

MODERN LUXURY

An Alternative Perspective

By Alinca Cohen — December 2017



Installation view of the exhibition “Cercle d’Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League)” at SculptureCenter, New York, 2017

What transcends the almighty market? Three top art writers choose the 2017 exhibitions where ideas trumped commerce.

If you’re reading this, you’re probably either at Art Basel in Miami Beach or you’ve just returned. Whatever your relationship to the fair - collector, gallerist, curator, artist - most likely you’ve been steeped in discussions of financial benchmarks over the past few days. These conversations help identify trends and illuminate the mechanisms underlying most art-world activity. But not all of it.

We recruited three seasoned art writers to tell us about their favorite 2017 shows that, in some way, bucked the market. In more and less subtle ways, artists and curators are maneuvering around economic pressures while making and showing today’s most important work. As you reflect on the monetary lessons taught at this year’s fair, also consider the projects offering alternative perspectives on power, place, and what it means to live and work as an artist.

Jason Farago

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No exhibition this year did more to upend the stale rhetoric around markets and art’s place in society than **Ruba Katrib’s** sophisticated show at **SculptureCenter** in New York, featuring the African sculptors known as the **Cercle d’Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise**.

The show's suite of impressive figurative totems, including a pensive, bespectacled man and a woman bitten by an alligator, were created by artists who live and work on a cocoa plantation in a rural province of the Democratic Republic of Congo; most do not speak French and have never been to Kinshasa, its capital, let alone one of the art world's capitals. (The smell of cocoa filled the gallery; these works were carved from wood, then 3-D scanned and cast in Belgian chocolate, a foodstuff for which these artists harvest the raw materials but have never tasted.)

With the help of Renzo Martens - the (white) Dutch artist who happily avows his own privileged place in the global art world - these sculptures, made in Congo, routed through Europe, and now on view in New York, played the logic of the art world against itself. Here was the art world's economic basis, in front of your face and inside your nostrils, recast so that its least powerful participants could get a larger share. Proceeds from the sale of the CATPC sculptures go right back to Congo. They deserve the money - not as charity cases, but as artists.