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Yael Bartana, *Zamach* (Assassination), 2011, production still. Photograph: © Marcin Kalinski. Courtesy the artist and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

# The Artist as Director: 'Artist Organisations International' and its Contradictions

– Ekaterina Degot

In his famous 1935 lecture on the political position of Surrealism, delivered as the Second World War was fast approaching, André Breton stated that humanity lived 'in an era in which man belongs to himself less than ever, in which he is held responsible for the totality of his acts, no longer before a single conscience, his own, but before a collective conscience of all those who want to have no more to do with a monstrous system of slavery and hunger'.<sup>1</sup> One increasingly has this feeling today: as a 'monstrous system' continues to spread out into all layers of life, middle-class intellectuals and artists – to whom Breton was referring – are not just abandoned in their lonely precarity, but are also frequently held responsible (not least by themselves) for exactly this 'collective conscience'. Having interiorised the guilt of being socially isolated and deprived of togetherness, artists are beating themselves up over 'just' being individuals working in private; more than this, they are increasingly ashamed of 'just' being critical and reflexive, as these qualities now signify weakness and inability of action.

As today's cynical corporate capitalism supplants democratic politics for so many across the world, artists are now looking for democracy in unlikely places – namely, in art itself. On this territory, they are fighting structural inequalities propelled by the power of institutions and curators, with mixed results. But in trying to make 'righteous' art, might they be making themselves responsible for what they are, in reality, victims of? This question was on my mind as I sat on a stage at Hebbel am Ufer (HaU) in Berlin – the venue's stage and audience seating having been reversed for the occasion – for 'Artist Organisations International' ('AOI'), a congress of institutions and platforms organised by artists.<sup>2</sup>

The event was initiated by a theatre curator, dramatist and writer (Florian Malzacher), an activist-artist (Jonas Staal) and a visual arts and performance curator (Joanna Warsza); the twenty or so groups they brought together were a hotchpotch of different, often incompatible approaches and agendas. There were real political activists present (Concerned Artists of the Philippines, Gulf Labor), but also witty and ironic performance artists (Zentrum für Politische Schönheit). There were 'normal', if a bit informal, art institutions (Performing Arts Forum (PAF)) and there were 'official', though a bit unusual,

ambassadors of a political movement (Artist Association of Azavad). There were projects dictated by one artist's wild imagination that were later brought to reality by other people; some artists were ambivalent about this fulfilment of their

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## Ekaterina Degot reflects on the the turn towards activist institutions and 'artistic NGOs'.

dreams (Yael Bartana and the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland), while others welcomed this turn of events (Ahmet Ögüt and The Silent University). There were activists now in the midst of ecological downshifting (The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination) as well as those at the height of a career climb towards the United Nations (Forensic Architecture). There were self-organised schools (Chto Delat's School of Engaged Art) alongside production companies hiding behind misleading names (Milo Rau's International Institute of Political Murder). There was a non-organisation about which little was known but which was already a vague object of certain political projections

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1 André Breton, 'Political Position of Today's Art' (1935), *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press / Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1972, pp.212–33.

2 'Artist Organisations International', Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, 9–11 January 2015. Except where noted, quotations in this article are taken from video documentation of the event, available at <http://www.artistorganisationsinternational.org> (last accessed on 14 July 2015).

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(‘Artists of Rojava’, present as a video only<sup>3</sup>), as well as a highly elaborate, extremely self-reflexive and ultra-controversial project (Institute for Human Activities, directed by Renzo Martens) that effectively questioned, if not castrated, exactly those kinds of political desires.

To call for such a congress was a timely move. If, until very recently, contemporary art could be seen as a religion of criticality, there is now a strong desire among curators and artists to stop the constant nagging of criticism, and to build a better reality instead. This reality is to be sustainable rather than temporary; tangible rather than imaginary; collective rather than individualist; indisputably ‘good’ rather than ambivalently subversive. In other words, such practices aim to create a discussion rather than an exhibition — or even better, a school; better still, a commune, a political party or a bakery. Institutional critique is over; instead, the door is open to (re)construct the very thing that gives art scale, duration and — importantly — financial and organisational support: institutional activism.

There is an interesting moral undertone behind this activism. One increasingly hears that all art initiatives should be read and evaluated in a very basic, fundamental manner, in consideration of whether they do any good for society, or at least, whether they minimise harm (less transcontinental flights, less damage to the climate, less exploitation and inequality in working conditions). It is a question of the sustainable value art can produce, which, interestingly, seems to come more often from inside the art world than from outside it. And although critical observation and analysis is one obvious value that art has long produced, the current art scene seems to have lost unconditional faith in its force. Both the classical bourgeois institution of art (production of luxury commodities for individual consumption through the institution of collecting) and its cognitive-capitalist iteration (critical knowledge production for consumption through the institutions of exhibitions, biennials and, lately, artistic research) are perceived by many of their current practitioners as deeply and irrevocably flawed. Since critique itself is unsatisfactory, the ‘original sin’ of art is not to be dealt with through critical or self-critical practices, but only through repentance: one has to act. And indeed, it is not enough just to *act* ‘good’; one must *be* ‘good’. It is not an activist turn we are currently witnessing, perhaps, but an ontological one.

Should ‘AOP’ itself be understood as a project that operates along these lines?

In other words, what were we part of, if we felt like taking part; what were we observing, if that is what we were doing there? The event was described as neither a conference nor a symposium, but nothing short of an *International* (in the revolutionary socialist sense of the word, or at least so I presumed); yet its status was something that even the organisers themselves obviously did not fully agree on. In his opening speech, Staal said he truly hoped it would not be ‘one more thematic conference leading to the inevitable next’, but a formative congress of artists who would no longer be betrayed by curators and institutions; who would proceed instead through self-organisation, ‘regain[ing] control over the means of production, distribution and dissemination of the practice of art’. And yet, the very next speaker was a curator (invited, like myself, to moderate one of the panels), who did not hide the fact that everything at this event was ‘very interesting’ to him; he was there to research, to get an overview of a recent tendency of artists who defy research. Throughout the congress there were also complaints of being paired with groups who were not sufficiently activist or, at the other end of the scale, not sufficiently artistic, and while as an observer I was able to take intellectual pleasure in such quirky variety, there were people who felt insulted by exactly that. It was also clear that some attendees expected the literal inauguration of an ‘organisation of artist organisations’; others simply took the title as a figure of speech. I can only suspect that the organisers anticipated that these conflicts and contradictions might work dialectically. And to a certain extent, they did.

The particular confusion between the regime of representation and critique understood as ‘art’ and the activist regime of ‘real life’ is something new. Whereas once upon a time the viewer who jumped onstage in order to save Desdemona was called naïve, naïvety is now rehabilitated as a revolutionary instrument; the activist turn insists on

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3 The video, which can be seen at <http://www.artistorganisationsinternational.org>, featured footage and interviews from the region and focussed more on the political project of Rojava than any organisation of artists as such. The video was co-produced by the New World Academy, an academy established by Jonas Staal and BAK, Utrecht in 2013, and connected to the New World Summit, also founded by Staal, in 2012, which is ‘dedicated to providing “alternative parliaments” hosting organisations that currently find themselves excluded from democracy’. See <http://newworldsummit.eu/about/> (last accessed on 4 August 2015).



Ilya Repin,  
*Ivan the Terrible  
and His Son Ivan on  
November 16, 1581*,  
1885, oil on canvas,  
199 × 254cm



reconsidering any sort of art and reading it at face value. This shift should be distinguished from the historical avant-garde's claims of blurring the boundaries between art and life, since it was still under the rules of art's typical uselessness that avant-gardist 'art-life' works were to be judged. It is well known that Vladimir Tatlin's *Letatlin* (1929–31) did not, in fact, fly; and it is not by the body count that we assess the self-shooting scenarios of Chris Burden or Marina Abramović. Institutional-activist initiatives, by contrast, will hardly brag about their ineffectiveness. Here, we are finally out in the real world, bidding farewell to the arts and their cult of failure, and recognising initiatives by their fruit.

Here's an anecdote on the subject. Some years ago, at one of the many infamous court cases against artists in Russia, one gallerist made the familiar argument that art should not be interpreted literally.<sup>4</sup> The example he gave was Ilya Repin's huge and chilling *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581* (1885), where the tsar is depicted just after killing his son. It would be naïve, the gallerist argued, to understand the painting

***There is now a strong desire among curators and artists to stop the constant nagging of criticism, and to build a better reality instead.***

as an appeal to murder. It is an artwork, not reality — not a pipe, in other words. Although all the traditions of modernism, the avant-gardes, even classical art might seem to support the gallerist's argument, he would have found much less understanding at 'AOI'. The representation of a murder scene, as artistic as it may be, nonetheless

spreads uncontrollably into reality; the literal meaning cannot be excluded, and should perhaps even be the first to be considered. A pipe is a pipe after all, hence it is the right thing to 'call a pipe a pipe'. In fact, Repin would have agreed: *Ivan the Terrible* was painted as a political statement on the occasion of the terrorist assassination of Tsar Alexander II, its argument being that tsars were guilty of murder themselves, that violence breeds violence. The painting thus incorporates a dimension of real political action as part of its representational field.

'AOI' was similarly suspended between these two modes, and interestingly the mode of the 'real' (a political congress) required a larger infusion of art to support its claim than would have been expected within the mode of art-related critical research (a conference). There is something I call the 'hammer-and-sickle effect', which occurs when artists grow

4 The gallerist in question was Marat Guelman, who posted about the case on his blog on 26 August 2012. See <http://snob.ru/profile/5167/blog/page/2?page=25> (last accessed on 3 August 2015).



extremely sentimental about political one-liners and start to see them as ‘good’ in a moral, not just aesthetic, sense, using them to mark their identity and their territory. The inverted theatre at ‘AOI’ – (over-)designed in the brisk and vigorous style of Russian Constructivism – was indeed a one-liner. But between this strong design and the limp human figures who spoke in front of it, between the revolutionary mood of the set and the general depressive-as-usual tone of the presentations – between ideal and reality, if I may – there was an interesting gap, a telling disjuncture, so wide that it is impossible to bridge in one swoop (the sort of swift formal swoop that characterises so many of today’s multimedia tours de force, performances and performance-lectures). I had expected that at least some of the organisations would be flamboyantly fictitious, but they all tended towards plain speech, without a performance-lecture in sight. And as the congress evolved into something slightly awkward, I found this disjointedness between actors and stage design stimulating and perversely enjoyable. The situation put me in mind of the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012, curated by Artur Żmijewski (with Warsza as an associate curator), which was supposed to demonstrate the triumph of activist art, only to show its epic failure – but epic, nevertheless. At that moment, the defeat of activism seemed definitive; yet, in Beckettian style, it continues to ‘fail better’ again and again.

Regardless of whether the International of Artist Organisations will ever be inaugurated, it might make sense to take a closer look at this new tendency. It is often observed that in the previous regime of critical art, the role of the artist was strongly eclipsed by that of the curator, which increasingly led to artists either assuming this role themselves or excluding this figure in a self-organised, activist mode. Both paths generated interesting results, with the activist mode offering the more oppositional, anti-institutional approach. But what happens when this activism abandons its oppositional stance and reverses the paradigm, proposing institutional activism as the main mode of an avant-garde? Under these conditions, who are we finding in the curator’s stead? Who are artists here competing or aligning themselves with, who are they gravitating towards, whose role are they taking on?

It is obvious to me that the answer to these questions is: the state. There always has been some longing for the state in the left-wing art scene, with its wariness of private money and private modes of production, with its insistence on identifying the artist as worker rather than entrepreneur. This attitude has been strongly reasserted recently by organisations such as W.A.G.E.:<sup>5</sup> artists are claiming the right of artist fees rather than

‘Artist Organisations International’, Hebbel am Ufer (HaU), Berlin, 10 January 2015. Photograph: Lidia Rossner. Courtesy HaU, Florian Malzacher, Studio Jonas Staal and Joanna Warsza





Zentrum für Politische Schönheit, 'Marsch der Entschlossenen' ('March of the Determined') from the project 'Die Toten Kommen' ('The Dead Are Coming'), Berlin, 21 June 2015. Photograph: © Nick Jaussi

relying on the vague promise of the private market, which shows, of course, their awareness of their own precarity as well as highlighting the inequitable labour norms of the cultural field. Yet, it also suggests a potential willingness, or at a least lack of aversion, towards identifying as paid employees. The artist as a contract worker who is given a thematic frame that is oftentimes ideological and political — this is not the 'free', 'independent' artist. And so, just as they finally dealt with curators, artists may look forward to a time when they might cut state or state-like organisations out of the loop entirely by assuming their functions and then giving this frame to others. Today, the state is becoming the horizon of artists' ambitions.

This situation recalls the dilemma, according to Breton, that the contemporary artist was facing in 1935 (with reference to Karl Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach<sup>6</sup>): 'The very urgency of the task of changing the world, such as it appears to us, commonly leads people to believe that all available means ought to be enlisted in its service, that the pursuit of all other intellectual tasks should be postponed.'<sup>7</sup> Breton himself is clearly on the side of discursive practice that 'raises awareness', that works on the conscience (this is the core of Marxism to him), but he also admits this is because he resides in the West, where artists 'live in open conflict with the immediate world', a world '*without an alibi*'. His Russian comrades in the USSR can permit themselves to be, as he puts it, 'witnessing and participating' as they are building a completely new world.<sup>8</sup>

It is Breton's path, not the path of the Russian comrades, that Western academic Marxism has taken in the aftermath of 1968 — the path of individualism, criticism and constant reminders that the world around us has no alibi. Since this aftermath remains traumatic, it is no surprise that today's artists express their dissatisfaction by shifting towards collectivism and action. In something that could be described as a desperate act of regression, artists appear to be returning to the mid-century in order to correct historical

5 W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) is a 'New York-based activist organisation focussed on regulating the payment of artist fees by non-profit art institutions'. See <http://www.wageforwork.com> (last accessed on 27 July 2015).

6 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.' Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845, trans. W. Lough), in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Selected Works*, vol.1, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, pp.13–15; also available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm> (last accessed on 5 August 2015).

7 A. Breton, 'Political Position of Today's Art', *op. cit.*, p.223.

8 *Ibid.*, p.216.



School of Engaged Art, *Yeah, I Remember*, 2015. Courtesy the artists

mistakes — the type of the state they are longing for, and compete with through their artistic NGOs, is obviously the welfare state. Importantly, this was a time when artistic freedom seemed unshakable, and when the avant-garde, despite its unpopularity, still benefited from the political climate of the Cold War — this art represented the ‘free world’ (something not really on the table anymore). In the same desire to reconstruct the Cold War ideological balance, artists often flirt with the re-enactment of the missing Soviet Union that worked as a counterweight to the Western system: they recreate their ‘imaginary communism’ under whose conditions they can ‘witness’ (the return of realist practices, in drawing as well as documentary film this time, is another tendency that is clearly in the air) and ‘participate’.<sup>9</sup> But it is not just participation that is on the agenda now, it is also its bureaucratisation — not just ‘imaginary communism’ but something closer to ‘really existing socialism’. Needless to say, this idea of the Soviet Union as the realm of collectivism, solidarity and state support is totally fictitious; after 1968 (which, in this part of the world, was about the collapse of the Prague Spring), self-reflection, criticism, despair and extreme individualism were dominating the social landscape to a much greater extent, it seems to me, than in the West.

In any case, the idea of artists’ organisations seems to be rooted in all sorts of deep leftist traumas. In a recent conversation with Peter Engelmann, Alain Badiou claimed that ‘the defeat of the Paris Commune gradually led most revolutionary militants to embrace the idea that a well-structured party was necessary, that representation was necessary’.<sup>10</sup> This desire to compete with the state machine brought violence into the picture — the left’s fascination with violence is no secret, of course — but the catastrophic fortunes of really existing communist states in the last century has no doubt indelibly marked the left’s collective psyche. (Perhaps all the more so for not being immediately apparent to Western intellectuals who, as Badiou has noted, once greeted this violence with great optimism.) In the Constructivist environment of ‘AOI’, it was difficult not to compare the congress with the leftist congresses of artists and writers during the 1930s. The USSR Union

9 Claire Bishop has been critically addressing what she calls ‘the social turn’ for a decade now, and her diagnosis of the discursive criteria of socially engaged art as being ‘drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism and the Christian “good soul”’ is still relevant. See C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012, pp.39–40.

10 Alain Badiou and Peter Engelmann, *Philosophy and the Idea of Communism* (trans. Susan Spitzer), Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, p.85.





School of Engaged Art at a May Day rally in St Petersburg, 1 May 2014. Courtesy School of Engaged Art

of Artists was inaugurated in 1932 as an open and participatory group of like-minded cultural producers as well as a platform for the representation of different artists' collectives and individuals, an instrument of assistance for their work and life. It was almost an artists' state. But even before it was appropriated by the real Stalinist state (which would happen a couple of years after its founding), it revealed a dimension of violence and exclusion: discussions led to expulsions and *Berufsverbots*, non-aligned members were not tolerated and political intransigence overtook artistic radicalism. When Staal claimed that 'institutions should adapt their ethical stances to those of artists', I shivered slightly, imagining the fate of artists who would not agree to be a monolithic group with a unanimous idea of moral standards. I also wondered what the relation of a union of artists who have organisations might be to other artists who are not protected by those initiatives. Should an International of Artist Organisations come about, could any artist turn to it for help, or only members? Would it offer a hierarchical relationship? A representational model? A relation of exclusion?

Or perhaps these concerns are just my Soviet paranoia. Maybe organisational artistic initiatives are a way of pragmatic survival for artists in the world of creative capitalism, where the traditional art market is not supporting them anymore, or only marginally, but art is invited to infiltrate every zone of life. It is a step similar to the move towards institutionalised 'artistic research' in academia, which, for years now, has been formalising and bureaucratising the existing inclination of contemporary artists towards processing information, documenting and archiving. In the same way that artists feel economically and socially safer by becoming university professors, they may feel safer in many different ways by becoming directors, or even honorary directors, of organisations, platforms or obscure institutes, and this tells us something about the world we are living in: among other things, that art is now much more welcome in the capitalist system than it was at the time of Breton. He had to defend the role of art in society, citing Leon Trotsky's claim of the human right 'not only to bread but to poetry'.<sup>11</sup> Whatever good or bad poetry can do now, it seems to come in larger supply than bread.

11 Leon Trotsky, 'To the Memory of Sergei Essenin' (1926), as cited by A. Breton in 'Political Position of Today's Art', *op. cit.*, p.228.