

Jonas Staal

Progressive Art

The Mass Performance of Blank Voting

José Saramago's novel *Seeing* describes a city—somewhere in the Western world—where democratic elections are being held. When seventy percent of the population turns in his or her ballot blank, the government of the day decides to rerun the election. But when an even higher percentage of the population, eighty percent, casts a blank vote, the government embarks on an operation to hunt down the conspiracy they believe is recklessly undermining their regime. The confusion grows when not a single blank voter is prepared to admit his or her choice and the resistance movement seems to lack any organizational coherence. Put succinctly, the people have used the margin provided by the system—the possibility of voting for none of the candidates—as a civil right. Consequently, the state does everything it can to restart the “regular” democratic process and track down these saboteurs of the free world. The state newspaper attempts to address the citizens' responsibilities (“Capital City Orphaned Overnight” and “Blank Voters Blanked By Government”), but the citizens systematically give the same explanation:

No, sir, I didn't [cast a blank vote], but if I had, I would be just as much within the law as if I had voted for one of the parties listed or had made my vote void by drawing a caricature of the prime minister.

As a result of the citizens' actions, the government, which is no longer recognized as legitimate by the citizens, decides not to back down and to employ every means of violence at its disposal to reestablish its rule and convince its citizens to “return to democracy.” False bombs are planted by government officials to convince them of the dangerous state of anarchy they have brought upon themselves by retracting their vote from the system. Leading figures of the “conspiracy” are executed to set an example. And ultimately, the city is closed off and left to starve until it comes to its senses as the government literally abandons its former citizens, while waiting for them to embrace the democratic doctrine again while stationing itself outside the city. No one asks the government to return. The blank vote thus becomes an act of defiance that triggers the state of emergency that is always located at the criminal core of the “democratic” state.

In the face of the state of emergency the blank vote proves to be both an artistic and a political act. The blank vote is at once a political and a performative gesture that subverts the notion of representation in the most radical terms. Through the blank vote—this unwritten “exit” from the democratic doctrine by means of the very mechanisms it propounds—the promise that power belongs to the people is acted upon in the most fundamental sense. The people of Saramago's city do not abandon their power in order for new rulers to continue ruling; this is about taking power back. The radical imagination needed to enact this subversion is precisely where I locate the role of progressive art as a tool for mobilizing progressive politics.

The difficult and terrifying process of reclaiming power—power so long lost to unknown and unloved representatives—is precisely what Saramago describes in his novel. In this context, cleaning the street or baking bread become acts that in the given context are more revolutionary than firing a gun. The state already overpowers us with drones, wiretaps, and military arsenal. It takes little imagination to create a global state of terror and control. That is the basic dream of every dictator and of the dictator inside of all of us. It takes much greater imagination to act upon the idea of a world beyond that.

Another crucial dimension of Saramago's novel is its focus, not on the moment of the election itself, but on the disasters the citizens have to face in its wake, and on the tedious day to day struggle of living resulting from their revolutionary acts. Similarly, what has been referred to as the Arab Spring is not limited to the symbolism of peaceful cohabitation on public squares, no matter how hopeful and moving these moments might be. Equally moving are the days after, the moments when power rearranges itself, the moments when new and unknown oppressors manifest themselves. The Western media have created both the myth that the “real event” was the protests themselves and the myth that these protests “failed” because of the complications and ideological struggles and oppositions that followed. Our notion of revolution has been severely reduced through the lens of those who are not served by any structural change whatsoever, and thus, the Arab Spring is suddenly the Arab Winter. Revolution in the eyes of commentators takes as long as the most visible of events: that is the blind order of the media, in great contrast to Saramago's city of the seeing.

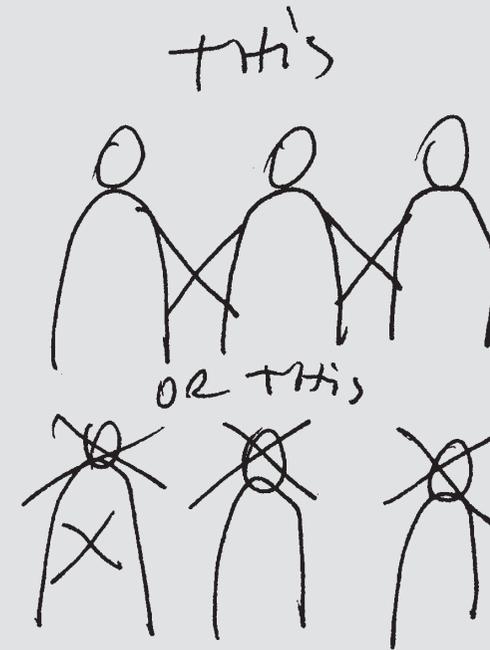
The significance of Saramago's story is that the initial moment of subversion, the mass performance of the blank vote, is valued only through the practice of the days following this moment and the continuous fidelity of the people's choice to abandon the ruling power structures. I don't know whether “poetry” is the right word to describe this, but let me say that it encompasses a moment in which the project of progressive art and progressive politics create the foundations for a struggle in a new, radical, creative political reality—creative in the sense that it opens up a concrete, material field of politics still to be defined by the actors involved. This is a field in which the revolutionary slogan “Power to

the People!” becomes a permanent question: “Power? To which People?!” The notion of progress in “progressive politics” thus does not become a blind strive for acquiring more means, but indicates the capacity to alter the fundamental conditions in which we define the notion of people and power beyond the idea of man as a mere animal who knows nothing but survival. Progress lies in the deconstruction of the notion of power as a commons, not in the glorified survival of the fittest, which today has translated into that worldwide nightmare, the myth of the American Dream.

A similar analysis can be made of the Occupy movement—the global wake-up call of the Western lower and middle classes to oppose the disasters of their financial systems. Today the initial moments of the movement are still celebrated by former Occupiers, artists, and intellectuals: the mass gatherings in public squares, the enthusiasm that resulted from the establishment of public kitchens and libraries. This was, according to many, the “true” meaning of Occupy. But should we not be just as interested in the abuse and violence in the camps, the financial corruption and tedious bureaucratic political processes that have characterized so many of Occupy’s settlements, be they in New York or Amsterdam? There is a tendency to pick revolutionary moments as suited, and to consider critique as betraying its intentions. But isn’t the true meaning of the Occupy movement and its decline to be found in its participants’ continued willingness to end the outsourcing of power and thus to confront so many of its mechanisms inside of each of us? A mass act of global psychoanalysis, a public challenge of the oppressive institutions that have managed to occupy our very being. I’m not trying to make the absurd claim that “we are the system,” which would severely depoliticize the role of the oppressive economic and political forces truly responsible for the crises we are facing. But nonetheless, our occupation opposes both those responsible and the traces of the occupation these institutions have left within our very being.

After outsourcing power for so long, reclaiming it means that we are first confronted with an unprotected political sphere. The beauty is that this is our sphere. The terrifying consequence is that there is no one else to look after it but us. Again, the imagination of a different political sphere touches upon the tedious practice of shaping it while remaining loyal to its principles. But that means we confront its successes as much as its failures. For at least, these failures are ours, and ours alone.

Saramago’s novel is the ultimate political pamphlet: a script for the masses of militant blank voters willing to engage in the political struggle of everyday life. This is where the task of progressive art lies today: in its capacity for aligning its radical imaginative force with the project of progressive politics.



Lenin in Japan

Our understanding of art today is shaped by dominant political, economic, and social forces, and as such much of art practice is forced into complicity with the self-proclaimed democracies that have taken our public domain hostage. This has created the rather cynical consensus that we cannot escape the conditions of the systems that structure our daily lives and thus that there is no longer any outside from which resistance is possible. The additional illusion that our world is just too “complex” to develop any consistent political position within it proves the success of a delicate ideological operation that suggests that resistance is futile, there being no real opposing ideological positions to choose from, as philosopher Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei has argued. The rise of the new social movements has proven that both these illusions are false, both in the sense that our forced complicity with the systems that occupy our existence does not keep us from engaging in alliances that help us to recognize this “enemy within,” and in the sense that the revolutionary event proves that there are always unthought outsides to manifest themselves. Samarago’s novel again provides us with a dialectical way out: the blank vote is an act against the system, performed within the system but loyal to a political principle in a not-yet-defined space located outside the system.

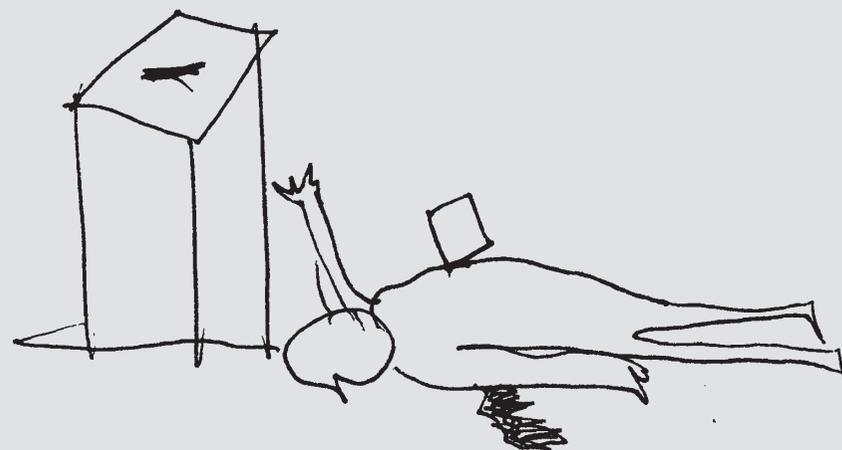
In essence, the blank vote makes visible two democracies within democracy. Its ruling body, which legitimizes itself through the notion of democracy but is sustained by the state of exception and the manner in which the blank vote—the exit button—shapes a new democratic space beyond the guise of parliamentary election. This “doubling” of the concept of democracy has an important historical precedent. When Lenin visited Japan, he was forced to perform an intervention that today we would recognize as the Deleuzian proposal to “speak of what we know best in a language that we know the least.” Lenin, when speaking to the masses, was forced to make use of a translator. When he came to his fundamental critique of what he considered to be “bourgeois democracy,” the translator looked at him confused. It became clear to Lenin that the word “democracy” did not exist in Japanese language; at best, it could be translated as an ism: as democratism.

Translation resulted in subversion. The term democracy broke, fell apart, and doubled up. By speaking the language least known to him, Lenin was confronted with a choice: the choice between democratism and democracy. In Japanese, democracy was the word that had yet to be spoken. For Lenin, similar to our situation today, democracy was a term that had yet to be imagined in practice. Lenin made good use of the term, and after returning to Russia the following lines can be found in his essay “Working-Class and Bourgeois Democracy”:

Besides the interests of a broad section of the landlords, Russian bourgeois democratism reflects the interests of the mass of tradesmen and manufacturers, chiefly medium and small, as well as (and this is particularly important) those of the mass of proprietors and petty proprietors among the peasantry.

The democratist doctrine, what philosopher Alain Badiou refers to as the “capitalo-parliamentarian order,” is inherently connected to the field of art, technology, and culture. First of all, democratism, through its permanent display of culture in the form of art, industrial progress, and even conquered people, aims at proving its capacity to engineer “peaceful coexistence” between different cultures and ideologies: it functions as a grid for a variety of lifestyles. Second, democratism’s display of global peaceful coexistence is based on the fact that its engineering structure, formed by colonial capitalism, is not questioned or subverted itself, which would result in the immediate introduction of martial law or other “states of exception” in order to guarantee the continuation of democratism’s rule. And thirdly, this engineering structure is defined by a continuous overlap between governmental forces and private ownership, which Lenin refers to as “mass of tradesmen and manufacturers,” and which in our time would be referred to as commercial enterprises or corporations.

Democratism stands for the translation of the constantly self-reassessing emancipatory principles of democracy into a stagnant, non-reflexive, expansionist



ideology. Of key importance are the series of monopolies it upholds in the field of politics, economy, ecology, and the public domain. Art today is impotently trapped in these monopolies, a hostage to the legitimization of the democratist doctrine of “holding up mirrors” to the world, asking “critical questions,” showing “ambiguity,” and “paradoxes,” but never confronting or altering the conditions of dominant rule in which it operates. Since the postwar global expansion of the democratist doctrine, art has become one of its primary tools of legitimization: art exactly embodies the “freedom” that democratist rule claims to bring to the world. And the more art criticizes its superstructure, the more it confirms the engineering structures of democratism as the final phase of historical political struggle. For where else than in democratism do politics and its free markets ask artists to be critical of their own rule?

Possibly the ultimate example of the bizarre conglomerate of the power of state and “free market” in employing art as democratist propaganda is a notorious CIA funded project during the Cold War, the “Congress for Cultural Freedom,” which was among other things tasked with globally promoting the works of American abstract expressionist artists in response to the pictorial regime of socialist realism as the officially sanctioned art of the Soviet Union. Through the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which journalist and historian Frances Stonor Saunders has described in *Who Paid the Piper?* as the “Deminform,” the notion of “abstract art” became a

synonym for “free art.” Even though the American public was far from charmed by the works of the abstract expressionists, this abstraction allowed democratism in the context of the Cold War to be depicted as the “natural” outcome of centuries of social struggles precisely by ruling out all depiction. The work of that Cold War weapon, Jackson Pollock, is the ultimate figurative representation of the incapacity of the artist to understand his role as an instrument of democratism. This implies that I do not acknowledge his work as abstract, but that I perceive it as a series of figurations that we are supposed to recognize as “abstraction.” I would claim that it is not the artwork as such that is the work of democratist propaganda, but that the figure of the democratist artist “performing” gestures that have been “liberated” from the dogma of figuration is the real ideological expression.

Wasn't that why the “critical” theater group Orkater and the author Arnon Grunberg joined the Dutch troops in Afghanistan in 2006? Both are known as critical cultural producers who have translated their experiences in Afghanistan to expose the ambiguities and paradoxes of war, the discrepancies between the home command and the war on the ground. Interestingly enough, it is not in spite of, but precisely because of this criticality that they were tolerated by the military. By their mere presence, the artists prove the success of democratism as an exported product: its transparency and self-critique extend to the point where war is being criticized even while it is being waged. However this critique never brought the war to an end. Here of course we arrive once again at the methodology of the blank vote: the act of critique “within” the system, needs its imaginative counterpart—the space it wishes to open up rather than to occupy—in order to move beyond its legitimization. Instead, in the case of Afghanistan, the artist has become a living statue of liberty in favor of democratist rule.

The Art of Fundamental Democracy

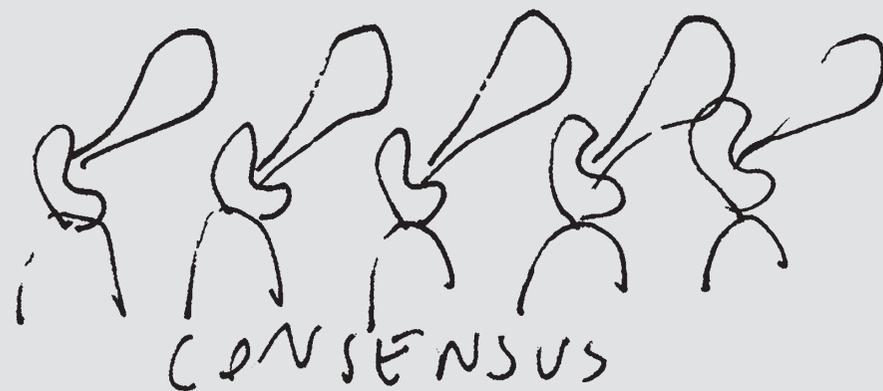
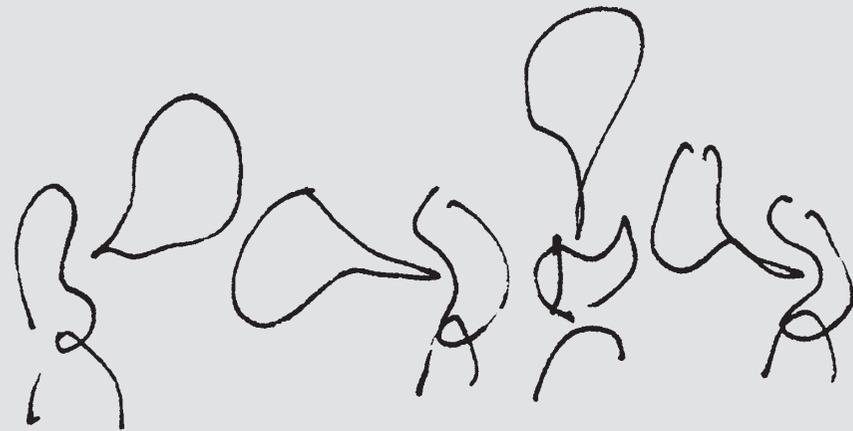
Following Saramago's pamphlet, I believe that the militant blank voters of the progressive political project are to be found in what I regard as the “international democratization movement,” which is certainly not as new as is often claimed, although it has made its mark in recent years by developing its claims in a dialectic between the not so World Wide Web and our cities' “public” squares. I believe that this movement's claims reside in a refusal to continue to operate under the conditions of a domain dictated by unknown others, and a demand to shape and decide upon these conditions ourselves. In other words, where democratism is defined by the maintenance of the monopolies of power in the field of politics, economy, ecology, and the public domain, this movement—which I refer to as “fundamental democracy”—demands the mass democratization of the fields of politics, economy, ecology, and the public domain.

What we witness in the international democratization movement is the blank vote in practice. However different the conditions are that resulted in the Indignados protests in Spain, Catalonia, and the Basque Country, the worldwide Occupy Movement, Real Democracy Now in Greece or the Gezi protests in Turkey, the old Green and new Pirate Parties, the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI), Wikileaks, and the leading role of whistleblowers such as Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, we can recognize some common denominators. The most important being the reoccurring demand to organize ourselves not simply as “citizens,” but as political beings. This demand translates in the shape of public spaces where the meaning of this concept of egalitarian society is explored in varying collectives: through protests, squares, and virtual spaces. By working on what has sometimes been referred to as the “parallel polis,” parallel political infrastructures, cooperatives, and collectives that enact the principle of the commons through day to day political work and sometimes—as is the case with the “Indignados party,” Partido X—in between parliamentary and public space, they are forms of political action that transcend the moment of gathering by becoming infrastructure. This means that the act of revolt becomes the art of day to day living beyond the structures that have previously subjected us to their governance. Political commentators tend to see only the empty squares of our cities, arguing that yet another protest movement has disappeared; but what they choose not to see is how these movements are interconnected, borrowing from each other's successes and mistakes, and slowly building a common agenda and a common infrastructure. This is an infrastructure where we do not outsource our vote (the Dutch word for vote, *stem*, literally means “voice”), but where we attempt to shape ourselves. This notion of fundamental democracy as an emancipatory movement that does not take territorial or ethnic dimensions as its basic points of orientation, but grounds itself in the spirit of internationalism, is irreconcilable with democratism.

In his book *Mammonart* (1924), Upton Sinclair attempted to analyze the history of art as a history of the ruling classes. He regarded the time he lived in as “extended prehistory,” dedicating his life to the dawn of a new internationalism that would break with the prehistory of man under capitalism that equally defined the prehistory of art. His exploration of what we today could consider as the “culture industry” starts with a group of cavemen. The cave drawings of the protagonist Mr. Ogi scare the leader of the group of cavemen, forcing Mr. Ogi to convince him that his drawings are made not to invoke resistance against the leader, but as a way of acknowledging, honoring, and expanding the leader's existing power.

The history of art as something more than the narration of the dominant class has, according to Sinclair, yet to be written. He would most certainly have endorsed Andrea Fraser's famous dictum “We are all always already serving,” and he ends his exercise in an institutional critique *avant la lettre* with the following words:

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 artworks, 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.

Our task as artists is to expose, defy, and change the conditions that maintain the violent, criminal core of democratist politics. In the field of art, the historical basis for the need to alter the conditions of our practice to oppose democratist instrumentalization can be found in the movement of institutional critique and its inroads into the field of concrete political practice—not in order to produce art, but to change the conditions that have taken hostage the figure of the artist as a living statue of liberty in favor of the doctrine of democratism. Democratist freedom has proven to be a freedom in the service of a continuously expanding global state of control, placed there through the “incentive” of tools of massively subsidized markets and illegal wars. Artistic freedom today should be tied to a different ideological project: an exploration of a principled fundamental democracy in which the imaginative force of art is a primary tool to defy rather than secure democratist monopolies of power.

We oppose the monopolies of democratism that define our world in order to break them. Breaking them is an act of liberation, releasing power from the privileged to a public sphere. Revolutionary moments are the moments when power becomes unstable, when power is no longer capable of holding itself together. These are moments when power becomes fluid, undefined; moments in which it belongs indiscriminately to the people as a whole. What Saramago tells us is that this revolutionary moment cannot be separated from a progressive art. The mass performance of blank voting, this call to become political beings, is as much a conceptual proposition as a concrete mode of action. It is as much a questioning of the conditions of representation as a tool to arrive at new ones. The truth of politics is here first spoken by art; its radical imaginative force redefines our notion of politics as whole. As Sinclair makes clear to us, the art of a fundamental democracy is not only to question the world and imagine it differently but to redefine the concept of political action, of political being in the world itself. Not to make new artworks, but to make a world. For the world we live in is not merely “a world,” it is our common world. The task of progressive art is to make that truth a reality.

Jonas Staal (NL) is a Dutch visual artist who focuses on the relationship between art, politics, and ideology. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization, *New World Summit*, which contributes to building alternative political spheres for organizations banned from democratic discourse, and together with *BAK basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht*, of the *New World Academy*, that connects political organizations invested in the progressive project to artists and students. *Jonas Staal* was a member of the collective *Artists in Occupy Amsterdam*.