what they can tell you is that 'you are the true nobility'. And it can't be a nobility of design, it has to be a nobility of the spirit. So every artist feels the messianic idea that artists are of the utmost importance, and if only we could figure out what to do or say, we could change everything.

That is why we are always worrying about utopia. And even though this is sort of laughable, it is also valuable. Somebody's got to have that self-delusion."6 Later in the conversation, both artists reached a conclusion in their search for the relationship between art and politics, and they formulated it this way: namely, that a mediator is needed between art and politics, and Martha Rosler eventually concludes that this mediator is knowledge or awareness. "[W]hat art does is help you reformulate concepts, ideas and beliefs and to become conscious of things, not in a visceral way alone, but in a cognitive way....7 Perhaps Martens' objective could be to formulate a mediation, to create a means through which to see reality, to understand and interpret it.

These were issues that I could not just throw at the artist. I would need to speak to him at length and ask all the related questions. Together with him, I would also have to get through to the essence of his film, *Episode 3*, a project still in progress, one that Martens has already been working on for a few years and for which he has undertaken several long stays in Africa. As I write, the film is still not quite finished, but I have been able to preview many raw and unedited clips. Eventually, Martens and I also had two long, exceptional conversations, interviews that took place over the Christmas holidays at the artist's home in Brussels. My intention had been to proceed under the assumption that, on the one hand, Martens views his film as a kind of mediator that provides information, but at the same time is art in its own right; and on the other hand, that the film also bears a kind of anti-aesthetic (a little like the theatrical works of Bertolt Brecht), in which the author is convinced that neither the art nor the artist has any inherent missionary task, but can only have educational objectives. This seemed to be a safe starting point in gaining some understanding of this controversial work. This is probably a good moment to shed some light on the idea behind *Episode 3*, the film from which the stills on the preceding pages are taken. Following his travels through Chechnya, in *Episode 1*, Martens has once again set out with his camera for a region scarred by war and poverty. This time, it is Congo. He has travelled both on his own and with two porters, in the latter case letting himself be directed to various locations where NGOs were at work. Martens joined a group of journalists and photographers, and were duly confronted with the food relief activities of Unicef, infirmaries supervised by Doctors Without Borders and such events as the Congolese presidential elections. In other segments of the film, we see Martens engaged with local people. He tries to make the mechanisms of their exploitation clear to them. He moreover teaches them to photograph their own circumstances, just the way the white 'relief

workers' appear to be doing. He teaches them to enjoy their poverty: the words, "Enjoy Poverty," are spelled out in big neon lights mounted on a raft with which he travels along the Congo River. The locals, who speak French, are given a translation and remain behind, bewildered and uncomprehending. Once Martens has summoned these mechanisms of abuse for the viewer (and for the local people), he goes a step further, confronting Western relief workers, journalists, art photographers and collectors with their own activities. He tries to show them (using a kind of Socratic Method) that what they are doing can be seen as patently unethical. As a result, Martens is repeatedly forbidden to film and at more than one point, the situation in which he finds himself looks downright dangerous.

Emerging from the first of our two lengthy conversations was an artist with a decisive point of departure: making use of the same strategy as his 'fellow' photographers and journalists, Martens refers to his film as a tautology. "As the producer of the film, you are always implicated. You are always involved. Many filmmakers and photographers try to cover this up." According to Martens, declaring your own position is the ultimate prerequisite for opening up an external reality. Moreover, on the part of the filmmaker, exposing or not exposing one's own position is often tied up with an economic implication. As a result, the position of the photographer or filmmaker in this context can only be recognized when it is lucrative. For example, in presenting help by a relief worker, the latter (usually a white man or woman) is put in the image, but where exploitation is being presented as the subject matter, you never see a white person in the image. Martens refers to Tillim, the white South African whose photographs were shown at Documenta, and how Tillim ensures that there is never a white journalist to be seen in any of his photographs, even if, at the events he photographed, he was surrounded not only by hordes of black protesters, but also by hordes of white photographers. According to Martens, this is only because Tillim wants to sketch the situation as an external reality, with which the future buyer of the work has or wants no real relationship. The person who purchases or sees the work will see the African situation as an outsider, certainly not as someone who is in fact involved with it, let alone contributing to its perpetuation.

Martens moreover has clear doubts about the potential of showing the suffering and pain of others in images, and to support his thinking, he refers, among others, to Susan Sontag. As Martens puts it, Susan Sontag described it well in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. It is, in fact, impossible to visualize suffering. "It seems too simple to elect sympathy (as a feeling

generated by photographs). The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers—seen close-up on the television screen—and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet once more a mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent it can be (for all good intentions) an impertinent – if not inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same maps as their suffering may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, Martens agrees with Sontag that the pain and suffering of others is in fact impossible to depict.

In *Episode 3*, Martens proposed an emancipation project for the poor. He encouraged them to embrace their poverty so they can harvest the rewards of their circumstances. He sent them off with a camera to photograph their own violated women and corpses, to no longer leave it up to Western photographers selling their photographs for costly dollars to television stations or collectors in art galleries. Martens tries to talk them into an African enterprise. At some places or moments, Martens in fact concludes that no help can be offered as poverty in itself, when it is in places where NGO’s never come, is worthless, has no economical value. In such cases, he thinks that for these people, acceptance is the best strategy.

### III

During our second interview, which took place in the afternoon on the day before Christmas, I saw a more emotional and vulnerable artist, who was visibly moved by what he had seen and experienced during his many months in Africa. During our conversation, we watched fragments from *Episode 3* together and talked about the many sidelines and stories that needed to be developed in the film, such as the education of local people or a visit to an art gallery. The segment on the art gallery is interesting.

In it, the gallery is exhibiting ‘artistic’ photographs of workers in appalling conditions. They seem virtual slaves. Taken by the wife of the manager of the plantation where the workers were being exploited like slaves, the photographs are being sold for \$600 apiece at the



opening of this local gallery, to buyers who include the plantation owner himself. In this scene, Martens' investigation reaches a climax. Concurrently, it is here that cynicism also reaches its apex—not Martens' cynicism, but that of the exploiter and the Westerner with the clear conscience, aware of no wrongdoing whatsoever. Almost equally repulsive, or in any case hard to digest—on Christmas Eve—is a scene in which a few local men, on Martens' own instructions, take photographs of malnourished and literally dying toddlers. They emphatically tell their fellow villagers how they will pay nothing for their photographs, cannot give them anything at all, cannot be of any possible use to them and will themselves only earn a penny from the commercialization of their poverty. These are horrible situations, and it is at moments like these that I suddenly look at what I am seeing with different eyes. I feel very involved and responsible for what is happening, and I understand that Martens here reaches his goal. Consequently, my further questions to Martens become more personal. How can he film this? How can he deal with his own involvement in this reality?

Martens compares his tactics with those of a satirical tradition, as he tells me about *A Modest Proposal*,<sup>9</sup> the satirical pamphlet published by Jonathan Swift in 1729, describing how parents should best serve their children to be eaten at fancy London dinner tables, rather than let them be a burden to themselves or to the state. At the time, the pamphlet was dismissed as satanic and immoral, but its intention was to open people's eyes to the misery prevailing in Ireland in the eighteenth century.

With this comparison, Martens sees his position as a filmmaker as deviating from that of ordinary reporters because he brings himself into the image while showing what is happening. By making a film about its own broader parameters, elements that are normally obscured become obvious and visible. In this way, one's sense of involvement also becomes far greater.

Gradually, in the interview, the artist's own commitment becomes evident. This is also reflected in the two different contracts, made between Martens and the local people of Kinshasa and its surrounding area (as shown in the pages of this journal). In the first contract, paraphrasing Central Africa's most common business practise, we read a cold statement that any profit of any picture taken of the people will NOT be returned to them. In the second contract, made at a later period, Martens is less hard and agrees on sharing any eventual profits with the people portrayed. We move from the rather cold-blooded, distant observer who has seen a great deal of misery and no longer believes in the goodness of humanity, to an

empathetic individual who asks himself what he can do to alleviate abuse in Africa, who in total desperation concludes that he can “do nothing for these people”, one who finally wants to complain that nobody in this story wants to take responsibility, that ultimately, only the corrupt African leaders are accused of guilt and not the Western companies that make sure any leader who does not cooperate with corruption on the one hand and provides little return to the local population on the other, will be ousted. Indeed, Martens now has something of ‘the man out to save the world’ about him; a man who, despite the hardness of his technique, wants to show and teach the world something, who even pokes his head out from under a mosquito net, in tears over his powerlessness.

For this too is part of implicating oneself in the image: the doubts about one’s own standpoint, the questions about the intentions of what one does, about the results of one’s art. In the confusion of images taken at moments of vulnerability and doubt, this filmmaker finally shows himself not suffering from the same delusions as his fellow photographers. Although Martens perceives the film as a tautology, when it comes down to it, he does somehow want to make a difference.

*(Translated from the Dutch by Mari Shields)*

#### NOTES

1. Congo Democratic is a series of photographs taken by Guy Tillim in Kinshasa in July, 2006
2. Press Release dated 19 January 2006, published by De Balie Cinema, on the occasion of Filmbanktour: Warped Vision.
3. Courbet depicts ‘L’Atelier du Peintre’ in a letter to his friend, art critic Jules Champfleury, see Rubin, J.H. 1997. Courbet. New York: Phaidon, p. 139.
4. Rancière, J. 2004. The Politics of Aesthetics. New York: Continuum, p. 60.
5. Ibid., p. 62.
6. Chan, P & M. Rosler. 2006. Between Artists. New York: A.R.T. Press, p. 29.
7. Ibid., p. 50.
8. Sontag, S. 2003. Regarding the Pain of Others. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 102.
9. Swift, J. A Modest Proposal: For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick. First published in 1729. Available in its entirety at: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/SwiMode>