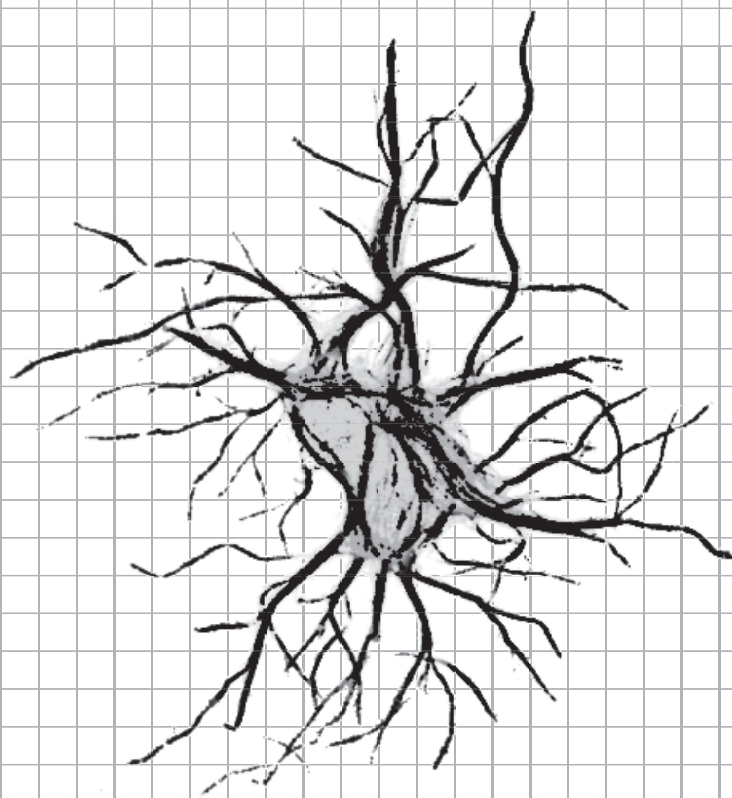


For Art and the World

Jacob Wren



valerail
polemics
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Trailer of "Episode III": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yREqd8QYtsQ>

valeveil polemics

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valeveil polemics is a project aspiring to collect, archive and disperse concise works expressing a specific position: empathic concerns, discreet arguments, provocative essays, personal commentary, coy observations—rare phenomena ranging from the askew to the contempo. The subject matter *typically* engages in investigations in-and-of America and/or Scandinavia (though, this is not a prerequisite). *valeveil* polemics exist as gratis, downloadable .pdfs.

The work of art that I have debated most this past year, and perhaps even the past ten years, is the feature length video *Enjoy Poverty* by the Dutch, Belgium-based artist Renzo Martens. It is a work I feel extremely conflicted by and with. One thing however is very clear to me: any work of art that gets people talking, that gets people debating to that degree, and about such essential things, must be both powerful and effective. *Enjoy Poverty* is definitely powerful and effective, but it is also many other things.

I believe *Enjoy Poverty* derives a great deal of its power from expressing, quite forcefully, a simple truth: that the first world achieves its wealth and comfort by ripping it violently off the backs of people in the third world. And that our compassion for the malnourished in far away lands serves to mask the fact that we are the ones economically benefiting from their misery, which is in fact just a disguised form of slavery.¹

The fact that first world wealth directly benefits from third world misery is an idea I have been obsessed with for my entire life. I have often felt that Simone Weil had the right idea: *we should not eat as long as people in the world are starving*.² But of course, starving to death, much like falling into a severe depression over the state of the world, solves nothing.

To make *Enjoy Poverty*, Renzo Martens spent four years in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Actually, I was about to summarize the film but suddenly feel that it is better if I don't. Go see it. Decide for yourself. Instead, I will speak in and around it, using it for my own purposes, as gasoline thrown onto the flames of my own endless self-questioning.

Often, when I am viewing bad art (a bad dance show, a bad reading, a bad video installation) I am overwhelmed by a very specific feeling of disgust: how can they possibly be making something so irrelevant and bland when, at this very moment, there are people being massacred in Darfur, Burma and Tibet, being bombed in Afghanistan, children dying of malnutrition in the Congo, dying of AIDS in Africa, when somewhere in the world right now someone is being tortured and mutilated and will possibly die in a state most of us will never even need to contemplate much less experience. And when our role as wealthy Westerners makes us, to some extent, complicit in so many of these catastrophes. I believe this is what one might call an unfair criticism, but I also feel certain we need to think about the world we are living in in order to make art—that art that doesn't have an awareness of these basic contemporary realities in its very DNA is somehow irrelevant.³

However, my other point is that I did not feel *this* particular kind of disgust—a disgust triggered by ethical irrelevance—while watching *Enjoy Poverty*. The disgust I felt was of a very different order. Renzo Martens spent four years in the Congo, but his attitude towards the Congolese is not one of communal brotherhood.

In my opinion, he behaves like a self-important, Western asshole. I also believe he does this on purpose, as

1. In the press release, Martens quotes Susan Sontag: "Compassion obstructs us from realizing we are a constituting part of the world being represented."

2. I hope I have not simplified Weil's thinking too much.

3. I'm definitely not suggesting that art should be *about* such injustices. That might well be the road to mediocrity. I'm only pressing on the necessity of an acute awareness. This is a key distinction.

a kind of persona, in order to make a point. Nonetheless, it seems to come rather naturally to him. Perhaps, because in real life, he is something of a self-important asshole.⁴

His behavior towards the Congolese is in many ways the emotional fulcrum of the film: when he is unkind or behaves in a conflicted manner towards someone on screen, it is a constant stand-in for the many ways in which we, the Western viewers, are treating these people on an economic and systematic level each and every day. We do not really care about them. We say we care, but our actual behavior suggests otherwise.

And Renzo Martens has theories. “You cannot give these people anything they do not already have,” he mutters into the camera, as if to himself, just out of earshot of the Congolese workers he has hired to carry a series of heavy crates for him across a swamp. In response to some fisherman hauling in their net, he tells them that he thinks their catch is small, then once again turns away and speaks privately into the camera: “there are new technologies, new global markets for these people, new opportunities.” This he attempts to demonstrate by embarking on a scheme with three young, local photographers: instead of continuing to photograph weddings and celebrations for next to nothing, they will instead photograph scenes of war and starvation, selling them to the international market for considerably greater profit.

Poverty is a “commodity” that the West has been exploiting for years. Instead, the Congolese should start exploiting it for themselves. When this scheme doesn’t work out, he drops the photographers coldly, telling them that they should go back to photographing weddings. We see the three Congolese photographers walking away: dejected, betrayed, misled, and the analogy couldn’t possibly be more clear. When we try to help these people, we only end up betraying them, exploiting them, letting them down. This is also Renzo Martens’ position on international aid, with the added caveat that often Western countries are the ones actually profiting from international aid projects. I believe this position to be very close to the truth of the matter.

When it comes to first world / third world interactions, I don’t think Renzo Martens believes in small acts of kindness. He seems to find them hypocritical: a small band-aid placed on the massive wound of structural exploitation and violence. But maybe now it’s me who is being too harsh.⁵ Everyone believes in small acts of kindness from time to time. Even Hitler was kind to his dog. But—and this is the real heart of my critique—in *Enjoy Poverty*, there is analogy, and then there is documentary. The unkind things he says, he is saying them to real people. That is why the work is so powerful. But it is also why I believe the work to be unfair.

Lately, my health has been extremely poor. Actually, I have had chronic health problems for the past eighteen years, but in the past year, it has become rather extreme and unbearable. I often view my own poor health, and my inability to really work in a serious way towards improvement, as analogous with the self-destructive nature of global capitalism. This is a bit of a stretch. Most of my life has also been a struggle with severe depression. Sometimes, I think my depression has to do with the state of the world,

4. I’ve never met him—how the fuck would I know? It’s just a hunch.

5. Or even worse, perhaps I’m only projecting.



at other times I think it only has to do with the fact that I am rather bad at living. Yet at other times, I think it is because I was born this way—that it's genetic. A friend of mine heard a Buddhist neuroscientist on the radio. The scientist was saying that studies show that when we spend time thinking about ourselves, it fires off the neurons in our brains that cause depression, and when we spend time thinking about and helping other people, it fires off the neurons that cause happiness. This fit very well with his Buddhist perspective.

I realize that this is supposed to be a polemic, yet it might well be too confused to convince anyone of anything. Thinking about these questions, as I have been doing for as long as I can remember, always produces, for me, more confusion than clarity. But if this is a polemic for anything, it is for an art that looks at what is systematically, and often horrifically, happening in the world today and yet continues to search for ways to honestly and empathetically make art. In many ways *Enjoy Poverty* does this—and very powerfully at that. And yet watching it, I wanted to stand up in my seat and scream out: *no, this is not exactly what I meant*. Expressing shallow compassion for people who live very far away while continuing to economically exploit them, this is an everyday reality that cannot be condemned harshly or often enough. But how you treat and speak to a person that you are interacting with, that is standing a few feet away from you—this is a different matter altogether. And I'm just not sure that one should be used as a metaphor for the other. On the other hand, listening to the discussions people were having after the screening, discussions that I believe many of them had never had in their lives, I'm also not sure that it shouldn't.

Everything is allowed in art today. To tell an artist that he or she shouldn't do this or that thing, on moral or ethical grounds, is considered paramount to being some kind of minor Nazi. It is considered only slightly better to tell them what they *should* be doing. To fight for this or that kind of art today almost seems comical. But fighting for certain kinds of art is nonetheless *exactly* what we should be doing.

It's massively over-used, but Adorno's famous "to write lyrical poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" feels, to me, more relevant than ever. To make art today that is about nothing, or about very little, only serves to bolster the apolitical status quo. I should probably look up the citation, but I recall that Adorno states something to the effect that the Holocaust could happen again at any time, that we have solved nothing, because people still have no autonomy.

When George W. Bush and his fascist cronies were bombing Iraq, torturing people and further eliminating American civil liberties, there was a very real feeling that very little could be done about it. And of course, equal or even more savage injustices are currently being committed in more places than I can list. I don't think I can believe in any art that doesn't know these basic facts in a very deep way, that doesn't try to internalize them, to think about what it might mean to live in a world with the technology to completely eradicate itself, with the propaganda know-how to keep this fact only in the back of peoples' minds, with a greed that has the potential to literally devour everything, to bring the entire tower of cards crashing down upon our heads. And at the same time, well ... life also means very little without great feelings of joy. A sense of lightness and potential must also be cherished and preserved.

A work of art like *Enjoy Poverty*—a work that gets so very, very close to the art that I am dreaming of and yet, for me, still falls so far short of the mark—is bound to provoke my ire. Why is it that the things that are closest to the position we desire, but in their very closeness at the same time almost seem to betray it, have the power to infuriate us the most? I feel that Renzo Martins and I should be on the same side. That if, for me, he goes too far on certain points, I should in fact celebrate this—because it has helped me further clarify just exactly what kind of art I want to be fighting for. To fight for a fairly specific position in the creation of artistic works does not mean that we might ever hope to achieve it.

There is no perfect way to live. To paraphrase Heiner Müller: “You cannot wait for a tool without blood on it.” I am searching for the artists who know that of course the world is drenched in blood, who are outraged by this fact, who realize they are implicated within a maze of considerable and constant injustice yet still wish to fight against it, who believe that, whether consciously or not, art is always in some sense an ethical act in a world where functionally ethical acts are, debatably, few and far between.

But then again, fuck art: how is one to live, think and flourish in a world full of such systematic injustice and violence? Ignoring it should not be an option.