

CATPC & Renzo Martens Balot

*CATPC and Renzo Martens's exhibition at KOW marks a new stage in their longstanding collaboration, in which they delve deep into both colonial relations and the mechanics of the art world, in order to understand and alter them. The show features six new documentary films (2022), Martens's widely discussed film *White Cube* (2020), and the launch of an NFT as a new instrument of decolonialization in the form of digital restitution (2022).*

Since 2014, Lusanga, a palm-oil plantation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, has been the scene of an emerging new ecosystem. Former wage laborers founded the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League (CATPC) to reclaim their culture, their land, and their self-determination. They have built a sustainable artistic and economic practice that defies colonial expropriation and violence.

WHITE CUBE Renzo Martens's 74-minute film tells the story of CATPC's founding and shows how the plantation workers revive the local sculptural tradition, which withered after it was all but banned around a century ago. With Martens's assistance, the sculptures from Lusanga attract international attention and generate initial revenues for the Post-Plantation. CATPC buys back the land that was stolen generations earlier and develops autonomous agrarian structures.

The film makes evident that the imperialist and colonial museum operations of the North were and still are financed by unpaid plantation labor by the Pende and other communities. In an act of self-determined restitution or repatriation, CATPC, in collaboration with the Dutch architecture firm OMA, erect their own *White Cube* in Lusanga, bringing the museum back to its economic origin. For the time being, however, the galleries remain empty.

PLANTATIONS AND MUSEUMS A series of six short documentary films follows CATPC's Mathieu Kasiama and Cedart Tamasala as they search for an important sculpture that was taken away from their community decades ago and that they hope to return to Lusanga. The sculpture was made by the Pende in 1931 in an effort to control the spirit of the Belgian officer Maximilien Balot, who was decapitated in an act of rebellion after committing rapes and other atrocities.

Kasiama and Tamasala travel to the Pende revolt's battlefield and to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, USA, where the Balot sculpture is now held. They talk to experts in the postcolonial discourse, unravel the hidden interconnections between the plantations of the South and the museums of the North, and visit the collector who acquired the sculpture in 1972 and later sold it to the Virginia Museum. Kasiama and Tamasala show up at the museum to demand that the sculpture be given back, in vain.

THE BALOT NFT On February 11, 2022, CATPC will mint an NFT to take digital possession of the Balot sculpture and reclaim their heritage. NFT technology, a digital tool designed to create private property rights in works of art and other materials, is repurposed in order to demand the return of a privatized communal cultural asset into the hands of the people who produced it, who need it, and who want to share it with others.

The Balot sculpture—the spirit of the Belgian officer exorcised decades ago—once again serves the community's purposes. Anchoring it on the blockchain and later disseminating it as a series of NFTs will enable them to reactivate the sculpture's powers and buy back land that was stolen and despoiled in order to reintroduce sustainable forms of management and land use and provide financial support for the rebuilding of communities. An NFT's value of 0.1 Ether is enough to buy one hectare of land in Lusanga.

A NOTE So much for the basic facts on the projects and works on view at KOW. The collaboration between CATPC, Renzo Martens, and many others who have been involved in the Lusanga project began over ten years ago. The international critical response to the project has

been a key factor in determining its trajectory. It has acted as a corrective check on a complex endeavor whose objective is to understand, identify, and challenge in one specific place the global relationships that often have been and still are steeped in violence and that shore up the grossly unequal distribution of the privilege of self-determination.

The long-term project and individual stages of its evolution have repeatedly met with polemical criticism. It has typically been Martens's role as initiator and producer (rather than the project itself) that has drawn condemnation. Polemicists routinely simplify factual considerations; they are often unfamiliar with (and cannot be bothered to read up on) the larger story behind the object of their ire. KOW would like to note:

The Lusanga project grew out of questions that Martens raised in his film *Enjoy Poverty*, which came out in 2008: if the victorious societies find ways to turn even their victims' suffering into a profitable cultural business—does that make those suffering possess a capital that they may appropriate and market on their own so as to obtain a form of economic redress? A provocative, perhaps even perverse idea, but not an illogical one.

After *Enjoy Poverty*, Martens realized that the idea was itself polemical: by abstracting from the interdependencies between power, money, and violence, it failed to tackle their concrete reality. As *White Cube* documents, Martens subsequently harnessed his European privilege to provoke these interdependencies in symbolic, political, and positively physical ways (by putting himself as a white man and artist into play). Yet provoking white imperialism and its critique was only a part of what he aimed at.

With the establishment of CATPC in 2014, Martens's project turned into a collective endeavor in which roles and tasks, interests and resources, authorship and financial profits were distributed in order to bring the Post-Plantation into being as both a new narrative and a new model of de-facto independent action. Since then, Lusanga has seen the growth of social, economic, and artistic structures, including property relations, that have evolved autonomously and now cooperate on a project basis with Martens and others (including Human Activities, Amsterdam, as coordinator).

KOW has supported this process and today represents both Renzo Martens and CATPC as an art collective featuring individual voices who enrich the gallery's program. For us, this has also been a singular opportunity to be part of a performative process with origins in Lusanga and Amsterdam that has been designed to engender a steady succession of fresh perspectives, actors, interests, and problems. Martens's approach is summed up by something he said in conversation: "I don't want to talk about the problem, I want to have the problem." We at the gallery could not agree more. The remark pinpoints the core of his practice: to counter the complex of colonial perversions by allowing his European self to get entangled in them and taking responsibility, in full view of the public, for roles that will inevitably be fraught.

In the colonial North, some observers thought he was being cynical or naïve. In Lusanga, many believed what he was doing was right. Instead of waiting for solutions to problems that everyone knows will not be solved anytime soon—and certainly not with the means of critique—CATPC and Martens immersed themselves into actual experiences of prejudice, racism, blindness, inequality, and violence both structural and personal. Their goal: to "inhabit" the relations of power that their bodies were already enmeshed in in new ways, and perhaps to change them as well, but from a new standpoint.

CATPC's positions and interests have since become manifest: by buying back land that global corporations had seized, they lay a vital foundation for secure livelihoods. Revived artistic practices that are now embedded in local as well as international contexts pursue diverse aspirations, some in cooperation with Martens, others without him. These practices rightly reclaim their self-sufficiency and independence from a still-violent plantation regime.

In one of the films, *Simon Gikandi*, author of *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, encourages Tamasala and Kasiama to continue on their chosen path: "The people who critique you may be under the assumption that those who live on the plantation are not interested in art, or are not capable of art. You have to be strong and say: we do this for ourselves, for our community. We have the right to art." And Ariella Aisha Azoulay, author of *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, emphasizes: "There is no other way to defeat imperialism than to build your own world."

One final remark: if Cedart Tamasala, Mathieu Kasiama and CATPC reappropriate the Balot sculpture in digital form, as an NFT, that does not imply that they agree with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts's continued possession of the physical sculpture. But that's another tale, and another step in this long process of bringing solutions to problems that are known all over the world, solutions that are as complicated as that world itself.

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