

## On SculptureCenter's CATPC Exhibition

*Exploitation or representation? An exchange between SculptureCenter curator and 4Columns on its review of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League.*

**By Ruba Katrib — March 17, 2017**



Jérémie Mabilia reflecting on his work, 2015.

***In response to:***

***Ania Szremski's review of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, published March 3, 2017***

### **Letter to the Editors:**

While I appreciate that Ania Szremski wrote about the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC) exhibition at SculptureCenter and that she carefully elucidates many aspects of its program, the questions she ventures demand further inquiry, in fairness to the members of the collective. It's not typical for a curator to respond to a piece of criticism on an exhibition they've organized. However in this instance, the ethical aspects of the project that Szremski indicates must be more actively called forth. Szremski is correct; this exhibition and the project it presents raise ethical queries. Yet not by accident, as she implies.

Far from hiding behind do-gooderism, the framework of the project addresses the messiness of collaboration, the creation and distribution of art, and the extreme divides that separate those with access to the art world and those without. Does this mean the ethical questions are resolved by acknowledging them? Of course not, but they are a key facet of the discourse produced by CATPC and inform changes made in day-to-day operations. The crux of the ethical question of CATPC that Szremski doesn't articulate in her piece is that of representation, not the exploitation she hints at. What does it mean for those with access to the Euro-American art system to work with and represent people who do not have that same access?

Yes, CATPC originated and came to our attention through the efforts of Dutch artist Renzo Martens, but this is clearly part of the CATPC narrative. How can we exhibit the artwork of plantation workers in the Congo, who make approximately \$200 a year working for multinational corporations, without the intervention and promotion of individuals who are already established in the Euro-American art world? Is it inherently unethical to recruit plantation workers with artistic inclinations in rural Congo to engage in sculpture-making workshops? Is it exploitative to pay the profits of art sales, after the gallery's cut, back to the collective so they can choose where to invest it?

Is it unethical that this project has only directly impacted the lives of the dozen or so members thus far, and not more? Only a few years old, CATPC has more developments planned. Maybe it will work, and maybe it will fail, but does this mean it is unethical to try?

I ask these questions to underpin why I was surprised by Szremski's piece. It may be tempting to critique a long-term project that is the effort of over two dozen people and attribute it solely to one individual, Martens. But this blatantly ignores the considerable efforts and participation of everyone involved in CATPC. (Over a dozen plantation workers/artists from Congo named on all exhibition materials, plus a few from a professional class in the DRC—such as the important environmental activist Rene Ngongo, whom Szremski describes as “high-profile.” They work closely with about ten European artists and scholars who are members of the Institute for Human Activities [IHA]). Sure, Martens is integral and has developed much of the structure and language of CATPC, but he's done this with considerable feedback from members of both the IHA and CATPC. He has made mistakes along the way and has mostly learned from them—he doesn't hide his faults. He has performed as a callous buffoon at times, as in his film *Enjoy Poverty*—a difficult work made nearly a decade ago that revealed the entrenched power structures and interdependence of multinational corporations, the aid industry, and poverty journalism. But is his persona really what's at stake?

The most problematic part of Szremski's critique is that she denies the agency of CATPC members in their self-expression by fixating on Martens's personality—a presence he is actively reducing, as she admits in her critique, even as he remains financially responsible and is still a necessary spokesperson—and by speculating into his true intentions. It troubles me to think that Szremski believes that CATPC members can't intellectually contribute, that their extensive knowledge of plantations, monoculture, and biodiversity wouldn't be crucial to the development of the post-plantation, a term Szremski dubs “nebulous.” Does her critique really go so far as to imply that CATPC members couldn't or shouldn't learn about contemporary art from outsiders? And that from this knowledge they couldn't or shouldn't have significant input into the structure of CATPC and the formats it is engaging and rethinking, like the white cube, the post-plantation, the research center, the garden, etc.?

The artist members of CATPC have never left the DRC, except for Matthieu Kasiama, a palm oil cutter, who received a tourist visa, against the odds, to attend the opening of the exhibition, and speak in a public conference. During his visit, he certainly wasn't a passive or ignorant participant. He is a self-aware adult capable of interacting with a variety of people in new contexts, even while he is grossly underpaid for his agricultural work and was born into an extreme economic disadvantage, a formidable obstacle to his entry into the western art world. If Kasiama wants to make art with CATPC and take advantage of the opportunities it has afforded him, his family, and community thus far, who are we to say whether this is good or bad for him? And what is the authentic artistic product we seek from him, when framing a form of western contemporary art exposure as “missionary zeal”?

The well-intentioned liberal paternalism in trying to protect CATPC members from their potential exploitation as artists seems misdirected. What does this concern say about the status quos we implicitly enforce? CATPC isn't conscientious consumerism. It isn't quite a feel-good project, because it always refers back to the traps of the larger social and economic inequities that are largely hidden from the western eye, but are explicitly caused by a brutal colonial history and perpetuated today by the multinational corporations that comprise our reality, outside and inside of the art world. Notably many of the sculptures and drawings on view refer to narratives of greed and corruption brought by westerners, such as *The Art Collector* by Jérémie Mabila and Djonga Bismar. CATPC members aren't outside of this system; they are in it, as are we. And like those of us with the ability to more freely work within the Euro-American art worlds, they have the capacity and right to comment on it, despite lacking the luxury of passports, visas, and bank accounts. And even if it means they collaborate with those who have the platform to facilitate and circulate their messages.

**Ruba Katrib**  
**Curator**  
**SculptureCenter**

**Ania Szremski responds:**

Dear Ruba,

Thank you for your thoughtful and eloquent response to my review of the CATPC exhibition at SculptureCenter. I very much appreciate both your close reading and the passion that informs your argument. However, there are some vexing points in your letter that trouble me.

I would first like to point out that this very correspondence is a testament to what the CATPC project does best: incite debate, as I wrote in my review. This is why I view the CATPC project as largely discursive in nature—it is a project that necessitates careful explication, and inspires conversation through robust publications, symposia and presentations, arts criticism, and dialogues such as this one. I am, in fact, in agreement with you that the ethical concerns the project raises are not by any means accidental ones, and it is this conceptual unpacking that allows us to address the difficult questions that are at the heart of the project.

But despite this important discursive work that the CATPC project does, these persistent ethical concerns cannot be dismissed, no matter how self-aware the project's administrators and spokespersons are of them. And indeed, in the materials associated with the CATPC, they are keenly aware of and continue to struggle with these problems.

In your letter, you raise a distinction between the issue of representation versus exploitation, but in this project, I don't believe these two valences can so easily be divorced from each other. The issue of the representation of the CATPC members is a crucial one, and one that is carefully, if not apprehensively, raised in the Sternberg Press publication on the CATPC's activities that I cite in my review. As you write, due to linguistic, economic, and political barriers that impede the collective's members access to international discursive systems, the burden of representation falls on the shoulders of those who do have access to those systems, including curators such as yourself. This means that the collective's members are primarily spoken for by Western interlocutors.

My point is not, as you would suggest, that the CATPC members should not engage with actors who have access to the international art world. My point is that there is an inherent asymmetric balance of power in this equation that has not been adequately addressed in its activities (such as this exhibition). For instance, there is a deep problem in how the "deprivation" of the CATPC members is consistently and vigorously foregrounded in the materials that surround the project—including in your above letter. In the exhibition guide offered at SculptureCenter, the workers are described as "grossly underpaid" and as unable "to live off of the wages they receive for their work and survive without basic amenities such as clean water and electricity." The handout that includes the CATPC members' biographies and explications of their artwork—texts that were, according to the editors of the Sternberg Press publication, born out of a multilayered process of interpretation, transcription, and heavy editing—similarly emphasizes the members' poverty, lack of education, and the brutal difficulties that they have withstood. While this context is clearly crucial to understanding the CATPC's mission, to underscore this context so insistently exoticizes that deprivation, and indeed serves to feed a Western fetish for images of the atrocious living conditions endured by people living in the so-called Global South (especially African nations). This is a mode of representation that I would argue is an exploitative act—it effectively reduces these actors to the sum of their economic suffering in order to create a conceptual framework.

This, in turn, leads to the question of agency, an absolutely vital issue that you raise in your letter. My review was certainly not intended to rob the CATPC members of their agency in this project. As I originally wrote, I do believe the project is profoundly important to the CATPC members, and nowhere did I infer that they could not intellectually contribute to its manifold activities. But I would like to see, in direct and unfiltered terms, the participants' own language and vision regarding their artwork, their interaction with the international art world, and the forthcoming "white cube" in Lusanga, as opposed to the highly mediated third-person accounts offered by Renzo Martens or other team members. You argue that, in order for the collective members to have access to an international platform, they need interlocutors like Martens. But it's not enough to say that such is the art world, forged out of inequalities and geopolitically determined hierarchies—it behooves a project like the CATPC to discuss strategies to upend those hierarchies, not simply to reinforce them.

This is also why the question of who "owns" the language and conceptual processes around the CATPC is a slippery and important one, and why I insisted in my review on Martens's seminal role in this project. You argue that my critique unfairly reduced the CATPC project to a question of Martens's personality. But as the instigator behind the development of the collective and as its primary interlocutor to a Western audience, Martens's role and intentions must necessarily be interrogated. Is it "wrong" to invite the people of Lusanga who have an inclination to the arts to participate in sculpture workshops and exhibition-making endeavors? Of course not. But Martens's approach has been problematically top-down as he seeks to drive home his thesis to a Western audience.

You ask, "Who are we to judge whether this is good or bad" for the participants. It certainly isn't my place, nor would I be able, to say if the project is bad for its members, but it is precisely the role of the critic to question, to point to, to try to expose the problems inherent in a given project or practice. To say, as I do, that the CATPC's very structure is founded on an inherent imbalance of power that could lend an exploitative cast to the enterprise is not to say that its members are per force suffering for it, or that they are unable to contend with the conceptual work that surrounds the project, or that the project as a whole should pack up and give in. It is to say that this is not an ideal model, and that the project itself should ideally evolve in a more equitable direction, or other models should be found. As you say in your letter, this is a young project that is still in the process of formation, that is "learning from its mistakes." A critique such as mine should be taken not as mere provocation, but as fodder for self-reflection in that very act of formation.

— **Ania Szremski**  
**Managing Editor, 4Columns**