

Autonomy for a ‘new world’?

4th New World Summit, Royal Flemish Theatre, Brussels, 19–21 September 2014

Blooming in the shadow of an austerity-era EU cultural policy dominated by ‘measurable outcomes’ that has tasked the cultural field with a plethora of social work from civic engagement, care work and alleviating unemployment to any number of regeneration-based solutions, a number of recent ‘critical’ art practices have come to articulate a politics of ‘demonstrable impact.’¹ Putting art ‘to work’ for society must be understood in parallel here with neoliberal policies which have pushed formerly public goods and services into the ‘private sphere’. Art must now work to exist, its value no longer being understood as of innate public benefit. While clearly linked to the conversion of art into financial metrics at the level of the state, the notion of ‘measurable outcomes’, with its implication of ‘social engineering’, makes it clear that programmes geared towards financial or social ends are increasingly difficult to separate.² This shift has not eclipsed the well-documented instrumentalization of art in the multicultural neoliberalization of the 1990s, but it is distinct from it. An art of measurable outcome is one that turns on a valorization of concrete tasks and explicit capability. Rather than a general promise of increased participation, for example, an art of ‘measurable outcomes’ is pitched, executed and its results documented in ways akin to all other ‘best practices’ of neoliberal governance.

Within this landscape, critically engaged art practices such as Jonas Staal’s New World Summit (NWS) have come to situate themselves in relation to demonstrable social justice impacts. While not necessarily in direct dialogue, there is a structural relationship between dominant policy regimes which mandate artistic social outcomes and justice-oriented critical practices: the critical quests of these artistic projects come into existence (and multiply) in an attempt to materially mitigate the intensifying effects of these very policies and their larger, globally influential apparatuses. At the same time, practices such as Staal’s are part of what is made visible in the EU

as art, because they articulate themselves, in part, in terms of realizable solutions. This is not to say that these practices align politically with contemporary cultural policy or necessarily reproduce their effects – they espouse ‘progressive’ or radical causes – but it is to argue for the necessity of situating them within this field of appearance and recognizing how the two are linked through the logic of ‘verifiable’ gain.

The New World Summit is an ‘artistic and political organization’ founded by Staal in 2012 that seeks to develop ‘alternative parliaments’ for ‘stateless politics.’³ It is also to be understood as the leveraging of art to partially sequester an emergent internationalist politics from the state. NWS was originally conceived as offering a platform to organizations and political parties variously blacklisted as ‘terrorist’ by interchanging Western powers, and, in so doing, providing a necessary visualization of exclusion from a supposedly ‘democratic’ world order. The Fourth Summit in Brussels, titled the ‘Stateless State’, expanded its purview to include unrecognized states, peoples’ organizations and political parties, which occupy varying degrees of distance from the international political community. Most of the peoples at the Summit had been failed by the existing, neocolonial world order. Any criticism of the NWS as failing to connect participating parties with Western political power misses one of the event’s central tenets: that existing forms of recognition, ‘aid’ and jurisprudence further the existence of statelessness, rather than eradicating it. In the case of West Papua, for example, an unrecognized state within Indonesia which asked Staal directly if he or the Summit could force the International Court to look at their case, any recognition achieved in an international court would negate the struggles of those still blacklisted and unrecognized surrounding them at the Summit.

The architecture of the forum, a stark plywood oval structure occupying the entire stage at the Royal Flemish Theatre, provided a skeleton for the

event's choreography: each phase of the tightly timed and regulated sections became framed. The telling repetitions of parliamentary procedure announced themselves as performed. Maps representing the contested territories were installed behind each speaker. This both provided an imperially resonant 'all-seeing' power to the Summit, a vision of a 'New World', and also isolated a central tension in political programmes between speakers. Some fought for territory, some were fighting for overlapping territories, and others still (like the Pirate Party) were unconcerned with physical territory within their programme for self-determination. The design and inauguration of the forum, the dominance of the NWS brand identity – a visual coherency that functioned to translate the divergent worlds into the context of the Summit, and thus lessen the distance between them – and the event's procedure, consisting of five curated segments each of which framed a possible relation to the contemporary state, constituted the artist's gesture, or his 'invisible hand'. Titled 'Oppressive State', 'Progressive State', 'Global State', 'New State' and 'Stateless State', each section was convened by a different chair (never Staal, who gave the opening and closing remarks). The speeches themselves are best understood as live 'primary documents', a people or organization in its own words, which were held together under the terms, sequence and political rationale of the

representation that bypasses existing impasses in a colonially inherited world order; second, to bolster an international 'progressive' solidarity, through connecting the exclusions from self-determination faced by those both within and outside of internationally recognized democratic citizenship. The Summit acted as a 'new' international forum, which offered a platform for the speech of parties unable to appear elsewhere, as well as the ground on which to compare differing philosophies and political programmes for the achievement of self-determination, from the creation of new states to the rejection of the state-form altogether. Less than a month after its closing panel, the NWS has already seen the materialization of a key goal. As the crisis in Rojava unfolds between Isis and the Kurdish resistance, the speech by Dilar Dirik, a member of the Kurdish Women's Movement, made at the NWS is perhaps the only statement available for the 'international community' which recounts the history of the Kurdish resistance to Isis as well as to US-led 'Coalition of the Willing' militarism, within a detailed and visualized account of Kurdish 'democratic confederalism' or the form of direct democracy operating within the Kurdish-controlled 'autonomous zone' in Northern Syria.⁴ The NWS produced a platform for the production and circulation of a statement by an active member of the Kurdish Resistance, which adheres to terms wholly unlike that of existing

Western forums and media outlets – a platform which connected the Kurdish resistance to a global network of other struggles at the Summit. Dirik's image from the Summit has even emerged as an Internet meme.

However, as an entity with the power to 'give voice', or, in Staal's opening words, 'to imagine new worlds', the ground the Summit itself stands on must be delineated. One could argue that the Summit was staged as a departure from and critique of supposedly democratic European parliamentary politics, as

the NWS took place in Brussels, and was founded by a Dutch artist using European cultural funds. The NWS would certainly not deny its European status as a host. Its use of its own autonomy to shoulder state intervention (here in the form of cultural funding), and carve out a space for its own rules of appearance, is akin to the ubiquity of international caucuses – the Climate Summit, G20 Summit, Nuclear Security Summit – which operate with



Photo: Ernie Buts

Summit. The event's realism functioned to translate each speech into its programme in a naturalization of its own framing devices: while what unfolded was not under the direct control of the artist, the careful placement, ordering and titling of what transpired, the terms of speech and engagement, constituted the event's power: its 'conduct of conduct'.

The goals of the NWS emerged as twofold: first, to use 'the space of art' to develop a form of political

similar distance (partially subject yet able to convene on independent terms) to state rule and regulation. The Summit form was developed to respond to the shared problems of neoliberal globalization, and as such falls outside of representational democracy: its form is one of emergency, of direct intervention and even of cooperation, but it is a harbinger of de-democratization.

In this regard, the NWS assumes a powerful form of contemporary governance: a space within yet announcing its separation from the state, a forum of unelected yet 'varied stakeholders', but most importantly a form which, while it may seek to serve democratic interests, is fundamentally not of a democratic structure itself. Here the heterogeneity and expansionism of the cultural professions (Staal listed NWS's members in the familiar lengthy list: 'artists, designers, philosophers, cultural producers') acts to bolster a sense of collectivity – which might be present, but whose structure is unavailable. The terms of membership are opaque. And the invitation for the stateless to speak is an elective decision, part of the constitution of the artwork. Artistic decision-making neither purports to transparency, nor is subject to electoral process. A similar observation was made concerning Women on Waves (WoW), a Dutch NGO which presented during the 'Progressive State' section of the NWS. WoW provides abortions in the international waters offshore from countries where it is illegal, and its logic has been compared to the fluid influence of global financial capital: offering offshore services in spite of state regulation.⁵ Like the NWS, its correspondences to contemporary capital do not negate its political message, but rather point to a necessary unease concerning the relation between form and content. WoW is able to exist through its appeal to artistic autonomy, completing its first voyage because the shipping container that housed its onboard abortion clinic was designed by an artist and could be classified as art, and therefore was allowed to sail despite the violation of regulations.

NWS's invocation of 'progressive politics' is inextricable from the progressive claims of all contemporary summits, in a marriage of progressive political rhetoric with the structural displacement of democratic possibility, and in its own sector the financial streamlining of the formerly public value of art. This was especially clear in the relationship of progressivism to the control and distribution of

women's reproductive labour. As Rebecca Gomberts of WoW pointed out, women's reproductive rights are always first to be bartered in political compromise by progressive movements. Dilar Dirik rejected progressivism as the seeking of freedom based on the acquisitions of (state-granted) rights. As she stressed, women's liberation, the sub-excluded within any group of excluded, cannot be won through rights alone. Rather, Dirik identifies a series of layers of autonomy: the Kurdish Women's Movement as autonomous within the PKK, and both groups being within the autonomous zone of Kurdish Syria. Is it possible to rethink artistic autonomy, as a seizing of space and implementation of social organization in plain sight of authority, in light of the Kurdish resistance? The NWS is situated to do so, but it must shed itself of art, of its 'outcomes' and 'progress', and their cultural corollaries 'imagination' and 'creativity', in light of the Kurdish example.⁶ Such a gesture would entail forfeiting artistic decision-making. Or perhaps this entails the development of a new art of government. It is said that the historic 'avant-garde art movements critical of artistic autonomy strove for an autonomy that dared not speak its name': real political autonomy.⁷ Inside the NWS, autonomy spoke.

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Notes

1. Artist organizations that promote initiatives for immigrants and refugees, such as those instigated by Ahmet Ögüt (The Silent University) and Tania Bruguera (Immigrant Movement International), to name only one area of practice.
2. Even the UN convention specifies culture as a 'source of intangible' value. See 'Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, Paris, 20 October 2005', http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&url_do=do_topic&url_section=201.html (accessed 16 October 2014).
3. 'New World Summit – Berlin | Kochi | Leiden | Brussel', New World Summit, <http://newworldsummit.eu> (accessed 16 October 2014).
4. There have since been impassioned pleas on the left to support the Kurds as an important democratic model emerging from the Syrian revolution. See, for example, David Graeber, 'Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?', *Guardian*, 8 October 2014.
5. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 'Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 309–27.
6. The complex Kurdish system of 'democratic confederalism' has gender and religious quotas for its leadership.
7. Sven Lütticken, 'Autonomy after the Fact', *Open* 23, 2012, www.skor.nl/_files/Files/open23-en%20P88-105.pdf (accessed 17 October 2014).