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

More or less at the same time as the publication of Didi-Huberman’s text, the Dutch artist Renzo Martens completed his first video project, Episode I (2005), for which he travelled to war-torn Chechnya. In this work, the artist entered the image frame, filming himself among professional image producers — photojournalists, cameramen and political and humanitarian fieldworkers — and Chechen refugees. Four years later, for Episode III: Enjoy Poverty (2008) he repeated the performance in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a nation immersed in violence and trenchant inequality, and which similarly exists in the West via mediatisation of these miseries. By being on location and becoming part of the images produced in the region, Martens not only shows but also reinforces the ongoing erasure of the ‘outside’ for the people of Congo — an erasure conceived in terms of globalisation, in that the reality of the Western capitalist world has become part of the Congo’s reality (through, amongst others, development workers, economic investors, political involvement and other professionals — including this artist — moving to the site), and in terms of mediatisation, by which images of the Congolese reality become part of the reality of the viewing world. This is a new situation in which there is no more outside — not for the Congolese in these images, not for the professionals in the region, not for the Western viewer at home. This erasure of the outside, then, could suggest that the acceptance of the inside is the first condition for any possibility of resistance.

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

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

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2 For a good account of how these images were made and came to be published, see C. Chêneux (ed.), Mémoires des camps, op. cit., pp. 86 — 91.
indicates a doorway and hence points to the position of the photographer — has been cropped. The poor contrast and focus, testament to the circumstances in which these contraband images were produced, have been altered. The manipulations went as far as retouching the faces and breasts of the women, as if to render the figures more human and the images more legible.

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

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

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

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


122 | Afterall
made a nine-hour-long documentary of the Final Solution that does not contain a single image of the camps.\footnote{Lemnmann has also been the editor in chief of Los Tjegs reviews since 1986.}

In both incarnations, the arguments pit the essence of images (according to Wajcman, the actuality of death in the gas chambers, of which there are no images) against their extension (which Didi-Huberman identifies as the Final Solution in its broadest sense, the events in and around the camps).\footnote{G. Didi-Huberman, Images in Spite of All, op. cit., p.58.} They deal with how an image can become reduced to a reality, and vice versa. The intensity of Didi-Huberman and Godard’s quest for images of the camps and the intensity with which they look at them ultimately springs from the conviction that every new image particularises, and thus opens up a more nuanced rendering of a much larger reality, Wajcman.

After reading Images in Spite of All, it is hard to maintain that these four photographs were made to remain unviewed. Rather the opposite. Prisoners risked their lives to get a camera into the gas chamber (hidden in a bucket), then smuggled the negatives out of the camp (in a tube of toothpaste). Their sole motivation was the conviction that the outside world had to see what was happening inside the camp, making the images themselves an act of resistance against the horrors inflicted upon the camp inmates by the SS, enabled by the ignorance of that outside world. The interior of the camp poses the threat, but the exterior world provides the drive — the ultimate condition — for resistance. These photographs demand to be seen. And, as Didi-Huberman shows, looking at them takes a good dose of courage and much empathy. For they will...
engagement on the part of the viewer to move into the interior of the image.\textsuperscript{6}

2. The Invertibility of the Inside
This type of displacement into the image, or into the work and discourse that lies behind each image, constitutes a Foucauldian gesture. When, in the first chapter of The Order of Things (1966), Michel Foucault discusses Diego Velázquez’s Los Meninas (1656), he deals not so much with the painter or painting, but with the role of the viewer, analysing the painting by inhabiting the position of the painter as viewer and co-author.\textsuperscript{7} In other words, Foucault speculatively moves the exterior, which he occupies as a viewer, to the interior of the painting, putting himself in the same position as the subject of the painter. His aim is to decode what he calls the blind spot in Los Meninas, which is situated in the painter’s line of sight: it is the image he is in the process of painting on a canvas whose back is visible to the viewer. The painter’s gaze is directed at the model (or models — the king and queen). Yet the viewer in front of the painting, too, finds himself within the painted painter’s line of sight. Part of the blind spot is made visible in a mirror hung behind the painter’s easel, on the wall in the far back of the painting. The mirror casts the gaze back to the viewer, the painter’s eternal accomplice, who helps him create and complete the image.\textsuperscript{8}

In the case of the four photographs made at Birkenau, the blind spot is what is situated behind the photographer: the viewer, again, whose point of view is conflated with that of the photographer, but also the gas chamber, which the viewer has to imagine in order to complete the picture. The gas chamber and the photographer’s personal history, his employment in the Sonderkommando — his history, but also his hope for an outside and a future.

At stake for Didi-Huberman is the viewer’s active engagement with the image, which implies an ethical dimension: not looking away, but having the courage to look, to look differently, to imagine and hence to stave off ‘any fatalism of the “unimaginable”.’\textsuperscript{9} Foucault’s point is that the viewer needs to change his or her position in order to imagine. Didi-Huberman goes one step further, arguing that to call something ‘unimaginable’ (‘imaginable’) comes

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., pp.50—60.
\textsuperscript{8} Foucault’s conception of the painting’s perspective is inaccurate: the mirror doesn’t reflect the viewer, but rather the canvas Velázquez is painting inside the painting. See Joel Snyder and Tali Cohen, ‘Los Meninas and the Paradoxes of Visual Representation’, Critical Inquiry, Winter 1980, pp.429—47.
\textsuperscript{9} G. Didi-Huberman, Images in Spite of All, op. cit., p.179.
down to a refusal to inhabit the image, to move inside it. As Jean-Paul Sartre argued, the image constitutes an act, but also implies an act, which raises the question of how images should be approached.10 How exactly can and should we partake in their reality? The move into the interior space of the image is necessary in order to fully understand its functioning. Necessary and inevitable.

Exactly how inevitable the idea of taking position is to the act of understanding and witnessing becomes clear in Agamben's Remnants of Auschwitz.11 Agamben demonstrates that the true witness is the witness who has lived through the whole experience — in the case of the camps it is the witness who died in the gas chamber. Agamben calls it “Levi’s Paradox” (referring to Primo Levi): the true testimony of the camps is that of the Muzelleur, the prisoner on the brink of death who is no longer capable of expressing his or her condition.12 If the true witness is not (or rather no longer) capable of bearing witness, then the testimonies of the survivors — eternally the third party — can of necessity to avoid. This was the image no one wanted to acknowledge within themselves, that no one wanted to be (or see). Only those who were (in that image, who experienced what was inside it, can fully comprehend the events that comprise it. That image needs to be actualised over and again to bear witness. So true testi-

10 The Sartre quotation serves as an epigraph to Part II of Images in Spite of All: ‘The image is an act and not a thing.’ Ibid., p.50.
12 Ibid., p.82. Though Ausinhorst means ‘Moslem’ in German, in the concentration camps it was the name given to the prisoner who “was giving up and was given up by his conseder […].” Jean Amery, quoted in ibid., p.41.
mony for the witness means inhabiting the one form of life they resided in the camp; that of the Muslimo, who experienced the process of the Final Solution to its full depth — the only true witness of the camps. It means re-humanizing the Muslimo, reviving the (near or actual) dead. Agamben mentions that the Muslimo were referred to by the Germans in the camps as ‘figurine’, and hence as images. Furthermore, the German insistence on naming forms part of what Didi-Huberman refers to as a ‘machinery of disimagination’. Finally then, breathing life back into the Muslimo also means becoming image oneself. This reveals empathy as the highest form of imagination.

3. There Is No More Outside
At the tail end of 2000, Renzo Martens travelled to Chechnya — then a war zone — of Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979), which was inspired by Conrad’s book. At the same time, as a viewer I am tempted to make references to Doste’s hell, omnipresent in the imagination of the concentration camp, or Didi-Huberman’s four photographs, ‘snatched from hell’. But, of course, this isn’t hell. This is pure reality. Not an image, but a real place you can visit, explore, interpret and ultimately transform. It is a reality of which images are a substantial part.

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

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

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

13 Ibid., p.61.

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

Not only the border between inside and outside but also the border between image and reality has been effaced here. The references to different films mentioned earlier — the artist's and the viewer's — are inevitable. All these images are part of one and the same reality, fragments of one and the same history. There is no longer a way to separate image from reality, just as there is no way to separate the Congolese reality from our own — however much European politics tries to do so. The reinforcement of European immigration law does not separate both realities, but rather makes it clearer how deeply they are intertwined. The exterior, still NGOs he pointedly films and employs within his images). It is precisely in the act of 'exporting' itself to the Congo and other Third World countries that Europe — or, generically, the West — tries to efface this notion of a possible outside for the Congolese. It is precisely the presence of the media and the NGOs that undermines the urgency of the Congolese citizens' potential demand to be accepted in Europe as refugees. The logos make them part of our European reality. Helping them on the spot is also a way to prevent them for coming to Europe to take part.

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

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15 It is interesting to refer here to a contract Martens made, stating that part of his profits go to the Congolese he worked with on this project. He actually made two contracts, splitting the ambivalence of his films, increasing the percentage from donations from 0% to 100%, with a guarantee of $500 if no donations are received (both contracts are reproduced in A. Potter, no. 56, 2006, pp. 176—79). With these contracts, Martens made the villagers in his film shareholders of the work. He also sold some of the pictures of the photographers in his film to collectors in Belgium, of which the profits go to the Congolese photographers.
the fact that there is no more outside. Not for the Western European who boards a plane to the Congo to go work there; the film-maker, inescapably complicit, who moreover hardly ever leaves the frame. Not for the Congolese men and women pictures of the work, who have nowhere else to go and thus have to accept the unattainability of Africa as a possible outside — the closest to Europe they can get is the Europe that is brought to them. And finally, there is no outside for the viewer, constantly confronted with the unreadiness of his or her own involvement in the story.

Even though the pictures by the Congolese photographers Martens trains are poorly framed and lit, they are, in contrast to those of the Birkenau prisoners, perfectly legible and usable (and to be fair, since Martens is his own cinematographer and shoots all images of himself at arm's length, the look of his own camerawork is often equally poor, in a more or less staged cinéma-vérité style), the reality of the Congo — inherent to our times — is much closer to us than that of Auschwitz. Primo Levi's shame of being human has been replaced, by the end of Martens's film, by the film-maker's acknowledgement that misery is part of the human condition. As Georges Bataille made clear, there is no outside to history: "Like to understand, the viewer must intervene into and claim space for him or herself in the story of the witness, in the archive, in the image. It is imperative for the viewer to partake actively in the labour of imagining, otherwise these images remain mute. That is why Episode III can be read as a work about images in spite of all, a lesson in imagination. It makes the Western viewer think about his or her position in relation..."


17 Ibid., p.3.
Displacing oneself. Going on location and (dis)positioning oneself in order to intervene into the image. All of this means becoming part of the image and the medium, and therefore becoming image and medium oneself. It implies imaging (producing images) and sharing (distributing them). It constitutes what one can describe as an act of love, of sharing oneself with another, becoming one with another. That is the reason why Martens is not only resisted, but — in all his otherness — also accepted by some of the Congolese people featured in the film, who take his lessons, his art, his food and the logos that go with it.

Love is the planned subject of Episode III, the closing chapter of Martens’s triptych, a project with increasingly evident religious undertones. That, after all, is the bottom line of his st

Translated by Yasmina Van Pwe.

Exteriority as Condition for Resistance | 129