

The
sterility in
critical art
within the white cube

By Rosanne Jonkhout

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Introduction.

Upon graduating from my bachelor in Fine Art, I wrote a thesis of which its front page was charmingly signed: *an attempt to save the world by Rosanne Jonkhout*.¹ It dealt with the existence and problem of evil, amongst which unjust inequality in all its forms, and its place within contemporary society. It discussed whether 'bad' actions were something inborn, taught or something completely different, and out of our hands. It covered the dangers of 'good intentions' before finally concluding in cautionary advice of combining Martha Nussbaum's openness with Hannah Arendt's unwavering vigilance as to give evil least possible chance.²

However heroic my title page back then, and while being influenced by these two powerhouses, I found that saving the world needs more than the 'can-do-attitude' I possessed at the time. It required a more targeted and hands-on approach. It would bring me to apply my newfound criticality to my own beloved field: Art. Specifically, this essay will target the artwork of those whose concept is critical of social or economic inequality and especially the position of the white cube in relation to this. This analysis approached by the functionalist method will focus on contemporary art studies to navigate the junction in my own artists practice. To narrow it down, two case studies will be provided, a project by Hito Steyerl: *Is the Museum a Battlefield* (2013) and Renzo Martens with the *Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality* (LIRCAEI) (2014 - now). The term sterility refers to a term borrowed from a recent lecture I attended where Martens defines sterility as the unproductiveness and even harmfulness of critical artworks.³

That art has the capacity to be harmful can be a controversial statement when the white cube is generally seen as one of the most neutral of spaces. Even though artworks can be a carrier of frustration and protest, that are in conflict with one's beliefs, ever since art started to have a conceptual meaning the white cube is seen as a sanctuary. A place of artistic freedom and free speech, where ideas are traded.⁴

¹ Jonkhout, Rosanne. *To What Extent Is Mankind the Cause of Its Own Misery?* Thesis. ArtEZ University of the Arts Arnhem, 2016. Mistermotley.nl. Mister Motley, 13 Aug. 2016. Web. 06 Jan. 2017.

² Jonkhout, Rosanne. *To What Extent Is Mankind the Cause of Its Own Misery?* Thesis. ArtEZ University of the Arts Arnhem, 2016. Mistermotley.nl. Mister Motley, 13 Aug. 2016. Web. 06 Jan. 2017 p.20

³ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:57:27

⁴ Steyerl, Hito. "Is the Museum a Battlefield." Vimeo.com. N.p., 2 Oct. 2013. Web. 13 Nov. 2016. 00:00:53
Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:14:02

Nevertheless, the analogy of the white cube as battlefield is one that I have come across more than once. And if the white cube proves to be a battlefield like New York based artist, writer and activist Gregory Sholette's text *Dark Matter* and Hito Steyerl's *Is the Museum a Battlefield* claim,⁵ is there a more productive way to use the artist practice as an actor of social, economic or political change? I will advocate there is, and follow up on the direction I am anticipating my own artist practice to head to.

Exploring the terms white cube and critical art.

I will borrow the definition of 'white cube' as used by Martens and Steyerl to describe the emblematic white exhibition space, gallery, museum. It seems important to stress that when both artists talk about a white cube they seem not only to address the four white-walled space itself, but everything that comes with it and what it inevitably creates around it, like art centres, lecture halls, art festivals, etc.⁶

Ever since art left the confines of religious or elitarian context artists have been using art to voice their dissatisfaction and opinions. This paper will focus on art as an actor of, or resistance to inequality. Whether it is defending the working class, rises against mass culture or a loving outreach to those disadvantaged by post-colonialism. More specifically, art that has a socially, economic, or political engaged meaning fuelled by any situation of inequality which is created or maintained by the lack of capital.

To what extent these protest art works provide any real traction is not the aim of this essay. However, not to brush the subject is neglecting the power of art. The promises made by a critical artwork may seem powerful to artists, curators, art connoisseurs etc., but may appear futile to someone not related to the art world. As Sholette puts it:

However, in so far as these fragmented acts suggest the need for some greater "meaning and totality" yet nevertheless remain unarticulated as such, they are little more than isolated and ultimately impotent moments of a distorted wish fulfillment. Then again, both dark matter and working class fantasy do occasionally resist bourgeois ideology in ways that are especially unapologetic and irredeemable. First, because they interrupt normative structures of production and appropriation, and second because they present at least a taste of opposition at the level of content even if in an undeveloped form.

- Gregory Sholette⁷

⁵ Sholette, Gregory. "*Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere.*" *Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere.* gregorysholette.com, 5 Apr. 2011. Web. 29 Nov. 2016. p.11

⁶ Martens, Renzo. "*Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens.*" Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:06:47

⁷ Sholette, Gregory. "*Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere.*" *Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere.* gregorysholette.com, 5 Apr. 2011. Web. 29 Nov. 2016. p.11

In fact to feel like one is making a difference in the world, or to feel that something is setting you apart from others is all the rage in a hyper-individual society.⁸ Being different is a trend that companies are happy to let one indulge in. Sholette states:

I believe that with the emergence of the consciousness industry, capital gains the means to reach ever deeper into the shadows of working class fantasy and with greater sophistication.
- Gregory Sholette⁹

Whether this hyper-individualism consists of individuals or in a group with like-minded differences,¹⁰ the profit companies make are often at the expense of impoverished location. This I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

Is critical art useless?

Hito Steyerl, the German artist, filmmaker and writer and considered to be the pioneer of making video-essays.¹¹ The video-essay *Is the Museum a Battlefield* traces down relations between museum and the arms industry.¹² By the use of a PowerPoint-presentation, she reveals her horrific findings and pairs them to a peculiar and captivating allegory of an invisible bullet circling between the arms-industry, battlefield and the white cube.

That art is connected to disreputable companies is a subject that Martens has been struggling with for over a decade. To understand Martens' new project, I will discuss his older work *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2009). In this film, starring himself as the protagonist, Martens is us. He arrives in Congo with the determination to combat poverty; whether this is to help the Congo or make himself a better person is debatable, however, once there he suggests multiple strategies that soon prove to be lost causes. Martens presents us with an uncomfortable image: White westerners coming to Congo to get what they want, and then leaving the locals emptyhanded. He uncovers that poverty is Congo's biggest source of income, off of which everyone profits except the impoverished. This inherently means that people in Congo do not live outside of capitalism as much as anybody living in the west, as Martens emphasizes in his lecture.¹³

⁸ McKibben, Bill. *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. New York: Times, 2007. Print.

⁹ Sholette, Gregory. "Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere." *Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere*. gregorysholette.com, 5 Apr. 2011. Web. 29 Nov. 2016. p.11

¹⁰ Sholette, Gregory. "Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere." *Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere*. gregorysholette.com, 5 Apr. 2011. Web. 29 Nov. 2016. p.11

¹¹ "Hito Steyerl." E-flux.com. E-flux, 4 Oct. 2012. Web. 06 Dec. 2017.

¹² Steyerl, Hito. "Is the Museum a Battlefield." Vimeo.com. N.p., 2 Oct. 2013. Web. 13 Nov. 2016. 00:16:30

¹³ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:13:13

In *Enjoy Poverty*, Martens does not merely accuse journalists of earning more money the more miserable a picture looks, not just the western farming companies and hedge-funds exploiting the workers and the land, not just non-profit organisations by depicting them as well-oiled tear-jerking machines; *Enjoy Poverty* is also paradoxical; the work accuses itself when Martens made himself a participating character. Thus accusing the art world of being guilty of the same exploitation. As Martens claims the point of *Enjoy Poverty* is:

[...] to show how people consume poverty, [that it is] something you can package, distribute, market, sell and turn into profit.

*- Renzo Martens*¹⁴

Enjoy poverty is a cynical piece and Martens critics have reproached him for only perpetuating the very issues Martens seeks to condemn, and not providing a solution. Granted, whether intentionally or not, it did not provide a solution. However, since 2009 Martens has been occupied finding one through trial and error.¹⁵

Both Martens and Steyerl aspire to push the boundaries of the traditional art world with their institutional critique. Steyerl's *Is the Museum a Battlefield* is intended to be displayed within a white cube,¹⁶ as she shocks the maybe-unsuspecting audience members when she addresses them directly.¹⁷ It is therefore safe to say that Steyerl still believes in the ethical promises that art makes. So why would art then be useless? To say critical art is useless can be seen as a bold statement that many would disagree with. Steyerl recognizes the power images have:

[Images are] nodes of energy and matter that migrate across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems.

*- Hito Steyerl*¹⁸

Steyerl is right; images do have effect. They raise awareness, controversy, exchange of information, and information has value. Moreover, without *Enjoy Poverty* or *Is the Museum a Battlefield*, I would not have been writing this essay.

¹⁴ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:11:11

¹⁵ Demos, T.j. "Gentrification After Institutional Critique." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 40 (2015): 76-89. Web. 1 Dec. 2016. p. 5

¹⁶ It was first screened at the 13th Istanbul Biennial

¹⁷ Steyerl, Hito. "Is the Museum a Battlefield." Vimeo.com. N.p., 2 Oct. 2013. Web. 13 Nov. 2016. 00:20:55

¹⁸ Steyerl, Hito. "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *E-flux*, Nov. 2013. Web. 13 Nov. 2016. p.1

Nevertheless, Martens argues critical art has more disadvantages than benefits, since it is still being traded and marketed in the same way, and before any capital reaches the plantation, *it disappears through the Cayman Islands*, as Martens says.¹⁹

The question then becomes: How much is this 'awareness' worth? Probably very few people will pack a suitcase, will catch a flight to Congo and pick up a white flag after visiting *The Enclave* at the Venice Biennale. I was very moved by Mosse's *The Enclave*, but I too went on my merry way home. Most people have probably done the same, not making any fundamental difference to the situation. Martens states:

The Venice Biennale, the next dOCUMENTA for sure, will speak about all of these issues. But unfortunately these exhibition, whatever happens in these white cubes, whatever subject matter that deals with these inequalities, in practice seems to have very, very little impact on these value chains [...].

- Renzo Martens²⁰

In the meantime, a lot of people have made a profit, but such actions do not benefit the original subject of the artwork at hand. Critique in the white cube becomes currency, and inequality a commodity. However, what the visitors of the Enclave, me included, in fact did, is financing the city of Venice; we all went to spend money on coffee and pizza. Some of us got to take our yacht home, some of us had to take a bus, but we all felt slightly better about being 'aware'.

Problems of critical art.

It becomes even more disheartening when the artwork protesting the war in the middle east is in fact sponsored by the company providing artillery for the same war. Awareness and protest of inequality seem like a progressive step toward bettering the world, but galleries and museums are often financed by companies that harvested the money for their donations through plantations, arm-dealings, etc. In this way white westerners are still as a patriarchal entity as they were in colonial times. In *Is the Museum a Battlefield*, Steyerl infuses her findings with both curious and frighteningly horrific connections, illustrating buildings that look like helicopter rifles or artworks that have bullet holes.²¹

What the Biennale did accomplish at the very least, is generating a lot of money. In fact, so much that Venetians are forced out. In 64 years the steadfast population of Venice has shrunk from 175,000 to

¹⁹ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:45:45

²⁰ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:09:04

²¹ Steyerl, Hito. "Is the Museum a Battlefield." Vimeo.com. N.p., 2 Oct. 2013. Web. 13 Nov. 2016. 00:09:08

some 55,000 due to gentrification.²² Gentrification by building a white cube is a known tool for upgrading a tired neighbourhood.²³ A town's municipal authorities often welcome this urban development and are encouraged to place them near poor neighbourhoods that are thereby disrupted, if not entirely uprooted.

It is one of the main reasons why art is funded.

*Again, not because of the critique that will change the status quo,
but because it would reinforce it, because it would bring capital to a place.*

- Renzo Martens²⁴

It can thus be said that artists that make critical art are therefore (used as) economic agents that assist the very exploitative practices they are trying to critique by facilitating financing from companies like Unilever, Nestlé (plantations), Siemens or Lockheed Martin (arms-dealers). Obviously not just the artist is to blame; the white cube, its financier, the artist and the visitor are all agents in the reaffirmation of this system. And so, the moment we all left the Irish Pavilion, we were accomplices.

*The type of art you exhibit is almost completely
irrelevant in terms of its agency.*

- Renzo Martens²⁵

If one accepts this statement to be true, it in fact makes almost every type of artwork a political one. If something has to be done about these exploitative practices it seems recommendable to give it exposure, though this again can be problematic. Not just the artistic exploitation of places of inequality and gentrification of white cube locations in the west are downsides. The capital that art accumulates is not just economical, but also accumulates what Martens calls 'capital of the mind'. Essays like these contribute to an accumulation of white westerners doing research, making documentaries, artworks, having debates,

²² Holmes, Simon. "Annual 'acqua Alta' Phenomenon Sees Venice under Water as Hundreds of Furious Protesters Carrying Suitcases Take a Stand against Damage Done to Their City by Tourism." Dailymail.co.uk. Daily Mail Online, 12 Nov. 2016. Web. 26 Dec. 2016.

²³ Florida, Richard, and Andrew Small. "Why Quality of Place Matters: Cultural Amenities like Parks and Museums Attract Young Talent to Big Cities. But How Do They Work for Smaller Cities or Older People?" CityLab.com. The Atlantic CityLab, 28 Dec. 2016. Web. 06 Jan. 2017.

²⁴ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:14:25

²⁵ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:48:17

lectures and PhD programs etc.,²⁶ thus providing again a profitable situation in itself. Something an artist should pay attention to when making critical art about a place of economic inequality they themselves do not originate from, is to make sure not to muffle the voices of the original subject. To express other people's feelings and situations is problematic, which can be considered as the same kind of exploitation as an economic one. A solution is to talk *with* rather than *for* and enter in a collaboration with someone representing the situation in question.

Solutions.

Steyerl gives us an abstract mission to '*grab the invisible bullet and curve it the other way*' before it kills more people.²⁷ Still, the video ends in the gimmick of asking Angelina Jolie advice how to do so, but lacks any kind of concrete resolution, thus pitifully dissolving back into the confines of the white cube. So what then is a plan of attack?

The research centre *Institute for Human Activities* (IHA) initiated by Martens together with *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise* (CATPC) put together a new project called *Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality* (LIRCAEI). In this project Martens and ecologist and activist René Ngongo are in the process of building a quintessential white cube smack-dab on the first plantation Unilever ever founded in Congo.²⁸

Martens realized a white cube means bringing capital and gentrification, therefore he and Ngongo, are planning on gentrifying the jungle. This art-centre will be built on what Martens calls the ground zero for global economic inequality, the first plantation Unilever ever founded.²⁹ If the art world is a rigged game that the artist can't win, then an intervention in this system is needed. By placing an art centre on a plantation, it enables impoverished plantation workers to profit off of their own poverty, thereby Martens plans to use the system of links between plantation and white cube to bring capital back to the place it was originally extracted from, thus creating inclusive value chains.³⁰

Since officially this approach is still only playing in accordance with capitalist rules, it is uncertain to know what will result from this attempt. It might prove that an entire new economic, political and lingual system is needed, but for now I am curious to see what this project will set in motion.

²⁶ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:14:02

²⁷ Steyerl, Hito. "Is the Museum a Battlefield." Vimeo.com. N.p., 2 Oct. 2013. Web. 13 Nov. 2016. 00:35:40

²⁸ Martens, Renzo. "Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:07:00

²⁹ "Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality." Humanactivities.org. Institute for Human Activities, n.d. Web. 06 Jan. 2017.

³⁰ Goodfellow, Melanie. "Artpowerment." Idfa.nl. International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, n.d. Web. 01 Jan. 2017.

Conclusion.

I consider my own artists practice as socially- engaged and critical, even if kept at a microsocial level. My interest lies in the representative of the everyday in social media, film industry etc., and potential underlying harm therein. The pervasiveness of media, the 'everydayness' that stems from their accessibility; whether we form the media or it forms us. I use archive material, preferably from a pre-internet; before people were skilled in the way they could represent themselves. I collect projections of people's seemingly-harmless micro-cosmoses that I then research to trace harmful social behaviour to their roots.

Obviously, critical art is good in raising awareness and uniting like-minded people, but one can now argue that critical art in the traditional sense does more harm than good. Critical art in a white cube can certainly still be useful, provided it doesn't stay at that. Critical art and de-sterilized critical art are both relevant, but a recalibration is needed regarding the position of the way we make art surrounding the white cube on the one hand, and its repercussions on the other. If the artist wants to make critical art with actual traction, the artist needs to become aware of implications of art and rethink the white cube as an institution and take ownership of the art we make'.³¹

I have purposefully kept my artists practice strictly in the microsocial and avoided big artistic statement on heavy issues (racism, feminism, etc.) because I have felt hesitant and out of bounds. I have not been able to pinpoint exactly why, and still can't to some extent. What I do know is to not be part of the solution is being part of the problem,³² and I don't intend to be.

³¹ Martens, Renzo. "*Beeldbepalers: Renzo Martens*." Vimeo.com. De Balie, IDFA, 19 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. 00:48:17

³² Famous quote by writer and political activist Eldridge Cleaver (1935 - 1998)

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