

An Interview with Milo Rau conducted by Avi Feldman

27 August 2015

The Congo Tribunal is a production of director Milo Rau and the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM) founded by Rau in 2007. The tribunal was divided into two hearings taking place on two continents. The first was held at the Collège Alfajiri in Bukavu, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the Congo) on 29-31 May 2015, while the second was held at the Sophiensaele Theatre in Berlin, 26-28 June 2015.

This theatre and film project follows the structure of a tribunal as it sets out to investigate the ongoing Congolese Civil Wars, which since 1996 have claimed the lives of about six million people. Recognized by many as one of the bloodiest wars since World War II, the tribunal invited more than sixty witnesses and experts to closely unfold the political, social and, perhaps most importantly, the economic background and causes of this never-ending conflict. Entangled between rebel armies, local and international corporations, NGOs, the World Bank, and the United Nations, the tribunal pinpoints the globalized state of affairs of a conflict too seldom recognized as a global war.

Avi Feldman: Let us begin with how you got involved with The Democratic Republic of the Congo (the Congo).

Milo Rau: That's quite simple. I started with a project entitled *Hate Radio* (2011). It was a staged narrated work that dealt with the Rwandan genocide of 1994 through news broadcasts and racist speeches, but also through pop music and sounds with performers from Rwanda. Then I started in 2010 to travel to the region and learn from close-up about the local conflicts of the Congo and Rwanda. These conflicts have been going on now for more than twenty years as the central government in Kinshasa has lost control of the situation. To simplify the matter—during this time of Congolese civil wars, gold and minerals were discovered, and that's one main reason that the war never stopped. There are way too many people who are profiting from the situation. To sum it up—I went into the project of the *Congo Tri-*



bunal from a local political interest and shifted into a more, let's say, economic globalized interest, or perspective, on the conflict.

AF: The shift was also in form, as while *Hate Radio* was a sort of re-enactment, the tribunal is more of a pre-enactment, and further exploring the legal system.

MR: That's true, but it's important to mention that the steps I took were somewhat different. I didn't go directly from *Hate Radio* to the *Congo Tribunal*. There were stages in between; there was another trial—*The Moscow Trials* (2013)—and this was a kind of open re-enactment, where we kept the form of a free trial dealing with real actors in Russia of the last ten years. The project engaged artists, and state and church representatives in a non-scripted trial with an open ending following the Russian law. Also that year, we made another trial called *The Zurich Trial*. In this work, I created a trial that never happened in Switzerland against the right-wing newspaper dealing with the issue of freedom of speech. It was also, if you want, a pre-enactment.

In the case of the Congo, it was not a Congo Trial but a *Congo Tribunal*, which I think is something very different. In the previous trials, we tried to give arguments of right-wing journalists, or Orthodox activists and so on, the same space as you give the dissidents and to the left-wing press. However, in the *Congo Tribunal*, dealing with an ongoing war and the killings of six million people, I decided not to give the same space to the army and to activists of the region. We were looking into the Congo constitution and the national human rights as resources, but different from previous projects, in the Congo those laws do not really exist at the moment, and if there are laws, no institution implements them. What became more and more clear was that the global economy, and its tremendously acute effects on the Congo, is the issue that needs to take centre stage.

AF: A month before the tribunal in Berlin, you held one in Bukavu—how would you describe the differences between the two?

MR: in Berlin we analyzed the outcomes of the hearings in Bukavu with the help of experts, allowing a more distant level, an analytical approach. In Bukavu it was a tribunal of the people. It was really antagonistic in its nature as government officials were voicing their opinions along survivors giving testimonies of what happened. All this as we were searching for some sort of truth. In Berlin we were

asking other questions, spanning from why the UN is failing to bring peace to the region, to questioning the right of global companies working in the Congo to operate as they do, to what we should change in European and international law. So, it was more of an analytical discussion.

Also, now when I am in the process of editing the film with all the documented materials, I am focusing on the Congo part more closely and sometimes I step out as if trying to include footnotes from the Berlin tribunal. This helps to clarify and make the situation better understood by the Western public. After twenty years of civil wars and some one hundred different rebel groups and rapid governmental and institutional changes, it is a hard situation to grasp. I made the Berlin part to show, and this is very important to point out, that the conflicts in the Congo are part of a globalized world while no trial has been held. It needs to be understood as an international war, a world war, not a regional ethnic war as some might wish to think.



AF: Doing this while exposing the limits of the local and international law? Perhaps while re-thinking it?

MR: The trials I did up to the *Congo Tribunal* were more an idealization of law. It's a utopic law in which I was interested in the search for truth. I was interested in the very simple analysis of what you have to do to tell the story of past trials through a new one. In the earlier trials I worked on, it was a bit of a shock at first when I realized that everybody took their role [seriously] and everybody understood what it meant to search for the truth through law, through a lawsuit, a trial, even if it's fictional.

In the *Congo Tribunal* the situation was different. It is another level of behaviour when dealing with an existing fight among people. I felt a need to expose what lies behind this ongoing conflict and wars, while the tribes themselves deny it. They claim it's a post-conflict situation. I wanted to first show the truth, and secondly to understand what is the meaning of the so-called globalized society. We so often talk about globalization, but to underline the meaning of this term, to have a clear picture of it, is at the very same time extremely difficult. Twenty years of a conflict continuing to go on as if it was some sort of normality. It is even more vivid to me now, when I am editing sixty hours of filmed materials, as all the many different levels of operation and reasoning come out and intertwine.



AF: Mentioning the film—at the beginning of the first day of the tribunal in Berlin you are seen briefly on stage holding a clapperboard. It marks the beginning of the process as well as of its documentation on film.

MR: Yes, that's true.

AF: And in a sense you are the only artist on stage during the whole tribunal, right?

MR: Yes, I'm making the documentary.

AF: Were you thinking of involving other artists as part of the jury, for example, or in other aspects of the tribunal?

MR: There is one other artist whom perhaps you have forgotten—the author and playwright Kathrin Röggla. She is the writer present on stage, and she has a very important part in my opinion. What she is writing is presented live to the audience via a large screen. She is a much known writer, perhaps one of the best of our time to live now in Germany. While the tribunal develops, her role is to write live comments on what she's listening to and witnessing on stage. The audience sees it and reads it as it is happening, and it is also streamed online. This also took place in the tribunal in Bukavu, and in the end this written material will be used by me as part of the script for the upcoming film of the *Congo Tribunal*.

AF: Going back to the stage of the tribunal—was it important for you that the tribunal be held in a theatre? Was it in a theatre in Bukavu as well?

MR: In Congo there were not so many options of where to hold the tribunal. The space where the tribunal took place has some history behind it, but for me the most important aspect is in having a tribunal in the Congo, to have it where the war and conflicts are happening. I perceive it as a problem that the *Vietnam Tribunal* organized by Bertrand Russell (1966) was never made in Vietnam itself. The same goes for many other tribunals such as the *Russell Tribunal on Palestine* (2009), which was not held in Jerusalem, to the *World Tribunal on Iraq* (2003). Perhaps because they were not made by artists, the importance of being at the place itself did not occur to them. This was the reason why we did it first in Bukavu and then in Berlin, and in Berlin every space would have been a good space. It was more about holding the tribunal's sessions in the city of Berlin.

AF: Skipping quickly to the final words made by both tribunals, the one in Berlin seemed to have ended in much more hesitant verdicts.

MR: Yes, I agree, it was much more hesitant in Berlin. The jury found it difficult to give the verdict, as they felt in some cases that they needed more fact-based evidence. It was a long process, going through the whole night, and the jury became more and more hesitant with every hour that passed. There were a lot of questions that the jury was facing which

are hard to answer in only three days; and of course, it is almost impossible to be fully convinced on all matters. I think that the jury gave, at the end, a clear verdict, but at the same time it's more hesitant than the one given in Bukavu. In Bukavu, it was extremely clear. For example, the government and army were found to be totally responsible as it was managed to be proved throughout the tribunal. In Berlin it was less the case.

AF: I also wanted to point out yet a different tribunal—*A Trial Against the Transgressions of the 20th Century*—that was held at the ZKM in Karlsruhe just few weeks after the *Congo Tribunal*.

MR: Yes, I was invited by the ZKM to take part in it, but it was too close to the dates of the *Congo Tribunal*, so I couldn't attend.

AF: Do you feel that there is maybe more of an interest in the art world nowadays in having tribunals?

MR: I think we are in a moment during which artists are making political art that is often not surrealist, not anarchistic, and not ironic. It's a kind of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus normal way of putting it. The question for me would be whether they use it as a form of intellectual platform to speak their ideas, or do they want it to function as a platform where things happen not necessarily in the way one would initially expect. If we take the tribunal in Bukavu as an example, we invited survivors along with rebels, and army generals, and we allowed matters to unfold without knowing what might happen and what would come out of this. This is why at first I was not very sure about making a tribunal in Berlin, although now I am happy we did. I did not want it as a space for only repeated argumentations.

AF: What are the next steps for the tribunal beside the release of the film?

MR: We are planning together with ZDF/ARTE to create an Internet platform, which will hopefully allow spreading the message of the tribunal through television and mass media. I think the problem with some projects made today is that very few know about them except you and me and about fifty other curators, and I am not elitist enough to accept that situation.

Captions

1 Setting „The Kongo Tribunal“ at Sophiensaele Berlin, Photo: Daniel Seiffert.

2 Chief prosecutor Sylvestre Bisimwa questions Presidential candi-date and expert of the tribunal, Vital Kamerhe during „The Berlin Hearings“. Photo: Daniel Seiffert.

3 The jury of „The Berlin Hearings“ from the left to right: Wolfgang Kaleck, Saran Kaba Jones, Harald Welzer, Colette Braeckman, Saskia Sassen. Photo: Daniel Seiffert.

4 Milo Rau during an investigative film-shoot with Congolese soldiers.

Milo Rau (born 1977) is a Swiss theatre and film director, journalist, essayist, and lecturer. Rau studied sociology, German and Roman studies in Paris, Zurich, and Berlin under Tzvetan Todorov and Pierre Bourdieu, among others. In 2007, Rau founded the theatre and film production company International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM), which he has been running ever since. His productions, campaigns, and films have been invited to some of the biggest national and international festivals, including the Festival d'Avignon, the Berliner Theatertreffen, and the Kunstenfestival Brussels.