

World-Making as Commitment

Jonas Staal (in conversation with Maria Hlavajova)

MH: I would like to begin by discussing your conceptual premise “new world.” It seems to me this has been the key philosophical (and ideological) foundation for the series of projects you have presented at an unrelenting pace over the last couple of years. Some of these projects have brought us together, not only in thought-provoking, ongoing conversation, but also in collaborations convening projects-turned-institutions, such as the New World Academy (2013–2016), New World Embassy: Azawad (2014), and the latest iteration of the New World Summit (2016). Your departure point is a claim made in the early 1920s by writer and political activist Upton Sinclair:

The artists of our time are like men hypnotized, repeating over and over a dreary formula of futility. And I say: Break this evil spell, young comrade; go out and meet the new dawning life, take your part in the battle, and put it into new art; do this service for a new public, which you yourself will make . . . that your creative gift shall not be content to make art works, but shall at the same time make a world; shall make new souls, moved by a new ideal of fellowship, a new impulse of love, and faith—and not merely hope, but determination.¹

While I am intrigued by it, I don't readily see the choice of a "new world" anywhere among our options. I will offer another quote, an epigram of Jacques Mesrine, with which *The Invisible Committee* begin their 2014 book *To Our Friends*: "There is no other world. There's just another way to live."² Both statements are but tools with which to think the notion of "instituting otherwise" under the conditions of the present—and the place of art in it, in the possibility, as you often say, of "future history."

JS: When I founded the New World Summit as an artistic and political organization in 2012, I thought of the concept of the "new world" in its variety of contradictory and oppositional usages. There is the new world of the European colonizers. There is the new world of Sinclair, which is the new world of revolutionary socialism; a future world of collective ownership: a world we ourselves will make, a world we authorize collectively. There is also the radical, paranoid vision of the new world order that has resurfaced in the mass support for Trumpism in the United States. And there is the new world of Subcomandante Marcos: the world that he describes as "many worlds."

I myself am a Swiss-Dutch artist, and a child of empire. An heir to those who claimed the right to declare the world *their* new world, and consider themselves to be its sole authors. It's a violent claim to inheritance that remains present in today's neocolonial wars in the form of the War on Terror. When George W. Bush revived the neo-Orientalist trope of the us/them dichotomy, he reinstated the "right" of a class of citizens to narrate the history of—and for—a class of "non-citizens." The War on Terror is thus a renewed *class war* on a planetary scale. Bush reinforced the absolute division between the so-called western democratic citizen and the non-western non-citizen; the latter being the "barbaric terrorist" that supposedly desires only to return to the year zero of his or her prophet. The War on Terror and the us/them dichotomy aim to stop us from "hearing beyond what we are able to hear," as Judith Butler has written so powerfully.³ Critical academics, journalists, lawyers, writers, artists: if you are not on the side of the War on Terror, you are conspiring terrorists, cultural relativists, and apologetic "excuseniks." This is why lawyer Nancy Hollander, a representative of several organizations and individuals prosecuted as terrorists, and a contributor to a number of New World Summits, declares herself a "terrorist lawyer." For after September 11, even defending the legal rights of so-called terrorists has been considered an act of terrorism in itself. It shows us a near-Stalinist erasure of history, in which defending the law as it was before the World Trade Center attack is taken for treason. Invoking history differently becomes an act of terror; only the dichotomy of a terrifying present remains.⁴ Hollander has been accused of supporting terrorism because she invokes the law as a principle that allows her to hear beyond what we are able to hear, represent beyond what we are able to represent, namely, the



New World Academy #2: Collective Struggle of Refugees. Lost. In Between. Together., 2013, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, photo: Ernie Buts



Moussa Ag Assarid and Jonas Staal, *New World Embassy: Azawad*, 2014, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, photo: Ernie Buts, courtesy of Moussa Ag Assarid and Studio Jonas Staal

struggles of her clients: from author Mohamedou Ould Slahi, recently released after 14 years of imprisonment in Guantánamo Bay, to whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

In the New World Summit, the “new world” relates to the meeting point between those in whose name the War on Terror is waged, albeit against their own convictions, and those against whom it is fought. As you know, New World Summit began by inviting organizations placed on designated lists of so-called terrorist organizations: groups and individuals considered threats to democracy, which leads to the removal of their passports, and the cancellation of their rights to travel or hold bank accounts. Being placed on a blacklist thus literally means being declared stateless. A people in a democracy are defined by their statehood, by their citizenship. A stateless person is not a citizen, and thus cannot be recognized within democracy, at least not in what we have come to term “democracy” in the War on Terror. When we organized our first summit, in the form of a temporary parliament at Sophiensaele in Berlin in 2012, the organizations confronted with blacklisting that accepted our invitation were far from “anti-democratic.” Jon Andoni Lekue from the Basque independence movement, Fadile Yildirim of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, Moussa Ag Assarid from the National Liberation Movement of Azawad, and Luis Jalandoni of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines—organizations that you, by now, know well—all belong to histories of anticolonial and liberation struggle. Many of them—Azawadians, Basques, Kurds—are, albeit to different degrees, stateless peoples, making the blacklists a means of enacting a double negation: the stateless are declared doubly stateless through blacklisting. The different political philosophies of many of these groups reside in a radical and principled take on the notion of democracy, often articulated



New World Summit—Utrecht, 2016, Utrecht University, Utrecht, photo: Ernie Buts

as democracies of peoples rather than citizens. Meaning that we are talking here about a notion of “a people” that cannot be equated with the category of “citizenship.” Thus we touch upon the possibility of democracy as *practice* rather than as a form of representation. One should not conflate these struggles, and the specificity of their historical, cultural, and geographical backgrounds, but I dare to say that, in the first alternative parliament of the New World Summit, we observed that the global politicized civil society, which emerged in protest against the illegal invasion of Iraq, shares more with those who are violated through that war than with those who perpetrate it.

The alternative parliament of the New World Summit in Berlin was thus aimed at creating a space that would resist and overcome the us/them dichotomy of the War on Terror, and that could identify the threat of this war as a type of state terror that forms the actual common and existential threat to all of us, citizens and non-citizens alike. Many citizens of politicized civil society have learned in the 15 years since September 11 that their so-called rights are relative to their support of what is defined as “us.” The whistleblowers, immigrant communities, people of color, activists, intellectuals, artists: many have learned that the radical erosion of civil rights has allowed the concept of statelessness to be far from an exceptional position, and to become more and more a normative threat against dissidents or supposed others. The result is that the gap between us and them is actually, paradoxically, reduced through the War on Terror, although the rhetoric of its protagonists encourages us to think otherwise.

New worlds emerge when we create forms of assembly in which we renegotiate our dependencies, our bonds, our common struggles—it’s a line I take from Butler’s writings on the theory of performative assembly.⁵ These propositions and imaginaries of new worlds emerge when we recognize that the radical precarity of the so-called terrorist relates, albeit in an unequal way, to the precarity of those whose civil rights are trampled. And when I refer to the trampling of civil rights, I don’t only refer to the erosions or privacy or racial profiling, but also to less evident forms of precarity that the War on Terror legitimates. Who cares about climate change when a terrorist can blow up our cities at any moment? Who looks at the origins of economic crises when a weapon of mass destruction is about to go off? Who looks at structural discrimination when the clock is ticking for the next beheading? The perpetual image of imminent destruction propagated by War on Terror propaganda desensitizes us to the actual existential threats we face. Anthropologist and social scientist Joseph Masco notes, for example, that when Hurricane Katrina left its trail of devastation, the media tended to frame it within the possibility of a terrorist attack: If we cannot even prepare for a “natural” disaster, how can we ever defend ourselves from the terrorists?⁶ The image of imminent destruction is so strong that we cannot recognize actual crises, even when they are right in front of our eyes.

The precariat manifests itself in many different ways, and it would be incorrect to suggest that prosecuted activists or people living the slow death of austerity endure a condition of oppression comparable to that of those prosecuted as terrorists or fleeing war. But the truth of the matter is that these *different conditions of precarity* resonate with one another far more than they do with the powerful elites who wage war in our name; sell resources in our name; destroy our livelihoods in our name; or, if not in our name, then in the name of “democracy.”

What I’m trying to say is that if we wish to invest in the very possibility of a future history, then we need to *reassemble*. We need to break ties with those who wage war in our name, securitize in our name, privatize in our name, etc., and reassemble peoples—ourselves—on the basis of our different experiences and conditions of precarity. I would hope the parliaments of the New World Summit form together a modest contribution to that endeavor: the attempt to engage the imagination of art to create new social constellations, in order to enact a different understanding of what defines a people, and the many new worlds that emerge from these encounters—the new world of many worlds.

MH: You appeal to art for its critical faculty of imagination. I could not agree more with this, but I would like to push it a bit further. Given the depth of crises and devastation—social, political, environmental—in the world at this point in history, imagining things otherwise might not be enough. I think you gesture toward this doubt when you call for engaging the imagination of art to create what you name *spaces to assemble*. That is already a call, in my view, to not just produce the imaginaries of a different world, but to act them out, to inhabit and embody them. In other words, the idea of art as a space, both conceptual and physical, which contains the possibility of *being together otherwise*, even if or when it is unthinkable elsewhere, seems to me at the core of your artistic effort. In my understanding, this is where there is a radical potential for alternative political, social, and cultural projects in the present.

What I am interested in is the paradoxical use of what is left of artistic autonomy. The projects with undocumented, undeportable refugees in limbo in the Netherlands, or with the rebels from Azawad, to name but two examples from our recent collaborative endeavors, have only been possible because they have taken place in the context of art. Or, better yet, because they have taken place “in the name of art,” or even as “art projects.” This means stepping into a complex, contested territory, and, I wonder, could you speak to your understanding of this practice a bit more?

JS: You are right, calling solely on the notion of art as the domain of the imaginary can also be a way of making it even more powerless: it leaves art to imagine everything but change nothing—in order for it to remain art. My particular question is how the imagination of art and its

morphological understanding of the world—analyzing and organizing the world through and as form—relates to the notion of assembly. With “assembly,” I don’t only mean people gathering on squares or in parliaments. I also think of models of education, the model of the union, the assembly of knowledge and bodies in the library, the political party, the “movement.” Butler effectively pushes this even further by speaking of the assembly in the form of the hunger strike: bodies that cannot inhabit the same space, but engage in the same gestures of protest, assemble across different locations or even geographies—an assembly that is partly also a protest against the impossibility of assembly. All of these forms propose an imaginary of a form of communality, although that does not mean this is a communality of sameness. There is a potential in each of these forms to gather the largest possible collectivity through a common denominator.

The imagination of art here for me relates to engaging and rearticulating these forms as emancipatory sites of assembly. Take the library, for example, which we tend to glorify in a European discourse as a symbol of enlightenment; knowledge and education are considered as inherent parts of the common good. But libraries are also sites that give testimony to violence; much of “their” knowledge has been stolen and abducted from others. They are sites of a secularized and rationalized fortification of knowledge. But the library can be many other things as well. The Glasgow Women’s Library, for example, engages in what Adele Patrick, one of its co-founders and organizers, calls a “feminist methodology of archiving”: adding on a regular basis new terms—inserted by library users or library workers—to reorganize knowledge, and, as such, continuously question where and to whom knowledge belongs. It’s a library that acknowledges that knowledge is not neutral, but inherently carries within it certain biases and exclusions. I think the fact that Patrick frequently involves artists in helping to develop the Glasgow Women’s Library as a site of permanent self-questioning is significant here—from the design of the structures of categorization to the sites of gathering within the library itself. To imagine an open library also demands an imaginative effort of visualizing and morphologically structuring this library.

For me, a similar question relates to the parliaments of the New World Summit: they are structures that continuously ask what a parliament is, to whom it belongs, who has the right to speak, and why. Our parliaments do not base themselves on the representation of existing states, but on new states in the making—states of mind, often, rather than formal models of the nation-state. And that endeavor depends in a large part on a morphological understanding of the parliament: the parliament as sculpture, as installation, as theater, as a site of collective experiments in performativity. The parliament in our case does not merely represent a people, it produces an ongoing series of imaginaries and performative understandings of what a people is, could, or should be.



Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal, *New World Summit—Rojava*, 2015–2017, construction site of a new public parliament commissioned by the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, Derik and realized in collaboration with New World Summit, photo: Ruben Hamelink

In the case of our collaboration at BAK, *basis voor actuele kunst*, we have engaged in a similar process in relation to the model of the school. We established the New World Academy as an educational platform in which stateless and liberational organizations taught artists and students about the role of art in political struggle, and subsequently developed collaborative artworks that brought these ideas into practice. Many of the outcomes of the work done between the lecturers and students—such as the We Are Here Cooperative, a systemic partnership and cooperation between undocumented migrants and artists, and the Alternative Learning Tank (ALT), a school for digital literacy—continue to operate. So, you and I have together questioned the model of the school as a platform that actually brings into being a pluriformity of new schools, rather than disciplining its subjects into society’s existing school. This, I think, is the core of the effort to redefine existing models of assembly and test their emancipatory potentials.

The idea that the autonomy of art can be instrumentalized—or repurposed—in relation to larger social struggles has great potential. It is not a way of abandoning art, but rather an endeavor to understand the imaginative and morphological capacities of art differently; to see art not as a mere object of contemplation, but as a means to construct new notions of subjectivity. The assembly as an aesthetic and political practice is very much a part of that effort. It’s true we make use of the exceptional space that art grants for imagining our assemblies differently, at least in our part of the world. At the same time, that is a possibility not merely granted by art, but also by the organizations themselves—whether it is the refugee

collective We Are Here, the National Liberation Movement of Azawad, or the Kurdish Women’s Movement—if they did not recognize art as a site of struggle, then these collaborations would never have taken place. To be sure, it is not just the institution of art that grants space to emancipatory politics; it’s through emancipatory politics that the legitimacy and relevance of art is determined.

In order to repurpose the autonomy of art, we need to be part of a larger politics that recognizes and supports that politicized autonomy in the first place. By the time the ranks of the French National Front (FN), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) have joined the “illiberal democracy” regimes of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the Polish Law and Justice party already in power, there will be no artistic autonomy left to repurpose. So, an important part of art’s role in redefining the model of assembly is to build the broadest possible alliance around art as well: from stateless and liberation movements to progressive and emancipatory political parties, academics, students, journalists, activists, and so on. The assembly must not only challenge and question power, but produce new notions and practices of power through which we can organize our world differently. Only when the imaginaries of emancipatory art and politics stand in a structural relationship with one another do we have a chance to not merely claim power as it is, but to produce new understandings and practices of power in which alternate futures become reality.

MH: How does this figure into the initiative *New Unions* that you have just launched, which seems to refocus your work in our own backyard, as it were, the European continent, and driven by a clear understanding of how entangled the realities of the postcolonial, the post-communist, and former west actually are, cutting transversally across the global political economy?

JS: *New Unions* is planned as a long-term artistic and political campaign, with the aim of establishing alternative models of transdemocratic unions through the domain of art. Essentially, it takes the form of a series of Europe-wide assemblies that depart from Europe’s current political, economic, and humanitarian crises. It is designed to gather the imaginaries of alternative unions that have emerged in response to these crises, from the work of the Popular Unity Candidacy in Catalonia to the Feminist Initiative in Sweden to the Common Weal in Scotland—organizations that are invested in creating transdemocratic unions that depart from traditional notions of state and capital. We are asking all of these different parties to join artists and cultural workers in the assemblies, and present their scenarios for what these future transdemocratic unions could look like.

I see the *New Unions* campaign as a response to the crisis of the European imaginary. The so-called Brexit vote is paradigmatic here. A choice proposed to the peoples of Wales, England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland that was no choice, for it came down to either legitimizing the unelected elites

of the European Union—think of the European troika with the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, for example—and their politics of austerity, or legitimizing the far-right and their mythical return to a kind of nation-state that never existed in the first place. I believe that we should reject both of these options. We need new third, fourth, fifth, sixth scenarios, which would allow us to establish the egalitarian, transdemocratic unions that we actually desire. And, to connect to your previous question, that is a union that can only become a reality if the imaginary of art positions itself at the heart of concrete, day-to-day political struggle.

I'm hesitant to call it a “European” project, though. For although the *New Unions* campaign departs from the European crisis, it is invested in the idea of union, not in the concept of Europe. Possibly, our future lies in transcontinental unions, or parallel unions, that move across what has been defined as the borders of Europe. When we discussed the campaign publicly for the first time at State of Concept in Athens, in a panel to which you contributed as well, Despina Koutsoumba from ANTARSYA, an allied front of radical left parties in Greece, argued that Greece relates to the largest conception of the Middle East as much as, or possibly more than, it does to what has been defined as Europe. So, possibly, the map within which we define the notion of *New Unions* will shift in the process. Or, possibly, we will abandon maps altogether.

It's true that the *New Unions* campaign has derived from a feeling that my own house is being torn down by ultranationalist, fascist, and neoliberal forces. But I would say that the New World Summit addressed similar issues. The role of Europe in establishing the blacklists, in executing the War on Terror as an ally of the US, in the murder of civil populations abroad, and in the institutional racism that has been bolstered as a result—all that is also our “backyard.” And many organizations I have worked with outside of Europe would tell you that, unfortunately, Europe is with them all too often, whether it is in the role of the colonists in dividing North Africa or the Middle East, or in creating the power vacuum in Iraq out of which Islamic State has emerged. Europe has shown itself unwilling to limit its power to the continent in both the past and the present, and, thus, our responsibility to resist and oppose its neocolonial policies relates to a domain that reaches beyond Europe's geographic confines.

MH: Let's then be more direct about the notion of art you have in mind. I think it is important to decode, if you will, that all-encompassing noun without reproducing the us/them divide you have discussed. For art, of course, is many things, but, more often than not, it is a practice complicit in all the extreme inequalities in the world that you address. It is part of an opaque, unfair, prejudiced, corrupt, top-down theater of oppression and class war—just clad in deceivingly fancy clothes. Having said that, if, as I believe, the space of art is a complex mesh of overlapping, intersecting, entangled undercurrents, is there a way to articulate the undercurrent that you and I, and many others, inhabit through our work?



New Unions: Athens, 2016, digital study, courtesy Studio Jonas Staal

JS: Indeed, the concept of art contains many things at once. It can relate to the notion of the imaginary or the morphological, and it can be understood as part of an ongoing historical class war—the “velvet chains” that Jean-Jacques Rousseau has spoken of when it comes to art's dependency on the elites of the past and present. I follow Sinclair's proposition in this regard, not merely to repurpose the autonomy of art, but to define the importance of the imaginary and morphological capacity of art within a larger transdemocratic struggle for political autonomy. Only when the interests of art become the interests of a larger collectivity—a collective autonomy—can we come to an understanding and practice of art that does not merely question the world as it is, but engages a collective process of world-making. For me, the assembly, as an emancipatory site of gathering and action, is the core of that process. If we follow Butler, then it would be possible to think the work you and I are doing, this “undercurrent of art,” as you call it, as a *practice of performative assembly*.

MH: Despite your work consisting of many projects—disguised, if you will, by different titles to appear as individual works of art—together they seem more like iterations of *one* immense, ongoing project; a continuous mission that gathers strength—and ever more substantial, durable assemblies—as it evolves over time. One should perhaps engage in rethinking our vocabulary, for it seems to be more a *commitment* than a project you have undertaken; a commitment with multiple public interruptions, conceptualized as collective negotiations of how to recompose and inhabit and live the imaginaries of the (new) world at present. Do you see it this way? Can you think of your own work as a practice moving us toward a kind of manifesto of commitment?

JS: I hope that my work contributes to models of assembly in which we build our communalities and form alliances under different terms than those of the us/them dichotomy, the conditions laid out in the Brexit vote, or the dangerous mythologies of ultranationalism emerging throughout the world. I want art, in this process, to challenge these conditions and generate new ones. To create sites of assembly in which new social contracts are signed as a result of transgressing the tactics of intimidation of those who insist we already inhabit the best of possible worlds and the lesser of evils. You remember how Kurdish Women's Movement representative Dilar Dirik has phrased it: "Living without approval."⁷ I feel this is an important proposition in relation to the work of the New World Summit and now the *New Unions* campaign—it is a *principle*, even, of world-making. To reject the conditions of approval of the existing political and economic order, and to collectively inhabit a domain of political and artistic desire about the kind of world we wish to make. It is there that we will not merely imagine, but *enact* our new manifestos of commitment.

This is an edited version of a conversation between Maria Hlavajova and Jonas Staal that took place via e-mail in October 2016.

1. Upton Sinclair, *Mammonart* (San Diego, CA: Simon Publications, 2003), p. 386.
2. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Books, 2004), p. 18.
3. The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), p. 9.
4. Nancy Hollander, "A Terrorist Lawyer, and Proud of It," *The New York Times*, 26 March 2010, online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/opinion/24iht-edhollander.html>.
5. See Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
6. See Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
7. See Dilar Dirik interviewed by Jonas Staal, "Living Without Approval," in *New World Academy Reader #5: Stateless Democracy*, Renée In der Maur and Jonas Staal in dialogue with the Kurdish Women's Movement, eds. (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015), pp. 27–54.

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