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See the Congolese artists igniting a modern arts movement

From an art museum on a former plantation, sculptors in Democratic Republic of Congo are challenging injustices and boosting the local economy.



At a February workshop in Lusanga, in western-central Democratic Republic of Congo, veteran artists gathered with hopefuls auditioning to join the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, or CATPC.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELÉONORE HELLIO

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ON A RECENT Tuesday morning, some 20 Congolese villagers sat bent over mounds of river clay, determinedly pinching and massaging the orange-brown masses into expressive lips, eyes, and fingers. Birdsong floated into the open-air atelier, a two-story structure set alongside the gently coursing waters of the Kwenge River, as a pair of instructors wandered among the sculptors, asking questions and offering gentle encouragement.

You won't find the name Lusanga among the likes of Bilbao and Miami on the art lover's global circuit. Simply getting to this town in western-central Democratic Republic of Congo entails either a ten-hour drive from the capital of Kinshasa or a two-hour flight on one of the 19-seaters that arrives here just twice a week. What you will find, incredibly, is a Modernist art museum—an iconic “white cube” designed by [OMA](#), the renowned Rotterdam firm founded by [Rem Koolhaas](#)—along with a determined group of activist-artists engaged in an effort to reverse decades-old injustice while driving economic activity.

The whole unlikely enterprise—the museum and workshop sit amid huts of mud and thatch, and there isn't a flush toilet or hot shower for miles—is the brainchild of a Dutch artist named [Renzo Martens](#). In 2008, the then-35-year-old made waves internationally with a documentary-of-sorts called “[Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty](#).” In the film, Martens voyages into the Congolese hinterland with a handheld camera and confronts the people he meets about their place in the global capitalist system. Accompanied by a few local men bearing unwieldy trunks on their heads, he trudges through thick jungle and wades through swampland before arriving at a clearing and removing foot-tall letters from the trunks. Mounting them on a rickety bamboo trellis, he hooks the contraption up to a generator and the words “Enjoy Poverty (Please)” blaze out as locals dance around the spectacle. In another scene, Martens advises young Congolese photographers to capture images of starving babies and women who've been raped rather than the birthday parties and wedding couples that have previously served as their subjects. It's the former images, he tells them, that the West wants and expects from the DRC.



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The 2017 inauguration of the "White Cube," in Lusanga, attracted visitors from around the globe. Designed by the Rotterdam firm Office for Metropolitan Architecture, or OMA, the... [Read More](#)

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Martens, who is based in Amsterdam, explores similar themes in Lusanga, where he traveled in February to lead a workshop with the artists. “Enjoy Poverty,” he told me, over an al fresco breakfast of warm roasted peanuts and just-picked passion fruit, spurred economic activity in the places it was shown—places like Venice, New York, and Berlin, “everywhere but in the one place where an economy is very desperately needed.” The practice of critical art, he went on, is in many ways an extractive enterprise. “So I thought, it makes no sense for me to make another critical art piece and then have it in a white cube in Brooklyn, where it will further gentrify Brooklyn but have no effect in Congo. That’s just not serious.”

In 2010, Martens founded something called the Institute for Human Activities, or IHA, whose mission is to prove that artistic critique on economic inequality can redress it—not just symbolically, but in tangible ways. The Lusanga project stands as its centerpiece. The town itself was formerly known as Leverville, named for the British industrialist William Lever, who established a giant oil palm plantation here in 1911, under what then was Belgian rule. For decades, Lever’s company, the Huileries du Congo Belge (later the Plantations Lever Zaire, or PLZ), depended on forced labor to churn out the palm oil upon which his soap empire was founded. (The company would later merge with a Dutch firm to become Unilever, still among the top buyers of palm oil today.) (Discover whether palm oil can be sustainable.)

By creating an arts institution in one of the poorest parts of the world, Martens hopes not only to draw the art world’s attention to the communities wronged over the decades by multinational companies and colonial regimes, but also to reclaim some of the wealth they’ve long been denied. “Putting a white cube in the forest,” he said, upends the power relationship between resource extraction and art. The sculptors, who were recruited via an open audition facilitated by artists from Kinshasa, founded a cooperative, the Congolese Plantation Workers’ Art League, or CATPC, in 2014. Ranging in age from 23 to 87, the eleven original members are mostly impoverished farmers (the average Lusangan earns less than \$20 a month) and cutters charged with the dangerous work of dislodging oil palm bunches from the tall trees on which they grow.



Emery Mohamba works on *The Art Collector (revisited)*. The son of an oil-palm cutter, the 49-year-old artist says that he sends messages through his sculptures, "as a way to share our concerns."

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELÉONORE HELLIO

Of course, for this “reverse-gentrification program” to succeed, it needs to generate cash. And given its remote location and lack of infrastructure, Lusanga won’t likely be pulling in the international jet set very soon. Which is why Martens’s project incorporates a creative workaround: Once the artists have crafted their sculptures from river mud, the pieces get digitally scanned and the resulting data sent to Amsterdam. There, technicians employ 3-D printers to create molds of the pieces, which are then cast in unsweetened chocolate made from African cacao beans. “It’s gimmicky,” Martens said of the chosen medium, “as well as being a comment on global trade and inequality and race.” Like palm oil, cacao has a long history of being produced on stolen land and relying upon abusive labor practices. Collectors get the digital file, so that they can reproduce their art pieces should they melt, get eaten, or otherwise meet an unfortunate end. Before embarking on this project, not a single CATPC member had tasted processed chocolate. “It was incredible when I learned there was an art project nearby,” said Cedrick Tamasala. “I couldn’t believe it.” The dreadlocked 33-year-old had spent a year at Kinshasa’s Académie des Beaux Arts before moving back home when his father ran out of money to pay tuition.

The artists’ sculptures, which have been exhibited in galleries and museums from Berlin and Amsterdam to Tokyo and New York (the *Times* named a show at the SculptureCenter, in Queens, among the best art of 2017), have so far generated more than \$68,000. The money goes back to the cooperative, which uses it to pay the artists as well as to buy land and seedlings. In addition, the group has hired a professional agronomist who is helping the community determine which crops might best grow in the soil and find a local market. They are in the process of replacing the decades-old oil palm monoculture with an integrated farm intended to produce food for local families rather than a single commodity for export. The group also has begun raising chickens and has established a fish farm and beehives, among other income-generating and food-security-focused projects. As it brings in more money, the cooperative plans to purchase additional land, with an ultimate goal of securing the titles to some 5,000 acres. “We produce art,” Martens said, “not just the sculptures but all kinds of art, and what comes out is land. Land for former plantation workers or their relatives, who have no access to land.”



The artwork tends to reflect the outsized role that the plantation played here. Irene Kanga, the 25-year-old stepdaughter of a former PLZ employee, took as inspiration for her first sculpture the rape of a local Pende woman during a 1931 revolt against colonial administrators. Tamasala, whose grandfather was orphaned after his father fell from a tree while working for Lever, named his first piece “How my Grandfather Survived.” It features two figures, a larger, fatherly presence in robes holding open one side of a book, and a boy in shorts supporting the other side. Peeking up through the elder’s hair is a pair of tiny horns. “The priest saved my grandfather,” he said, “but his mission was to destroy the culture. He was here to facilitate colonialism.”

Tamasala, who emerged early on as a leader in the group, shares an office and administrative duties with a fellow artist named Mathieu Kasiama. From the time he was a boy, said the 32-year-old Kasiama, whose father died of a hernia after a life of cutting fruit, he had fashioned objects out of wood and woven grass, but he’d never thought of himself as an artist. (See the artists often overlooked in modern art.)

The recent workshop—which brought together, in addition to Martens and René Ngongo, a prominent Congolese environmental activist who serves as president of CATPC, five local agronomists—focused on securing the project’s future. Land issues in the DRC have historically been fraught, and everyone involved is determined that the community as a whole, rather than particular individuals, reap the program’s benefits. Though the recently purchased land currently is in the name of IHA, the agreement is to transfer it to CATPC as soon as is legally possible. Also discussed: the documentary and feature films currently underway about the project, and the educational program in development, which Martens hopes to one day emit from the white cube to plantation workers around the globe, thereby jumpstarting action among them.

The question remains just how much economic activity a cultural center sited in an obscure village in perennially troubled DRC will generate, particularly if the well-connected European behind it decides to move on. Martens maintains that he isn't going anywhere ("This is what I do"), but in the meantime, the artists say that a fire has been lit within them. Leading a visitor around the plant nursery and the newly intercropped fields on what Martens has dubbed the "post-plantation," Kasiama and Tamasala pointed out the first successful cacao planting and spoke animatedly about their future plans. "When I arrived here and started with the project," said Tamasala, "I felt like my body really had power. This has given me a life." 🟡