



Post-human coalitions

Laure Prouvost and Jonas Staal had their first collaboration in 2017, a co-configured parliament of the *Obscure* that was a symphony of two unique artists delving together into new territories. While seemingly different, their artistic practices share a common axon: both artists have been known for proposing immersive environments that, rather than offering a virtual or technically pristine simulation of reality, actively employ the imaginary to implicate audiences in other worlds and forms of living. Their practice—respective and collaborative—offers imaginaries for new worlds yet to come.

One of the characteristic elements of Prouvost’s practice is her employment of non-human entities as equal partners and protagonists in both moving image works and sculptural installations. Prouvost’s mastery in unhinging the innate connections made between language and image—tapping at times into surrealist ideas of the “image as vehicle”—display the correlation between the conscious and the unconscious. Recently, the artist has begun introducing new forms to her lexicon: small sculptures of mobile phones, “lcd-screen headed” humanoid figures made out of iron, animals (octopuses, doves, fish), embroidery and weaving, carpets, quilts and egg shells, comprised her installation at the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019. They are all parts of a Prouvostian universe that draws from her deepest and most fragmented subconscious memories. Although her work has rarely been discussed through a direct socio-political position, Prouvost’s projects truly embody the central tenets of post-humanist theory: a break from the Anthropocene with a shift towards multi-species alliance that recognizes equalities and kinship between humans and other forms of life. The protagonists in Prouvost’s work—plants, animals, undefined entities that inhabit machinery, or objects that speak—are recognized as equal partners, vital elements in directing and formulating a narrative. In the world of Prouvost, they are given life.

Staal delivers large-scale projects that propose the redistribution of power through form and the performance of power itself, particularly through the realm of politics. The artist’s focus towards breaking open the power structures that govern us is evident in his long-term project *The New World Summit* (2012-current), a political and artistic organization that constructs parliaments for blacklisted organizations¹ from all over the globe, gathering them in

architectural and sculptural installations to imagine alternative forms of governance. The creation of an otherwise composed political tableau-vivant thus re-forms the classic architecture of politics (the parliament) and proposes a new structure, which the artist names “assemblism.”² His long engagement with questions related to propaganda and their relationship to art are gathered in his newest book, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019). His propaganda for another future is elaborated in an alternative underground biosphere titled *Interplanetary Species Society* (2019) presented in collaboration with Public Art Agency in Sweden. In the installation, humans stand side by side with plants and fossils of extinct ammonites in their quest for a future comradeship. They demand a new world: one of comradeship in deep time, one that unionizes human and non-human alliances that together will break from the hierarchical present of evolutionary science.

The references from which both artists draw to produce their propositions individually are various and manifold, but what is critical to better understand this co-authored work is to focus on two basic axons of their practices that meet in this joint proposition. Firstly, their construction of an alternate reality that scrutinizes prevailing understandings of form, identity and subjectivity, thus consummating a new glossary with which to understand the world. Secondly, their orientation towards the construction of a politics for a post-human future, one that is equally determined and governed by human and non-human entities. The artists thus ask with this work: How can we re-think the self and our relationship to everything non-human?

One possible way forward is to build on the legacies of French philosopher Michel Foucault and his writings on biopower (the social and political powers that control people’s lives), on which philosophers like Achille Mbembe have elaborated to describe the regime of necropolitics. This latter term describes the use of social and political power to dictate how some people might live and how some must not by analyzing how “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death”³ forces bodies to remain in a state of exception and precariousness, exemplified in histories of slavery, colonization and the contemporary treatment of refugees.⁴ Contemporary humans—particularly in Western societies—are now more than ever before alienated from the misfortunes of others, especially those who are in far away countries. Stories of war and destruction pass quickly in front of our eyes through social media or news feeds leaving us unfazed. But the psychological drive for success embedded in neoliberal subjectivities further alienates them from those who are less affluent and fortunate, and those that do not belong to the same class as them. A dependent or vulnerable human is seen as a failure, thus encouraging the corrosion of any system that challenges the inequities they face. When it comes to other-than-humans, they are used as trophies for our Instagram feeds: pedigree puppies and cats that operate as commodities, or—in the case of plant life—just decor in our living space. Objects are fetishized, and provide some sort of “proof” of social standing, but due to commodification are replaced speedily with new more advanced versions, rendering their life-span very short.

Though breaking down the necropolitical agenda of governments the world over has become a popular topic of discussion among theorists, philosophers and politicians, we seem to lack a concrete proposal for a new position on subjectivity, one that introduces epistemologies that remind us of our affinities with other-than-human ecologies of life. Theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway have highlighted ways in which we can redefine subjectivity by resisting the power structures that govern our current understanding of the self and the relation of the self with others (humans and non-humans). I will point to Braidotti’s writings on the concept of cosmopolitanism and how to strip it from its neoliberal legacies by employing the concept of the self in relation to not only others and their bodies, but other species as well. These concepts are all entailed in the world of Prouvost-Staal: in their *Obscure Union* there are gates to be passed, controls that are conducted by unseen powers that remain opaque, obscure, and yet undefined. You are greeted and once inside, you are witness to the ongoing congregation of an other-than-human practice of unionization where we encounter what Braidotti calls the “displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of trans-species solidarity.”⁵ You are slowly drawn to the warmth in the centre of this site of assembly; you are directed and enclosed by signs and flags; you can sit on body parts. What Prouvost and Staal,

the co-administrators of this union, propose through their joint endeavour is that we abandon the comfort zone of categorization through species with a view to reconsider the relation between bodies-objects-materiality and what they are capable of: within material space, in the space of our imaginary, and in the domain of the obscure. Accepting that we need to find a new framework to describe not only our scientific affinities with other-than-human species, but also our social post-anthropocentric shift in what Braidotti describes “as an act of unfolding of the self onto the world and the enfolding within of the world - a becoming world that goes beyond the superficial planetary flows of global capital.”⁶

This proposition is embodied in *Obscure Union*: octopuses merge with body parts scattered in the space; neo-constructivist signs acknowledge the political subjectivities of more-than-human comrades; suddenly, there is agency everywhere. The artists are mere administrators. It is a proposition building on a previous legacy of artistic practice: declaring the object as comrade, the idea developed by Russian Constructivists such as Lyubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova and Alexander Rodchenko. Working in post-revolutionary conditions during a period of rapid social change, these artist-engineers examined strategies for leveraging artistic practice to aid in the building of an egalitarian society. As shown in Christina Kiaer’s study of constructivism, *Imagine No Possessions*,⁷ rather than trying to dispel the power of the object, the Constructivists decided to de-commodify, to unleash the agency of the revolutionary object as a co-creator of a new world. This approach was possibly given its fullest and most complete expression through the writings of Boris Arvatov, who argued that rethinking one’s relation to commodities and objects was part of the overall transformation of everyday life.⁸ Rejecting the passivity of objects and thinking of them instead as co-workers enables new modes of kinship that alter the relation between human and object alike.

This is the foundation of the new world—the new union—in which one encounters the work of Prouvost-Staal. Their carefully crafted realm affirms a sense of belonging, that is redefined by an attachment and connection to an alternate terrestrial ecology, in which life is understood as one to be lived in equally defined comradeship through multi-species coalition.

—iLiana Fokianaki

1 A blacklist is a list of persons or organizations that are penalized because they are believed to engage in unlawful or unethical activity; many are labeled as terrorist organizations. Inclusion on a blacklist can affect an individual’s ability to travel, have a bank account, be part of a political party, among others.

2 Jonas Staal, “Assemblism,” e-flux Journal 80 (March 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/>

3 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019): 42.

4 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

5 Rosi Braidotti, “Becoming-world,” in *After Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin, Bolette B. Blaagaard (Routledge, 2013).

6 Ibid.

7 Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005).

8 For an English translation of Abratov’s texts on “the socialist object,” see Christina Kiaer, “Boris Abratov’s Socialist Objects,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 105-118.

iLiana Fokianaki is a curator, writer and educator based in Athens and Rotterdam. Her research focuses on the formations of power that manifest under the influence of geopolitics, national identity and cultural and anthropological histories. In 2013 she founded State of Concept Athens, the first non-profit institution of its kind in Athens. Fokianaki is also co-founder of Future Climates, a platform that researches viable futures for small-scale cultural organizations. She has curated exhibitions for KADIST Foundation, Paris/San Francisco; La Colonie, Paris; and National Gallery of Prague; she has upcoming curatorial projects for Witte de With Center of contemporary Art, Rotterdam; e-flux, New York; and Vanabbe Museum, Eindhoven. Fokianaki holds an MA in Art Criticism from City University London. Her PhD research focuses on economy, identity, and politics.