Jonas Staal's plea for utopian realism

Jonas Staal, New Unions – Athens, study. Produced by State of Concept Athens. Digital study for the transformation of the abandoned Faliro Stadium into a site of public assembly, 2016

Jonas Staal's The Scottish-European Parliament sets out to address some of the most pressing political problems in Scotland today. We talk to the artist about building a positive vision of the future ahead of his exhibition in CCA.

Can you tell us about some of the research that went into the project along with the collaborators you have worked with for two years?

In the past years of my artistic practice I have worked a lot on the form of the parliament which, [as well as] looking a lot like a theatre, is also made by architects, by designers and artists. I felt that if we, as artists, have this competence of giving form to power, why could we not create parliaments in support of political alternatives? Recently, I completed a three-year

commission to build a new parliament for the Democratic Federation of North-Syria for example, which is a 'stateless democracy' led by Kurdish revolutionaries that aims for local self-governance and gender equality. The parliament we made together hopefully is an example of the way art, design and architecture can participate in the imagination of political alternatives.

When invited by curator Viviana Checchia to develop a project in Scotland, I had already been following the Scottish independence movement for quite some time, and Women for Independence had participated in an earlier project of mine. In my eyes, the Yes campaign redefined what independence means through the massive intergenerational energy and vision of a social Scotland, that would repurpose its resources away from the neoliberal and warmongering regime of Westminster. And when Scotland overwhelmingly voted to 'Remain' as part of the EU, the situation became even more complex: Scotland's independence from one union, would become the interdependence with another. I felt it was bizarre that Alyn Smith now had to convince the EU to 'keep' Scotland as a member, considering the disastrous state of our union, and all that we could learn from the social vision of the Yes campaign.

So, with Checchia and Professor Johnny Rodger, I began a series of conversations, ranging from the Scottish Green Party to the Common Weal Platform, the Radical Independence Campaign and the Women's Library of Glasgow, to discuss how a new future union could be imagined. Not a continuation of the austerity union we have today, but of a social, green, and feminist union. The idea that came as a result, was a new parliament, a 'Scottish-European Parliament,' a utopian parliament located on the decommissioned oil rig Kittiwake on the North Sea – in between Scotland and the European mainland. A transnational parliament, that acts in between territories, with the aim to rethink the future of the EU from a Scottish point of view.

What motivated you to invite organisations and groups to take part in real-time discussion as part of the exhibition?

The power of art is that of the imagination, but without support of larger communities, that imagination remains powerless. I have worked with many political parties, social movements, and since 2017 with the Pan-European DiEM25, for which I designed several campaign assemblies. Art becomes alive and meaningful when it participates in a larger assembly to re-imagine our world. To start a project on transforming the EU into a genuine transdemocratic union for me logically entails to speak with the groups and people that have shaped our popular imagination of how such a political alternative can come into being.

These conversations inspired me to create The Scottish-European Parliament. It should not be left to Scotland to explain why it has the 'right' to be part of the EU even though the majority of its population decided it to be so. Civil society across the EU has the responsibility to create a pathway for Scotland to return, and hopefully, not a return into the EU as it is, but as we will transform it: ideally with one parliament in Scotland, and one in Athens, so we can abandon the ones in Brussels and Strasbourg.

What difference would it make for national parliaments to become dually national and international? Is it too far to say that the federal structure of the European Union presupposed some of the fracturing (Brexit) that is taking place now?

In DiEM25, many of us support the idea of a federal Europe, with a strong central bank that does not punish member states in economic crisis but recirculates the surplus of other members to maintain an egalitarian balance. A federal Europe could support large scale investments in open

source technology and start a continent-wide basic income dividend to create the conditions for a post-work society. But a federal Europe needs to recognise cultural specificity: there is no point in imposing quota on economies that are specific to a region, or to monopolise cultural identity as a federation.

For me, as an artist, the most important thing is to imagine and create spaces of assembly where we can break through the idea that our only options today are the nationalist 'Leave' camp or the austerity 'Remain' one: we need new options, new unions, and that begins with imagining them first. That, I believe, is where the task of art lies: to contribute to the liberation of our imagination.

The CCA describes your mode of research as 'science fiction' – how do you interpret that?

Science fiction is a way to imaginatively unleash the potentials of our presents to liberate the future. Today, our science fictions are instead focused on imagining every possible end to the world, but hardly ever to the idea that the future in any way could even be modestly better than our present. As artists, we have to insist to politicise the imagination, to tell new stories about who we can become, and the kind of world we desire to live in.

This also relates to what you call the 'laying out of statistics and evidence.' From Brexit to Trump, we have seen that facts, in and of themselves, do not matter; what matters is the narrative with which we present them, the world that we can imagine through them. I plea for utopian realism, which The Scottish-European Parliament is in a way. Although, through my own work I have realised that many of the projects I once deemed fictional, actually turned into reality – like the parliament I created with my team for the Democratic Federation of North-Syria. Once an idea takes hold of you, it already becomes real in a way.

What other good literary examples or other cultural examples can you think that also invigorate political will and imagination currently?

I was deeply impressed by the work of the Lateral North collective in Glasgow, that re-imagines future unions between Scotland and the Nordic and Arctic regions. By speculating on alternative transdemocratic unions, they explore the real-time possibilities of socialised technologies and social ecologies.

But the work of my collaborator [Johnny] Rodger, is also an example: his research on what he calls the 'hero-building,' explains how the idea of Scotland is first and foremost cultural, narrated through writers and poets throughout history: it shows that change comes through culture first, and through politics second, and in that sense, he is a key protagonist in showing how art – in past and present – has been and can be an agent for political change.

The Scottish-European Parliament, at CCA from 16 Jun-29 Jul