

Visiting *The Repatriation of The White Cube*

On invitation of the *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC)* and the *Institute for Human Activities (IHA)*, Michel van Dartel, professor at the *Research Group Human-Centred Creation (EKV)* at *Avans University* visited the *Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI)*, a joint initiative of *CATPC* and *IHA* in the *Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)*, for an event titled *The Repatriation of The White Cube*.

The event inaugurated a quintessential “White Cube”, that the renowned Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) designed for LIRCAEI, built on the site of a former Unilever palm oil plantation in the village of Lusanga in the south west of the DRC. The inauguration of this white cube marked the launch of a five year-research programme of LIRCAEI, aimed to attract both the capital and the visibility required for plantation workers to buy back land and develop a new economic and ecological model on the site. The development of this so-called “post-plantation” will be core to the research program and follows the widely-acclaimed US debut exhibition of the *CATPC at the Sculpture-Center in New York City*^{*}. For the occasion of the inauguration in Lusanga, the CATPC curated an exhibition which featured artworks by members

of the cooperative alongside contributions from international artists such as Kader Attia, Sammy Baloji, Carsten Höller, Luc Tuymans and Marlene Dumas.

In an earlier stage of the collaboration between IHA and CATPC, the group of plantation workers that is now united under the cooperative CATPC received professional art training, after which they developed a first series of artworks. The poverty of the workers can be attributed to their position at the very beginning of the value chain of chocolate production, where profit margins are generally lowest. As such, they came up with an artistic concept that would connect them to

^{*} <http://www.nytimes.com/chocolate-sculpture-with-a-bitter-taste-of-colonialism.html&usg=AFQjCNGOd7SrOZacsSS3>

^{**} http://v2.nl/lab/blog/v2_s-collaborates-with-renzo-martens-ih

^{***} <http://v2.nl/lab/blog/pop-up-store-at-art-rotterdam>

the end of that value chain, where chocolate becomes a retail product and profit margins are typically much higher. They conceived a series of sculptural self-portraits made from the chocolate they would normally only harvest cacao beans for. In this stage of the project, V2 Institute for the Unstable Media contributed to the realisation of the chocolate sculptures by coordinating the development of a *technical solution to materialize the chocolate sculptures based on the river clay models produced by CATPC's artists on site*^{**}. Subsequently, IHA and V2 realised a *pop-up store concept around the sale of a series of 'multiples' of CATPC's sculptures*^{***} to boost the revenue stream flowing back to Lusanga.

Much has changed in Lusanga since the plantation workers gained access to the global art market. The sales of the sculptures, through Galerie Fons Welters and the travelling pop-up store, have resulted in a steady stream of revenue flowing back into the CATPC cooperative. From this revenue, the artists are paid fees for their artistic work and investments are made into the post-plantation. While setting up one his sculptures inside the white cube, in preparation for its inauguration, artist Jérémie Mabila offered an interesting perspective on what impact the investments have on the community of Lusanga. Whereas a tour of the post-plantation earlier that day presented most of the concrete returns based on the artistic revenue stream, such as workspaces, housing, land, and seeds, among others, Mabila's perspective on these returns captures something more fundamental about the changes currently occurring in the village of Lusanga. According to him, the returns from their artistic labour are used to invest in one essential thing; diversity. He distinguishes three kinds of diversity that he regards of critical importance to the future of Lusanga: 1.) ecological diversity, which will improve the soil of Lusanga, worn-out over decades of incessant cultivation, as well as providing better food security, by making the local agriculture more resilient against extreme weather conditions; 2.) economic diversity, creating a bigger spread in the types of income generated by the community, such as artist fees besides income earned over plantation labour, intended to make the local economy more adaptive to fluctuations in de-



Fig 1. The White Cube; headquarters of the Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI)



Fig. 2. Inauguration speech by Renzo Martens



Fig. 3. Tour of the post-plantation

mand and production, and 3.) social diversity, which widens the range of social backgrounds and perspectives within the local community. The latter, Mabilia explains, is an important requirement to make productive alliances, such as the one between IHA and CATPC.

Mabilia's point regarding the necessity of social diversity also refers to a concern that is often raised in relation to IHA's activities in Lusanga: Is IHA's director, artist Renzo Martens, not simply exploiting the people of Lusanga for his own artistic gain? In the end, Martens has often positioned his work as a critique on the (mis) use of the notion of "artistic engagement" in the art world. An argument that arguably holds little value to the people in Lusanga. Mabilia smiles when asked for his opinion on the matter by a reporter for the Frankfurter Allgemeine. Of course he is aware of the point that Martens is trying to make as an artist, he responds,

Fig. 4. Kikwit Airport



but then invites us to just look around to see if Martens can really be argued to gain most from what is happening here. Mabilia sees the post-plantation as a productive collaboration that many can benefit from in their own way. Everyone involved in this project knows exactly why others partake in it and what they gain from it, he seems to be saying. It is important to add that the plantation workers that received art training through the project never gave up their plantation work completely. Otherwise they would simply be creating yet another homogenous economy, albeit around a different type of labour, Mabilia clarifies.

Hearing representatives of CATPC, IHA and LIRCEI passionately talk about the intentions behind Lusanga's new post-plantation, while showing off the promising first outcomes and current developments, one gets the sense that the project is well on its way of becoming successful in offering a better livelihood to the plantation workers by 'gentrifying the jungle', as The Guardian wrote when Martens revealed his ambitions for the project three years ago. A lot needs to happen still, says CATPC's director Rene Ngogo, while providing a tour of the plantation to all visitors attending "THE REPATRIATION OF THE WHITE CUBE". One of the bigger challenges that CATPC presently faces is acquiring more of the land that once hosted the Unilever plantation in Lusanga. That



Fig. 5. Artist and plantation worker Jérémé Mabilia



Fig. 6. A critical curriculum is part of the art training that CATPC provides

countries are investments into improved access to capital and markets, combined with the right policies. In the least, the post-plantation can be considered a worthwhile investigation into how such access to markets and capital can be created, as well as in probing what the 'right policies' may look like. So far, the post-plantation has for instance already provided an illustrative example of how labour could be organised to facilitate economic diversity. It has also identified a potential critical role for emergent technologies in creating access to markets and capital, as the technological solution that V2_ contributed to the project makes use of the latest in 3-dimensional scanning and printing techniques for the sculptures to enter the commercial art realm.

land is needed for the plantation to provide for basic food security, as well as some trade with Kinshasa, where the only demand for ecological produce in the DRC seems to exist. The post-plantation will require a lot more external funding in the years to come, however, before CATPC can buy back the land needed to provide for a sustainable future to the community. This external funding is not to be confused with traditional aid, however. In contrast, the investments into the post-plantation could be considered a concrete response to the failure of the type of aid that comes down to simply 'handing out money'. Whether or not the post-plantation will be more successful than initiatives based on traditional aid have been, will become clear over the next years, when on-site research conducted by LIRCAEI will further develop the post-plantation, CATPC succeeds to expand their landownership in the region, and the artists involved in the cooperative manage to consolidate their artistic careers.

Spending a few days in Lusanga is enough to understand the precarious conditions of the local community and to envision the consequences of a potential failure of the project. Just travelling to and from Lusanga provides one with enough encounters with the DRC's ludicrous bureaucracy and open corruption to understand why traditional aid fails to reach those most in need of it, and potentially only just makes matters worse. As some experts on the topic have argued for years, the only way forward for such

Subsequently, Martens indeed also makes a critical point about the notion of 'artistic engagement' through the project. In contrast to artists that claim to engage with socio-economic issues facing society by merely reflecting on the topic from within the art realm, Martens attempts to intervene in a real-world situation faced with such complex challenges. In a recent essay titled *Aesthetics in the Wild* I have argued that such artistic approaches could be the beginning of a significant turn in the arts. A turn based on the growing realisation that art that is not situated in the context in which the problem that an artist intends to engage with exists, will at most raise mere awareness of the problem, yet leaves the actual situation unaffected, and even risks misrepresenting or undermining the intricacies of the context in which the problem it seeks to address occurs. However, the issue at stake is not that artists are not willing to properly engage with the urgencies that they observe; it is at present simply unclear what this entails exactly. This translates into practical questions, such as what productive methodologies exist for artists that want to take embedded positions in a certain context, as well as ethical ones, such as the



Fig. 7. Luc Tuymans - *Mwana Kitoko* (2000) X Carsten Holler - *Upside Down Goggles* (1994-ongoing)



Fig. 8. CATPC atelier

responsibility that such artists have over the people that their work incorporates or directly affects.

Without going into great detail on these matters here, which the scope of this report does not allow, the post-plantation also offers intriguing insights into potential answers to these questions. IHA's methodology, for instance, is striking in how it combines a seemingly stubborn persistence in achieving the loosely formulated artistic vision of 'gentrifying the jungle' with a great sensitivity for the ideas and opportunities that emerge in response to practical and conceptual problems that occur along the way. In doing so, IHA's methodology has close resemblance to so-called 'situated actions' in interaction design, which is considered the preferred opposite of developing such designs on the basis of a detail plan. In a way, the post-plantation is an interactive system, both are a means to help people achieve a goal. It is common knowledge among interac-

tion designers that developing such systems requires the constant validation of assumptions regarding the behaviour of the people using the system in real world tests. Hence, why the post-plantation would likely turn out completely useless if it were to be designed from within the IHA office in Amsterdam.

Just as designers adhere to the universal design guideline that users should benefit from the design and never be at risk of harm, the same basic premise could be applied to IHA's activities in Lusanga to help answer the question of ethical responsibility over the people involved or affected by these activities. The question then becomes twofold: first, do the people that IHA's work affects benefit from the project, and second, does it put them at risk of harm? Mabiala's remarks offers an answer the first question, but the second is more challenging.

There certainly is a risk in that the project will fail to provide a sustainable model for the community of Lusanga, leaving them disenchanted and potentially reversing gains made in addressing and even exacerbating their poverty. It is debatable, however, whether a return to poverty can be considered 'harmful' when the basic condition is poverty.

My visit to the "THE REPATRIATION OF THE WHITE CUBE" addressed my wish to observe the role of technology in the post-plantation concept and to experience the artistic methodologies applied by IHA from up close, which I will analyse in more depth as part of my work at V2 and AVANS in the near future. The most significant insight that I took home from Lusanga was, however, not related to either of these professional interests. Spending some time amongst the local community in Lusanga, representing the international art crowd that roams biennials and openings in its concept, did not come without a few confronting lessons

in what it means to live in extreme poverty. In interacting with the local community, I was continuously challenged to rethink my relationship to their situation. The experience left me with an intense feeling of powerlessness. Disregarding how one might feel about IHA's activities in Lusanga or perceive Martens' position in the project, or estimate the likelihood that the post-plantation will truly bring a more sustainable future, a visit to Lusanga makes one understand very clearly why, after his first visits to the region, Martens could not return to his gallery with some mere artistic reflections to subsequently sign off as artworks under his name.

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Fig. 9. Tents, as part of OMA's master plan

