

On the outside: Exteriory as Condition for Resistance

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At the start of the twenty-first century, French art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman caused somewhat of a stir with an essay about four photographs from the middle of the twentieth century.¹ The photographs, taken in 1944 by Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau, show the importance images can have for understanding history. With his analysis and reprinting of them, Didi-Huberman sought to expose the futility of the claim that there is such a thing as the unimaginable. Finally, these images show that the existence of an outside — of the camp, of the image frame, of one's own subjectivity — is the ultimate condition of resistance.

More or less at the same time as the publication of Didi-Huberman's text, the Dutch artist Renzo Martens completed his first video project, *Episode I* (2003), for which he travelled to war-torn Chechnya. In this work, the artist entered the image frame, filming himself among professional image producers — photojournalists, cameramen and political and humanitarian fieldworkers — and Chechen refugees. Four years later, for *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008) he repeated the performance in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a nation immersed in violence and trenchant iniquity, and which similarly exists in the West via mediatisation of these miseries. By being on location and becoming part of the images produced in the region, Martens not only shows but also enforces the ongoing erasure of the 'outside' for the people of Congo — an erasure conceived in terms of globalisation, in that the reality of the Western capitalist world has become part of the Congo's reality (through, amongst others,

Anonymous (member of the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz), cremation of gassed bodies in the open-air incineration pits in front of the gas chamber of Auschwitz, August 1944. Oswiecim, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (negative no.278)

development workers, economic investors, political involvement and other professionals — including this artist — moving to the site), and in terms of mediatisation, by which images of the Congolese reality has become part of the reality of the viewing world. This is a new situation in which there is no more outside — not for the Congolese in these images, not for the professionals in the region, not for the Western viewer at home. This erasure of the outside, then, could suggest that the acceptance of the inside is the first condition for any possibility of resistance.

Considered together, Didi-Huberman's book and Martens's video show how different eras with different media produce different notions of interiority and exteriority. By setting Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of It All* (2003), which addresses the images from the camps and speaks to the necessity of an outside, next to Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1998), which analyses testimonies from Nazi concentration camps and argues that the complete witness needs to have been internal to the event, I will search for a new way to interpret the images in Martens's work and their erasure of the distinction between inside and outside.

1. The Necessity of an Outside

The images Didi-Huberman discusses came into being, as he says, 'in spite of all'. The photographer — or photographers, as there are at least five names of prisoners known to have been involved in the operation, all members of the Sonderkommando, work units in Nazi camps comprised mostly of Jews who assisted with the different operations of the camps — is thought to have taken the photographs from inside the Birkenau gas chamber.² One sequence of two photographs shows corpses next to a fire in the distance. Men with rolled-up sleeves are working; others in uniform stand guard. Another sequence of two photographs shows a group of women in a forest: stripped bare, alive (first image); and a glimpse of sky seen through the branches of trees in the forest (second image). These pictures have been altered over the years in different ways and with different aims: they were, as Didi-Huberman shows in his book, rotated to counteract the tilted camera angle. The frame — the dark edge that

1 'Images malgré tout' was first published as an essay in Clément Chéroux (ed.), *Mémoires des camps: Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis (1933—1999)* (exh. cat.), Paris: Marval, 2001. The essay became the first part of a book of the same title, published in 2003 by Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris.

2 For a good account of how these images were made and came to be published, see C. Chéroux (ed.), *Mémoires des camps*, op. cit., pp.86—91.

indicates a doorway and hence points to the position of the photographer — has been cropped. The poor contrast and focus, testament to the circumstances in which these contraband images were produced, have been altered. The manipulations went as far as retouching the faces and breasts of the women, as if to render the figures more human and the images more legible.

These photographs were not only *made* in spite of all; their history also makes clear that they must be *looked at* in spite of all. Not just in spite of their poor image quality, which forces one to look closer, and not just in spite of the horror contained within them, which makes one want to look away. But most of all in spite of all that is not shown in these images and in spite of all the other images that cannot be seen

Antelme, Primo Levi and other survivors of the camps) and reality (the images of life before and during the camps) become one.

These photographs, ‘four pieces of film snatched from hell’ as Didi-Huberman calls them, are shreds, fragments within a greater whole.³ That they are parts of a reality larger than can be captured in an image is an argument to show the images, but also to hide them. This lies at the heart of a discussion that ensued between Didi-Huberman and the French psychoanalyst Gérard Wajcman following the initial publication of Didi-Huberman’s essay. Wajcman launched the exchange from within the columns of the journal *Les Temps modernes*; Didi-Huberman’s response eventually became the second part of his book *Images in Spite of All* (2003). This issue had been the topic of



of the camps, which could have helped a viewer standing on the outside to gain a clearer picture of events as they occurred. Like the images from camp archives, for instance, which the Nazis threw in the ovens right before the camps were liberated. Or the images that were among the meagre possessions prisoners brought to the camps, and the images the prisoners kept in their memory — all these images where fiction (Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is a recurring reference in the book, as in the works of Robert

discussion in France before, between the film-makers Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Lanzmann in 1998. In his film and book project *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98), Godard intended to create a history of the twentieth century using all the films that had been made and all the films that had not been made. The events of World War II take central importance within that reconstructed twentieth century, and consequently in Godard’s search for images. In contrast, with *Shoah* (1985), Lanzmann

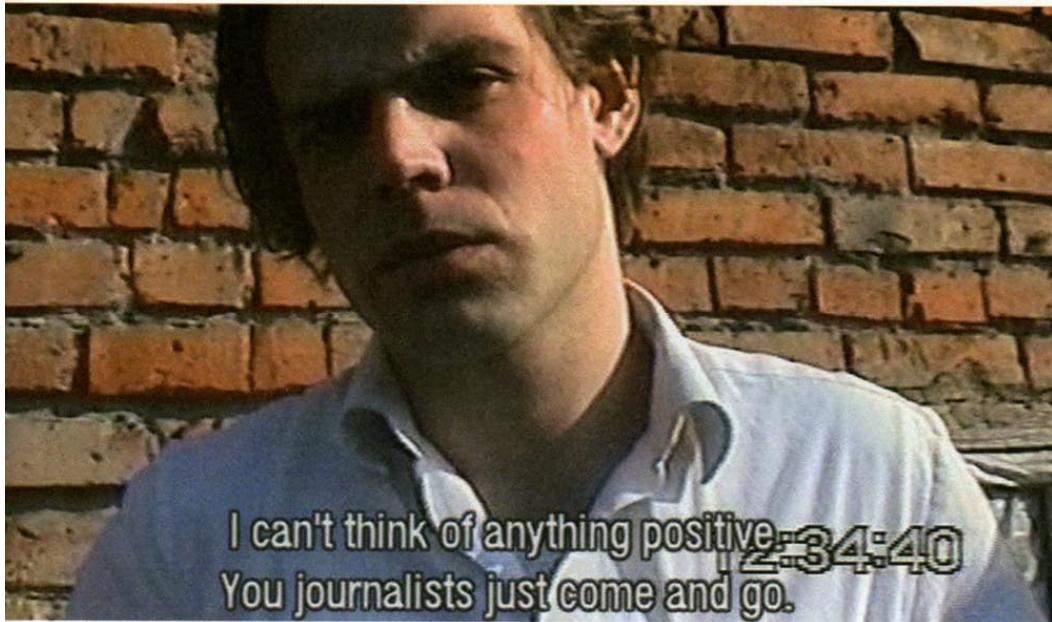
³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (trans. Shane B. Lillis), Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 5, 33 and 38.



made a nine-hour-long documentary of the Final Solution that does not contain a single image of the camps.⁴

In both incarnations, the arguments pit the *essence* of images (according to Wajcman, the actuality of death in the gas chambers, of which there are no images) against their *extension* (which Didi-Huberman identifies as the Final Solution in its broadest sense, the events in and around the camps).⁵ They deal with how an image can become reduced to a reality, and vice versa. The intensity of Didi-Huberman and Godard's quest for images of the camps and the intensity with which they look at them ultimately springs from the conviction that every new image particularises, and thus opens up a more nuanced rendering of a much larger reality. Wajcman

After reading *Images in Spite of All*, it is hard to maintain that these four photographs were made to remain unviewed. Rather the opposite. Prisoners risked their lives to get a camera into the gas chamber (hidden in a bucket), then smuggled the negatives out of the camp (in a tube of toothpaste). Their sole motivation was the conviction that the outside world had to see what was happening inside the camp, making the images themselves an act of resistance against the horrors inflicted upon the camp inmates by the SS, enabled by the ignorance of that outside world. The interior of the camp poses the threat, but the exterior world provides the drive — the ultimate condition — for resistance. These photographs demand to be seen. And, as Didi-Huberman shows, looking at them takes a good dose of courage and much empathy. For they will



Renzo Martens,
Episode I, 2003, video,
45min, stills. Courtesy
the artist

and Lanzmann, on the contrary, refuse to use these images precisely because, for them, they always fall short of that larger reality. Since it is impossible to imagine that reality, Wajcman and Lanzmann claim, one ought not even use the images of it that do exist. For Didi-Huberman, however, nothing is unimaginable — not the horrors of the camps, as these pictures prove, nor the ways images can be used, to which the photographs' multiple manipulations speak.

always remain incomplete — always an 'image in spite of all' ('image malgré tout') and never an 'all image' ('image toute'), or complete image. There is no such thing as an 'all image' that represents the whole of Auschwitz, or any other reality. In this Didi-Huberman is very clear. What is left are just 'images in spite of all' — images that therefore have to be worked on, thought about, discussed and completed by the viewer. That demands an engagement to complete, an

4 Lanzmann has also been the editor in chief of *Les Temps modernes* since 1986.
5 G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, op. cit., p.58.

engagement on the part of the viewer to move into the interior of the image.⁶

2. The Inevitability of the Inside

This type of displacement into the image, or into the work and discourse that lies behind each image, constitutes a Foucauldian gesture. When, in the first chapter of *The Order of Things* (1966), Michel Foucault discusses Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), he deals not so much with the painter or painting, but with the role of the viewer, analysing the painting by inhabiting the position of the painter as viewer and co-author.⁷ In other words, Foucault speculatively moves the exterior, which he occupies as a viewer, to the interior of the painting, putting himself in the same position as the subject of the painter. His aim is to decode what he calls the blind spot in *Las*

visible in a mirror hung behind the painter's easel, on the wall in the far back of the painting. The mirror casts the gaze back to the viewer, the painter's eternal accomplice, who helps him create and complete the image.⁸ In the case of the four photographs made at Birkenau, the blind spot is what is situated behind the photographer: the viewer, again, whose point of view is conflated with that of the photographer, but also the gas chamber, which the viewer has to imagine in order to complete the picture. The gas chamber and the photographer's personal history, his employment in the Sonderkommando — his history, but also his hope for an outside and a future.

At stake for Didi-Huberman is the viewer's active engagement with the image, which implies an ethical dimension: not looking



Meninas, which is situated in the painter's line of sight: it is the image he is in the process of painting, on a canvas whose back is visible to the viewer. The painter's gaze is directed at the model (or models — the king and queen). Yet the viewer in front of the painting, too, finds himself within the painted painter's line of sight. Part of the blind spot is made

away, but having the courage to look, to look differently, to imagine and hence to stave off 'any fatalism of the "unimaginable".'⁹ Foucault's point is that the viewer needs to change his or her position in order to imagine. Didi-Huberman goes one step further, arguing that to call something 'unimaginable' ('*inimaginable*') comes

6 *Ibid.*, pp.59–60.

7 See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), London and New York: Routledge, 2001, pp.3–18.

8 Foucault's conception of the painting's perspective is inaccurate: the mirror doesn't reflect the viewer, but rather the canvas Velázquez is painting inside the painting. See Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, 'Las Meninas and the Paradoxes of Visual Representation', *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1980, pp.429–47.

9 G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, op. cit., p.179.



down to a refusal to inhabit the image, to move inside it. As Jean-Paul Sartre argued, the image constitutes an act, but also implies an act, which raises the question of how images should be approached.¹⁰ How exactly can and should we partake in their reality? The move into the interior space of the image is necessary in order to fully understand its functioning. Necessary and inevitable.

Exactly how inevitable the idea of taking position is to the act of understanding and witnessing becomes clear in Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*.¹¹ Agamben demonstrates that the true witness is the witness who has lived through the whole experience — in the case of the camps it is the witness who died in the gas chamber. Agamben calls it 'Levi's Paradox' (referring to Primo

do no more than speak on behalf of that mute other. Further, every reader, Agamben states, is always a witness to the witness; by reading the account, imagining it, he or she inevitably becomes (co-)author of the testimony and thus part of its narrative. By reading, Agamben argues, the reader collaborates in the writing. By looking, each viewer collaborates in the imagining of the events. Reading and writing are the tasks of the witness; looking and imagining those of the spectator.

Agamben devotes one of his four chapters to the *Muselmänner*. These were walking corpses, he writes, the living dead: not deceased yet, but not wholly alive anymore either. The *Muselmänner* were the next ones to be selected for the gas chambers; they were an *image* of that phase every prisoner desperately needed



Renzo Martens, *Episode I*, 2003, video, 45min, stills. Courtesy the artist

Levi): the true testimony of the camps is that of the *Muselmann*, the prisoner on the brink of death who is no longer capable of expressing his or her condition.¹² If the true witness is not (or rather no longer) capable of bearing witness, then the testimonies of the survivors — eternally the third party — can of necessity

to avoid. This was the image no one wanted to acknowledge within themselves, that no one wanted to be (or see). Only those who were (in that) image, who experienced what was inside it, can fully comprehend the events that comprise it. That image needs to be actualised over and again to bear witness. So true testi-

10 The Sartre quotation serves as an epigraph to Part II of *Images in Spite of All*: 'The image is an act and not a thing.' *Ibid.*, p.50.

11 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen), New York: Zone Books, 2002.

12 *Ibid.*, p.82. Though *Muselmann* means 'Muslim' in German, in the concentration camps it was the name given to the prisoner who 'was giving up and was given up by his comrades [...]. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions.' Jean Amery, quoted in *ibid.*, p.41.

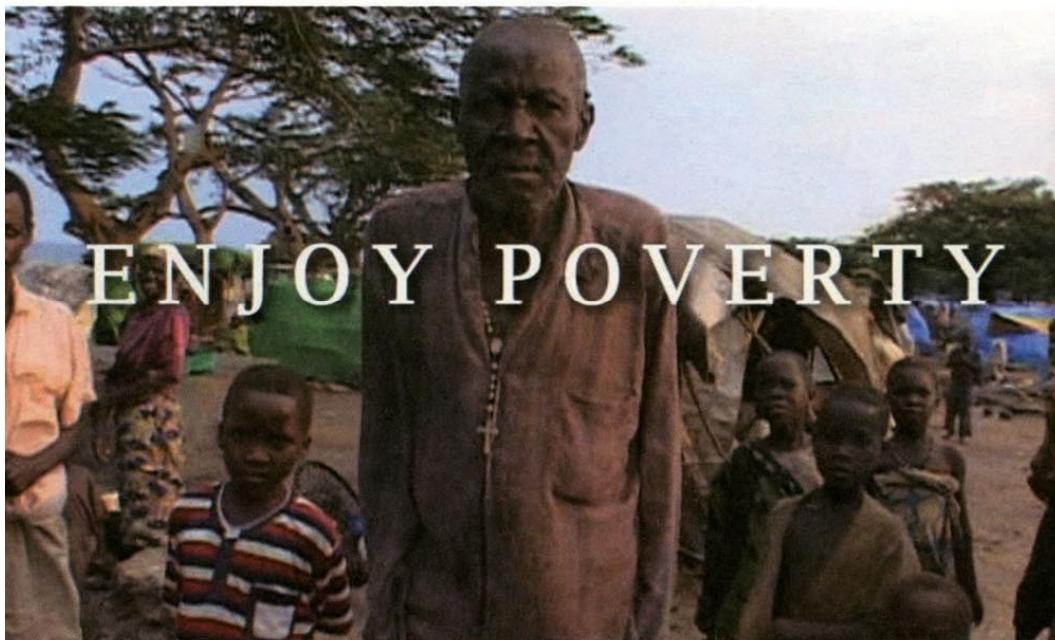
mony for the witness means inhabiting the one form of life they resisted in the camps: that of the *Muselmann*, who experienced the process of the Final Solution to its full depth — the only true witness of the camps. It means re-humanising the *Muselmann*, reviving the (near or actual) dead. Agamben mentions that the *Muselmänner* were referred to by the Germans in the camps as ‘*Figuren*’, and hence as images.¹³ (The SS’s insistent process of naming forms part of what Didi-Huberman refers to as a ‘machinery of *disimagination*’).¹⁴ Finally then, breathing life back into the *Muselmann* also means becoming image oneself. This reveals empathy as the highest form of imagination.

3. There Is No More Outside

At the tail end of 2000, Renzo Martens travelled to Chechnya — then a war zone —

of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which was inspired by Conrad’s book. At the same time, as a viewer I am tempted to make references to Dante’s hell, omnipresent in the imagination of the concentration camps, or Didi-Huberman’s four photographs, ‘snatched from hell’. But, of course, this isn’t hell. This is pure reality. Not an image, but a real place you can visit, explore, interpret and ultimately transform. It is a reality of which images are a substantial part.

Martens uses different strategies to force his audience — both the Congolese men and women in the film and the viewers in the cinema or gallery — to transgress the borders of the screen. All of these strategies confront the Congolese with their misery, their reality, of which the West is a substantial part.



in order to work on *Episode I*. He wanted to reflect on his own self-image, both with and among professional image producers (press, NGOs, government bodies). Four years later, for *Episode III*, Martens flew from Brussels, where he lives, to Kinshasa, where he embarked on a boat journey that took him into the interior of the Congo. In his video and personal presentations of the work, Martens invokes the infernal voyage of Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and the hell

Martens trains Congolese photographers to make images of war, rape and poverty — following their Western photojournalist counterparts — instead of photographs of marriages and births they had until then made a living from. He organises a party in honour of poverty, which he sees as the last resource left for the Congolese themselves to mine. He pins logos of international-aid organisations on malnourished children, enforcing the fact that his Congolese subjects and his Western viewers

13 Ibid., p.51.

14 G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, op. cit., p.20. Italics original.



are part of one and the same system. He teaches them to abandon any hope of an outside. Acceptance of the interior reality now becomes the prime condition for resistance.

Not only the border between inside and outside but also the border between image and reality has been effaced here. The references to different hells mentioned earlier — the artist's and the viewer's — are inevitable. All these images are part of one and the same reality, fragments of one and the same history. There is no longer a way to separate image from reality, just as there is no way to separate the Congolese reality from our own — however much European politics tries to do so. The reinforcement of European immigration law does not separate both realities, but rather makes it clearer how deeply they are intertwined. The exterior, still

NGOs he pointedly films and employs within his images). It is precisely in the act of 'exporting' itself to the Congo and other Third World countries that Europe — or, generically, the West — tries to efface this notion of a possible outside for the Congolese. It is precisely the presence of the media and the NGOs that undermines the urgency of the Congolese citizens' potential demand to be accepted in Europe as refugees. The logos make them part of our European reality. Helping them on the spot is also a way to prevent them from coming to Europe to take their part.

The force of *Episode III* is also its problem. Travelling to the Congo, intervening in the image and literally taking control of its production displaces the exterior and thereby effaces it, replicating the situation already



Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2008, video, 90min, stills.
Courtesy the artist

an actuality for those in the German concentration camps, has been erased in present-day Congo through the presence of journalists, NGOs, relief workers and other mediators in the refugee camps of Eastern Congo — a group to which Martens, the 'artistic development worker' with press accreditation, inevitably belongs (a position underscored by the logos of

enforced in places such as the Congo by the presence of the media and relief workers. No matter where he is, arguably, Martens is always part of their reality, affected by their misery. He would not be there if he were not, and it is not by leaving Congolese soil that he leaves their reality.¹⁵ This both is *Episode III*'s great triumph and tragedy: its ability to reflect

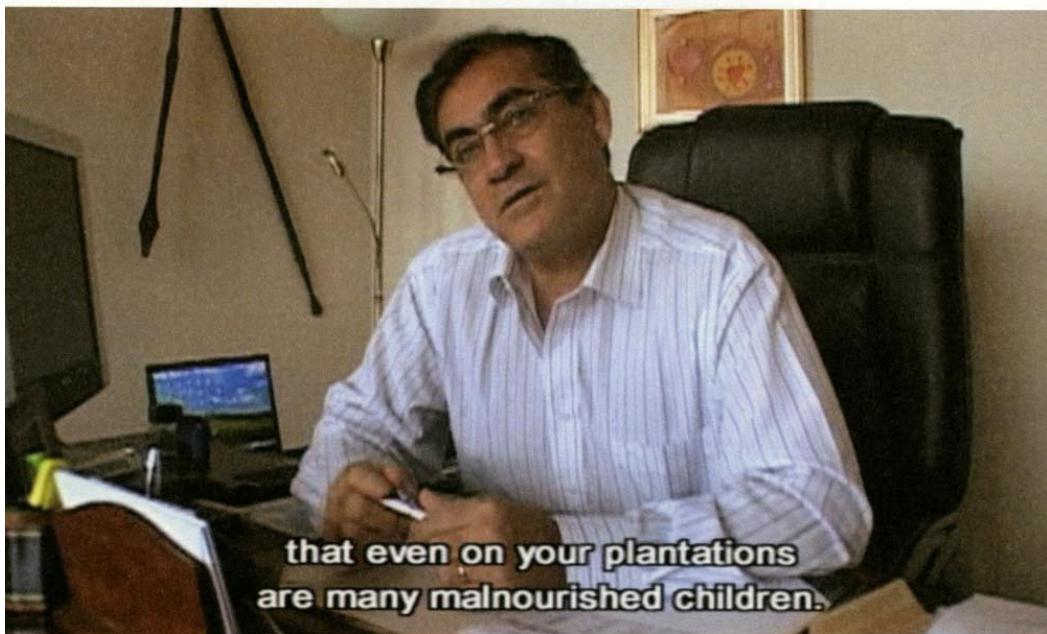
¹⁵ It is interesting to refer here to a contract Martens made, stating that part of his profits go to the Congolese he worked with on this project. He actually made two contracts, fitting the ambivalence of his film, increasing the percentage from donations from 0% to 100%, with a guarantee of \$500 if no donations are received (both contracts are reproduced in *A Prior*, no.16, 2008, pp.174—75). With these contracts, Martens made the villagers in his film shareholders of the work. He also sold some of the pictures of the photographers in his film to collectors in Belgium, of which the profits go to the Congolese photographers.

the fact that there is no more outside. Not for the Western European who boards a plane to the Congo to go work there: the film-maker, inescapably complicit, who moreover hardly ever leaves the frame. Not for the Congolese men and women pictured in the work, who have nowhere else to go and thus have to accept the unattainability of Europe as a possible outside — the closest to Europe they can get is the Europe that is brought to them. And finally, there is no outside for the viewer, constantly confronted with the uneasiness of his or her own involvement in the story.

Even though the pictures by the Congolese photographers Martens trains are poorly framed and lit, they are, in contrast to those of the Birkenau prisoners, perfectly legible and useable (and to be fair, since Martens is his own

the Pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is the fact, the sign of man. The image of man is inseparable, henceforth, from a gas chamber...¹⁶ Contemporary reality does not allow for exteriority, that is Martens's lesson. The tragedy of the Congo now also stands as a sign of mankind.

Didi-Huberman's enigmatic opening sentence to *Images in Spite of All* — ‘In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves’¹⁷ — implores us to share in the task of recounting, translating, babbling, stuttering in the language of the witness. The original French phrasing of the sentence uses the term ‘s’imaginer’, underscoring a move away from a simple imagining (*imaginer*) to a type of imagining that weaves the self into the image, an empathic inhabiting of the image. In order



cinematographer and shoots all images of himself at arm’s length, the look of his own camerawork is often equally poor, in a more-or-less staged *cinéma-vérité* style). The reality of the Congo — inherent to our times — is much closer to us than that of Auschwitz. Primo Levi’s shame of being human has been replaced, by the end of Martens’s film, by the film-maker’s acknowledgement that misery is part of the human condition. As Georges Bataille made clear, there is no outside to history: ‘Like

to understand, the viewer must intervene into and claim space for him- or herself in the story of the witness, in the archive, in the image. It is imperative for the viewer to partake actively in the labour of imagining, otherwise these images remain mute.

That is why *Episode III* can be read as a work about images in spite of all, a lesson in imagination. It makes the Western viewer think about his or her position in relation

16 G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, op. cit., p.28. Quoted from Georges Bataille, ‘Sartre’ (1947), *Oeuvres Complètes*, XI, Paris: Gallimard, 1988, p.226.

17 *Ibid.*, p.3.



to the situation and therefore engages in completing the image. Not only the viewer, but the Congolese men and women also are encouraged to complete their own images. The film constitutes a positioning (in the sense that Martens takes a position of a Westerner trying, and eventually failing to help the locals take advantage of their situation) and a dispositioning (in the sense that he, from that vantage point, puts himself at the disposal of his audience, creating for them a prescriptive possibility). *Episode III* is an ongoing attempt to complete the image, an act of engagement that turns this work into an actualisation of Didi-Huberman and Agamben's theories and a translation of them into the present (specifically the present relationship to media). Martens searches for involved, non-professional witnesses with the same all-

Displacing oneself. Going on location and (dis)positioning oneself in order to intervene into the image. All of this means becoming part of the image and the medium, and therefore becoming image and medium oneself. It implies imaging (producing images) and sharing (distributing them). It constitutes what one can describe as an act of love, of sharing oneself with another, becoming one with another. That is the reason why Martens is not only resisted, but — in all his otherness — also accepted by some of the Congolese people featured in the film, who take his lessons, his art, his food and the logos that go with it.

Love is the planned subject of *Episode II*, the closing chapter of Martens's triptych, a project with increasingly evident religious undertones. That, after all, is the bottom line of his at



Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2008, video, 90min, stills.
Courtesy the artist

consuming dedication that Didi-Huberman devotes to the four images made by the members of the Sonderkommando, or Godard to his quest to find images that never were made. Inscribing himself into the image (the lesson of Godard and Didi-Huberman) is the only way to bear witness. Making himself part of the situation of the victims (Agamben's lesson) — or attempting to — is the only way to force a solution together with them. He shows us the image as site, and the witness as participant.

times ironic but always messianic endeavour: by situating himself at the heart of his work, by making a film the protagonist of which is his own unhappy happiness in the face of the Congo's misery and not so much, as one would expect, misery itself — he transforms himself into the ultimate and complete witness, resolving interior and exterior, if for a short time.

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