

# “Art is always related to power” - an interview with Jonas Staal

Anna Remesova | artPortal • 2019. 07. 24. | Olvasási idő: 13 perc



Cover image: *Closed Architecture – Society as Prison*, 2011. Photo: [jonasstaal.nl](http://jonasstaal.nl)

**"We see the enormous power of propaganda in changing discourse and install a new normative regime. Whether it is Orbán in Hungary or the Law and Justice Party in Poland, we can witness the ultimate consequences of these propagandistic operations " - An interview with Jonas Staal in Prague.**

Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy – this is what you can read on the Dutch artists's website. But while this self definition is absolutely correct it is also very important that Staal is often taking the risk of creating and using unusual formats. Public events, staged debates, discussions, attractive shows and installations – all are somewhere between exhibition, performance, theatre. And all are based on research, as he describes: academic and artistic research. Jonas Staal (born in 1981) challenges the issues of alt-right, he analysed Steve Bannon's propaganda practices as well as the social architecture visions of the far-right in his homeland, The Netherlands and finds its parallels in today's Hungary and Poland. But he is also considering the future of EU and the chances of new democratic forms like the "stateless democracy".

The making of this interview started in October 2018 when Jonas Staal had a lecture on the concept of "emancipatory propaganda" at the VI PER Gallery in Prague. Completing this interview was a long process which ended this May when Staal went to Prague again to take part in a symposium titled *Who Are We Talking With? What Can Institutions*

Unlearn from Artists organized by tranzit.cz. This text was first published by Artalk.cz in Czech.

**Anna Remesova: How did the development of your projects look like? When did you realize that you don't want to create art objects but rather events and organizations?**

**Jonas Staal:** In 2011 I was doing a research called Closed Architecture on a prison model that was designed by an architect who is today one of the leading members of the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), which is the ultranationalist and second biggest party of the Netherlands. It also is a party that takes a very strong stance against contemporary art, which they considered as a form of leftist propaganda. When I realized that the number two of the party, Fleur Agema, had herself worked in the field of art – she studied at the architecture department at the same art school as where I was educated – I became very curious to understand the artistic imaginary of her work related to her political convictions. When I went to the archives of the art school where she studied, I found her thesis that was titled Closed Architecture in which she describes an extremely detailed prison model, in which prisoners are reconditioned through four phases to become productive subjects of society. What she proposed is a paradigmatic structure of the control society, in which the prisoners are not sentenced to jail for some specific period of time but instead placed in a game-like logic in which they are moved forward to a next phase in case of “good” behaviour and backwards to a previous phase in case of “bad” behaviour. The prisoners are then, in Agema’s model, essentially made responsible for their own liberation, but of course only on the conditions set by the ruling regime. I thought this model was extremely representative for the type of aesthetics emerging within new ultranationalist and alt-right regimes. I studied Agema’s proposed prison and translated her sketches into a detailed three-dimensional architectural and computer model, and I further published a book with the research and organized a gathering in a theatre where parts of the model were reconstructed in detail. I tried to grasp at what level her vision of the prison could be understood as an ideological model for the closed society that is currently being constructed by ultranationalist and alt-right regimes. And I further tried to research how the architectural imaginary of Agema was translated into new policies of the first Rutte government (2010-11), that was supported by her political party. This project was debated quite widely, as I presented the research just after the that first Rutte government had come into power.



*Closed Architecture. Year: 2011. Artist: Jonas Staal based on a concept by Fleur Agema Exhibition "IK-00 Spaces of Confinement," V-A-C Foundation, Venice Photo: V-A-C Foundation*

While the project showed how art – architecture – can structure and shape political ideology, I simultaneously felt that there was a limit of what this model of artistic critique can bring about. I find academic and artistic research very important in understanding how various visual morphologies – like the prison model – structure our social and political life, but at the same time only analysing it doesn't change anything. You can understand how propaganda works but that doesn't mean that it stops having effect. You need something more than that. I realized that Agema understood that in order to change society you have to work on the infrastructural level; you have to translate your ideology into forms that structure social and political life. That means that if you want to counteract, you have to understand what the ultranationalists and alt-right are trying to do, which I attempted through the Closed Architecture project, but in the end, we need more than that. We need new discourse and infrastructure of our own. And that is why I started to change my own artistic practice in order not only to analyse existing oppressive regimes, but to also help organize new forms of emancipatory power.

**A year later you organized the first New World Summit in Berlin. What did you set as a main goal of this gathering?**

The New World Summit (2012-ongoing) was a direct response to the Closed Architecture project. It was my first attempt to think of the alternative infrastructures that art could propose to open up new spaces to explore and develop radical forms of democracy. It was my attempt to explore the role of art in reimagining the democratic project. Essentially, the New World Summit is an artistic and political organization, that develops alternative parliaments for stateless and blacklisted organizations. Bringing together audiences with groups prosecuted as "terrorist" organizations is a way to challenge the Us versus Them

dichotomy cultivated in the War on Terror. Many groups that participated, from the Kurdish to the Azawadian liberation movements, are excluded from democracy because they form a supposed threat to it. But what if their political models are more democratic than capitalist-democracy itself? In that case, their threat is primarily ideological. Possibly citizens of societies in whose name the War on Terror is waged might have more in common – or would be better represented – by these supposed “terrorists” than by the governments that claim to act in their name. In other words, the New World Summit tried to redefine who exactly is “Us” and who is “Them” in a way more representative of our real struggles. You can also argue that the ultranationalists and alt-right emerged from the dichotomies of the War on Terror. They hijacked the discourse in order to include refugees and migrants in what defines “Them”, turning many different groups and peoples into a homogenous enemy.



*New World Summit – Utrecht. Year: 2016. Artist: Studio Jonas Staal. Produced by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht / Utrecht University. Photo: Ernie Buts*

### **How did you create the design of the assembly?**

That was very important part of the project because I think that the forms in which we organize and structure the political assembly have an extreme impact on our experience and outcome of it. For example, the first parliament that we created in in 2012 as part of the 7th Berlin Biennale, was a circular one. We literally doubled the half-circled parliament as we know it, and as such, eliminated the idea of a single representative that speaks to the people gathered. In our case, political representatives sit among the audience. The performative dynamic of the round parliament means that sometimes someone sitting next to you stands up, almost as if speaking on behalf of you. Whereas in other cases, they might stand up from another part of the circle, speaking to you, as if to convince or oppose you. These changing positions of the speech act were a way of making the audience

aware that the form of how we organize an assembly has a huge impact on how we interpret politics and how we identify with it.

**During the talk in VI PER gallery in Prague you were talking about inviting the non-human actors to the assembly. How would this look like?**

That is the question that I am working on now with artist Laure Prouvost. We made a project recently called *The Aube's cure Parle Ment* (2017) – read: *The Obscure Parlement* – as part of iLiana Fokianaki's exhibition *State (in) Concepts* at KADIST Art Foundation in Paris. Laure works with hybrid assemblages of disembodied tongues, breasts, branches and signs. As a result, she creates constellations that shift between human, non-human and more-than-human agencies. For me they represent the “obscure”; a dynamic that emerges between human and nonhuman subjectivities, and the ambiguities that these tensions can provoke. In this collaboration, instead of developing a parliament for organizations and people, I tried to develop a parliament for her assemblages. As such, the project asked the questions about the space of politics and its agencies; who is present in the political space and who is not. Generally speaking, our parliaments are extremely disconnected from the larger ecologies that sustains us. For example, we talk about climate change but we don't pay attention to the fact that our ecologies sustain us to enable us to sit and breathe in the parliament in the first place. Without the larger ecological systems of life support, we would not be able to sit in a circle and discuss anything at all. So, in a way, larger non-human constellations are always present in our assemblies, they are just not acknowledged as political subjectivities. This work with Laure invokes presences that you wouldn't normally consider as political actors, so it's a way of expanding an understanding of the larger ecologies that sustain – and thus partake to – human assembly.

**Concerning this question why is still important for you to stay in the context of the art scene? What is the perspective of art?**

The European liberal definition of autonomous and critical art was itself a product of revolutionary movements, particularly the French Revolution that liberated art from the chains of the upper bourgeoisie, church and monarchy. Artists actively participated to the French Revolution, and as a result they instituted the very first public museums and public art subsidies.

We tend to speak about art as something that is disembodied or dislocated from politics, but political revolution laid the basis for present-day understanding of art.

As artists, we might not have executive power the way politics does, but we have the power of the imagination. Meaning, the power to challenge the visual morphology of the world, the way we understand the world through forms.

I perceive art as a competence through which we can rethink the infrastructures, symbols and narratives through which we organize our society.

If art doesn't engage in these questions, then it risks being complicit in the rise of ultranationalist and alt-right forces that will impose their own aesthetic regimes in service of their interests. We see the emerging of this “alt-art” already today, from the Pepe the Frog memologies of the online alt-right, to the films directed by Steve Bannon, the former advisor and ideologue of Donald Trump. Emancipatory politics enables new artistic imaginaries, but oppressive politics will instrumentalize art to impose its violent doctrines. Either we, as artists, join progressive politics to tell new stories that can inspire and mobilize people, or they will – and at this moment, we are not on the winning side.



*Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective, 2018. April 20-September 23, 2018. Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam. Photo: [jonasstaal.nl](http://jonasstaal.nl)*

**Steve Bannon was also a main figure of your last exhibition project in Spring 2018 which you were talking about in the context of the contemporary propaganda strategies. How is this project related to your previous ones?**

I roughly divide my work in propaganda art research on one hand and propaganda work on the other. Propaganda research is about mapping the role of art in dominant formations of power, for example the Closed Architecture project or the Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective (2018) exhibition-project that I developed with curator Marina Otero Verzier at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam.

Propaganda work on the other hand, is less about researching and more about experimenting with new artistic morphologies within emancipatory social movements, progressive political parties and Pan-European platforms. The alternative parliaments we have created through the New World Summit for example, were often developed in close collaboration with stateless political organizations. The New Unions campaign that I started in 2016, develops artworks with and within political movements seeking to radically reform the European Union, for example in the form of the assemblies of neo-constructivist stars that I made for the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25). Or even the current parliament that I'm conceptualizing with various Scottish independentist platforms on an abandoned oil rig on the North-Sea, titled The Scottish-European Parliament (2018). I'm inspired by the political imagination of these parties and platforms, and my propaganda work aims to build new artistic morphologies to contribute to them.

**Can we understand these projects in the realm of the “emancipatory propaganda” as you call it?**

Developing emancipatory models of propaganda art would certainly be my aim, but of course I cannot be sure that I achieve that. Artistic morphologies can take a life of their own sometimes, and tell unexpected stories the artist was not aiming for. Or sometimes, as an artist you are critically confronted in your intentions by the artwork itself, like through a glass darkly.

**Can you briefly explain why did you pick the figure of Steve Bannon? Especially in the European context?**

A lot of my work has dealt with the rise of ultranationalism and the alt-right in Europe and the Netherlands. Some of my very early works dealt with the self-declared martyr status of its figureheads, such as Geert Wilders – leader of the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) – who sued me as a result. So, I was embedded in my own locality for a long time. In the case of Steve Bannon, I felt that the rise of the alt-right and Trumpism in the US was both a national and an international phenomenon, that has effected and fuelled ultranationalist and alt-right platforms across the world. And sometimes it is more helpful to understand your own political context by looking somewhere else; to look through the similar to the familiar. That was an important reason to develop the Steve Bannon Propaganda Retrospective. And exactly when the exhibition-project was on display, Bannon began his European efforts to unionize parties from the AfD in Germany to the Freedom Party in Austria and the Lega in Italy.

Bijlage bij X-pol nummer:

2005137109



*The Geert Wilders Works, 2005-2008. Photo: [jonasstaal.nl](http://jonasstaal.nl)*



It was important for me to understand how Bannon as a propaganda artist – a filmmaker mainly, he authored ten documentary films – for almost fifteen years worked on the key narratives of Trumpism, centred around his ideological proposition of “white Christian economic nationalism.” If you look at his earlier film on Tea Party figurehead Sarah Palin, you essentially see the core ideas of Trumpism laid out well before Trump actually entered on the political stage as a candidate. Bannon has literally referred to Trump as an “imperfect vessel,” to carry his ideological master narrative. It shows the role of a propaganda filmmaker in imagining political formations that do not yet exist but that are in the process of becoming. Or, in other words, the propaganda retrospective tried to map how artistic imagination precedes political reality.

Simultaneously, Bannon’s work is a very good example of a propaganda artist who operates not in a dictatorial regime but in a capitalist democracy like the US. Democracy is not immune to propaganda, and this is important to emphasize, as propaganda is not limited to the age of so-called totalitarianism. Propaganda always played a major role in democratic countries as well, even though it is a different kind of propaganda, as different formations of power generate different propagandas in the plural.

### **How can we understand the rise of the alt-right? And is there something the leftist artists and artistic groups can learn from their propaganda work?**

People like [Angela Nagle](#) argue that the alt-right are really the “Gramscians” of the 21st Century, that they have adopted the leftist Gramscian strategies of changing politics through culture. In some way she is right in the sense that alt-right and related movements have been able to develop a cultural discourse that changes our norms and core narratives based on which we decide what is right or wrong, truth or lie. They changed the value system and you can see that also in Europe: what was considered unacceptable fifteen years ago – for example in the case of criminalization of ethnic or religious minorities – has become completely normal amongst the mainstream political parties. What was the extreme-right is now the extreme-right to the extreme-right, whereas centrists are the new right.

This shows the enormous power of propaganda in changing discourse and install a new normative regime. Whether it is Orbán in Hungary or the Law and Justice Party in Poland, we can witness the ultimate consequences of these propagandistic operations right in front of our eyes. To counter this propaganda, we must understand that we will have to be willing to install new values, norms – a new hegemony – in defence of emancipatory political ideals ourselves. We won’t get there by just critically questioning and showing the ambiguities and complexities of our world, we will also have to collectively engage in shaping and constructing our world differently. If we don’t someone else will, and we see the results as we speak.

Of course, the main difference between the alt-right discourses and discourses in emancipatory politics is how we define power. In the alt-right the core idea of power is centred on authoritarian and elite governance. Even though they always claim to speak in the name of people, there is always a great leader who becomes the sole sovereign. From an emancipatory political point of view, the challenge is to author reality anew as a collective endeavour, as part of what KUCHENGA from Black Lives Matter UK explained as a “leaderful” movement. We can’t use the same mechanisms of power with a different value system, our value system has to alter and reorganize power at its very base to make another world imaginable and possible.



*New World Summit – Rojava (People’s Parliament of Rojava) Year: 2015-18  
Artist: Democratic Federation of North-Syria and Studio Jonas Staal, Dêrik, Canton Cêzire,  
Rojava. Photo: Ruben Hamelink*

**At the end of your talk you were talking about the parliament in Rojava, that was how I understood your position and the meaning of the notion “emancipatory propaganda” which we already talked about.**

The Rojava revolutionary movement is most certainly an emancipatory political movement, as it brought into being a fundamental reorganization of power. In their region, in the North of Syria, they have created what they call a “stateless democracy”: a multicultural project of local self-governance, gender equality and communal economy. When their autonomous government, the Democratic Federation of North Syria, commissioned me to develop a new public parliament together with them, I saw it as a chance to contribute through my work to the visualization and creation of new spaces and infrastructures of assembly in the realm of this emancipatory political framework. The result, the People’s Parliament of Rojava (2015-18), is both a monument to the revolution, as well as a space for gathering to practice the principles of the revolution on a day to day basis.

**How are you thinking about the viewer or receiver of this project? Is it mainly for the place and to help the community there, do you consider the position of the viewer in Europe where you present it?**

Of course, the context is always very important, the People’s Parliament of Rojava is a result of many meetings and collaborations with different cooperatives, local communes, the municipality, political representatives and parties, that we worked together with and with who we developed the visual conceptualization of the parliament. The same goes for my collaborations with DiEM25. When you work with political organizations, you work

towards an exchange between political and artistic imaginations, that generate new forms that could not have been created by either one alone.

Another important aspect in that regard is the role of historical spaces. The New World Summit – Utrecht (2016) for example took place in the main hall of the Utrecht University, where the first confederacy of Dutch provinces was signed into being to fight against the Spanish. That document, in some sense, is the beginning of what would later become the Dutch nation-state. Gathering there with blacklisted, stateless and autonomist groups, was a way of returning to those originating moments of the nation-state, and to challenge its foundations and ideas from a non-state perspective. It's a critical dialogue with history in a way. One in which the space as a historical agent participates in the assembly.

But these are all notes on the creation of the artworks, your question regarded the viewer. I think in that regard the morphology of the parliaments is important to mention. Their forms – circular, square, triangular – in which chairs have been exchanged for benches, speakers stand in between the public, and light is spread equally upon speakers and public, anticipate the presence of bodies. The alternative parliaments of the New World Summit propose conditions of assembly, but only gain meaning when they are used, when the material parliament comes to co-exist as a parliament of bodies. And in that moment, I would not call someone in the parliament a “viewer,” but rather a constitutive part of a new community in the making.

**Are you working still with the same participants and organizations in order to develop broader and broader network of similar political groups and representatives?**

I work with many different organizations on many different projects, and there is indeed a lot of exchange and overlap between them. There is the New World Summit, New Unions, New World Academy, and at this moment I am running a utopian training camp called Training for the Future (2018-ongoing) with Florian Malzacher at the Ruhrtriennale in Germany, that aims to turn audiences into trainees to exercise in alternative future scenarios. With the Kurdish revolutionary movement, I mainly worked through the New World Summit, but they also contributed to New Unions and will act as trainers in Training for the Future. So there is continuous migration between different organizational works, because it is also about sustaining a broader community. It is through this ongoing engagement that new ideas and forms emerge between political and artistic imaginary. I don't see any art work as the end of anything, I see it as a continuous reiteration and exploration of political ideas and the way they can enable new artistic forms.