

# Art, Democratism, and Fundamental Democracy

## **An Exploration of the New World Summit**

---

Jonas Staal

---

### **What Do We Mean When We Say "Art"?**

In order to answer the question What do we mean when we use the word "art"?, I believe we should first address the ideological context within which the word art is articulated and operational.

Owing to the sustained frontal attack of Dutch extreme-right politicians on contemporary artists and art institutions, which they claim to be propaganda for the left – or whatever is left of the left – the word "art" has now indefinitely lost its "sovereign" status in the Netherlands. It seems that, uncomfortably enough, the extreme right has a point. The terminology that they use to disqualify art, such as the now infamous concept of art as a "leftist hobby," may be obscene, but the fact of the matter is that the current Dutch cultural infrastructure is rooted in a clearly ideologically defined era. Because of the extreme-right discourse, the word "art" has today returned to its place in a long forgotten social-democratic post-WWII policy.

This policy described the task of the cultural infrastructure as spreading art and culture to the entire population. The social-democrats perceived art to be a form of knowledge that belonged to the shared collective project of building a new civilization, rather than art being the property of an aristocratic minority that had ruled the old world which had collapsed in totalitarianism. But even though the extreme right justifiably considers art unambiguously to be propaganda for the left, their discourse lacks precision

and historical awareness. Nonetheless, they are right that the values that we attribute in artistic discourse to the role of art in society, finds its roots in this specific, social-democratic tradition. A project of democratizing knowledge, which I in essence support. However, the conditions under which this democratization was supposed to take place ended up obfuscating precisely what was at stake, and it took the intervention of the extreme right to reassert the ideological core of the Dutch cultural infrastructure

It was in the context of this specific social-democratic project that the Dutch artist was able to gain his celebrated *freedom*: the idea of the artist and art itself as *sovereign*. This idea is precisely the one I object to: the idea of sovereign artistic freedom masks the *essential political task* attributed to art as a form of knowledge and knowledge distribution. This idea is a remainder of the post-WWII cultural infrastructure which was meant to provide artists with the means to create their work unrestrained by political influence. Unrestricted by the propagandistic use that the Nazi regime – which today remains the symbolic embodiment of 20th century totalitarianism – had made of the arts. It is this *fear of propaganda* that has obscured the essentially ideological project that art embarked upon. This fear created a depoliticized art, believing it was sovereign yet serving a specifically political goal.

As a result, the Dutch cultural infrastructure was created with the unacknowledged aim to formalize the ideal of democratic freedom, with which the newly risen “enlightened” West distinguished itself both in space from the East and in time from its blood-soaked past. By establishing the role of the artist as the symbol of democratic civilization and freedom, it was not so much the *artist’s work* that mattered, but the *unrestrained existence of the artist within the democratic state itself*. It is not the artist that sculpts society, but it is the artist himself who is sculpted based on a vision of the post-WWII democratic state.

We encounter here the underlying principle of the doctrine of artistic freedom: if the democratic state grants freedom to the artist, it does so at a double profit.

First – it makes each and every artist into a living statue of liberty; they become a propagandistic tool merely because the state sponsors their free existence. But second, and most importantly, *the state is at the same no longer directly responsible for the results that the artist produces*.

Whenever politicians do take direct responsibility, they are met with heavy criticism. Even though we know that the real curator of the cultural infrastructure is the state, acknowledging this situation would dispel the systematically sustained smokescreen of artistic sovereignty, as a pillar of democratic freedom.

The French philosopher Jacques Ellul speaks of our technologically driven society in terms of *total propaganda*. The biggest achievement of total propaganda is that even those in power – those who commission the artists to become the living statues of liberty, the avant-garde of the democratic state – have come to believe their actions and policies have nothing to do with propaganda. Propaganda is thus “total” at the moment it becomes the only possible truth, “just the way we do things.”

## Democratism

From the moment that the Dutch post-war doctrine of artistic freedom was translated into a cultural infrastructure, we have witnessed the rise of a form of propaganda that solely serves what the Japanese call democratism. In Japanese the word “democracy” only exists as an “ism” – making democratism simply one of the many -isms that are currently ideologically available. I propose to use the word “democratism” as a differentiation from the word democracy.

Democratism indicates the translation of the constantly self-reassessing emancipatory principles of democracy into a stagnant, non-reflexive ideology of administration and governance. Of core importance is a series of monopolies that democratism enacts, namely the monopoly on violence, the monopoly on representation, the monopoly on information and the monopoly on history. I would argue that, despite art’s claims as a form of knowledge production and source of alternative histories, it is within the context of democratism impotently trapped in its doctrine of sovereignty.

The painful truth is that exactly because art is considered free, it cannot refer to anything but the status quo of democratism itself.

The Dutch cultural infrastructure is obviously not the only propagandistic product in systematic denial of its own ideological agenda. We may, for example, point to the notorious CIA-funded project during the Cold War, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which among others had the task of 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, the notion of “abstract art” was transformed into a synonym of “free art.” Even though the American public at large was not at all 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 *exactly by ruling out all depiction*. The work of Jackson Pollock, this weapon of the Cold War, 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.”

We are in permanent need of a critique of ideology in order to identify the types of infrastructure that convey the real meaning to our work as an artist, to understand them so we can change them. But how to know the types of propaganda that we are dealing with in a state of total propaganda? Terry Eagleton evaluates this condition as follows: “The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power: and any practice of political emancipation thus involves that most difficult of all forms of liberation: freeing ourselves from ourselves.”<sup>01</sup> The difficulty today, in the condition of total propaganda as described by Ellul, is that there is no longer anyone who even identifies him or herself as the person in power, let alone as the oppressor...

Within what we would currently consider as “traditional” propaganda, we may already find the clues of the way in which Ellul’s total propaganda will come to assert itself. In the classic 1942 Donald Duck cartoon “Der Führer’s Face”, Donald finds himself as a Nazi in Germany, where he eats bread made of wood, works 24 hours per day, with only minor breaks during

<sup>01</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London/New York: Verso, 2007), xxiii.

which he enjoys a fake mountainous background, before being forced back into the weapons factory where he is enslaved by the Nazi industry. When Donald mentally crashes due to the excessive workload, he wakes up in his own bed. Upon realizing it was just a dream, he suddenly sees the shadow of what seems to be a Nazi officer saluting him – convinced that his own country has now been taken over as well; Donald immediately returns the shadow's Nazi salute. At that moment he realizes that he is actually standing in front of the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, and thus reassured he calmly returns to sleep. But at this specific moment – the moment in which one totalitarian doctrine is confronted with another, in which the Nazi salute is for a brief moment equated with the Statue of Liberty's pose – the film provides a brilliant criticism of our *lack of tools* to recognize the condition of total propaganda in contemporary democratism.

### From Institutional Critique to Fundamental Democracy

The betrayal of emancipatory principles in the imagery of democratism's propaganda, has been addressed most valuably in the artistic research that we call Institutional Critique. This ongoing research started in the sixties of the last century. Artists simply stopped producing and exhibiting objects, trying instead to shed light on the politics of their own practice as well as the politics of the institution representing – thus framing – their practice.

The artists involved in Institutional Critique engaged in an emancipatory project, recognizing themselves as part of the art institution, as complicit to the "democratic" state and "free" market regimes that defined art's political, economic, and overall ideological framing.

They demanded to establish their own framing, not as autonomous, "sovereign" units, but as political beings. "We are all, always already serving," are the words of Andrea Fraser<sup>02</sup>, an artist that was part of the "second wave" – the second generation – of artists engaged in Institutional Critique.

Fraser in this context speaks of art's "relative autonomy". Exactly because art deals with the historical question of what it means to "represent," it is in the context of Institutional Critique never "just representing," but always reflective of the context in which it positions itself. It is in this "reflexivity" of art, a result of its relative autonomy, that we, as artists, should add to Fraser's question 'Whom we are serving' the question *Whom do we want to be serving?* In other words: *within which political project do we desire to situate our practice?*

I believe that this should be a political project in which art is not simply instrumentalized by democratist politics as a propaganda of freedom, but in which, vice versa, *politics in its turn is instrumentalized by art.*

A very similar question is addressed by what may probably best be described as the "international democratization movement," which is certainly not as new as often suggested, although it has *visibly* emerged in the recent years developing its claims in a dialectic movement between "a not-so World Wide Web" and the "public" squares of our cities. I believe that this movement's claims in principle formulate the same demand that Institutional Critique has brought forward, but within a broader political context. These consist in the refusal to continue to operate under the conditions of a domain dictated by unknown others (who moreover deny having any "real" power), and a demand to shape and decide upon these conditions themselves.

02 Andrea Fraser, 'How to Provide an Artistic Service: An Introduction', 1994. <http://ebookbrowse.com/how-to-provide-an-artist-service-introduction-by-andrea-fraser-pdf-d200390817>.

Through the Spanish Indignados protests and worldwide Occupy movement, through the Modern Media Initiative (IMMI) and Wikileaks, through the old Green and the new Pirate Parties we can recognize a single demand: the demand to organize ourselves as political beings.

This demand directly confronts the monopolies of democratism. It entails the democratization of our politics, the democratization of our economy, the democratization of our ecology, and the democratization of our public domain. It is a demand to explore the principles of an egalitarian society. Such a society is not the same as a society where everyone has the right to everyone's belongings, or a society where there is no such thing as a private sphere or intimacy – a society in which the concept of *power*, the question *how it is constituted* and to *whom it belongs* is placed into permanent question.

The demands of the worldwide democratization movement rather take the shape of public spaces where the meaning of this concept of egalitarian society is explored in varying collectives: through protests, squares, as well as virtual spaces. These are platforms where we do not outsource our vote – in Dutch literally meaning “voice”, stem – but where we attempt to shape these ourselves. This concept of democracy as a movement of political beings, not tied to single leaders or dogmas, but through a fidelity to the principles of egalitarianism as a shared emancipatory project, is what I call *Fundamental Democracy*. It is a concept that is irreconcilable with democratism.

This however does not mean that I naively idealize the concrete functioning of the international democratization movement. Having lived on the squares of Occupy Amsterdam with a group of about thirty artists for more than two months, I have experienced how protests against a system can turn into its most perverted mirror. I speak of corruption by the abuse of public donations within the Occupy camp, the deployment of excessive bureaucracy in order to wear out political opponents, of the use of violence by so-called voluntary “peace-keepers” who were on night watch, and I speak of nightly deportations from the camp of unwelcome subjects such as psychiatric patients and immigrant drug addicts – people who, as philosopher Ernst van de Hemel has rightfully pointed out, were in fact occupying the square *before* the Occupy movement set camp. During those two months I often said that the only thing that is good about the system that we are opposing is that no one in the Occupy movement holds a position of power in it.

This does not mean that Occupy has failed. I would call the protest, and many of the phenomena that are part of the international democratization movement, collective *social experiments*. Occupy, IMMI and Wikileaks, the Green and Pirate Parties: these are not solutions, they are *instruments*. What the international democratization movement represents for me is thus most of all the current will to *start working*. By taking on the task of exploring what fundamental democracy may be through different social experiments, we explore what it means to be political beings, however terrifying and disillusioning that sometimes might be.

### **New World Summit**

In the past years I have collaborated with other artists, with politicians, political parties, and non-parliamentary political groups in an attempt to answer the question - how, from the perspective of an artist's practice, to

use the discursive space opened by Institutional Critique in the service of the demands of fundamental democracy, rather than as another legitimating force of democratism? As a result of these collaborations I will now introduce my artistic and political organization New World Summit, which attempts to structurally oppose a series of monopolies that I described as the pillars of democratist politics.

The first three editions of the New World Summit present alternative parliaments for political and juridical representatives of organizations currently placed on so-called international terrorist lists. The terrorist lists comprise organizations that are internationally considered to be state threats. In the European Union, a secret committee, the so-called "Clearing House," draws up the EU terrorist list. The Clearing House meets bi-annually, in secret and there are no public proceedings of the way decisions are made for the listing of political organizations. One could rightfully say that even by its own standards, the committee that is in charge of placing organizations 'outside' of democratism, is itself organized in a fundamentally undemocratic manner.<sup>03</sup> The consequences for the listed organizations and people who are in contact with them include a block on all bank accounts and an international travel ban.

A core characteristic of the New World Summit is that it is an exploration of the potential of an *international parliament*: it has no fixed geographical location, it represents no nation state, no properties or indefinite claims on the right to speak. On the contrary, it defends the demand of each and every political being to represent his or her political beliefs, if willing to do so in the shared space of the summit.

The first installment of the New World Summit took place on 4–5 May 2012 in the Sophiensaele, a theater and political platform in Berlin. Invitations to about one hundred organizations mentioned on international terrorist lists were dispatched. From the respondents we were able to host four political representatives, and three juridical representatives, the lawyers of such organizations.

The first day of the summit, entitled "Reflections on the Closed Society," allowed each speaker to hold an uninterrupted lecture on the goal of their organization and the confrontation they experienced with the existence of the international terrorist lists. No intervention from the audience was allowed.

The second day, entitled "Proposals for the Open Society," was based on an interrogation by the audience. As such, I defended the function of the New World Summit in these two days as a form of "radical diplomacy," by on the one hand proposing an unrestricted, albeit shared, platform to the organizations, but on the other hand by demanding political accountability through the similarly unrestricted interrogation by the audience.

The second installment of the New World Summit took place on 29 December 2012 in Leiden, and focused on the political, economic, ideological, and juridical interests that are invested in upholding the notion of "terrorist" by hosting as the keynote speaker Professor Jose Maria Sison, co-founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA). Both organizations are currently included on "terrorist" lists as a result of their ongoing armed struggle with what they describe as a "semi-colonial and semi-feudal Philippine government," which is under "US imperialist control" and consists of "comprador bourgeoisie, landlords and bureaucrat capitalists." Several experts representing the different layers of the system that revolves around this notion of "terrorism," separating certain

<sup>03</sup> Source: "Adding Hezbollah to the EU Terrorist List – Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives", 20 June 2007.

Photo: NWS, 2012



**Prikaz "alternativnog parlamenta"  
New World Summita s ručno  
izrađenim pločama, Aspin House,  
Kochi**

**Impression of the "alternative  
parliament" of the New World  
Summit with hand painted panels  
at the Aspin House in Kochi**

organizations and individuals from society, were asked to respond to Sison. In turn, a lawyer, a public prosecutor, a judge, a politician, and a political theorist spoke, each representing a "layer" that separates a civilian (the audience) from a listed civilian (representatives of the CCP and NPA).

The third installment of the New World Summit was held in March 2013 in an open air pavilion at the Aspin House in Kochi, India, and planned to feature a number of representatives of political organizations "banned" from the political arena by the Indian government, who would present lectures on the histories of their organizations, on their political struggles, and gained results, as well as debate their views with each other and the audience. The Indian context shows that there are profound ties between these organizations and the colonial legacy. The many movements in India that continue to fight for the right to self-determination comprise a wide variety of political orientations, including the sectarian movements of Sikhs, Muslims, Baptist-Christians, and Hindus, the political movement of the Maoist Naxalites, and the territorial struggles of the indigenous peoples of Tripura, Manipur, Assam, and Tamil Nadu. The New World Summit in Kochi is an attempt to make these political struggles, waged across the Indian sub-continent, visible, and an investigation of the relationship between India's history of colonialism and democratization and the organizations currently excluded from the political process.

Only a few weeks after the inauguration of the pavilion, which was built for the summit only, the Fort Kochi Police registered a case against me and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, at Kochi, Kerala on January 9, 2013 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act Section 10 (4). The State Intelligence ordered the removal of panels depicting the flags of organizations banned in India. Through the use of black and greys (they obviously lacked enough black paint) they covered about twenty of them, leaving about five they were

not familiar with, but which are listed nonetheless. Interestingly enough, the State Intelligence felt no objection to paint over the flags of organizations that they considered to be unrelated to the state, but did follow the abstract color scheme that lies at the basis of each of the alternative parliaments, as we organize the flags by color, not by geographic placement or ideological orientation. The three sides of the pavilion, ordered one side in red, the other in blue and green and the last in black and white formed the basis for the State Intelligence to cover lighter flags in grey, and more darker ones in black. So in a strange way, here abstraction shows itself the most powerful in changing the behavior of the authorities. They will cover the image, but they will follow the order of colors as decided by the New World Summit when it comes to this choreography of censorship.

The intention of the New World Summit is to bypass the existing terrorist laws, by (1) making use of legal tools to move through a variety of juridical gray zones and (2) creating new ones by the use of art. In the case of the New World Summit in Kochi, the success of this approach was tested on the highest level imaginable: by prosecuting the New World Summit through exactly the same law that is used to list certain organizations.

The first, crucially important tool in this process is located in the summit's capability to move geographically. Almost all countries today have an international terrorist list, and allies tend to copy organizations from these lists on request. For example, the New People's Army, the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, is placed on the list in the Netherlands at the request of the United States government, not because they were aware of any actual threats themselves. But considering the fact that not all countries are allies and not all geopolitical interests are matching, these lists sometimes do not correspond. Hence an organization such as the People's Mujahedin of Iran, an organization basing itself on an interesting combination of Marxism and Islamism, is considered terrorist in the United States but – after a long juridical fight – no longer in the European Union.

The summit started in Berlin and now continues to travel around the world, in the coming months from India (March 2013) and Belgium (September 2014). Each time it enters into a different juridical and political "zone," and is thus capable of offering a platform to voices that were impossible to host in previous summits. Theoretically, this way the New World Summit – a parliament in flux – at the end of its travel will have been able to host all organizations placed today on the international terrorist lists.

It is because of this reason that I describe the New World Summit as a "democratic supplement." An injection of knowledge suppressed by democratism, brought back into the public sphere by using the second tool that is key in developing this project: the juridically exceptional position of visual art.

The meaning of art's "relative autonomy" may be best highlighted from the perspective of the law. A simple example. In Germany, one of the flags shown in the New World Summit, that of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), may not be shown in public spaces such as the Sophiensaele, the location of the summit. A punishment of six months can be given to anyone who break this law. But because the parliament of the summit does not organize the flags of the listed organizations by geographical location or ideological orientation but based on color it is impossible to consider the showing of the PKK flag to be a "single" offense. I claim the flag to be part of a color scheme, of an abstraction that is created by the organization of all flags together. To take out one flag means to destroy the abstraction that is key to the work as



an installation. It would mean one would destroy my artwork. Yet, for the invited organizations the "truth" of their flags does not diminish because they are organized by color. These two realities, artistic and political, exist simultaneously: the flags are abstract, and they are the total opposite of abstraction at the same time. These two realities do not deny each other: they exist as a consequence of one another. Yet in front of the law, artistic freedom ironically trumps political statement. Philosopher Vincent van Gerven Oei rearticulated the concept of art's "relative autonomy" in the context of the New World Summit as art's "relative illegality." It is this constructive "state of exception" within a juridical framework that can become an important political tool for people who have been subjected to that other "state of exception": the one that has placed the organizations "outside" of democratism by help of the international terrorist lists. As such, art's relative illegality may create new forms of public domain, in which new histories may manifest itself – those many histories that have been suppressed from democratism's consciousness through the international terrorist lists. These are the histories according to the resistance. In the case of Kochi, this strategy still has to prove itself: even though again it became clear that the egalitarian principle of abstraction proved a powerful tool in engineering the State Intelligence in the choreography through which they censored the pavilion.

The true cynic might say that the organizations that spoke during the summit were merely "staged" within an artistic context, as some type of political objet trouvé, a curiosity.

I will answer this cynicism with a concrete example from the summit. When one of the speakers at the New World Summit, Luis Jalandoni, who spoke on behalf of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army, took the floor and said "I'm Luis Jalandoni, and that's my flag" while pointing to the other side of the room, there was no doubt that for him this space was not political despite the presence of art but that it was political exactly because of art. The space became a political space not simply because I labeled it as such, but because the speakers together with me demanded it to be so. If anything, these organizations were educating us through the urgency with which they brought politics back to the theater. Not as a mere simulacrum of politics in the negative sense of the word, but as the rightful place to speak of the meaning of the concept of representation: to ask the core questions that have made theater and politics each other's ideal birthplace.