



Art in Defense of Democracy

Jonas Staal

This is a revised version of a pamphlet published under the same title in NRC Handelsblad (April 12, 2012). The current text has been altered and expanded to suit the context of the development of the second edition of the New World Summit in Leiden (Netherlands) and the third edition in Kochi (India).

1.

The struggle of art in the twentieth century is characterized by an aspiration for freedom. Art has battled the church, the state, and the wealthy bourgeoisie in order no longer to serve a religious, political, or economic agenda. The politics of Post-WWII parliamentary democracies – such as in the Netherlands – has taken this struggle seriously. In our post-war era, politics has financed art's duty to be *free*. Any direct ideological commitment has become suspect, as a result of the role played by art in the Nazi and Stalinist systems. The conclusion of both politics and the art world has been that it is better not to be engaged at all, than to be engaged with "the wrong side." A generic politics – a politics replacing ideology with management – has sponsored an equally generic art. We believe that any art that does not dare to contextualize itself within a larger political project is at risk of becoming nothing but mere entertainment for the voter-consumer and his managers.

Without being explicit about their ideals, both art and politics have fallen prey to demagogues and populists who utilize

the landscapes of capitalist democracy and its art as hatching grounds for their own ideas. Ideology is back, yes, but it is in the hands of new racist movements in Western Europe, such as the Dutch Freedom Party, which has branded state-sponsored art as “degenerate” and who has likewise condemned the judges, educators, and journalists, whose relativist “multiculturalism” has “corrupted” the supreme values of the Western Empire. In the hands of these movements and their agitators, who have dismissed art as a plaything of the leftist “elite,” art has once again become political.

In response to this situation we need a proactive politics and a proactive art, which dare to serve a truly ideological project. The outlines of this project – a project that I would like to call the project of a *fundamental democracy* – have recently become visible. From the Spanish Indignados protests to the worldwide Occupy Movement, from the old Green to the new Pirate Parties, from Wikileaks to Anonymous and the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI), we see the outlines of an international democratization movement appear. In this context the concept of democracy is being defended fundamentally as a principled egalitarian space.

The international democratization movement should not be understood as a single organization – none of its participants proposes a “total” solution for the fundamental crisis in our politics, economy, ecology, and public domain. Thus they should not be judged individually – as existing monopolized politics and media have tried to do – by focusing on the empty squares today, the personality cult in Wikileaks, or the “cyber-terrorism” of the temporal collectives of citizens that take corporate websites out of the air under the name of “Anonymous.” These are systematic attempts to dismiss opposing forces as either

dangerous or mindlessly utopian. This is why it is crucial to see that these organizations are not isolated, but together form a movement, connected by its *collective demand* to break existing monopolies on power – the monopolies on representation, on violence, on information and history. Thus, each of these organizations – each part of this movement – offers itself as an *instrument*, through which politics is brought back to the streets, and democracy is shifted from representation to action.

Let’s describe some of these “instruments” more concretely. The Pirate Parties have experimented with members’ permanent participation in the decision making processes through “liquid democracy” software, which when implemented publicly would allow parliamentary systems, including all documents concerning public interest, to become digitally accessible for all citizens. This would lead to the end of the sphere of secrecy that we have learned to accept as a necessary part of the democratic doctrine; IMMI drove Iceland toward radical transparency policies after the economic crisis, among others through the collective rewriting of its constitution; Wikileaks supplemented the “democracies” of war mongering states with the information necessary for the public at large to understand its actual violent and economic motive; Anonymous allowed citizens collectively to bring down the servers of those who control the “free” space of the internet and enact blockades of the free flow of information; the Indignados still today build on alternative political spheres with their own media, internet, food, and medical infrastructure and Occupy showed the potential of a dialectic movement between the digital and physical squares.

Fundamental democracy is thus an ideological project that does not comprise a political system by itself, but actu-

ally makes it available for society as a whole. It provides the instrument to manifest ourselves as political beings, rather than as the voter-consumers that the existing monopolies of power would like us to be.

What can be the role of art within this political movement? I believe art may become of social significance again if it dares to make the “freedom” it has gained in the 20th century serve an ideological project, rather than to brand this freedom once more in the hysteric speculative economics of the market of art consumption. The movement in service of fundamental democracy is in search of a truly new visual language, a form that effectively makes the democratic instruments available for the people as a whole. This is where art can demonstrate its power; namely, through its imagination. This is also where it will have to transgress this power; namely, by supplementing it with a willingness to position itself ideologically. To contextualize the act of artistic imagination in that of concrete political action.

2.

Our attempt to contribute to the creation of new democratic instruments – apart from collaborations with other artist groups, political parties, and extra-parliamentary social movements – is the artistic and political organization New World Summit, which concerns itself with political organizations that are excluded from so-called democratic discourse. The New World Summit started as a two-day conference that took place in Berlin on May 4-5, 2012. Political and juridical representatives of organizations that are included in the so-called international “terrorist lists” were invited to speak within the framework of an alternative parliament.

These designated lists of terrorist organizations include organizations that are internationally considered to be state threats. In the European Union, a secret committee, the so-called “Clearing House,” draws up the EU terrorist list. Considering the EU’s own democratic standards, this committee operates in a highly undemocratic manner: *“The process for adding or removing names from the terrorist list is done in secret by a committee which generally meets bi-annually, and there are no public records of these proceedings.”* (Source: “Adding Hezbollah to the EU Terrorist List” – Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, June 20, 2007). The consequences for organizations on these lists and people who are in contact with them are numerous, including a block on all bank accounts and a travel ban. For the organizations that were able to attend the New World Summit we managed to map out a variety legal exceptions, either because the organization was listed as a terrorist organization outside Germany, or because the representative present was exceptionally allowed to travel as a result of ongoing peace negotiations.

History is written by the victors. A concrete example could be found Lebanon, where since the beginning of the civil war the history books in schools have remained empty. Until today power has not been consolidated and thus no singular “national” history can be told without resulting in extreme opposition. The so-called terrorist is not only excluded from this political, historiographical, process but as a consequence he is also excluded from the rule of law. Think of prisons such as Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, or the *extraordinary rendition* program of the CIA, in which terror suspects abroad are kidnapped in order to be interrogated in the prisons of allied countries – often with the worst consequences for what at home is presented to us as

“human rights,” rights that evaporate in the juridical no man’s land of allied countries or extraterritorial grounds. One of the consequences of these practices is the overall weakening of constitutional law. Since everyone is a potential terrorist, civil rights (such as the right to privacy) are restricted, while the state power over the citizen and the judicial system is strengthened. This is invariably justified with the argument that democracy must be resilient against its enemies; terrorists supposedly hate the free Western world and its acclaimed democracies.

But these organizations – which are characterized by a range of different ideological currents, from communist to socialist, from Marxist to anarchist, nationalist, racist, religious-fundamentalist, and sectarian – are by far not all opposed to democracy as such. There are organizations that support free elections and advocate equality between men and women, rich and poor, majorities and minorities. Many of them struggle for self-determination and against military occupation or other forms of oppression. For what the West has imposed upon the world as “democracy” in the last decades has not exceptionally led to corruption, injustice, and subordination of local interests to those of a Westernized local elite and their foreign patrons.

The organizations on terrorist lists worldwide are accused of terrorizing civilians with violence. 9/11 is the most extreme and frequently cited example in this context. But these organizations are themselves terrorized by Western military operations. What is the fundamental difference between the 3000 victims of the Twin Towers and the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq, as a result of the Western “liberation” (apart from the obvious one: that the *superterrorism* of our pretentiously democratic states results in many more casualties than the rela-

tively amateurish assaults of listed organizations). Anti-state terrorism and state terrorism thus constitute two sides of the same coin at best. Once we seriously consider that the state is nothing but yet another “organization” we will need a whole new juridical framework to prosecute the superterrorism that is a consequence of the foundation of the old, and still prevailing, Western Empire.

A context such as India shows us that there are profound ties between so-called terrorism and the colonial legacy: the many movements in India that still today fight for the right to self-determination, include a wide range of orientation, including sectarian movements of Sikhs, Muslims, Baptist-Christians, and Hindus, the political movement of the Maoist Naxalites, and the territorial struggles of indigenous people of Tripura, Manipur, Assam, and Tamil Nadu. They fight to reclaim their rights over territories that were previously occupied by the British, and later incorporated into the administration of an “independent” state of India. The unresolved tensions between castes, political parties, confessional communities, and rich and poor have sporadically fanned conflicts in the margins of India’s society, namely in the tribal lands and along India’s external borders.

These examples are not intended to legitimize any organization’s employment of violence – even though I would never question the right to self-defense against superterrorism – but to clarify that the qualities considered to be “distinctive” of democracy – such as so-called “human rights,” free elections, equality between men and women, gay marriage, or even policies against terrorism – can also be found in a variety of organizations on these terrorist lists. Moreover, the status of civilians of self-proclaimed democracies, under continuous threats of entering yet another state of emergency, does generally not at all

match their own “humanitarian” demands. Hence these qualities do not constitute or define a democratic organization or state per se, nor do they necessarily belong to the states that claim them as their own unique characteristics. Thorough study of the designated lists of terrorist organizations will reveal many organizations that one could consider “more democratic than democracy itself,” once we start to compare them to the not so high criteria of the self-proclaimed democracies whose monopolies the New World Summit aims to confront and deconstruct.

The violent policy of the so-called “terrorists” therefore reflects, even historicizes the violent neocolonial policies of the so-called “democracies.” The purpose of the New World Summit is to bring these two policies together, by creating a new political space. A space where the boundaries of our current system are mapped out. A platform for its “shadow side.” Only together they constitute the world order for or against which we have to take a position today. Together they comprise the field of conflict in which we must define what we actually understand by the notion of democracy. And to engage in that process of positioning we need to know about the suppressed world histories that are defended by the organizations that resist monopolies of power today. This “world history according to the resistance” that the New World Summit aims to introduce into the public sphere must contribute to the expansion of the terrifyingly narrow political field in which the voter-consumer is supposed to make his “choices” today. Choices that too often limit down to one variation of superterrorism as opposed to another.

The New World Summit started in Berlin and now continues to travel around the world. Each time it enters into a different juridical and political “zone,” and is thus capable of offering

a platform to voices that were impossible to host in previous summits. Theoretically, the New World Summit – a parliament in flux – will at the end of its travels have been able to host all organizations currently placed on the international terrorist lists.

The New World Summit proposes an injection of knowledge suppressed by existing monopolies of power, brought back into the public sphere by using the juridically exceptional position of visual art on one hand, and its radical imaginative force on the other. It is this combination of characteristics that has brought forward our idea of an art that is “more political than politics itself.” More political, because unlike existing political structures whose ideals are evacuated from the democratic system under pressure of geopolitical power interests, art offers the space, the juridical instruments and the imaginative potential capable that makes it possible to rethink and enact a fundamental democracy.

3.

What is the democracy that we stand for? This is the question that denotes the project in which we see art and politics united in a significant manner.

Fundamental democracy is the project we wish to defend. Not as the exclusive property of the nation state on the one hand, or the “terrorist” on the other, but for everyone, always, under any circumstance. We believe in democracy as a movement. A movement that fights for a principally egalitarian political space where every voice can make itself heard, seen and felt, without any “state of emergency.” As an artistic organization with a political agenda we

want to create the conditions for this political space. We do not want to create art within a so-called democracy; we want to shape democracy ourselves. And as it has become apparent globally, we are not the only ones.

Jonas Staal (1981) has studied monumental art in Enschede NL and Boston USA. He currently works on his PhD research entitled *Art and Propaganda in the 21st Century: A Dutch Perspective* at the University of Leiden NL and is the founder of the artistic and political organization New World Summit, that contributes to building alternative political spheres for organizations banned from democratic discourse. His work includes interventions in public space, exhibitions, lectures, and publications, focusing on the relationship between art, politics, and ideology.

