



Power of assembly: on the New World Summit

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New World Summit (NWS) is an artistic and political organisation founded by Dutch artist Jonas Staal in 2012. Resembling an alternative United Nations, the Summit was initially convened to invite groups blacklisted during the 'War on Terror' – and thus excluded from formal democratic processes – to a series of 'propositions for alternative parliaments'. As one might expect, being involved with a terrorist organisation has serious consequences: members have their bank accounts frozen, are subject to travel restrictions and isolated from the political sphere. New World Summit takes advantage of the non-standardised way organisations are listed, as different groups are banned in different countries, or assembles when representatives are granted temporary diplomatic visas if engaged in formal negotiation processes in Europe.

The first summit commissioned for the 2012 Berlin Biennale ran over two days, with representatives of terrorist-listed organisations and those of the international judiciary debating 'Reflections on the Closed Society' and 'Proposals for an Open Society'. Subsequent summits have addressed the use of 'terrorism' as an instrument used to exclude organisations from the political sphere and the concept of 'limitless democracy'. In 2014, the Summit, in collaboration with the artspace and research centre BAK (*basis voor actuele kunst*) in Utrecht, organised a 'temporary embassy' for the recently declared independent Azawad. A 'stateless state' in North Mali held by Tuareg rebels, Azawad is not currently recognised by any nation. In ensuing fora the relationship between democracy and the state has become an explicit theme, notably following an invitation extended to NWS to visit Rojava, the recently declared autonomous regions of North Western Syria.

Since 2012, the confederated regions of Rojava have captured the world's attention as a hard-won emergent democracy in the midst of a devastating multifactional conflict that has seen the rise of the Islamic State and that is perceived by many as a proxy war between US–EU aligned Western powers, Russia and an authoritarian Turkey.

In an area south of the Turkish border that many Kurds consider their homeland, the three multi-ethnic 'cantons' that constitute Rojava are founded on principles of gender equality, secularism, self-defence, communalism, social ecology and Democratic Confederalism. The latter is 'The Philosophy' of the revolution, as written by Abdullah Öcalan, one of the founders of the Kurdish struggle who has been imprisoned on a Turkish island since 1999.

Drawing from the ideas of late American political theorist Murray Bookchin, Democratic Confederalism is a bottom-up theory of participatory democracy that refutes the organising principle of the nation-state. In 2014, the NWS team travelled to autonomous Kurdistan to observe Democratic Confederalism in action and were consequently asked to design the fledgling democracy's permanent public parliament, which it will inaugurate this year.

Drawing on Rojava's political experiment, the sixth NWS convened in Utrecht over the last weekend in January this year to consider the prospect of 'Stateless Democracy'. It marked the culmination of a year-long collaboration between NWS, BAK and the University of Utrecht's Centre for Conflict Studies. The Summit convened within a temporary architecture built inside the main hall of the university – where the Treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1579, the document by which the 'free' Dutch provinces claimed independence from the Spanish monarchy. In this latest iteration, NWS performed a historical intervention as a critique of the Dutch nation state, using the site of its foundation to stage an assembly of stateless organisations.

Readers from Australia may be interested to note this most recent summit was

attended by a delegation that included the artist Richard Bell (representing the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and the artist collective *ProppaNOW*), alongside Callum Clayton-Dixon, of the Aboriginal Provisional Government (APG) and the Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR). Others in the session themed 'Future Representation' included Emory Douglas, former Minister of Culture for the Black Panthers, and artist Ilena Saturay from the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines.

Saturay set the tone of this session by recalling a musical performed by the New Peoples' Army in a remote village in the Philippines, which concerned a young peasant whose land had been confiscated by a landlord. During a dramatic peak in the performance, the frustrated protagonist approached the Peoples' Army to announce: 'Comrades, I have decided to join you.' Immediately, a member of the audience approached the stage and also announced his intention to join the NPA. One by one the other audience members followed, filling up to the stage; an unscripted intervention that changed the narrative of the play. Saturay offers it as an example of art made from the material of daily life: the audience identified so strongly that they felt that it *was* them rather than their representation. By stepping onto the stage they presented themselves as actors in a common struggle, who collectively felt empowered to determine their own outcomes. Saturay continued to rally against the commodification of art and a system that produces 'art stars' rather than artworks that are directly engaged with people's struggles. She argued for an art that departs from what curator Vivian Zihler labelled the 'business model' of contemporary art production, which Zihler pointed out that NWS is also an example of.


Zihler also highlighted that this was the first Summit in which Aboriginal nations co-existing with settler colonies were represented. On the same weekend, Zihler had opened Bell's exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, a collaboration with Douglas and artists drawn from Amsterdam's migrant and refugee communities. It features Bell's homage to the first Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, an iconic protest camp which he describes as the greatest work of performance art within Australian history.

At the summit, Bell recalled that WAR had re-established tent embassies around Australia in 2011–12, reviving this iconic performance of an institutional form originally proposed by poet Tony Koorie in 1972. Alongside its characteristic document, the passport – a document denied to many of those present at the Summit – these bureaucratic forms remain, to paraphrase Zihler, 'Anglo-European technologies of oppression'. Clayton-Dixon discussed how the APG had been issuing Aboriginal Passports since the late 1980s, encouraging Aboriginal people to travel with them as an inherent sovereign right. Delegations had entered other states with limited success, but the powerful irony of the 'prop' was revealed when delegates persisted to use them to re-enter Australia. 'What are they going to do, deport us to our country of origin?' Clayton-Dixon quipped.

The Tent Embassy and the Aboriginal Passport both use humour, mimicry and rhetoric to articulate their demands. They are forms by which the colonised can force recognition from authorities, recognise themselves as political actors, mock and subvert hegemonic power. Similarly, it could be argued that New World Summit hijacks the form of the contemporary art spectacle as *the* cultural expression of neoliberal capitalism – which ironically also argues for the minimisation of the state – by devising a political theatre in which global assemblages of collective resistance are acted out large.

In Utrecht, the sixth New World Summit presented itself as a formidable alignment of institutions and autonomous organisations who had come together 'not to make artworks, but to make a world'. Since its initiation in 2012, NWS has steadfastly accumulated interest and developed its capacity to 'act'. As the last session drew to a close, Staal indicated that for the inaugural sitting of the public parliament in Rojava the Summit intends to develop resolutions, thus it seems poised to enact *real* power rather than its representation.

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