

TOPIC

Anthropocene

Art Writing

Art Education

(A)Social

Co_temporaries

Outskirts



Oslo Architecture Triennale 2016 / Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava & Studio Jonas Staal: New World Embassy: Rojava. Installation view, Oslo City Hall, 2016. Photo: István Virág.

New World Embassy: Rojava

INA HAGEN on January 11, 2017 at 6:27 AM

Since 2012 the Rotterdam-based Studio Jonas Staal has been organizing a project under the umbrella title *New World Summit* – an artistic and political organization which builds alternative parliaments for organizations who, for different reasons, are excluded from traditional global democratic processes. Together with Maria Hlavajova, artistic director at Basis voor Actuele Kunst, Utrecht (BAK), Staal expanded the Summit in 2013 to include *New World Academy*, a long-term project that brings together students, artists, theorists, activists, and artworks, followed by exhibitions and a public forums hosted by BAK. In 2014, representatives of the Rojava-region in the north of Syria, also known as west-Kurdistan, invited Staal to build a permanent parliament of this kind in the city of Dêrik.¹ This also marked the starting point for *New World Embassy: Rojava*, a collaboration between the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, Studio Jonas Staal, Oslo Architecture Triennial 2016 and Art in Public Space Norway (KORO/URO) presented during the closing weekend of the Triennial.



New World Summit: Rojava - International Delegation

from [New World Summit](#)

07:13 |

In Oslo on the 27th and 28th of November 2016, one could therefore visit the temporary embassy building of the black-listed Independent Democracy of Rojava, inside of Oslo City Hall. Already visible the moment one entered through the main entrance, the domed embassy building had a monumental look but fit spaciouly into the main hall without making too much fuss of itself. The construction revealed stacked and slightly askew wooden frames covered in fabrics of vivid colors surrounding an atrium with a circular table in the center. An architectural

model of sorts, it was built to resemble the soon to be completed Rojava parliament in Dêrik. The dome was used as hosting site for a two-day seminar of several panel discussions and presentations by representatives of the region and other unrecognized states or marginalized groups and scholars. The rays of sun that reached in through the large windows at the very end of the City Hall engulfed the whole construction in a kind of light that made it seem as though it was lit from inside. When taking a closer look at the fabric, the dome appeared as a collage of flags merging with each other. It was to represent an “ideological planetarium” to use the phrasing of the artist, Netherland-born Jonas Staal, who developed the structure with the Democratic Self-Administration as well as architect Paul Kuipers and designer Remco van Bladel.



Timelapse New World Embassy: Rojava

from [New World Summit](#)

00:32 |



On the first day of the seminar in Oslo the co-curator of the Oslo Architecture Triennale, Marina Otero Verzier, drew our attention to the formal dimension of nation-building and how art and architecture are tools to envision new forms of society. For his part, Staal underlined that new ideologies create the need for new art. He claimed that art can work as an imaginary for new political structures and introduced the phrase “ideology as form” as a central concept to the work that Studio Staal is doing. I looked around me, eyes resting for a moment

on the domed ceiling of the embassy building. Fragments of the frescos and murals that cover the walls of the City Hall were visible through slits between the pieces of fabric: the vivid colors of Alf Rolfsen's frescos that depict the building of the democratic state of Norway contrasted by an image depicting the German occupation during the Second World War, bled through the slits and formed a new dimension to the mosaic. This hall is also famous for the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony, which symbolic importance has been selected to contextualize *New World Embassy: Rojava*. There is no doubt that nation-building is the theme for how the project was presented, and along with it the construction of national liberation narratives.

Throughout the very inspiring and nuanced discussions that followed, Asya Abdullah and Sînem Mohammed of Rojava underlined how cultural platforms are central tools in the construction of new democratic societies. What we witnessed was, in other words, mainly a political revolutionary movement using an artistic platform to gain visibility for their cause. Even if not a complete reversal of the standardized power relation of many such projects, as Studio Staal produces a rigid framework for the project as one of two *Embassies* so far, the representatives of Rojava were at least give the opportunity to talk on their own behalf without the artist dominating too much in his role as their 'ambassador' in Oslo City Hall. Rojava's representatives seemed to believe in the potential of the art field as political agency. They took the opportunity to describe the main principles of their new society: democratic confederalism, equality between genders, secularism, self defense, collectivism and social ecology. Even though they are not acknowledged by surrounding states – Syria, Turkey or Iran, to name a few – they underlined how their society is blooming. Terms like the Renaissance of the Middle-East were used by other panelists to describe how central culture and education is in this work, describing their rather ingenious use of a cultural platform as a high-profile soap-box.



Rojava: Stateless Democracy

from New World Summit

12:11

I did however react to the equating of the Kurdish struggle to a western history-line as a well-meant bypassing of how radical the model Rojava has put out into practice in fact is. Their new *stateless* democracy stands on the pillars of the women's movement and freedom movement. These groups have fought on the frontline to liberate the region from jihadist organizations like ISIS, the Assad regime and generations of oppression of the Kurdish people on the basis of racial and religious discrimination. As co-ambassador of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Asya Abdullah pointed out to vigorous applause: the Rojava Revolution is a women's revolution as women's liberation is the first step any real democracy must take. After managing to gain relative stability in 2012, the population have developed their democratic confederalism to precisely break with fundamental patriarchal and oppressive forms of governance they believe to be inherent in the nation-state model. The day ended as a confirmation of what I think we all felt was in the air: the artistic proposal *New World Embassy: Rojava* was in fact a call out for a permanent embassy in Oslo.

Fights escalated in Aleppo, Syria on the night between the first and the second day of the seminar. Over that weekend 25,000 people were forced to flee their homes. According to *The Guardian*, Unicef's regional director, Geert Cappelaere, reported six million children in Syria were in need of humanitarian assistance in the area at the time and these numbers have only increased since then. These events were a reminder for those of us watching from afar that

the Rojava condition is still very much a military one and that its democratic ideals go hand in hand with the violent conditions of war. The People's Protection Unit (YPG), represented in the seminar by UK born activist Macer Gifford, is directly linked to the PKK, which is a central militant rebel group fighting the Assad regime and considered by some nations and coalitions (including Turkey, USA and NATO) to be a terrorist organization. Alongside the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the YPG is currently on the frontline of the war against the regime, ISIS and other oppressive forces forcing mono-culture and religion in the area. Rojava and its largest political party, PYD, is also ideologically tied to the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who from his cell developed the concept of democratic confederalism for the Kurdish condition it is built on.

The fact that the global political community does not recognize Rojava is telling: the War on Terror trumps any possibility for real democracy on a global level. Running the risk of supporting a possible terrorist organization is less favorable than risking the welfare and freedom of a population. Aldar Xalîl of the Tev-Dem explained this can be seen in the example of the Turkish government's leveraging of the European Union into compliance by means of migration control on the border to Syria. The stateless democratic model Rojava proposes needs to be understood in relation to how the War on Terror manifests in the region. I would argue that this war and its consequences: the displacement of millions, the forming of extremist religious groups, the right-wing resurgence through Europe and the US – to name a few — is one of the biggest global issues of our time. By claiming art's responsibility in tackling this issue, Staal and Hlavajova attempt to demonstrate the explicitly political promise of socially-engaged art. The artistic ambition of the project points precisely in the direction of art as political agency. In this view art necessarily must "position itself as a power that aims for a new imagination." The basic assumption of *New World Summit*, its *Academy* and *Embassies*, as well as Staal's other projects such as *Beyond Allegories* (2014) (where the above quote is taken from), is that art fundamentally is the free imagination of the global democratic project. These artworks claim to be "more political than politics itself" and to fight on behalf of a universal, global, democratic ideal that current politics are unable to fulfill for the people of the world. This is, according to Staal, because of geopolitical and economic selfishness amongst politicians who have no real interest to either listen or talk with true democratic intent.

This position was subjected to some scrutiny during the second day of the seminar which instigated critical investigation of the value of an embassy and the concrete diplomatic difficulties Rojava is faced with when entering global negotiations. A recurring theme was the importance of just, democratic representation of all peoples, within diplomacy and outside of it, pointing to the core of what *New World Summit* presents as its purpose. One question is whether a cultural frame like this makes it easier for politicians to reject the organization's seriousness in diplomatic negotiations. Moussa Ag Assarid of Free Azawad, a liberation organization for the Tuareg people in Mali, did not think so. He explained how an embassy serves an important function as a platform for cultural exchange and as leverage in negotiations. He told how *New World Embassy: Azawad*, the first iteration of *New World Embassy* raised in Utrecht in 2014, have given a strengthened position in negotiations with the

governing powers in the North of Mali to this day. The Sami parliament in Norway is another example, albeit of representation negotiated within the framework of the nation-state. Representative Runar Myrnes Balto underlined however that this formalized arrangement does not guarantee real democratic representation in the state. And herein lies the core problematic of providing a people with an embassy building as a symbolic act of imagination while promising to be “more political than politics itself”: when politics and diplomacy is failing a people, art is perhaps wrongly presented as a backdoor to the same results without the real leverage to make the results come true. The former European Union Supreme Court Judge, Hanne Sophie Greve, took part in nuancing this debate. She pointed out that to start with an embassy means to accept the concept of nation-state and play along with already established diplomatic rules. Building an embassy means, in other words, to accept, and not break with, the nation-state. Greve’s opinion was that the representation of Rojava in this way are in fact in danger of closing off other opportunities for the radically new models they seek.

So why does Studio Staal accept the embassy as ideological form and seemingly uncritically adopts its blueprint? Within the Embassy structure erected in Oslo City Hall the traditional formal structure of western democracy – the forums of ancient Greece – come to mind. Like the surrounding murals in the City Hall, it holds a symbolic function above all else. When Staal describes the dome as a planetarium he makes a promise for the prosperity of the future, not the present. But the two days in Oslo City Hall showed how practical problems of democratic representation can be, among other things related to translation. Shela Sheikh from Centre for Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths University in London pointed out the role of the translator as a key figure in this ongoing struggle, an interesting point that speaks to the function of art in politics from a slightly different perspective. The art scene can maybe use its relative autonomy to support political organizations by means of translating them into more abstracted terms – not necessarily either symbolically or as imaginary force for new futures, but perhaps on a more practical level. To use one example, art events can be used as a means to provide visitors visas to those who might not be able to travel otherwise. The function then is as some kind of non-judgemental middle-man. Seen in light of the seminar *Public Calling* held in the National Theatre of Oslo just weeks prior, also co-organized by KORO under Wallström with Staal as keynote speaker, *New World Embassy: Rojava* paints a picture of art as a medium perhaps even capable of revealing the truth.

As 2016 has passed, what has crystallized is that statistics and facts of media-covered conflicts and humanitarian crises are flawed at best and often outright false, with the USA election this fall as a demonstration of its consequences. With that knowledge, the situation in Syria becomes even more impossible to understand from a distance. In Norwegian media I see the YPG placed with ISIS on the oppositional side against Assad, while its representatives tell of a fight for freedom and democracy for all peoples. Does art have the ability or agency to help separate the bullshit from the truth?

Evaluation of the exact truthfulness aside – what is presented is a platform that allows for a seemingly equal footing to the stories of groups who by default are not listened to without prior

judgement. The biases that follow labels like “terrorist” color the listeners ability to empathize and respond accordingly. As an artwork *New World Embassy* is a mediator of stories, making selected knowledge more widely accessible. It is, however, not a politically impartial one. Even if I remain somewhat skeptical of the extent to which the political agenda of the project itself is left without further scrutiny, as an embassy it functioned insofar as it was, on those two days, a place for cultural exchange. First-person accounts are hard-hitting. As I looked across from me in the embassy building at the men and women who attended this art event, I was at least able to set aside the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and apathy I was feeling only hours earlier as I left my apartment for the City Hall. The seminar was recorded and also streamed online (as they often are) which means there is a small potential that a representative group of future or current politicians could be watching in. Together with the publication, which includes texts and interviews with representatives of Rojava, the overall exposure could be quite broad.

If one remains hopeful, it is possible to imagine that *New World Embassy: Rojava* could be a step on the way to broader knowledge of the Kurdish people. Whether the political promise that art can envision and therefore make possible new futures, remains more obscure. It is also not clear how seminars can work to change the course of things, even if they serve an enlightening function. To be honest, I feel they are not really taking us anywhere. Considering the now almost five year lifespan of *New World Summit*, it seems important to ask what kind of institution it has become. Staal could perhaps follow through their project with a closer look at the ideology bootstrapped with the seminar’s formal aspects, beyond its architectural premise, to help make this more clear. It is a committing dialogue Studio Jonas Staal and KORO, as the Norwegian representative, have initiated when calling out for permanent representation of Rojava in Oslo. I am anticipating how well these very different organizations are able to follow up on their promises – as of now they appear to have fallen quiet, leaving the hopeful in a kind of vacuum.

1. KORO/URO (Oslo); *New Worlds: The Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava & New World Summit* (Studio Jonas Staal), 2016. p. 7. [↗](#)

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