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Feature

Bryne McLaughlin's Top 3: Against the Grain

VARIOUS LOCATIONS JAN TO DEC 2011

by BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN



Olivia Boudreau *L'Étude* 2011 Video still Courtesy the artist

1. The **Quebec Triennial** at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal


With works by more than 50 artists selected by five curators filling the MACM, and a slate of on- and off-site performances and installations, the **Quebec Triennial** is a juggernaut of an exhibition. And, as is to be expected with this kind of ambitious omnibus survey (artists are only allowed to show once in a triennial, no repeats), there are hits and misses aplenty depending on your point of view. For me, the show started strong and ended strong, with a few particular highlights scattered between. The opening galleries of works by Chris Kline (in particular a new cartographic treatment of presence and absence), Steve Bates (a functioning radio antenna fashioned from barbed wire), Nelson Henricks (an installation based on the skull-jarring 2287 Hertz frequency—the same used for police sirens) and Olivia Boudreau (an immersive video installation depicting women slowly appearing then disappearing in a steam bath) all signal a discordant reality/ephemerality. Further on, Jean-Pierre Aubé's *31 soleils (Dawn Chorus)* takes this dissonance to cosmic proportions with a massive video of the transiting sun set to a cacophony of digitally captured radio

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broadcasts. Charles Stankie's **LOVELAND** fantastically captures an ominous arctic sci-fi (with a nod to American abstract painter Jules Olitski), and who would have thought that dot-matrix printers could make such maddeningly compelling music as experienced in an audio installation/composition by [The User] (a.k.a. Emmanuel Madan and Thomas McIntosh). Numa Amun's **Citadelle des sens** series of biomorphic drawings embedded into the gallery wall seem to hint at a weirdly beautiful clinical dystopia and made me think again about Stéphane La Rue's gallery of folded and painted minimalist geometries. Finally, a bit of playful humour arrives in sculptural and psychological mazes by Mathieu Latulippe and by the duo Florine Leoni and Sylvain Baumann, along with Alexandre David's latest interactive plywood intervention. Things I didn't get: Massimo Guerrera's relational aesthetics, which always leave me feeling like I missed something; Jacynthe Carrier's "psychologically charged" video triptych **Rites**, which only made me think of an avant-garde European car commercial; Jim Holyoak and Matt Shane's ongoing floor-to-ceiling drawing installation (maybe it'll make sense when it's done?); Sophie Bélair Clément's and Grier Edmundson's installations—enough with the coldly calculated and ironic-kitsch (respectively) conceptualism; and Claudie Gagnon's video/performance series **Tableaux**, which takes an absurdist jab at art historical imagery that seems for the most part to be just silly. It won the triennial's people's choice award, so I guess that shows how much I know.



Raqs Media Collective's "Surjection" installation view with (right) *The Untold Intimacy of Digits* 2011 / photo Cheryl O'Brien

2. Raqs Media Collective at the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto

Director and curator Philip Monk—who has just won this year's Hnatyshyn Foundation Visual Arts Award for curatorial excellence—and his team at the Art Gallery of York University have a reputation (that they've encouraged through gallery marketing) of being "out there." On the surface, this is a wry play on the fact that the suburban gallery is off Toronto's downtown art map, and perhaps on Monk's rather contrarian reputation as well, but that distance (and institutional support) has also allowed Monk and company the freedom to mostly ignore the trends that seem to dominate other major gallery spaces and art scenes in the city and to look further a field for new perspectives and programming. An exhibition of works by Panamanian artist Humberto Vélez earlier this spring was one example, as was this fall's solo exhibition by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Siddhabrata Sengupta). Taking its title from a mathematical concept that deals with the transfer of the elements of one set into the features of another, "Surjection" presented a range of text, film and sculptural

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ONLINE

Richard Mosse: Infrared Insights The landscape and people of eastern Congo, photographed with infrared film, are the basis for Richard Mosse's remarkable prints at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery. In this slideshow, David Balzer mulls the implications, which stretch from Conrad to Hendrix.

Jesper Just: The Human Touch It's rare to find a talent who can bridge the structural interests of the art world with the hungers of popular audiences. But as Richard Rhodes found on a trip to the Paris suburbs last week, Danish-born film and video artist Jesper Just rises to the challenge.

Studies in Decay: Where Endings are Beginnings If the world tends towards decay, is that a good thing or a bad thing? On the one hand, it could be gloomy, on the other, transformative. Now, three Vancouver-connected artists are riffing on these extremes in a group show at Or Gallery.

Changing Stakes: Deconstructing Dubai Dubai, home to the world's tallest building, is a city known for extremes. This fall, fissures between its fantastical marketing and hard-labour reality were concisely revealed in an exhibition at Mercer Union. Cheyanne Turions reviews.

Soft Turns: Seven Hours of Daylight In this feature from our fall 2011 issue, critic R.M.

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works that dove into the calculated reductions, and in turn the social implications, of modern global politics, culture and language. Raqs, whose art practice is well known on the international art scene and through their work with the Sarai program, have a smart, subtle touch with meaning and metaphor. The seemingly abstract gestures of sign language and the historical resonance of fingerprinting, as the Indian government undertakes the world's largest biometric database, are just two of the elements that underscored the malleability/viability of identity and emotional contact that coursed through the exhibition. There was much to think about in this show and I wonder, amid the distractions of a busy fall art season, how many people made the trek up to the AGYU. I had [a long chat with Sengupta](#) at the gallery, which, if you're interested (and you should be), fills in the details.



Renzo Martens *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty* 2009 Installation view at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery / photo Toni Hafkenscheid

3. Models for Taking Part at [Presentation House Gallery](#), North Vancouver, and the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#), Toronto

I'll admit right off that, even though I've chosen "Models for Taking Part" as one of my top exhibitions this year, I'm still not sure what to make of it. The group exhibition organized by UBC grad and Witte de With curator Juan A. Gaitán for Presentation House Gallery this spring, and recently on view in Toronto at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, takes a hard-hitting look at the chaos and contradiction of the modern "democratic" world. That's a strong premise and, indeed, Gaitán successfully crafted a strong show filled with differing perspectives by six international artists that carried the viewer from the streets of Poland to the depths of Congo. Notions of participation, or the fantasy thereof, played a big part here—in Polish artist Artur Zmijewski's cacophonous installation *Democracies*, footage shot at political protests, street parties/riots and a Second World War re-enactment is purposely overwhelming to the point of confusion; Romanian/Slovakian duo Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkáčová's video *The Descent of Man* follows the inherent breakdown of meaning as a group of giggling blonde girls pass along whispered sentences taken from the writings of Charles Darwin; Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili's video *Straight Stories – Part 2: ANYA* tells the story of a disenfranchised Iraqi refugee's failed attempts to escape immigration limbo in Istanbul. Yet the work that lingers most—and has caused me the greatest uncertainty—is Dutch artist Renzo Martens' video *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*. I felt drained after I sat through all 90 minutes of Martens' self-guided, Conradian tour through parts of the crisis-ridden, war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo. Corruption reigns on all sides here, always, it seems, at the expense of those whose impoverished lives are being fought over between warring factions, colonial industrialists and international aid groups. That's not a surprise, I suppose, but Martens does well to

Vaughan travels to Malmö, Sweden. There, he finds a gloomy city harbouring some bright talents: Sarah Jane Gorlitz and Wojciech Olejnik, the young Canadian duo known collectively as Soft Turns.

[More Online](#)

reveal the intricate layers of deceit, suffering and hopelessness—whether in the work of photojournalists, aid workers or between the Congolese themselves. As I discovered later, Martens has been subject to much critical dressing down over the film, ranging from being called a foppish interloper/narcissist to a morally vacant pornographer. There's a point to be taken here. After all, Martens is an internationally known artist who crafted the film to be shown (and sold?) in the Western art world. But cut away all of that theory laden art-world cynicism for a moment and at its core, I think, this work still seems to be about a visceral human response to what we see and, in turn, feel. Whether we do anything about those feelings is another, more individual, matter, but perhaps the knowledge of what we've seen and the conundrums it reveals should be taken, in the context of this exhibition, as a much needed kick-start toward participation.

Bryne McLaughlin is managing editor of Canadian Art.

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The Quebec Triennial: Eyes Front

Melding a major regional survey of more than 50 artists with an off-site installation, regular performances and a 500-page catalogue, the Quebec Triennial kicked off this week at an impressive scale. Daniel Baird reviews, finding it nearly flawless.

Raqs Media Collective: The Equation Makers

Poetics, politics and paradox multiply in the work of India's Raqs Media Collective, which has gained wide international attention in the past decade. Last week, as its latest exhibition opened in Toronto, Raqs' Shuddhabrata Sengupta sat down to chat with Bryne McLaughlin.

Larry Clark: Tulsa Time

American photographer Larry Clark is widely known for his documentation of youth on the verge. Now, North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery focuses on the body of work that made his name: ***Tulsa***, a rigorous look at 1960s teen experiments in drugs, sex and violence.

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Taken Part

by Allison Collins

Models For Taking Part

Presentation House Gallery
 333 Chesterfield Avenue , North
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February 19, 2011 - May 1, 2011



Lately in Vancouver there've been a duo of exhibitions employing video documentary as installations, both in their own way exploring the potential and the failure of how public structures relate to communities through the logics (and perhaps illogics) of power. At Presentation House, "Models for Taking Part" is by far the more pessimistic of the two, while "602,000: Works on Housing" at VIVO Media Arts Centre makes a more generous attempt to bring forward ideas on what kinds of self-government are possible given the strum and strain of its subjects.

In an otherwise empty gallery one recent afternoon, I found myself meandering through the flashing projections of "Models for Taking Part" all alone. With work by Anetta Mona Chişa & Lucia Tkáčová, Tobias Zielony, and Artur Żmijewski, the physical space of the three-room installation formed the crux of the exhibition, but the single offsite screening of Renzo Marten's film *Enjoy Poverty* is, for curator Juan A. Gaitán, the 'coda' for the exhibition. At the time of writing the film has not yet been screened, though one can get a sense of it by viewing bits [here](#) and [here](#).

The installation itself is comprised of three discreet areas in which video or moving images are installed, as well as a lobby room that contains photographic stills from Tobias Zielony's *Vele de Scampia*, 2009. To call the work simply video stills is inaccurate, because it is still images that comprise the video, bumping and jerking their way through a nine-minute slideshow. The images take the viewer through a modernist apartment complex in Naples, Italy that has been taken over by the Italian mafia. The curator (via a handy note) describes the video as a focus 'on Franco di Salvo's eponymously named modernist housing project in Naples, Italy—a product of Italian rationalism that was taken over by the mafia and thus "privatized", albeit in a very public way.'

Dark in tone, the static pictures get drunkenly focused and jumbled by the lens of the camera (or more accurately the hand of the artist/editor). The eye of the artist trawls through ~~visits upon the~~ di Salvo's structure and its inhabitants from without as well as throughout—up its stairs, in and out of its rooms and through its balconies to look out at fireworks flickering in the sky. A brutal and somewhat foreboding place, the structure is both filled with shadows and bathed in the coloured light cast by the Neapolitans' famous fireworks. Zielony lingers on these contrasts, pausing his lens on the colours in a way that attends to the beauty of light on the building as a form.

Ultimately though, despite the beautiful light opportunities, the flickering structure evokes a haunted house, and an unwieldy failure of modernist optimism that ushers in unwelcome reality—the inadequate result of a gesture toward progress and positive societal impacts that has been overtaken by a powerful and threatening private interest. I imagine that if I walked into di Salvo's building I would feel equally uncomfortable and unwelcome as those who are unaccustomed to visiting a gallery

often feel in one, an association not encouraged outwardly by artists and curators, but which nonetheless exists.

The exhibition persists in presenting a highly cynical view on the notion of 'taking part', with its other works, in which messages are misconstrued, and gestures of democracy are short-lived and equated with fiction. Both *Democracies*, 2009, by Artur Żmijewski and *Descent of Man*, 2010, by Anetta Mona Chişa & Lucia Tkáčová cast critiques on any possible vision of progress through collective action.

Descent of Man demonstrates the act of sharing complex matters (passages from Darwin's book of the same title) as the transmission of knowledge with a game of 'telephone'. Breakdowns in communication along a chain of blonde teenage girls are foiled as attempts to pass ideas from one person to the next result in the utter mangling of the original meaning of the words. I question the use of 'blonde' girls as an archetypal character to portray this fairly facile and superficial take on complex ideas, while admitting that this aspect of the work does perhaps make more plain a notion of the superficial triumphing over the complex. Still, these are not the models I was expecting to address, and the easy equation of 'blonde' with superficiality left me feeling pretty skeptical and ill at ease.



Artur Żmijewski, still from *Democracies*, 2009, twenty channel video, each around 15 mins, stereo, colour, with English subtitles. Image courtesy the artist, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich and Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw

My unease with the proposition in this work is echoed in my further discomfort with Żmijewski's *Democracies*, in which nine monitors form a triangular environment surrounding the viewer with 15 minute excerpts of representations and expression of democratic action in Western Europe and adjoining nations. The videos of protests and reenactments of struggles that were gathered by Żmijewski add up to a context for assessing the efficacy of collective mobilization. The critique is palpable, as a cacophony drifts toward the center of the space and content on the monitors seems to flit about, leaving the attention of the viewer split and uncoordinated.

Throughout, the show presents a bleak vision of the potential for democratic action to bring positive social effects. Perhaps this can be affirmed as accurate. As the curator assessed, despite its inherent cynicism, *Democracies* addresses an important truth or recognition of what is really going on in collective acts. Yet, the idea that a unified voice or gesture of social progress is doomed or empty feels vague and defeatist, particularly in light of the possibility of better understanding through public discussion.

"602,000: Works On Housing" presents a counterpoint to "Models For Taking Part". It hypothesizes that dwelling is a public act, but also presents an exhibition as a site for public conversation and research. At a recent screening of collective Urban Subjects' *Living Mega-Structures*, 2003/2004, and accompanying panel discussion the focus was on self-management. This concept has come to be realized with the confines of a modernist complex in Caracas that has been overtaken by its inhabitants and bent away from the goal of the state.

Urban Subjects, a trio of artist/academics (Sabine Bitter, Helmut Webber and Jeff Derksen) based in Vancouver, are behind this installation, but beyond what is seen

in the gallery they are collaborating with the 2011 Olympic Tent Village Coalition to mount a video installation and also produce a poster for the Fight for the 10 Sites 2011 campaign, in partnership with the Downtown Eastside Neighborhood Council. While homelessness and poverty remain persistent problems in the DTES neighbourhood of Vancouver, words of recognition are often left unaccompanied by action that might address these very real issues with tangible solutions. This exhibition takes a position of responsibility to both speak and act, as well as to articulate aspects of contemporary failures of the state. Perhaps simplified by the comparison of these two exhibitions, a question arises: active engagement, however faulty, or hand-wringing contemplation, however accurate?

It is perhaps at this point that any clear contrast should end, as these two exhibitions, while presenting similar associations, make their gestures on separate grounds. What is worthy of noting, and perhaps bears the reason for discussing them in tandem, is that each lays claim to an interest in other possible futures (attainable or unattainable) that we might strive for. Whether we feel that we'll arrive in them or not, the two points of entry are certain to provide us with different routes.

—Allison Collins

Top Image: Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkáčová, still from "The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex", 2010, color video with sound and English subtitles, 35:00 min. © Courtesy Christine König Galerie, Vienna

Posted by Allison Collins on 4/04 | tags: video-art

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On the Work of Renzo Martens by Allison Collins



The question of whether something is or isn't art has become largely irrelevant to whether or not it is worthwhile. I used to wonder over it, as I walked through white-walled gallery spaces confronted with a small monitor playing a documentary that brings the viewer into contact with social projects.

'She will die.'

I no longer question things in this manner. It is not because I no longer hold the technical aspects of art practice in esteem. Quite the contrary. I am impatient with art that uses form to illustrate concept, finding what was once a deep ironic gesture is more frequently replaced by an ersatz irony, or worse, an illustration.

'You know, who's to say if the parents of these malnourished ones don't drink and beat their children.'

So perhaps it is the straightforwardness of the documentary form that I appreciate of late. It eschews the notion of a gallery as a pristine space. It enters any public space where things, images or ideas are able to be encountered.

'Journalists make 50 per picture. They are paid about 300 dollars per story. About a

minute and a half of footage.'

I believe in the possible migration of the criticality that we aspire to find in all arts into the rest of our public spaces. So I am also no longer concerned with whether a film is a film and not an art piece.

'It is me that makes the picture of the situation, and that makes that picture mine.'

...

'The plastic sheeting that keeps them dry must have a logo?'

'UNICEF UNHCR, they all have a logo.'

It is exciting either way, when someone is openly and directly questioning aspects of the larger lexicon of cultural imagery that we use to go about our daily business. Artists do this, yes, but anyone might. To address what is visual is also to address an aspect of the world that we view which makes up reality.

'Between a quarter and a half of all aid is spent on technical assistance. ...it's this portion of aid from a country that flows back to the country that sent the aid.'

'If poverty can be sold, it's important to know who owns it.'

'It's a resource.'

...

'Can you show me your shop?'

'We make photos of birthdays, weddings, parties.'

Following this dialogue is a lesson by Renzo Martens, who stands among a group of young African men who are trying to make a business of taking photographs for their friends, families, neighbours. They are taking photographs of happy times. Martens impresses upon them the economic benefit of taking photos of unhappy times. Particularly war, rape, and malnourished children. An intelligent boy points out, even if we photograph corpses and violated women, we have no access to the market. Martens attempts to intervene on their behalf, to establish access for them to the international market for photographs of the starving and the poor in Africa. The experiment is deemed a failure.

But he tried, and he showed us he tried. He pursues with zeal the notion that first world nations and third world nations are colluding, moving capital about, and using the image and idea of poverty to do it. To know or think about this is worthwhile. Whether or not it can be considered as art has lost its import.

— Allison Collins

Top Image: A still from "Episode 3" of Martens' "Enjoy Poverty" Project.

Posted by [Allison Collins](#) on 4/05 | tags: [documentary](#) [video-art](#)

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Presentation House Gallery presents Models for Taking Part - Apr 2 Tuesday, March 29, 2011



Models for Taking Part with curator, Juan A. Gaitán
Exhibition tour and Reception
Saturday, Apr 2, 7:30 pmn
Location: Presentation House Gallery, 333 Chesterfield Ave, N. Van

Film Screening: Monday, Apr 4, 7pm

Screening of Episode III: Enjoy Poverty by Renzo Martens
followed by a Public Discussion and responses from
Ken Lum, visual artist
Isabelle Pauwels, media artist
Nettie Wild, documentary filmmaker
moderated by Juan A. Gaitán

Location:
The Dyavad Mowafaghian Cinema
Third floor, SFU Woodward's, 149 West Hastings Street, Vancouver

This provocative and controversial film raises questions about media coverage of poverty and what the poor get in return. The filmmaker critically investigates how poverty is represented and exploited as an industry by foregrounding the

contradictions of humanitarianism, photojournalism, as well as "concerned" contemporary art. Filmed in the Upper Congo, the disturbing footage examines the ethics and economics of producing images of human suffering, and questions the very premises of documentary filmmaking.

Dutch artist Renzo Martens is working on a series of films that try to mediate their own complicity with dominant visual regimes. His works have recently been shown at Tate Modern, London, Kunsthaus Graz, La Vireina, Barcelona, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and the 6th Berlin Biennale. Episode I of this series was shot in a refugee camp in Chechnya in 2002.

Supported by SFU Woodward's



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MODELS FOR TAKING PART

ISABELLE PAUWELS' RESPONSE TO RENZO MARTEN'S EPISODE III: ENJOY
POVERTY

I saw this film as being about our Western appetite for morality tales.

This film uses as its basic material a moral lesson that we already know. This moral lesson is: losers get to be spiritual; winners get to be engineers or storytellers— which amounts to the same thing.

We are drawn towards morality tales, because morality puts us in the judge's seat.

It feeds into our vanity.

I admire how Renzo Martens plays the vanity card, through his blue eyed shit disturber persona. He condenses all the moralizing facets of the colonizer. He uses two basic tactics: first three quarters of the film, the tactic is making roses smell like shit (that's what documentaries traditionally do). A good example of that tactic is the whole practical education around the ownership of images. We see him in a hut with a dry board, he teaches young Congolese photographers how to do the math like the winners do — an update of the schoolroom scene in Tintin in the Congo, the Belgian comic strip. Of course, this practical education, well, it stinks, right. For everyone. And it fails— the young guys don't get their Press Passes. When this fails, Renzo switches tactics: he makes shit smell like roses (that's what the church traditionally does) This is a key dramatic turning point in the movie, it turns us, the western audience, from consumers of the morality play into participants in the morality play. We are set on a spiritual quest- which means that we have to admit we're losers, too. We're asked to swallow a big one: Enjoy the spectacle of Poverty, please. What's big about it is that I am being asked, not told. Renzo is appealing to my vanity. But, do I really have to play along with this?

Well I like to say no when I'm offered a role, so turned to cynical diversion tactics. I wondered about things like, who bought the booze for the lighting of the sign ceremonies? Did Renzo pay the villagers at the lighting ceremonies to say certain things? But, even if he did, that wouldn't really change anything for me. I'm still the one who gets to judge, from a safe distance, the aesthetics of morality.

I found it very difficult to believe in Renzo's facial expressions. He's acting, he's over-acting – while the Congolese, well they're not acting, they're just being themselves, right? I must admit that I wished they showed more suspicion towards Renzo, so that I could feel better about myself... The fact that I make this racial distinction, between actor and non-actors, must mean that I've bought into the colonial narrative, or rather into the mechanics of narrative itself, period. I fell for it– and now I'm reduced to judging myself!

This leads me back to vanity. There's two moments where Renzo stops the narrative, in almost pornographic display of confession or soul baring. First, the Neil Young moment in the swamp. I checked the lyrics from A Man Needs a Maid, the Neil Young song, and they're almost like a summary of the film: the character in the song wants to make the world play a part he can understand. So Renzo is the pupil of Neil's character in the song. It's all so excessively self-reflexive, as if self-reflexivity is just a convention, an inherited pose—just another formal pleasure.

The second major pornographic moment is at the end, the climactic cleansing scene in the river. Renzo whispers to the camera that he is his own worst enemy, he must be so careful of his own vanity. It's almost as if he's quoting Marlow quoting Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. I find it significant that he says this in Dutch, a language a Congolese person is highly unlikely to understand. So using Dutch is a highly theatrical choice, like an aside just for me- but not for the Congolese [splitting the two audiences for the work]. There in the river, he even comes across another white man- doctor Livingstone, I presume. The man says the river is black- the only thing you can see is your own fear! Another moment of heavy-handed symbolism, over-wrought moral content [almost mythic]. And that's such a relief for me, because under conditions of global capitalism, morality can only be cheesy, cheap theatrics... And that's such a big relief for me, because Renzo has taken the evil out of the equation. I mean, let's face it, responsibility, accountability, morality—they're all just by-products of drama, of aesthetics... they're commodities—if you can afford them.

The screening of Renzo Marten's *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, was held at The Djavad Mowafaghian Cinema, SFU Woodward's, Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, Vancouver, BC in conjunction with Presentation House Gallery's exhibition [Models for Taking Part](#).

MURRAY WHYTE
VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

For those of you who missed the Justina M. Barnickie Gallery's enthralling, more-than-occasionally troubling, video-heavy show "Models for Taking Part" last fall, here's your chance to revisit what I thought was its most troubling, and most brilliant, portion: *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, a film by Dutch artist Renzo Martens that used absurd hyperbole to prove a point to an unnervingly distant extreme.

Martens is in town this week to talk about the film on Tuesday, but first, on Monday, the gallery will screen *Episode III*, filmed in Congo. Before Martens' talk on Tuesday, it will show *Episode I*, which was shot in Chechnya.

For *Episode III*, Martens spent almost two years in Congo, both documenting the daily lives of impoverished Congolese and exploring the relationship that those at the lowest end of society had with the upper-level machinations of what we might in the broadest sense call foreign aid: the various national and international committee working groups that funnel money into the country ostensibly to help the poor, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that typically administer it.

Martens takes an intentionally simplistic approach to what we in the West continually shrug off as a complex problem. Just to grab a single example among many, he asks villagers how much money each makes in a month — about \$1, they tell him — and then reveals that the typical NGO worker who parachutes into the village, for a month or so here and there, lives on a \$1,000 monthly allowance.

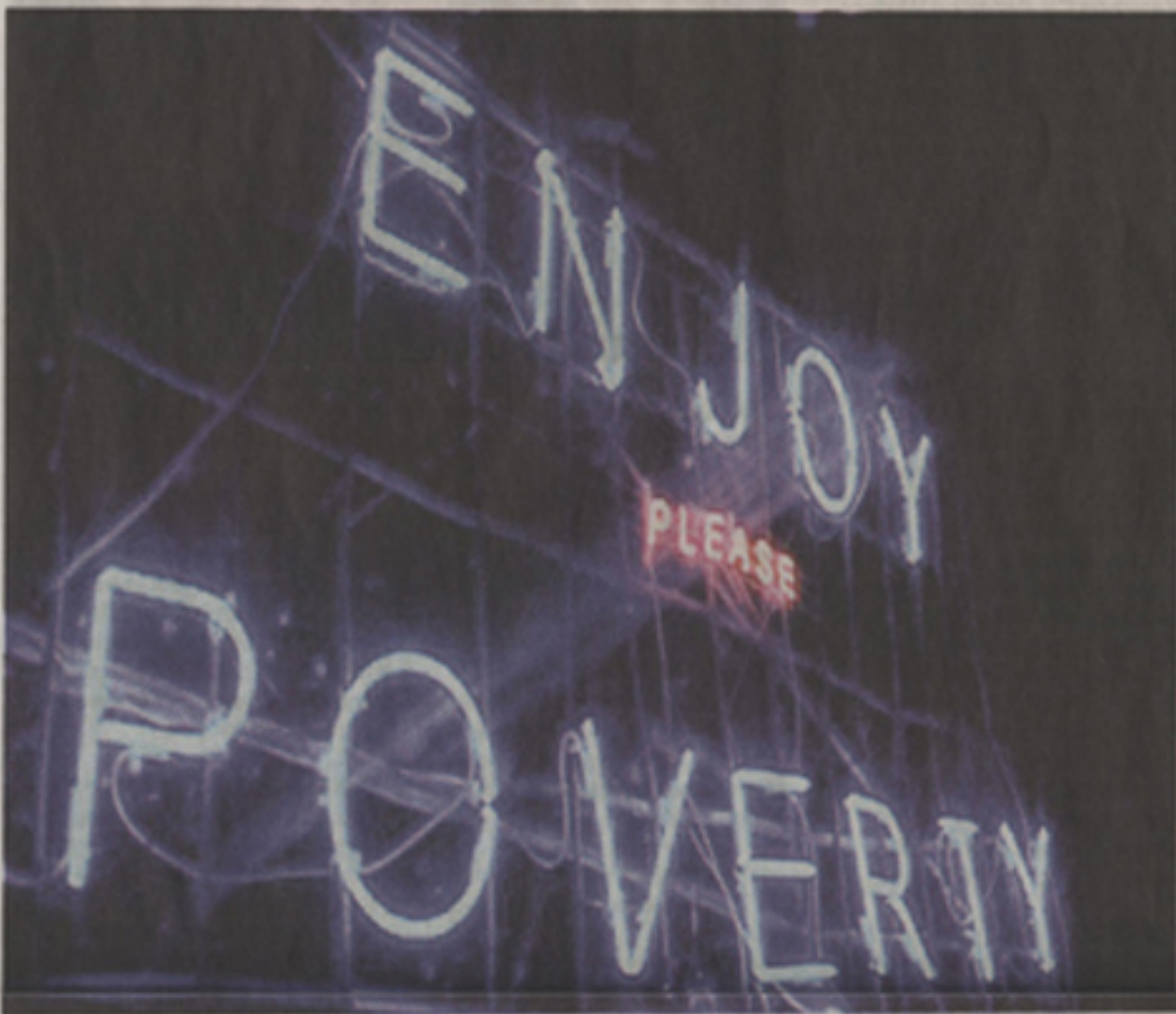
While this could easily smack of simple pedanticism, Martens injects *Enjoy Poverty* with an absurdist's sardonic glee.

He shows up at a meeting of World Bank governors where it's announced the latest international commitment to foreign aid for the Congo will be \$1.8 billion, and asks some simple questions: How much of Congo's total revenue does the \$1.8 billion represent and if it's significant, is it right to suggest that poverty is an important natural resource for the country, in terms of

VISUAL ARTS

A stark message in blue and pink

Dutch artist Renzo Martens takes aim at foreign aid and poverty in his provocative film shot during almost two years in Congo



RENZO MARTENS PHOTO

A still from Renzo Martens' film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, a gonzo critical take on foreign aid in the Congo.

attracting foreign investment?

One of the governors laughingly calls poverty "a defeat" for the entire international community, before he allows that foreign aid brings more money into the country than any of Congo's main resources — copper, diamonds and

coltan — combined.

This is, in essence, the bombastic core of Martens' exploration: that poverty is in fact a huge revenue stream to be exploited. Martens wants to see the Congolese get in on the action, though here's where that artistic hyperbole comes in again.

Among his revenue-sharing schemes is his suggestion that local wedding photographers turn their lens to international-media cliché images of starving children and fly-flecked bodies dispatched by hap-hazard, camo-clad militia — the kind that are bread and butter to

many news agencies — to make more money. "We should train them to become the beneficiaries of their own poverty," Martens said in a TV interview recently.

As a functional critique of what we typically call "poverty porn" — those endless, dislocated images of ravaged elsewhere that flash on our screens just long enough to register as troubling before being forgotten — Martens' work is brilliantly realized.

When he unapologetically films white aid workers on emergency relief efforts, gleefully snapping photos and videotaping the suffering that surrounds them, the sense is of a Disneyland of third-world misery; as they grin broadly, this is the happiest place on Earth, for them at least.

This is, in essence, the bombastic core of Martens' exploration: that poverty is in fact a huge revenue stream to be exploited

But it's just a prelude to Martens' point, eventually laid out in can't-miss fashion. Martens holds a party for a village he's spent time in, first fashioning an enormous neon sign in bright blue block letters: ENJOY POVERTY (smaller and bright pink is the word "PLEASE").

It's a tantalizing moment, as Martens fires up the generator and the sign, trussed up on ramshackle bamboo scaffolding, comes to life. Dark faces cast in the pale-blue glow light up in broad smiles, giving way to a chorus of cheering, dancing, drumming. He explains earlier to some villagers that the sign is in English, not the native Congolese French, pointing out that "for the audience, it needs to be in English."

The villagers nod. In other words, they're not the ones for whom poverty is to enjoy. By bald-faced declaration and a sudden rush of self-implication, Martens makes it crystal clear: if you can read this, he's talking to you.

Episode III: Enjoy Poverty screens Monday, Jan. 9, at 6 p.m. at the University of Toronto's Hart House. *Episode I* screens Tuesday, Jan. 10, at 6 p.m. at Hart House, followed by a talk by Martens at 7 p.m.

POSTEDTORONTO

At the Galleries: Cultural studies

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Angela Grauerholz's *The Library*

Angela Grauerholz

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It's midterm time soon, but even if you're not in university, it's always worth getting schooled at the University of Toronto's downtown campus art galleries. Here's are three shows worth taking notes on. By Leah Sandals

1. Models for Taking Part at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle, to Dec. 11

Humanity doesn't come off well in *Models for Taking Part*. This is especially the case when considering two of the exhibition's major works: Artur Zmijewski's *Democracies* and Renzo Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*. Zmijewski documents protests and other mass events such as state funerals, sports rallies and war reenactments — mostly in his home country of Poland, but also in France, Germany, Israel and Palestine. Arrayed over several screens in a single room, Zmijewski's videos are overwhelming, whether sonically (as reenactment gunshots ring out alongside requiem orchestrations), visually (as burning buildings lit by the Black Bloc meet "Feminazi" signs at an anti-abortion protest and national flags, well, everywhere), or psychologically (as each group's attempt at "outreach" only seems to entrench disparate positions in its actors and bystanders). As a whole, *Democracies* — a work labelled, supposedly, for one of the greatest inventions of humankind — makes prospects for peace and understanding seem grim. This effect is deepened in Martens' feature film, which traces a Congo journey exposing layers of injustice in a) global economies; b) global media; c) global aid organizations; and d) global art-making. No one, the artist included, seems to escape the film's cynical gaze. Heartbreaking moments, like the deaths of malnourished children, take place very nearly onscreen, while stomach-turning scenes — like Martens suggesting that the Congolese should just learn to "enjoy poverty" because it makes the rest of the world feel noble — provide little relief. Nonetheless, both these works remain strangely compelling for their no-holds-barred approach to our species' fascistic, hooliganistic and narcissistic tendencies. It's also worth noting that the ethical implications of these works could be up for discussion at a special curator talk Oct. 11, at 6 p.m., and a panel on Oct. 12, at 6 p.m.

2. Mark Boulos at Coach House Institute

39A Queen's Park Cr. E., to Dec. 11

Mark Boulos' *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* crystallizes concerns similar to those of *Models for Taking Part*, albeit a little more concisely. Viewers find themselves caught between two projections on facing walls; one wall shows commodities traders at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the other shows Nigerian rebels fighting to gain control of local oil resources. Establishing shots for both projections show area waterways, underlining the connectedness between these places. Similarities are also suggested as the camera focuses on the tribal, aggressive, back-and-forth gestures of the Chicago traders, as well as the confident grandstanding and ritual preparations of the Nigerian soldiers. Creating a simultaneous sense of distance, however, are the twinned-but-oppositional aims of both groups: Each is looking to profit from Nigerian resources, but the profit of one group would seem to require eliminating the other group entirely. Again, the effect is troubling, but the clear-eyed way it's conveyed — with no easy solutions or platitudes proffered — is also what makes it so watchable.

3. Angela Grauerholz at the University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle, to Nov. 26

Montreal photographer Angela Grauerholz's gentle survey at UTAC manages, surprisingly, to hold its own amid the political angst of the previous two campus shows. I've heard for years that Grauerholz's practice was intertwined with concerns around time and memory, but it was only in seeing this show in person (instead of viewing selected works in reproduction) that that effect really came across to me. The massive scale of her soft-focus black-and-white prints insists on the momentous weight that even banal moments — like views through a window, or of a stranger striding across a square — can have in our memories. Her photographs of burnt books and archival sculptures also pluck at this theme in a collective way. The thread gets more obscure in her *Reading Room for the Working Artist* installation, which features film clips, images, books and design objects that form a type of memory quite specific to Western artists of a certain generation. But whether you're conversant in art theory or not, there's a fine meditation on remembrance to be had here.

Posted in: Arts & Culture, Posted Toronto Tags: Art, At The Galleries, Visual Art



Tobias Zielony, *Mini Bike*, 2010.
photo : courtesy of the artist and Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin

Models for Taking Part

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, September 9–December 11, 2011

If “relate,” “participate” and “interact” have been the driving verbs behind much artwork produced since the late 1990s — and the rise of relational aesthetics in this period seems to indicate as much — then *Models for Taking Part*, curator Juan A. Gaitán’s exhibition of five works by international artists that interrogate the cohesion of the public sphere, reveals the dark undercurrents of these practices, focusing on states of infiltration, implication and complicity.

The exhibition offers two possible starting points for the viewer. The first, a noisy introduction through Artur Żmijewski’s *Democracies* (2009), a 10-screen video installation that simultaneously shows clips from a number of collective actions around the world. By bringing together a cacophony of scenes as diverse as church services, military reenactments, anti-globalization demonstrations, political rallies and labour actions, Żmijewski attunes us to the formal similarities in public demonstrations of belief systems: rehearsing, singing, chanting, speech-giving and flag-waving reappear as common methods of expressing what Gaitán describes as “self-affirmation” in the public sphere. Followed by a video by Annetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkáčová that puts the continued relevance of Charles Darwin’s theories about human evolution to the test in a game of “broken telephone” and a photo and video series by Tobias Zelony examining an Italian public housing project, this route through the exhibition foregrounds moments where meaning breaks down as messages circulate through a collective.

An alternate path through the gallery presents a quieter but no less provocative initiation into themes of fragmentation and complicity. In the first darkened room, Bouchra Khalili’s looping video *Straight Stories – Part 2: ANYA* (2008) unfolds the restrained autobiography of a young Iraqi refugee who has been living in the Strait of Istanbul as an illegal immigrant for more than a decade while “waiting for the authorization to leave” and join her uncle in Australia. The constant flow of images of the nighttime cityscape that accompanies the narrative refuses to let the viewer’s gaze settle, much as Anya’s story cannot cohere around a permanent sense of home or belonging. In the adjacent room, Renzo Martens’ now infamous 90-minute documentary-style film, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2009), depicts an artist, played by Martens, as he travels through the Upper Congo in an effort to convince its citizens that poverty is in fact their most important resource — a crusade that culminates in the public presentation of a neon sign that reads “Enjoy Poverty, Please.” Taking the logic of global capitalism and rhetoric of international aid work and exaggerating it until it becomes obscene (at one point Martens leads the community through a cost-benefit analysis of taking photographs of parties versus documenting “raped women, corpses, and emaciated children”), the film reveals the complicit double meaning of “taking part” in the lives of others.

[\[Gabrielle Moser\]](#)