

REPORT

Artist Organisations International Conference

BERLIN

JANUARY 9–11, 2015

The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters.

—Antonio Gramsci

Margarita Tsomou, artist, performer, and theorist, threw this portentous quote at the audience in her introductory lecture to the panel on "Solidarity & Unionising" at the Artist Organisations International (AOI) Conference held at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) theater in Berlin in January. It was perhaps an inadvertently apt metaphor for the unwieldy and contentious conference organized by Dutch visual artist Jonas Staal (founder of the New World Summit), Florian Malzacher (curator of the 2012 Truth is Concrete symposium in Graz, Austria), and Joanna Warsza (public program curator for last year's Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg). The AOI conference was conceived to address a perceived shift in the art world from artists engaging in ephemeral project-based work to, instead, artists coagulating long-term structures and organizations that outlive any one exhibition or biennial—hence the title, "Artist Organisations International." This title, on the part of Staal, was meant to be declarative, forward looking, and symbolic of a tidal change whereby artists lessen their dependence on institutions and regain agency over the means of production and distribution of their work, no longer puppets of the political agendas or "dirty money" of high art institutions. However, like many other aspects of the conference, the title was variously misunderstood, debated, distorted, and at times caricatured, becoming itself a bone of contention among the speakers and audience. Was it an adjective? A verb? A declaration? An aspiration? A broken promise of what the event was supposed to become? Did it allude to Leninist-inflected worker solidarity?

The conference was, in fact, a three-day marathon of a dynamic constellation of sociopolitically oriented "artist organizations" of varying levels of institutionality, from Forensic Architecture (Goldsmiths University), a counter-hegemonic research project melding

experimental geography, architecture, and the law in order to demystify how normative notions of architecture, human rights, and space enact violence; to Silent University, a nomadic university that militates against the stigmatized condition of asylum seekers and refugees by creating a university where they can teach classes; to Chto Delat, a Russian art-activist collective of visual artists, poets, and philosophers preoccupied with the representation of Russian historicity. The twenty organizations hailed from Austria, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Switzerland, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, the Philippines, Argentina, Cuba, Azawad, Kurdistan, and elsewhere.

On the first day, as part of the panel entitled "Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda," the German performance/intervention group Center for Political Beauty (*Zentrum für Politische Schönheit*) presented their *Kindertransporthilfe des Bundes* project, whereby they purportedly facilitated a federal emergency program that made possible the temporary asylum of fifty-five thousand refugee children from the Syrian War to Germany. This project, however, was an audacious hoax. The program does not actually exist, but the Center for Political Beauty created a website of seemingly impeccable verisimilitude and a comprehensive PR campaign that duped the German public into believing it did. It was a high-stakes strategy to embarrass the German government into admitting that they were not, in fact, going to help Syrian refugees, reminiscent of the hoaxes of the Yes Men and of Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle Project* in the 1980s (whereby Wodiczko transformed shopping carts into multipurpose temporary mobile shelters for homeless people and was denounced by New York City municipal authorities for proposing an inadequate solution to the homeless crisis). In a similar vein, the *Kindertransport* campaign created an intentionally inadequate solution to a society-wide problem, painfully highlighting the inaction and cynical disengagement of the society at large.

This concern for the "Other" of the Global South recurred through the conference, as John Jordan of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (for the "Violence & Non-Violence" panel) explicated the hierarchy of violence whereby privileged people at

the top of the social pyramid routinely enact violence onto people at the bottom (violence that remains invisible and unacknowledged), yet the reverse is unthinkable and elicits outrage, as in the case of the Charlie Hebdo murders in January 2015. The trope of the "Other" also resurfaced during the "State & Statelessness" panel in discussion of the film excerpt *Artists and Educators of Rojava* (2015), produced by New World Academy/New World Media and directed by Rens van Meegen in conjunction with Artists of Rojava. A three-canton autonomous region of Syria (i.e. Kurdistan) that is practicing an anarchist, Murray Bookchin-inspired form of "stateless democracy," Rojava is an experiment in radical democratic communal self-governance severed from the apparatus of the state. The film was made in a tone of univocal affirmation of the utopian experiment of Rojava, and a respondent on the panel, theater artist Alexander Karschnia, advocated the role of the artist as an in-between "trafficker," not bound to conventional rules, who aids the dispossessed, in the case of Kurdistan refugees. The film elicited a hostile reaction from a prickly curmudgeon in the audience, American artist Fred Dewey, who felt it was a romanticization of the usually involuntarily inflicted plight of statelessness.

On the third day of the conference was yet another subaltern-oriented presentation by Institute for Human Activities, represented by Dutch artist Renzo Martens. By far the strongest and most ethically compelling of all twenty presentations, and the one that best put forth an actual political proposition (as opposed to a mere showcase of accomplishments and portfolios), it hit roundly upon the issue of complicity. Speaking to both audience and panel speakers routinely engaged in activist art, Martens questioned the point of artists making work that criticizes capitalism, colonialism, or other social inequities, but is then sold in New York and London and feeds the economy and superstructure that is the target of criticism. He instead advocated for "reverse-gentrification," his way out of the cul-de-sac of the ubiquitous hypocrisy of the West. In the summer of 2012, the Institute for Human Activities went to a chocolate-producing plantation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo owned by the multinational consumer goods corporation Unilever,

where impoverished plantation workers make less than twenty euros a month, and galvanized Congolese workers to reorient themselves to “play the game” of creating cultural capital about their plantation that is salable in the West, with the aim of alleviating their impoverished condition. This led to the founding of the Congolese Plantation Art Workers League and to plantation workers making sculptures and artworks, some of which are now shown in the Van Abbemuseum and other galleries in Europe. A project that could easily have degenerated into a “My Fair Lady” paternalistic “Western makeover” of the impoverished Other from the Congo was instead startlingly credible.

The strengths of the conference were its openness to critique, dissensus, and agonism to the point of uncivil hostility at times from audience members, and its incessant self-examination and deconstruction of the premise of the event itself. For instance, Margarita Tsomou’s lecture perspicaciously noted that the notion of an “organisation” seemed itself an anachronism, a relic from an old-fashioned classical leftist conception of the rational centered subject that has been most recently surpassed by the Occupy Wall Street post-representative trope of the “swarm” and the nameless, formless “multitude” catalyzed by social media.

The central liability (or weakness) of the conference was that it tried to pack too many issues operating on completely different vectors into too short a time period, ranging from how

we define “solidarity,” to conflicts between the global and the local, to the never-ending navel-gazing about the format of the event itself. A more minor critique might be that there was a faint tinge of a messiah complex and an over-idealization, sometimes to the point of hagiography, of the role and impact of

the artist on the world, from Malzacher’s extolling of the unique role of theater in allowing social conflicts to be both played out and observed, to the Center for Political Beauty’s repeated exhortation that “German society was asleep” (with the underlying presumption that artists are uniquely situated to “wake people up”). Not a routine or predictable conference with a smooth sheen of politeness, but one fraught with vociferous disagreements and contentions among audience, speakers, and sometimes even organizers themselves, Artist Organisations International was a rocky but unforgettable meeting of disparate voices, strategies, and ideologies about how art can engage the sociopolitical. As Charles Esche said in the final debate, “Many times I go to conferences

the ever-expanding biennial map—no mean feat in a crowded field.

Founder and first artistic director Dan Cameron (P.1 through P.2) modeled Prospect after the Venice Biennale, notably in terms of the idea of an international exhibition of contemporary art sited all over a legendary locale. Just as Venice, New Orleans is an urban territory where multiplicities of identities, representations, and traditions constantly circulate. Just as Venice, New Orleans possesses an overabundance of geographical and cultural uniqueness, summoning exploratory revels abetted by siting art venues throughout the city. Given such parity with the standard bearer of international biennials, New Orleans’s entry into the biennial circuit so late comes as a surprise.



Jonas Staal presentation at Artist Organisations International (2015); photograph by Lidia Rossner

and we think we solved the world. Then we leave the conference, but the world outside is completely unchanged. It is precisely because we *didn't* solve the world here—that’s why I think something important has happened.” Not a glib sugarcoated meeting of people who already see things the same way, but one ridden with unvarnished clashes of ideologies, AOI’s greatest strength was the unpredictable alchemy of its constituent elements.

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Cameron felt that New Orleans was context enough for Prospect’s art and that further thematization would be excessive.² Of course, he founded Prospect in Hurricane Katrina’s wake, intending that event to imprint much of his curatorial selection in terms of both subject and siting. Yet there was always a long-range view for the exhibition. As its name implies, Prospect was launched to generate a robust biennial franchise that would contribute to the city’s revitalization. Prospect was never meant to be a “disaster biennial,” facing inevitable demise when its scars faded. It was instead envisioned as the archetypal biennial, deriving local flair from a lively place, recurring with a regularity eagerly awaited by a creative class that would swell attendance figures with each new edition.

Prospect.3

NEW ORLEANS

OCTOBER 25, 2014–JANUARY 25, 2015

Billed with eternal optimism as a “biennial,” the exhibition of international contemporary art staged in New Orleans since 2008 (Prospect New Orleans) was officially rebranded a “triennial” upon the opening of its third iteration in October 2014. In a press statement exploiting an appropriately musical analogy, Executive Director Brooke Davis Anderson stated: “Prospect New Orleans has, in essence, been a ‘triennial’ all along so it seems right to embrace the rhythm we know we can implement successfully.”¹ It seems this newly minted triennial has secured a durable placemaker on