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## Training for the Future

*Training for the Future. Ruhr Triennial, Bochum, Germany: September 20–September 22, 2019.*



IMAGE 1. View of the empty Training for the Future black-box theatre performance hall of the Ruhr Triennial with a view of the three training areas, including a gym-like floor, clear plastic dividing curtains, and sculptural elements co-designed by Jonas Staal and Paul Kuipers; courtesy Jonas Staal.

There are unique tensions in political art because it asks us to appreciate its aesthetics. It asks for appreciation in at least two ways: as a formal thing demonstrating who *we* are, and as an object that orients our collective becoming via politics. Unlike politics, political art takes on the explicit burden of having to be appreciated aesthetically. The stakes in conversations around the aesthetics of politics are only heightened within left politics; while the left has a strong artistic appearance, any realistic assessment of its strength suggests that it is hardly adequate to our developing needs. Yet, as pragmatists, we make do with what we have—because the left does have some space within the infrastructures and institutions that support it.

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Artist Jonas Staal invited me as an activist journalist to attend his and Florian Malzacher's Training for the Future, a three-day workshop event they hosted, led by creative activists they organized for their contribution to the Ruhr Triennial in Bochum, Germany, in September 2019. The event was supported by the Triennial, with additional institutional support by the Goethe Institute, the Dutch Mondriaan Fund, and the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, and was the first full iteration of what they hope to be a repeat workshop event. Training for the Future provided me an opportunity to think through the tensions of what it means to politically assemble and ways that the arts and cultural sectors attend to future political potential.

I had been familiar with Staal's New World Summit projects where, with European cultural institutions, he gathers banned political organizations—some labeled terrorists—for talks within institutions' legitimating settings. I knew of his relationship with the revolutionary project of Kurdistan—that he'd co-designed and built their People's Parliament of Rojava with support from the Mondriaan Fund, *basis voor actuele kunst* (BAK), and others. I'd read his new book, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (2019), and appreciated its suggestion that left political communication should, through its varied cultural means, aesthetically work hand-in-hand with politics to defend and develop the social and logistical realities of our lives. *Propaganda Art* affirmatively embraces a full palette of contemporary art's aesthetic efforts and would seem to support the cultural left's entree into politics from below toward a better world. So I was curious to see how "training" would bring attendees together to demonstrate ways of our being together, and relate us to forms of political becoming.

#### MY HAND, MY BODY AND MY MIND, AND MY TONGUE

I was drawn into the project as a trainee. I and other attendees felt and played through the pedagogy that Staal and Malzacher structured within the Triennial's black box theater with doors open to the outside world. Inside, black-and-white constructivist gym floor carpets, three-hour long workshops, and intelligent faculty gathered to deliver the workshop. Each trainer—consequential political practitioners from groups such as Not an Alternative and Women on Waves—were hired to highlight what they know of their piece of the heterogeneous world of activist and social practices, of patterns and routines stitched within the wider world.

A cultural institution might call the overall training an "interactive performance" although each trainee's experience remained theirs alone to process and unstitch. The theater was split into three large and equally carpeted spaces, divided by clear plastic curtains so participants could always see what was occurring in other sections. The left and right sections were for concurrent three-and-a-half-hour long trainings with groups of around seventy-five people, and the center carpet was reserved for whole-group exercises in the mornings, at midday, and in the evenings. Each day ended with whole-group debriefings on this central carpet, and we all seemed positively exhausted by the workshops' emotional, physical, creative, and mental work. So these chats never fully turned toward overarching themes familiar to the politicized art world.

Therefore, thoughts about the event and workshops remained to be processed and untangled alone or with those with whom we chose to connect. Attendees might be present

for one workshop, or for all three days of activity, and there were many new faces to constantly greet. The event's structure allowed trainees to inhabit a horizontal floor that was oriented toward the hall's open door, toward practice elsewhere.

In deference to the jumbled political sociality of life's heterogenous space elsewhere, in order to produce recognizable culture, institutions must edit out background noise and focus attention on what they think is of value. A theater must hire individuals to put on a play rather than simply opening their stage door to chance. Art supports politics by staging what it can. So, by conscientiously moving through the registers of existing sociality, Staal conceptualizes his events-based work in one of several conceptual categories: summits, assemblies, trainings, unions, academies. He describes his summits, like the one through which the Rojava parliament was built, as "artistic and political organization that develops parliaments with and for stateless states, autonomist groups, and blacklisted political organizations."<sup>1</sup> Describing his assemblies, Staal mentions Judith Butler's *Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), saying that they enact "what democratic cultures manifest through assemblist practices, and how such democratic cultures contribute to establish new forms of emancipatory (self-)governance."<sup>2</sup>

The week before Training for the Future, I stayed with workshop trainers John Jordan and Isa Frémaux of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination in the ZAD (*zone à défendre*/zone to defend) in western France. The ZAD is a contested region that the French government tried to clear of residents in order to build an airport. John walked me through the forests where ferocious battles between the police and activists eventually forced the state to drop its plans. The area had been successfully occupied by a diverse set of activist collectives and the farmers who invited them in to fight the state's efforts. The ZAD drew massive support from across the left and from ecological movements. For several years, this broad support helped the ZAD remain a de facto autonomous zone, with its own farms, flour mills, radio stations, newspapers, and governing assemblies. Knowing its constitutive diversity, it is easy to imagine the blistering assemblies representing the full diversity of what the ZAD was, and the difficult decisions that they had to make in order to internally coordinate even the most general concerns of their political becoming.

Common struggle and daily life provide us with the necessity to manage our own affairs as individuals and collectives. We must fulfill needs based on the resources, relations, and understandings we have and muster. The assemblies of insurrectionary and conservative governments provide formally consequential stages on which discourse can play out through composing governing forms. Staal's typologies of event-based gatherings provide attendees with opportunities to play with left institutionality beside and beyond the realities of our own affairs. Training for the Future had no assembly. There was no moment when we came together to draw a verbal picture of who we are and what we know. When discussing the problems related to political-seeming assemblies occurring in the artistic context, Staal notes

1. See Jonas Staal, "Congress of Utopias," *New World Summit* (2016), on the artist's website, [www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/new-world-summit-utrecht](http://www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/new-world-summit-utrecht).

2. See Jonas Staal, "Unionizing the Polish Flag," *Assemblism* (2017), on the artist's website, [www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/assemblism](http://www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/assemblism).

that regardless of the actual wisdom from praxis that individual attendees may have, those with both a command of English and experience with artworld talking points can disproportionately dominate.<sup>3</sup>

Staal's and other's creative assemblies compose ersatz communities, and despite their responsibility to present the currently political, they are distinct from formal and most movement politics because they lack the sticks and carrots that develop governance and law. Art's play at autonomous<sup>4</sup> assembly is afforded by being contingent to not much more than its own staging, even as it allows for the serious play at collaborative meaning-making. The fact that art's assemblies are not immediately constituted by the mixed world of social relations where praxis is easily distinguished from theory, leaves much politics to be played out elsewhere. With its door to the outside, Training's shedding of the assembly was notable because of the role assemblies have played in recent left politics attendant to art and culture.



IMAGE 2. An activated training area utilized for the “Killing the Dominant Male” training given by the Center for Jineology Studies (Ceren Akyos & Yasemin Andan) that introduces the Kurdish Women’s Movement’s field of Women Sciences; courtesy Jonas Staal.

3. Jonas Staal's comments remind me of what theorist Paolo Virno says about virtuoso performances from abstract settings: “One need only think of the process whereby someone who speaks draws on the inexhaustible potential of language (the opposite of a defined ‘work’) to create an utterance that is entirely of the moment and unrepeatable.” Paolo Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1996), 195. It is also reminiscent of the Training for the Future workshop led by the Initiative schwarzer Menschen in Deutschland (Initiative of Black People in Germany) workshop. Within this workshop, groups were tasked to debate the geographic and temporal source of racist quotes.

4. Obviously, this word “autonomous” here is utilized to reference the art historical and art theoretical concept of “autonomous art” particular to the modern and contemporary form of art.

The use of assemblies in and around Occupy is one such example. Occupy seemed to suggest that a properly constituted gathering might be key to movement success. Social practice arts' capacity to creatively bring people together, and art's ability to gather politically minded audiences once had me believing that art and its institutions were key to social movement composition. I was aware of the 2011 Creative Time Summit's synchronicity with Occupy's early days. *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (2016) by art historian Yates McKee narratively traces all kinds of art, activist, and DIY activity that can be read as precursors to Zuccotti Park's assemblies, and how certain activist artist practices helped establish the occupation's political core. In this shadow of Occupy Wall Street, creative representatives of Occupy seemed central to the 2012 Berlin Biennale. Then there was a resonance in the confluence of politically engaged artists and art institutions at the 2012 Truth is Concrete festival that Malzacher organized for Austria's Steirischer Herbst festival, which hinted at meaningful solidarities between art institutions and movements. Naively or not, the moment's electricity seemed so ripe, it drove the *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* that I co-edit to inquire into what activist artists might demand from cozier links we assumed would be established between art institutions and outright political resistance.<sup>5</sup>

But I was wrong. The post-Occupy story is not one of successful collaboration between art and political institutions. Rather, Occupy was a confluence of events and histories, where left arts had special resonance within wider social movements. After looking at the Occupy confluence, McKee's book examines how the political and representational concerns of Occupy helped give logic to certain New York-based artists' partial withdrawal from the arts so that they might more fully participate in Black Lives Matter and Decolonize this Place—movements that have their own place outside in the common political life and social struggles of the city. That they utilize aesthetic knowledge for general movements rather than for art is one thing that Training for the Future wants to help replicate.

In their 2016 book *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis & Contemporary Art*, Kersten Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt describe institutions that stage autonomy as essentially private spaces for artists to freely create things whose expression might manage or diminish capitalism's excesses. With an institutional framing devoid of any ultimate context other than the creation of speculative worth, art speculates on capitalism's limits under relational terms dictated by capitalist relations. In *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry* (2019), theorist Josephine Berry turns to how institutionally supported art in public space transposes artistic freedom to individual freedom in the public realm. This sort of abstract public art marks social possibility unmoored from actually autonomous social power. As Berry writes, "In a sickly twist, a community's inclusion within [this] art has today even come to betoken their imminent displacement within the process of regeneration."<sup>6</sup> Autonomous social power is different from autonomous art. While art produces independent objects, autonomous social power seeks to independently negotiate the power it composes.

5. This inquiry, entitled "Together, what can we do?," was co-organized by Truth is Concrete attendee and *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* co-editor Amber Hickey, artist and writer Heath Schultz, and myself. It hosted a short-lived but very active dialogue on the possibilities of coordinated action, within and outside of cultural institutions. See [www.joaap.org/diablog](http://www.joaap.org/diablog) for details.

6. Josephine Berry, *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 303.



IMAGE 3. A group of trainees experimenting with the coursework of Not An Alternative's (Steve Lyons & Jason Jones) class "Inventing the Radical." Attendees explored the exterior of the Ruhr Triennial performance hall, and were challenged to make minor interventions into the landscape with tape and strips of wood, in order to radically haunt landscapes with imminent possibility; courtesy Jonas Staal.

Assemblies within the ZAD or Rojava demonstrate their power by actually demonstrating living without approval. Formal art institutions like the Ruhr Triennial support artistic production while the ZAD and Rojava support radical projects that allow for actual social experimentation with real costs. I heard that Training for the Future's trainer Heath Bunting's Intimacy Encryption workshop encountered meaningful political difference when his training on avoiding arrest suggested a strategy that elsewhere would have likely led to immediate arrest if not a severe police beating. While both movements and art objects do stand for something, the ZAD and Rojava are actual struggles made real by actions and social relations within concrete contexts where what sort of activity would result in a beating is quickly made apparent by the imminent possibility of violence. Training for the Future is a training—for something else, elsewhere. This is not meant as a negative critique of Training.

I asked Staal how Rojava's violent loss relates to the futures he and Malzacher organized to train for. I incorrectly guessed his response; I'd guessed that bereft of Rojava's radical infrastructure present to help shuttle us through fascism and climate change, Staal's imagination would be oriented toward something dark and violent. I'd assumed too that such bleakness would also be a natural outgrowth of the Ruhr Triennial's generic artworld setting. Staal saw it otherwise, saying "we are training for the future we want to live in," because the future is always in the making. This is not a naïve sensibility, but rather an expression of his work on propaganda. The right has been training for their futures and the collective left has a lot of catching up to do—catching up by learning how to utilize the aesthetic tools and

sensibilities we already have access to. Though he discusses the horrible losses in Rojava, his ability to separate the world's dismal state from his awareness that shared social life meaningfully continues in non-fascist ways is remarkable.

#### AT PLAY IN THE FIELD OF AFFECTS

I am on the left-side carpet, seated in a staggered half ring of people, with the black fibers of the carpet rubbing pleasantly against my fingers, attentively listening to the lecture part of Not An Alternative's Jason Jones and Steve Lyons's "Inventing the Radical" workshop. The workshop's abstract suggests that it will demonstrate ways of "deploying myth and conspiracy in the production of social movement power." I am a very sloppy notetaker and I realized that my efforts with words on page were an effective way of displacing my enthusiasm for the possibilities in their words—telling a story that translated Not An Alternative's ever-deepening practice that weaves economic and social critique strategically through formal institutions that seem capable of carrying the burdens and potentials of their critiques, and also weaves critique into the mundane fabric of social life. They were translating their practice here for a European context that appreciates what myth means but is nevertheless reticent to embrace expansive storytelling's progressive potential; even though most Training for the Future attendees were progressive artists and arts administrators. These were people who should be aware of aesthetics' expansive potential for moving people, but were somehow trained to only speak with facts in regard to politics. Jones's haltingly self-effacing discursive style pulled me in, Lyons played a delightful straight-man, and I could only applaud when they finished and announced break time before we went outside with some hand tools and colored tape to form small groups and do our assigned exercise.

When we look at art, we are observing something composed. When social practice art composes ersatz communities, it is possible that that which has been constituted to somehow politically appear obscures the fact that what composes revolutionary politics is the difficult navigation or violent negation of heterogenous relations and institutional mechanics. It is especially these institutional mechanics that the left and (increasingly) the right have successfully waged propaganda campaigns around in order to buoy their own fortunes. So, rather than make play of any assembly's possible appearance, Training for the Future allows attendees to play in the wider field of aesthetic sensitivities and internal judgement. This, so that individuals and collectives might become better attuned to the ways that affects influence need and desire's variation. Critical judgement was attended to through various workshops, including those led by Initiative Schwarzer Menschen in Deutschland and the Kurdish feminist group, Center for Jineology Studies.

For Staal, propaganda and art are more than two sides of the same coin—they are the coin that helps define what we identify as the essential relationships that compose reality. While right-wing propaganda amplifies the precarious stand of particular social relations against imaginary terror, left-wing propaganda is only beginning to paint the absolute necessity of general sociality and its capacities to culturally co-develop better worlds.

As Terry Eagleton argued, "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>7</sup> To liberate ourselves from what we think the world is in order to enable the collective imagination of what we want it to become is the fundamental difference between what I will discuss as an *elite* versus a *popular* propaganda.

The translation that Not An Alternative makes from theory to the actuality of their workshop assignment makes sense, though it is tricky to explain here. It has to do with their understanding of how their practice amplifies preexisting aesthetics within our inhabited world—an amplification aimed at helping people recognize and reimagine infrastructures of the everyday on new political ground. First, their assignment has me wandering around outside the black box’s front door, chatting. I’m trying to coalesce a short-term working group that I’d like to have fun with; this is an opportunity to experience a group of people that I know or only slightly know—to play under unique circumstances. Together we will laugh, climb, crawl, debate, and throw tape balls into industrial architecture. We gather as one large group among several others as I hold tightly the red tape roll I’ve acquired so that I can appear responsive to what Not An Alternative tasks us to explore collectively. This larger sub-group can’t orchestrate an approach, so I drift off with part of the group whose energy I’m more curious to enjoy. Together we scan the landscape for interesting architectural elements to slightly alter with the additions of tape, clamps, and small strips of wood.



IMAGE 4. Photograph from the Army of Love’s (Ingo Niermann, Christian Bayerlein, Adriano Wilfert Jensen & Grit Uhlemann) “Redistributing Love” training, which, because of the warm weather, occurred on the lawn outside the Triennial’s hall. Here, trainees are experimenting with boundaries between affect and relational touch; courtesy Jonas Staal.

7. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), xxiii.

During Friday afternoon's training by the Army of Love, the assembled group moves outside to sit in a tight circle on the lawn, enjoying the warm afternoon sun. The Army's pedagogy of learning to love those we are not initially attracted to utilizes sight and touch to explore politically rich erotic boundaries. Cross-legged, I stare into and beyond the eyes of a someone; in our personal debrief, this someone's red lips whisper into my ear that they are a high-level arts administrator, present to see how money can unleash political sensibilities.

Training for the Future demonstrates the fact of the fluidity between more autonomous social movements and more formal institutions' funding that together can organize social attention. Its trainings facilitate promiscuous rather than needs-based sociality via engagements with varieties of exchanges: with workshop material, between trainer and attendee, among trainers, and between attendees. Attendees may or may not employ learned content into practice—how am I to know? Though most attendees seemed to be politically minded artists, actors, musicians, and arts administrators, there were also Triennial season ticket holders, a Goethe Institute–supported group from South East Asia, and a high school group attending for one afternoon. The students' disinterest made for rich interactions.<sup>8</sup> ■

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8. This essay was originally commissioned by the magazine *A Blade of Grass*. The author would also like to thank members of the PLANK network and Amber Hickey for comments.