

CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS

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Is There a Right Way to Do Wrong? *Enjoy Poverty* and the Case Against Ethics *1

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*1 This title is a reworking of Harry Houdini's book: *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals* (Boston, MA: The Barta Press, 1906).

• COMPONENT •

• STORYLINE •

• MINUTES •

• II. Emancipation Project (shots 282 – 420) •

• IX. Emancipation Class: Part 1 •

• 48.54 – 50.59 •

• SHOTS •

• CONTENT •

• FILM STILL •

• 282 – 291 •

• Martens instructs photographers. •



The critical connection forged between neoliberalism as a particular set of political-economic practices and the increasing appeal to universal rights of a certain sort as an ethical foundation for moral and political legitimacy should alert us.

—David Harvey*²

There is no ethics in general. There are only—eventually—ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation.

—Alain Badiou*³

The release of Renzo Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* in 2008 produced a series of critical responses that left commentators split into two apparently opposed camps: those who were adamant in their forthright criticism of it, and those who were broadly supportive of the film's confrontational approach to the twin issues of poverty and exploitation. These extremes of response should come as no surprise given that the film shows us despondent workers who, despite being in employment (or perhaps because of it), cannot afford to feed their emaciated, starving children, one of whom dies as the camera continues to roll.*⁴ This is a film in which the main protagonist, an apparently aloof Martens, promotes the idea that the rampant impoverishment that he encounters should be considered a resource and thereafter exploited as such by those who endure it. Consequently, in one of the more controversial scenes, Martens gives detailed instructions to local workers on how best to photograph the results of the poverty—including malnourished children—that surrounds them and give it a market value by selling it to international media outlets. The film's central message—*please enjoy your poverty; everyone else is*—gave rise to, understandably in retrospect,

*² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 179.

*³ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: Towards an Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), 16.

*⁴ One of the core allegations made in *Enjoy Poverty*, and confirmed by both local doctors and aid workers, is that workers employed on plantations, usually working on a casual rather than contractual basis, are poorer than those who toil in farming. They and their children are, therefore, fed less—resulting in acute malnutrition—and suffer from more health-related issues as a result.

a series of fault lines in critical responses, ranging from a direct attack on the artist as a person and his unedifying self-absorption;^{*5} Martens' incoherence and aimlessness;^{*6} and, not least, the "cruelty" deployed in his practice^{*7} There was also guarded support for the film's critical aims and its interrogative as opposed to affirmative approach to documentary aesthetics.^{*8} For some, its self-reflexivity in formal terms has been understood as an ethical gesture in its own right, despite the film's contentious approach to traditional notions of ethics.^{*9} *Enjoy Poverty* was likewise viewed as a speculative avant-garde gesture and, more recently, a "devastating alternative optic" for considering "Western" (and by extension the so-called art world's) complicity in producing the poverty depicted in the film.^{*10} For others,

^{*5} See, for example, Zihel's comments to the effect that "Martens's last major outing, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008), saw the artist trudging through the Congolese jungle in a white linen shirt and local straw hat, striving to save the lumpen poor with the message that they must sell their own suffering through photographic means." See: Vivian Zihel, "Renzo Martens and the Institute for Human Activities' 'A New Settlement,'" *Art Agenda* (May 27, 2015), <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/renzo-martens-and-the-institute-for-human-activities-a-new-settlement/>.

^{*6} Dan Fox, "Renzo Martens," *frieze* (April 1, 2009): 127, <https://frieze.com/article/renzo-martens?language=en>.

^{*7} Nato Thompson, "Ethical Considerations in Public Art," in *Scandalous: A Reader on Art and Ethics*, ed. Nina Möntmann (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 118.

^{*8} See, respectively: JJ Charlesworth, "Renzo Martens," *Art Review* (April 2015): 84–7; and Els Roelandt, "Renzo Martens' *Episode III: Analysis of a Film Process in Three Conversations*," *A Prior Magazine* 16 (2011): 176–85.

^{*9} For De Groof, the film's reflexivity is "presented as the ethical device par excellence for dealing with our voyeurism: it appears to civilize our own barbarity." See: Matthias De Groof, "Reflexieve ethiek in Renzo Martens' *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)*," *Ethische Perspectieven* 25, no. 3 (2015): 249. For Katerina Gregos, however, the "problem with [*Enjoy Poverty*] [...] is that it offers the disempowered false hopes of empowerment, which in this writer's opinion both treads dangerous ethical territory and perpetuates the same situation it sets out to critique, thus making itself susceptible to accusations of a neocolonialist stance." See: Gregos, "Raising the Phantoms of Empire: Post-Colonial Discourse in Recent Artists' Films," *Mousse* 22 (February–March 2010): 158.

^{*10} See, respectively: Paul O'Kane, "Renzo Martens: *Episode III*," *Third Text* 23, no. 6 (November 2009): 813–20; and T.J. Demos, "Poverty Pornography, Humanitarianism and New-Liberal Globalization: Notes on Some Paradoxes in Contemporary Art," *SMBA Newsletter* (Amsterdam: SMBA, 2011): 11–27.

Enjoy Poverty is nothing less than an "inaugural manifesto" for a post-critical era;^{*11} while, elsewhere, it is held aloft as an exemplary instance of committed art in the face of the apparently suspect moral provocations of artists such as Santiago Sierra and Artur Żmijewski.^{*12}

While disagreement among commentators is to be welcomed, if not encouraged, the one element that defines the majority of these debates is the sense that they coalesced—if not coagulated—around ethical debates and discussions that are relatively nascent in recent critical analyses of art as a practice, especially as it relates to representing the so-called "developing" or "Third World."^{*13} The diversity of ethically defined approaches to *Enjoy Poverty*—ranging as they do from skepticism to provisional endorsement—would suggest a spectrum of response that needs to be taken seriously as a distinct category of critical validation.^{*14} The far from resolved critical legacy left in the wake of *Enjoy Poverty* is, nevertheless, arguably contingent on the fact that the meaning of the term "ethics"—and its effectiveness as a frame of reference—would appear

^{*11} Dieter Roelstraete, "On Leaving the Building: Thoughts of the Outside," *e-flux journal* 24 (April 2011), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-leaving-the-building-thoughts-of-the-outside/>.

^{*12} Nina Möntmann, "Art at the Limits: An Introduction," in *Scandalous: A Reader on Art and Ethics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 6–26. I should observe here that Thompson's essay "Ethical Considerations in Public Art" was also included in this volume.

^{*13} It is worth noting here Badiou's term relating to the "reign of ethics" and where it originates from: "And this is why the reign of 'ethics' coincides, after decades of courageous critiques of colonialism and imperialism, with today's sordid self-satisfaction in the 'West', with the insistent argument according to which the misery of the Third World is the result of its own incompetence, its own inanity—in short, of its subhumanity." Badiou, *Ethics*, 13.

^{*14} The ethical and moral implications of *Enjoy Poverty* have been explicitly raised by a considerable number of commentators, including: Thompson, "Ethical Considerations in Public Art"; Möntmann, "Art at the Limits"; and Ruben De Roo, "Immortality as Ethics: Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty*," in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo, and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2011), 140–5. Elsewhere, it is considered by T.J. Demos in "The Haunting: Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty*," in *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 97–123; and, in an interview with Renzo Martens, by Ana Teixeira Pinto, "Love Is Colder Than Death," *Mousse* (2010). I have addressed ethics in passing in relation to *Enjoy Poverty* in, respectively: "Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' and the Politics of Aesthetics," *Third Text* 23, no. 2 (2009): 109–25; and "An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer," *Third Text* 23, no. 5 (2009): 593–603.

to be the issue, rather than the ethics of the film *per se*. The dilemma here, as I will observe throughout this essay, is that the label of “ethics” has become a shibboleth of sorts for the entry of the artwork into a pantheon of liberal-minded, culturally sensitive, socially committed, historically engaged, and politically conscientious (if not transformative) artworks. These artworks are broadly termed “ethical” or “unethical,” with the former elevated as an example of committed practice, while the latter is consigned to the corner of the room with other less enlightened approaches. The extent to which such declarations can tend toward provisions associated with normative ethics—in the shape of advice and moral judgments on appropriate systems of acceptable behavior—without a commensurate consideration of the meta-ethical frameworks involved in such statements should, I will suggest, give cause for concern. Whose ethics, I will ask, are being referred to in critiques of *Enjoy Poverty*? And what structures of authority and authorization do they ultimately appeal to?

To these already imminent questions, we should also ask the following: Do current critical analyses propose sustainable responses to artworks that are not operating within the current terms laid down by notions of ethical accountability and, indeed, unaccountability? Do we need, as a consequence, to rethink the ethical foundations that are being deployed and, in that moment, produce more robust and contingent provisions for art criticism to engage with the debates in hand? The prevailing question raised by *Enjoy Poverty*, alongside others, is successively straightforward: If the ethical structures and agendas being appealed to in current critical analyses are restrictive, to whatever degree, then how precisely do we offer a coherent critique of Martens’ film without falling back on yet another unanimous bout of moral throat clearing and critical piety? In posing such questions, I want to observe the extent to which these interpretive anxieties reveal—in critiques that both support and reject the ambitions of *Enjoy Poverty*—a methodological indebtedness to the prerequisites of ethical and moral communalism. To be clear from the outset: moral communalism reveals the determination to effect a consensual model of societal reaction and interaction.^{*15} To this end, one of the more pertinent outcomes of Martens’ film, as we will see, is concerned with the extent to which it discloses how often the use of the term “ethics” in art criticism ventriloquizes, albeit to various degrees, the consensual priorities that have become embedded in a globalized art world. This indebtedness to the invariably ill-defined requirements of moral communalism is troubling

for a number of reasons, none more so than the manner in which it can be deployed as a substitute for ethical debate that, in the moment of substitution, disallows—consciously or otherwise—any further enquiry into the efficacy and applicability of current ethical positions on contemporary cultural production. And it is precisely this dilemma that we need to address.

The Case Against Ethics (Part I)

In one of the more extended critiques of *Enjoy Poverty*, Nato Thompson outlines the “anti-ethical” context of the film.^{*16} Throughout this essay, which is an informative explication of Thompson’s approach to curatorial practice and its relationship to public sculpture, the discussion of an artwork’s ethical compliance revolves around a number of key areas: considerations of its affect (on the viewer’s emotions); decisions on how it reaches an audience (including the politics of considering who the artwork is for); and the problems of co-optation (how, that is, artworks can be instrumentalized to serve political ends). For Thompson, there would appear to be a transformative element at work when art is made public—a sense that it *does something*. “How does one produce something that affects someone,” he enquires, before adding “what does it mean to produce a cultural moment that makes someone walk away thinking about the world—or, perhaps, their place in the world—in an altogether new manner.”^{*17} Thompson’s concern with how “successful” artworks, in the moment of becoming public, can be subsumed “into the dominating logic of power” (alongside his argument that “stated ethical and unethical positions can equally be sucked into the logic of instrumentalization”), is a valid one but there remains an abiding sense that any instrumentalization of the artwork has already been performed by asking it to do something in the first place.^{*18} The argument, thereafter, converges

^{*15} This communalism is not to be confused with collectivism; the latter being precisely the nexus of societal and political relations that neoliberalism is determined to disrupt. “What is neoliberalism,” Bourdieu has asked, if not “a programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic.” See: Pierre Bourdieu, “The Essence of Neoliberalism,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (December 1998), <https://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>.

^{*16} Thompson, “Ethical Considerations in Public Art,” *passim*.

^{*17} *Ibid.*, 109. Thompson goes on to call for an art that invites a “complexity of interpretation,” and an ethical dimension in deciding “whom an artwork is for and whom it’s not for.”

around determinations of how to deploy art so that it answers to a political logic, albeit one that the author refers to as an “open-ended politics [...] that is almost anarchist in spirit.”^{*19}

Thompson’s essay continues, rightly, with a focus on how *Enjoy Poverty* exposes the extent to which the destitution of countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is both instrumentalized *and* privatized by vested (often Western) interests. “This kind of work,” Thompson proposes, “could be considered anti-ethical in that it doesn’t abide by the dominant logic of justice. Instead, Martens uses cruelty and a flagrant display of power (for he is clearly instrumentalizing the subjects of the film) to perhaps critique conditions of instrumentality that do the same kind of things in the name of an ethical position.”^{*20} Martens’ film does indeed adopt and adapt a position that could be construed as un- or anti-ethical (so as to highlight the hypocrisy of so-called ethical positions). All the same, the binary at work here, ethical/unethical, needs to be elaborated upon. We need to ask whose ethical framework is being appealed to and what these frames of reference reveal about a broader, largely art-world-based, application of ethical categories to works such as *Enjoy Poverty*.^{*21}

For supporters and detractors alike of “socially engaged” practices, ethics has become a defining critical trope: artists tend to be judged on the extent to which they offer “positive” ethical models—an ethics of discomfort or confrontation, for example—in their work, or whether they offer a “negative” ethical point of reference.^{*22} The latter, as we will see, is more often than not associated with apparent cynicism and/or the blatant exploitation of participants. Art, specifically collaborative practices or public art, needs to not only *do something* in these contexts but also *do the right thing* according to these

^{*18} Ibid., 114.

^{*19} Ibid., 110.

^{*20} Ibid., 118.

^{*21} Thompson subjects the film to a series of ethical rules based on the following: notions of register (does it provoke a reaction); who is it for (and who does it exclude); does it resist instrumentalization (no, according to Thompson, insofar as the film has furthered its author’s career); and how does the film line up within the broader matrices of power and co-optation. “The ethical trajectory of the film,” he argues, “serves a duel [*sic*] purpose of satisfying conservative values in the art world while simultaneously presenting a critique of ethics outside of the art world’s purview.” Ibid., 119.

particular political and ethical terms of reference. Within these interpretive qualifications, we can read an appeal to a liberally inclined, secular, democratic, and socially engaged principle of critique based, loosely, on ideals such as human rights, equality, commitment, diversity, justice, integrity, and inclusivity. This paradigm provides, on the whole, the general backdrop to the mores of the metropolitan art world. The inherent expectation that politically effective (successful) art be ethically responsible is nonetheless a new, almost original critical model, and there remains a need to reflect upon that fact rather than just apply it.

These issues, and others, were examined in an earlier essay by Nina Möntmann where she criticized the “excessive moral provocations” of certain artists, Sierra and Zmijewski being chief among them, and, in a later essay, where she utilized these two artists’ provocations to progress a favorable analysis of Martens’ *Enjoy Poverty*. It is instructive to compare these two essays in depth—published, respectively, in 2006 and 2013—and highlight what exactly is being advocated when an overtly ethical model is deployed to underwrite critique. Möntmann writes:

This more active understanding of a “political body” is countered by Artur Zmijewski, whose projects are designed as experimental situations in which the participants are *subjected to a specific scenario*. In these scenarios [...] humanity is stripped down to the point of *physical and mental humiliation*, evoking Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “homo sacer,” an outlaw devoid of all rights and reduced to “naked life” in a symbolic or actual area (camps, prisons) purposefully exempt from human rights laws—the central condition for persecutors’ readiness to inflict physical and psychological violence. As a result Zmijewski’s *excessive moral provocations* are as dubious as Santiago Sierra’s experiments with socially marginalized groups. The questionability of

^{*22} These and other points are addressed in Claire Bishop’s essay: “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum* (February 2006): 178–83. Bishop writes: “The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism. This is manifest in a heightened attentiveness as to how a given collaboration is undertaken. In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to ‘fully’ represent their subjects.” Bishop, 180.

works in which social evils are not discussed but demonstrated, using living *subjects treated as objects*, is further heightened when most of the participants take part only because of their own deprivation, solely for the (small) fee being offered. Their own motivations and experiences play no role whatsoever; the *participants merely perform*, either actively or passively, in order to give an art audience the crassest possible sense of its own moral dilemmas by means of a form of *shock treatment* and the breaking of taboos. But in *genuine participatory art*, as distinct from art that deals with objects, it is the participants themselves who constitute the basic constant factor.^{*23}

There are a number of points here, with respect to the author, that need to be addressed if we are to avoid ethical commentary becoming too prescriptive. Firstly, participants are viewed as having been subjected to something beyond their control and their involvement is thereafter construed in “negative,” nonconsensual terms. A debate emerges that pits the volition and agency of the participant against the notion of the artist as an aggressor of sorts; the latter throwing into further relief an increasingly biased focus on, in this instance, Żmijewski’s actions and intentions as opposed to the end result or effect of the work in question. Inasmuch as artists—such as Żmijewski, Sierra, and Martens—often place themselves center stage in the portrayed events and provoke participants to perform certain actions, too much focus on their agency can take us toward a model of criticism that relies upon a grammar of victimization and an extenuating analysis of culpability and intentionality. Participants, in these contexts, are consistently understood to be humiliated and evocative of Agamben’s notion of “bare life”—a term used to examine the idea that the subject of modernity is one whose ontological relationship to sovereign law is not only precarious but also potentially fatal. The resulting argument here revolves around—and is in part resolved through—the idea that the subjects in these works cannot make a volitional decision themselves and are beyond conscious decision-making pro-

cesses because of who they are—victims—and what they are subjected to in both this work and, by extension, their everyday lives.^{*24}

Apart from the disavowal of agency, this approach also produces a curious sense of abjection, whereby the participant is consistently figured as an unknowing and indeed unwitting performer who has been victimized by the various implements of extractive capitalism and the global injustice that ensues from it. Participants are frequently understood to be doubly exploited in the name of both capital and cultural production, with the artist taking advantage of his or her position to co-opt such subjects into their working processes but without the follow through of a transformative, potentially remedial, if not ethical, gesture. The intentionality—the good or bad intentions—of the artist becomes key here: in merely demonstrating inequality, the artists would appear to be playing to the gratifications of an art audience who would prefer—consciously or unconsciously—to have these issues replayed and displayed in an institutional context rather than either confront or attempt to ameliorate them. We, the audience, become complicit (in this reading at least) in the humiliation and victimization of the participants. But, underwriting all of these points, there remains an ethical pronouncement that can apparently recoup and reconnect the unethical artwork, through critique, to an ethical frame of critical reference—or, conversely, disavow it.

Inevitably, the question of remuneration conspicuously materializes in discussions of Żmijewski’s and Sierra’s work: monies have exchanged hands and therefore the motivational impulse or otherwise of the participants is put under further scrutiny. Ensuing issues of subjection and abjection come into play alongside the effectiveness of collaborative practices to right social ills and the evils of, it would seem, consumerist culture. The participants are performers, whether in an active or passive mode; this too would appear to denude them of their dignity as subjects. And *genuine participatory art* would seem to be about the participants engaging consensually in a democratically agreed practice that enables everyone to collaborate equally and, in turn, renders the artist as a benign facilitator rather than an *agent provocateur*.^{*25}

^{*23} Nina Möntmann, “Community Service,” *frieze* 102 (October 2006): 39–40 (my emphasis). Möntmann’s essay discusses, in particular, Żmijewski’s *Game of Tag* (1999), *80064* (2004), and *Repetition* (2005). Two of these works make direct reference to the Holocaust, while the latter alludes to concentration camps and internment.

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^{*24} For Badiou, this is symptomatic of certain trends in ethical thinking: “We must reject the ideological framework of ‘ethics’, and concede nothing to the negative and victimary definition of man. This framework equates man with a simple mortal animal, it is the symptom of a disturbing conservatism, and [...] prevents us from thinking the singularity of situations.” Badiou, *Ethics*, 16.

The attenuated focus on notions of community—specifically the consensual conditions and quality of the encounter between the artist and subject—and the aftermath of artistic intervention draws out an ethical response that questions how communities are formed within these contexts (that is, how communities *take part*), and the respect shown in each case to the subjects of such co-optation, if not coercion, and their long-term effects (positive or otherwise) on participating communities and individuals. The question we must ask here is whether the manifest content of such ethical proclamations promotes a broader model of thinking that can be located within ideals of moral communalism that may, as a consequence, result in the evacuation of politics proper from these debate in the name of ethics?

In a later essay that continues to address many of the themes noted above, Möntmann directly discussed Martens' *Enjoy Poverty* in the context of the "urgent role of ethics" during a period of global social crises. Möntmann is not only largely supportive of the film's aims, however contradictory the latter may appear to be, but holds it up as a model of sorts for pursuing a debate around ethics and art practices. Arguing that the question of ethics seems especially pertinent for Western industrial countries, the author astutely notes the extent to which codes of ethical conduct are instrumentalized to serve political interests.^{*26} Following the work of Badiou, Möntmann further observes how the refrain of human rights is nothing other than the ideology of modern liberal capitalism.^{*27} To the extent that neoliberal methods of ethical compliance do indeed draw upon the discursive rhetoric of human rights to manage crises, Möntmann is right to pursue the fallacy of "ethics" as it is used today.^{*28} On the other hand, in her ongoing critical analysis of Martens' film there is a further comparison with

^{*25} This is, broadly speaking, the gist of the argument that Bishop has progressed in relation to collaborative practices more broadly, suggesting as she does that "what serious criticism has arisen in relation to socially collaborative practices has been framed in a particular way [...] accusations of mastery and egocentrism are leveled at artists who work with participants to realise a project instead of allowing it to emerge through consensual collaboration." See: Bishop, "The Social Turn," 181. Elsewhere, Bishop argues that "today, political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago." Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 77.

^{*26} Möntmann, "Art at the Limits," 7.

^{*27} Möntmann is specifically referring to Badiou's groundbreaking book *Ethics*.

what is understood to be the moral provocations of artists such as Żmijewski and Sierra. These are telling appraisals, producing as they do a further binary in the ethical/unethical critical paradigms in use here. Arguing that Sierra and Żmijewski, under the logic of neoliberal doctrine, replay the inequities that they are ostensibly critiquing, Möntmann suggests that, Sierra in particular, "torments the body as the last remaining source of income of the socially discredited *Homo sacer*."^{*29} From this perspective, the author argues that for both Sierra and Żmijewski "ethics as a measure for the relationship of artist and participating subjects is deliberately negated and turned into its opposite: the acting out of an unequal power relation distinguished by maximum instrumentalization."^{*30}

In its focus on instrumentalization, Möntmann's argument comes close to Thompson's regarding the need to obviate such channels of co-optation. This also returns us to the tautology of victimhood, an inescapability that reveals not only instrumentalization, deployed on behalf of the artists involved, but its apparent inevitability. The result, despite Möntmann's support for Martens, replays a form of ethical-critical analysis that invokes a consensus around the agency or otherwise of an artwork that not only conditions responses to these works but also predetermines the consensual conditions by which these works are seen to successfully (ethically) or unsuccessfully (unethically) effect an encounter with their subjects in the name of equality. The interpretive formulation for substantiating this relies, ultimately, on a moral community that seems not only embedded in the all too obvious demands of an art world vying for relevance but a sense that the ethical gesture can replace the aesthetic gesture in *relation to* social and political transformation. Which leaves us with a further question: Do these methods of critique, in their preferred ethical model of interaction with the artwork, rely upon a moral communalism that is, in turn, a by-product of consensus that tends to prioritize ethical efficiency over political efficacy? Does an apparently ethical artwork or

^{*28} A similar point is made by De Roo in his analysis of *Enjoy Poverty* and its relationship to Badiou's notion of a "reign of ethics." See: Ruben De Roo, "Immorality as Ethics," 143. De Roo's argument that Martens' transgressive ethics is a means to defy the logic of Western ethics that, following Badiou, chimes with the fact that "contemporary ethics and human rights equal the self-satisfied egotism of the Western rich and servitude to the incumbent powers." De Roo, *ibid*.

^{*29} Möntmann, "Art at the Limits," 13.

^{*30} *Ibid.*, 14.

practice inevitably produce a politically effective event? I pose this latter question in a rhetorical manner for now, insofar as it is precisely the relationship between ethics and politics that tends to be elided in consensual appeals to ideals such as equality, diversity, participation, and inclusivity.

Both Thompson and Möntmann, to take but two variations on the theme of ethics as applied to *Enjoy Poverty*, offer critically nuanced and considered analyses of what are and remain complex issues. There is an obvious attempt in their work, commendably, to hold practice and the critical claims made on its behalf to account. My reflections correspondingly, and with respect, offer a rejoinder of sorts to critical analyses that rely upon paradigms of consensually derived ethics without fully considering the broader contexts out of which such paradigms emerge. However, I also remain aware of falling into one of the more insidious pitfalls of critique as a practice: any attempt to prove my point will involve disproving others, which does not make for constructive analyses. This is not my intention here; rather, I want to observe a consistent, if not ascendant, inflection within art criticism that, consciously and unconsciously, prioritizes “successful” projects geared toward (positive) political change that are inevitably based on the consensual demands of a contemporary art world that wants to be seen to be doing the (ethically) right thing in the name of equality. My observations, thereafter, are offered as a means to further understand the implications of applying current ethical tropes—which appear to be embedded in art world priorities and preoccupations—to practice in general and where we need to more fully develop the conventions and methodologies in use.

The Case Against Ethics (Part II)

In an age where social, financial, political, and historical emergency have become the rule rather than the exception, the consensual appeal to usefulness and community-based action has, despite certain misgivings, generated substantiative claims on the political and ethical effectiveness of art practices—made by artists, institutions, and critics alike—that tend to largely outweigh the actual transformative potential of cultural interventions. However, a substantial (and substantiating) discussion needs to be taken place on the ethical models currently in general use, ranging as they do from, among others, applied ethics (the ambition to utilize philosophical methods to distinguish appropriate courses of action in the various fields of public

and private life); utilitarian ethics (how the concrete ramifications of various policies are understood on the basis that the appropriate policy will be the one which results in the greatest happiness for the commonweal); deontological ethics (the ideal that there exists an objective moral obligation to perform the “right” action, regardless of its consequences); and so-called virtue ethics (the assumption that the “right” action will be the one selected by a befittingly “virtuous” and worthy agent). To these models, none of which have been adequately aired in contemporary art criticism, we could add role ethics, anarchist ethics, post-modern ethics, and evolutionary ethics, all of which offer, to varying degrees, specific takes on ethical responsiveness.^{*31}

The appeal to ethics in contemporary art practice and criticism has, often combining all of the above albeit in an elided, highly selective, sense, tended to prioritize a do-it-yourself ethos (an individualistic approach to production); notions of a common good (based on collective responsibility); inclusivity (at the expense of exclusion); and the accommodation of difference (evident in the politically opportunistic rhetoric of multiculturalism and equality). The dangers here, real and impending, is that the rhetoric of enterprise, equality, self-reliance, diversity, inclusion, and participation shares a disturbing linguistic propinquity to the language promoted by the consensual ideals that underwrite neoliberalism (including free enterprise, self-reliance, deregulation, privatization, equity, individual responsibility, the withdrawal of government and the emergence of “Big Society” solutions, so to speak, for social problems). Without a fuller deconstruction of the consensual model of ethical responsibility and responsiveness this proximity becomes all the more evident when we observe the degree to which contemporary art is increasingly proposed as a remedial to the socially depersonalizing effects of the neoliberal, postindustrial, and invariably globalized political demands of the so-called Western world.^{*32}

This propositional logic, since at least the 1980s, has seen a trend evolve in theoretical discourses toward political interpretations of cultural production whereby art criticism seeks to reestablish a connection

^{*31} To this cursory overview, I would also direct readers to the suggestion that ethics can be a method of commitment that realigns both political subjectivity and action, resulting in the reinvigoration of what we understand to be democratic potentiality in an age of disillusionment. See: Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007). I should note here that an interview with Critchley was also included in Möntmann’s *Scandalous: A Reader on Art and Ethics*, 26–38.

between art and the “world.”*³³ The politicization of artistic practices has sequentially given rise to a self-confirming and self-conforming ethical art criticism: the artwork must reify the claims of a consensual, democratic, politically liberal, ethical, and secularist worldview. If the apparent link between the “rightness” of the artwork in question and this worldview becomes problematic (if it becomes apolitical, unethical, amoral, anti-secularist, extremist, instrumentalist, exploitative, or antidemocratic), then it can be reconnected and “contained” through cultural theory, institutionalization and, increasingly, ethical forms of critique. Ethics, in these exegetical contexts, has a nice ring to it insofar as the term and its use makes us feel better and implies a degree of conscientiousness not only within the work in question but in the critical call to reconnect practice to the realm of human responsiveness and social responsibility. This demand that artistic practice subscribes to a transcendental, institutionalized ethical ideal of “right” or, indeed, righteousness, can correspondingly reveal the degree to which contemporary art criticism produces knowledge that flirts with systems of normative ethical pronouncements based upon a self-selecting, consensual community located within the restricted and restrictive networks of the so-called art world. Perhaps this would be relatively harmless in and of itself: the will to render contemporary art practices compliant with ethical structures, no matter how ill-defined the latter remain, is no doubt well intentioned. But, in an age

*³² This is certainly evident in Nicolas Bourriaud’s discussion of relational aesthetics, where he argues that, “through little services rendered [...] artists fill in the cracks in the social bond [...] through little gestures art is like an angelic programme, a set of tasks carried out beside or beneath a real economic system, so as to patiently restitch the relational fabric.” Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 36. For a fuller discussion of the implications of artists being dedicated to restoring “social bonds” and the neoliberal co-option of such gestures, see: Anthony Downey, “Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics,” *Third Text* 21, no. 3 (2007): 267–75.

*³³ For Robert Young, writing in relation to the threat posed by postmodern “semiotic” readings to the relationship of the text (action) to the world (history), “the call of the political in itself seeks to reinstitute or reground the link between representation and reference that has been questioned by the semiotics of the past twenty years. If the representation of the literary text to the world becomes problematic, then the link can be reinvoked by the introduction of political criteria in criticism which re-establish at a stroke the supposedly lost connection with ethics, action, and ‘the world’.” Young, *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 85.

where engaging the political (or versions of it) is a one-size-fits-all badge of both legitimacy and authority for artworks and institutions alike, it is precisely those underlying ethical structures—in their corroborative role—that need to be questioned.

One of the outcomes of questioning such structures reveals how theoretical, institutional, and heuristic conventions can cultivate consensus and, if left unchecked, give rise to one of the more notable objectives inherent within neoliberalism: the will, that is, to politicize ethics so that it serves expedient political imperatives and narrow ideologically driven agendas. We should observe here the extent to which the linguistic economy of neoliberal thought promotes often ill-defined notions of human rights, democracy, equality, freedom of expression, ethics, secularism, freedom, all being terms that have been readily adopted, if not watered down, by contemporary art institutions. In their capacity as generic terms, they can discursively materialize an ethical response within the context of artistic practices—the substantiation of an ethos within aesthetics—that provides a restrictive template for discussions of art based on the degree to which it is, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière, committed to restoring the social bond.*³⁴ For Rancière, it remains the distance achieved by aesthetics to politics and ethics that gives it purchase in the first place and anything that compromises that runs the danger of ideational and interpretive prescriptiveness that results in an art form that can only ever be answerable to political and ethical mores. It is the distance from the overtly political and ethical issues that arise here, and the space thereafter opened up in relation to these paradigms, that gives aesthetics—a relatively new regime in which art is viewed—the means to question such easy associations.

It is also worth mentioning, albeit in passing, that it is precisely the social bond—alongside the maintenance of community-based conventions of interaction and collectivity—that neoliberalism consistently disrupts and fragments in the pursuit of ideological consistency. As artists, critics and institutions alike pursue agendas based on the efficacy of art as a means to not only reflect upon social conditions but also improve them, however provisionally, cultural practices can be all the more readily instrumentalized within yet another neoliberal priority: the cooption of culture so that it, like ethics, answers to political

agendas rather than opposes them. The promotion of this critical link between the artist, political context, and a (neo)liberal model of behavior has been achieved, I would argue, at the cost of artistic practices entering into a highly instrumentalized economy not only of political but ethical value. This becomes more evident when we contemplate how, in a milieu where the political arena seems gradually more compromised, art practices are being increasingly called upon to agitate for social change and alleviate social injustices in the name of democracy, equality, and human rights—to name but a few of the more obviously emblematic terms bandied about by neoliberal discourse. But what if those very terms, alongside others, are merely rhetorical devices for effecting the longer term goals of neoliberalism? What if the so-called democratic right to protest and dissent has been effectively delegitimized and criminalized in liberal democracies to the extent that it can now be only staged or performed in largely cultural or non-political contexts? What happens when freedom of expression and radical calls for political transformation can be repackaged as entertainment or the byproduct of social media or, of course, as a cultural event? What if, as I have argued, ethics as a paradigm in use today can be deployed to promote and manage rituals of normative behavior that serve market-oriented principles of social, cultural, and commercial interaction? Are ideals of Western humanism and democracy merely a means, subsequently, to conceal the contempt directed toward those who refuse the prevailing logic of neoliberalism? What if the term secularism, as an ideal and nominal notion, is increasingly employed as a means to fan the flames of Islamophobia? And what if the discourse of human rights has become a relatively (in)efficient way of (mis)managing the global crises wrought by neoliberalism; an exercise in legislating for the all too evident and historically demonstrable after-effects of globalization and extractive capitalism.^{*35} We should, in light of these concerns, remain both suspicious and skeptical of these discursive developments inasmuch as the ethos of neoliberalism that informs the political and ethical logic of cultural debates is easily disguised (and digested) behind the façade of human rights, democratic participation, freedom of expression, equality, and so on.^{*36} In spite of this, or perhaps because of this discursive logic, the framing of these terms of reference—which are the essential terminological bedrock of neoliberalism—remains at the heart of a critical and institutional demand that artistic practice subscribes to a transcendental, institutionalized, secular and ethical ideal of “right” or, indeed, righteousness. We need, in short,

to more fully question these frames of reference if we are to understand the dangers in the instrumentalist relationship being forged between neoliberalism—as a specific set of sociopolitical and cultural demands—and the institutional stipulation that art practices appeal to an ethical and political foundation in order to garner cultural legitimacy.

One of the more influential voices in these debates, as noted, has been Rancière and his work on, respectively, the politics of aesthetics and, to use his phrase, the “ethical turn of aesthetics and politics.”^{*37} For Rancière, contemporary ethical categories are viewed as a “general instance of normativity enabling one to judge the validity of practices and discourses operative in distinct spheres of judgment and action. Understood in this way, the ethical turn would mean that today there is an increased tendency to submit politics and art to moral judgments about the validity of their principles and the consequences of their practices.”^{*38} Far from promoting a “return” to ethics, this “turn,” for Rancière, ushers in a moralistic inclination to judge both aesthetic practices and political action within the terms of an “indistinct sphere,” one where the specificity of political and artistic practice can be dissolved. Current ethical pronouncements, in this context, can often amount

^{*35} For a perceptive approach to the relationship between human rights and humanitarian intervention, alongside the discursive emergence of human rights as a historical fact, see: Samuel Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (London: Verso, 2015). Moyn argues that the way human rights are presented, historically and legislatively, often means they “make little practical difference, amounting to an ornament on a tragic world that they do not transform.” (177). Similar arguments are made in Eric Posner, *The Twilight of Human Rights Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). For a critique of how human rights discourse is deployed as an excuse for military intervention and the ascendancy of market-driven social policy, see: Slavoj Žižek, “Against Human Rights,” *New Left Review* 34 (July–August 2005): 115–31.

^{*36} David Harvey observes that it “has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centers of global capitalism.” See: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 119.

^{*37} Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 109–32. See also: Solange Guénoun, “Jacques Rancière’s Ethical Turn and the Thinking of Discontents,” in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, eds. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 176–92.

^{*38} Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 109.

“to the dissolution of norm into fact: in other words, the subsumption of all forms of discourse and practice beneath the same indistinct point of view.”^{*39} Rancière’s argument against the elision of ethics and politics has significant purchase when it comes to understanding how so-called socially engaged art, alongside responses to it, produces a disconcerting consensus within critical discourse. The ethical turn in aesthetics, he proposes, reproduces a transformation “according to which the political tension of right and fact vanishes in the couple formed by consensus.”^{*40} In this rubric, “it is tempting to say that contemporary ethical discourse is merely the crowning moment of new forms of domination.”^{*41}

To be clear: the ideal that art should be linked to the world is not in itself the issue here—art should and indeed is a social practice that is irredeemably if not irredeemably imbricated within the world. When we speak of contemporary art and politics today, we are no longer simply—if indeed we ever were—addressing mutually distinct areas. But there is a sense that in deflecting political debate into the consensual, “ethical” realm of cultural production (and the demands made on institutions to conform to structures largely put in place under the conditioning priorities of neoliberal cultural policies), we are merely ventriloquizing those issues in the name of vague habits of social encounter rather than in the pursuit of a transformative politics. This diversion of aesthetics and politics into quasi-ethical pronouncements reveals a specific historical danger: the diversion of aesthetics into the normative customs of moralism and the “soft” ethics of neoliberal consensus.^{*42}

All of which brings us, by way of an admittedly provisional conclusion, to a pivotal concern in these debates: the elision of political imperatives and ethical demands is precisely the gambit that underwrites a significant element within neoliberal ideology.^{*43} In a period broadly defined as one in which we are apparently experiencing a global crisis, films such as Martens’ *Enjoy Poverty*, among others,

are expected to function as a document for producing sociopolitical, if not historical, knowledge—be it of human rights abuses, the excesses of fanaticism, the cause of revolution, the injustices of globalization, the trauma of internecine conflict, or the legacy of murderous regimes and state-sponsored terror—for the self-styled art world and, more generally, broader constituencies drawn to the visual and political elements of cultural production. Such practices are expected to do it in a way that reaffirms ethical responsiveness and responsibility beyond other considerations, while delivering the event of a film in the “white cube” space of cultural experience. But is that what we really need at this moment in time, or is there another approach that would blast open the all too convenient continuum that exists between ethical pronouncements and the priorities that are clearly identifiable in the consensual politics of neoliberalism? None of which is to say that ethics do not have a role to play in these debates; on the contrary, it is to suggest that we need to reevaluate and reformulate precisely what we mean when we use the terminology surrounding current ethical models. Ethical art criticism may attempt, with good intentions, to define an aesthetic ethos that maintains a political value in the face of co-optation and instrumentalization, but the question nevertheless remains: Are we appealing to an outdated heuristic model of foundational, normative ethics that merely reifies the very devices of consensualism that remain key to the neoliberal will to void politics of debate and reduce culture to yet another function, if not symptom, of a recalcitrant state and the fast receding realm of effective government? Are we, in sum, becoming part of the problem rather than offering anything by way of a speculative solution to—or even a means to provisionally re-frame—the most pressing concerns of the early part of the twenty first century?

^{*39} Ibid., 109–10.

^{*40} Ibid., 130.

^{*41} Ibid.

^{*42} “Testifying to this,” Rancière argues, “is the pervading discourse in which art is placed in the service of the unrepresentable and of witnessing either yesterday’s genocide, the never-ending catastrophe of the present, or the immemorial trauma of civilization.” Ibid., 129–30.

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^{*43} There are, I should note, a considerable number of issues with the term “neoliberalism,” not least its liberal usage in contemporary debates. For an extended analysis of the various concerns relating to “neoliberalism,” see: William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (London: Sage, 2017).