

PROPAGATE AUTONOMY: ON JONAS STAAL, CAPTAIN AMERICA AND WILLI MÜNZENBERG

Kim West

Propaganda art, says Jonas Staal, is ‘the performance of power as art’.¹ What does that mean?

In the finale of season one of the Marvel TV series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), Captain America gives an improvised speech. He has just prevented a major terrorist attack in Manhattan: an international network of outlaw super soldiers has tried to blow up the headquarters of a sort of council of nefarious politicians and powerbrokers meeting to pass a law enforcing the ‘relocation’ of large parts of the world’s population. Captain America is conflicted: he sympathises with the outlaws’ cause, but is of course primarily committed to law, order and the USA, and so has had no choice but to reluctantly annihilate the ragtag rebels. In the immediate aftermath of the battle, he is in the street, facing two members of the council, surrounded by onlookers and the media. This gives him an unlikely opportunity to state his case to the omnipotent politicians, appealing to their reason and their sense of righteousness.

The only power I have is that I believe we can do better. We can’t demand that people step up if we don’t meet them halfway. Look, you control the banks. Shit, you can move borders! You can knock down a forest with an email, you can feed a million people with a phone call. But the question is, who’s in the room with you when you’re making those decisions? Hmm? Is it the people you’re gonna impact? Or is it just more people like you? [...] You’ve gotta do better, Senator. You’ve gotta step up. [...] Look, you people have just as much power as an insane god or a misguided teenager. The question you have to ask yourself is, ‘How are you going to use it?’²

The moral and rhetorical force of Captain America’s vaguely anti-elitist words convinces the council to abandon their indefensible relocation scheme – but we are neither invited to follow the council’s deliberations, nor can we see the effects or the ramifications of their radical policy shift. Instead, this particular story line ends here, perhaps to be picked up in a second season of the show.

The scene, of course, remains faithful to the conventions of the superhero genre. In both words and deeds, Captain America has the ability to act in a way that reaches beyond the limits of a single human being. When he hits, social movements are knocked out. When he speaks, laws are passed. When he lands on the Manhattan avenue, the structures really do descend into the street. He is an individual active on the level of historical process, a single monad rearranging the universe. And, we might note, he ascribes the same magical capacity to the politicians he confronts: you can move borders, you can feed a million people with a phone call. They are politicians without politics, as it were: in this world, there is no need for social organisation; decisions are somehow automatically realised; the individual and the structural are directly reconciled, bypassing society’s complex of mediations.

The scene, however, does introduce some factors that set it apart. What makes it possible for Captain America to hold the powerful council members accountable for their plans, is the improbable character of their chance encounter in the street. The politicians are simply there, passively available, perhaps wishing to express their gratitude to their saviour, in any case so distraught from the violent events that they allow themselves to be caught up in a consequential discussion about ethics and policy *on camera*. Indeed, the media also happens to be there, and not just citizens with cell phones, but actual news teams with reporters, cameramen, technicians, a whole apparatus of organised mass transmission, broadcasting the exchange live on national and possibly international TV networks. And so, the scene plays out as a sort of superpowered version of the archetypal Habermasian public sphere: there is a rational debate going on in an open urban space; it is being transmitted to the wider public through old school, centralised mass media; and the public's opinion – displayed synecdochally through a quick montage of affected reactions – directly informs government policy.

In other words, in this image of a performance of power, the bourgeois public sphere – and the media system that supports its function – is itself shifted into the superhero register, as another myth of magical agency. The logic of the scene is the same as the logic of any Marvel production, with militarised vigilante demigods defeating some extra-terrestrial threat. It serves, perhaps not to naturalise, but to accustom us, by the force of aggressive narrative saturation, to the absence of the dimension that it mythologises, which is the dimension of possible political intervention. And of course, this scene is brought to us through a global entertainment corporation's new media platform – the new behemoth Disney+ service, a result of the digital agglomeration and metastasis of a number of 'old' networks and media archives – itself a vehicle in the process through which the social mesh of contemporary media is further atrophied and its possible political functions circumscribed. In order to function, then, this performance of power enlists an image of the performance of power. It is, in Jonas Staal's understanding of the term, propaganda, and in this case it is hard not to agree with him.

One central claim in Staal's recent study of propaganda as a cultural form, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, is that the polyvalence of the concept should be restored. We should cease associating propaganda merely with dictatorships or 'totalitarian' regimes, he argues; we should stop seeing propaganda and democracy as mutually exclusive, the former denoting a practice of sinister brainwashing incompatible with a supposedly enlightened, liberal society. Instead, we should understand propaganda as something like the design – or, to use the word that Staal prefers, the *construction* – of the 'filters' through which social forms are mediated and defined. The line of demarcation therefore does not run between propaganda (bad) and, let's say, democratic information (good), but instead between 'elite propaganda', which shapes 'a new normative reality that serves the interests of elite power', and 'popular propaganda', which, Staal writes, would permit us to 'liberate ourselves from what we think the world is in order to enable the collective imagination of what we want it to become'.³

What would characterise such a ‘popular’ or ‘emancipatory propaganda’? Here, Staal proposes taking the model for understanding the term that Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman developed in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), but turn it on its head. Against the monopolised mass media that Chomsky and Herman described, which was based on concentrated ownership, an ad-based revenue model that translated into a support for private interests, and a strict control over information sources, Staal sets out a ‘popular propaganda’ that enacts demands for democratisation, that promotes narratives emerging out of ‘grassroots’ concerns, and that maintains public information access, so as to ‘challenge structures of power’.⁴ An element of popular propaganda’s ‘performance of power’, then, would be the establishment of something like a different or at least radically restructured media system, accountable to democratic principles and ideals – asserting popular control over precisely that complex of mediations that the Captain America scene mythologises and disavows. Crucial to propaganda, Staal boldly writes, is ‘control over infrastructure’.⁵ But what image of the performance of power should such a popular propaganda enlist? And what form of art could respond to its democratic ideal?

A figure who perhaps more than anyone else embodied the contradictions and the ambivalences, but also the boundless aspirations of propaganda, was the German political organiser and publisher Willi Münzenberg, today known mainly, if at all, as the founder of the left-wing, antifascist weekly *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (1924–38) – famous for its pioneering use of John Heartfield’s photomontage techniques – and possibly also as a co-author and co-publisher of the *Brown Book* about the Reichstag fire in Berlin in 1933, an important document in the history of antifascist propaganda, which among other things helped secure the acquittal of future Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov, who had been falsely accused of the timely arson.

For a long time a victim of cold-war-period intransigency towards figures either associated with, or critical of Stalinist Soviet – or, in his case, both – Münzenberg’s reputation is currently undergoing critical revision.⁶ The history of his multitude of activities is completely intertwined with the conflicted history of the international communist movement, as it wavered between being a force for social emancipation and a force for sectarian closure and brutality, during the interwar years. His communist career stretches from his association with the German communist party during the period of its factional formation, to his deep investment in the various popular front endeavours in the mid- to late 1930s, and to his infamously suicidal parting words to the Comintern in 1939: ‘The traitor, Stalin, is you!’

Reading the recent biography by journalist John Green – *Willi Münzenberg: Fighter Against Fascism and Stalinism* – it is difficult not to get the impression that, in spite of all, some individuals, through some coincidence of forces and events, find themselves at points of convergence in the field of causality, enabling them to act beyond human limits, at a superhero scale.⁷ A list of the various committees, congresses, magazines, publishing houses, cultural associations, trade organisations, financial institutes, production outfits, distribution services and so on that Münzenberg – a ‘Marxist Rupert Murdoch’, Owen Hatherley calls him in his recent review of Green’s biography, but that feels somehow

too restricted: we might call him Captain Comintern – initiated between the revolutionary years in Germany around 1920, and his death in 1940, would run a mile long.⁸

In the early 1920s, at the direct request of Lenin, Münzenberg set up the International Workers' Relief, an organisation designed to raise awareness and channel aid to famine-ridden, post-civil war Russia from supporting movements, parties and governments around the world. The Workers' Relief went on to mutate into an all-purpose organisation serving as the main non-governmental conduit between the Soviet Union and its allies, relaying Comintern propaganda, funds and resources to and from sympathising forces in Europe and beyond. Later in the same decade, Münzenberg launched what would become known as the Anti-Imperialist League, also a Comintern-backed organisation, whose purpose was to 'coordinate the fight of the oppressed nations', connecting anti-colonial and international anti-capitalist revolutionary struggles.⁹ Exiled in Paris in the late 1930s, after he had fallen out of favour with the post-purge Soviet *nomenklatura*, he worked tirelessly, and at great personal danger, with setting up an anti-Stalinist, German Popular Front, founding what would become his short-lived, final magazine project, *Der Zukunft* (The Future).

Among persons who may have come close to 'constructing reality' through propaganda, as Staal phrases it, Münzenberg undoubtedly has a privileged position. He was not only a key orchestrator of the Comintern's worldwide propaganda campaigns for almost the full duration of the organisation's existence, he was also instrumental for creating the sprawling media system through which those campaigns were circulated, as well as for establishing the economic structures that supported it. But it would be misguided to describe what he did as 'propaganda art', or him as a 'propaganda artist'. He left no such signature on the reality he constructed. Curiously, the more one reads about him, the less clear his image becomes. The accumulating data about his various projects and organisations, the wealth of unbelievable anecdotes about his different encounters and collaborations, do not combine into a fuller, richer, more detailed account of the person. Instead, the further you read in Green's biography, the more you take in from the slate of recent studies, the more Münzenberg himself seems to disappear, to disintegrate as an individual, dissolving into the network of relations he facilitated.

A semi-fictional Münzenberg shows up in Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975–81). The three-volume novel's anonymous protagonist meets him in exile in Paris in 1938, in the midst of his ill-fated attempt to set up a German *Volksfront* ('popular front'), sceptically reassessing his previous decades of unswerving support for the Soviet cause. I had laboriously 'attempted to put art in the service of the Party', he laments, but now I see that 'art is the means' of 'loosening the rigidity of political institutions, and reminding us of the diversity of our perceptions'.¹⁰ In *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, this late, *Der Zukunft*-period Münzenberg, becomes one of the central representatives for Weiss's vision of a radically democratic socialism, of a politics that could respond to the experimental openness of art, without reducing either politics or art. There is undoubtedly truth to Weiss's portrait of Münzenberg – but perhaps only insofar as it can be reconciled with the image that emerges out of the recent

studies: of someone for whom the activity as a propagandist eclipsed concerns of authorship, and who appears to have been somewhat impatient with, maybe even indifferent to, the ruminations of critical intellectuals and artists, mindful to assert the autonomy of their work.

Could Jonas Staal be described as a Willi Münzenberg of the post-communist era? Even though they belong to different historical universes, with wildly different political conditions and possibilities, there are undeniable parallels between their propaganda operations. To the profusion of communist associations that the organisationally hyperactive Münzenberg helped establish, corresponds the plethora of platforms, movements and assemblies that Staal has been or is setting up and assisting, from the *New World Summit* (2012–ongoing) and the *Artist Organizations International* (2015–ongoing), to his design and organisational work for the *Democracy in Europe 2025 Movement* (2017–ongoing). To Münzenberg’s persistent efforts with establishing a socialist media system for the international circulation of communist propaganda, information and art – from his vast ecosystem of printed publications, to the film companies that distributed Soviet cinema across the world, and to the *Association of Worker Photographers* aiming to show the world through the ‘eye of the worker’ – corresponds Staal’s ongoing projects that seek to mobilise resistance against, and devise alternatives to, the dystopia of twenty-first-century media, with works such as *Collectivize Facebook* (2021). Also, to Münzenberg’s concern with educating the public about, but also learning from, the devastating efficiency of the extreme-right propaganda machine – in his most famous book, *Propaganda als Waffe* (*Propaganda as Weapon*, 1937), in part a study of Joseph Goebbels – corresponds Staal’s concern with understanding and exposing the media strategies of the contemporary far right, as evidenced most clearly by his monographic counter-exhibition *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam in 2018.

Staal, however, is definitely not indifferent to art. ‘My name is Jonas Staal and I am a propaganda artist’, reads the gleefully provocative statement that opens his *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*.¹¹ It is a declaration of position – or a ‘declaration of dependence’, as artist Sarah Charlesworth once put it.¹² What does it mean? It offers a dose of sociological realism, establishing that, since any kind of art is unavoidably to some extent determined by and reflective of its social conditions, of the regimes of power it is caught up in, and so on, then the only straightforward and critically conscious attitude is to affirm this situation, and to try, within the realm of the possible, to affect it in some positive, progressive way. Staal quotes Andrea Fraser: ‘We are always already serving.’¹³ To pretend that we are not is to maintain an illusion of independence that is practically a ‘complicit blessing of the powers that be’.¹⁴ The question we should instead ask, Staal writes, is, ‘who could we serve otherwise and differently?’¹⁵

To be a propaganda artist, then, would be to reject the notion that art could disengage from power, and instead to actively engage in the work with creating overtly interested and propagandistic, popular representations, narratives and infrastructures, which do not perpetuate the myth of art’s autonomy. From this perspective, Staal can level a withering and quite amusing critique against

practices of modernism-washing among many major art museums and institutions, which revert to an idealisation of the pure artistic independence embodied by the abstract masterpieces of a limited set of canonised, male, white artists, in order to obfuscate their own dependence on and complicity in the art market's corrosive class-war-from-above financial machinations. Tracing the history of this confluence, Staal discusses the CIA's infamous propaganda operations during the cold war, when they set up the Congress for Cultural Freedom in order to promote the values of 'capitalist democracy', enlisting a number of those same canonised high modernists for that end. 'Essentially, there is nothing nonfigurative about the works of modernist propaganda art', Staal writes, with another exquisite provocation. 'Instead, these works offer figurative representations of the freedom supposedly inherent in nonfigurative representation.'¹⁶

But here I must nevertheless object to Staal. That any 'autonomous art' is itself inevitably heteronomous – that is, that it is the product of and vehicle for all sorts of external, sociological conditions – does not mean that its 'autonomy' is reducible to those conditions. The concept of autonomy must not necessarily imply naive notions of art's inherent independence and freedom. It would be more adequate to say that, in the critical philosophical and aesthetic tradition that is implicitly or explicitly invoked in discussions about this contested concept, autonomous art is an art that is able to produce an appearance, an image, of its own autonomy, which is the appearance that it has a self-legislating form whose logic can dominate the logic of its heteronomous determinations.¹⁷ It is as such an image – which cannot be assumed, but must be asserted, as literary scholar Nicholas Brown has recently phrased it – that art's autonomy can function as a prefiguration of freedom, enabling a critical attitude towards various forms of dominance.¹⁸ 'Autonomy', in other words, is not equivalent to an illusion of objective independence, but something like an inherently antagonistic regulative idea, whose only practical significance – critical or otherwise – comes into effect when its validity is evoked against art's heteronomous determinations.

Let me instead pose a provocative question in return: does 'propaganda art' not run the risk of becoming *superhero art*? That is, does propaganda art, understood as a performance of power, not run the risk of becoming an *image* of a performance of power, that serves to mystify the social conditions of art's economic and institutional system? Does it not run the risk of performing the same role as the hyper-idealised image of the bourgeois public sphere in the Captain America scene, where our benevolent superhero was able to talk a group of omnipotent deep-state politicians out of committing genocide, by employing mass media to leverage the great power of public opinion – a mythologisation that served as a sort of negative allegory of the destruction of that same public sphere on the part of the media system that circulates Captain America scenes?

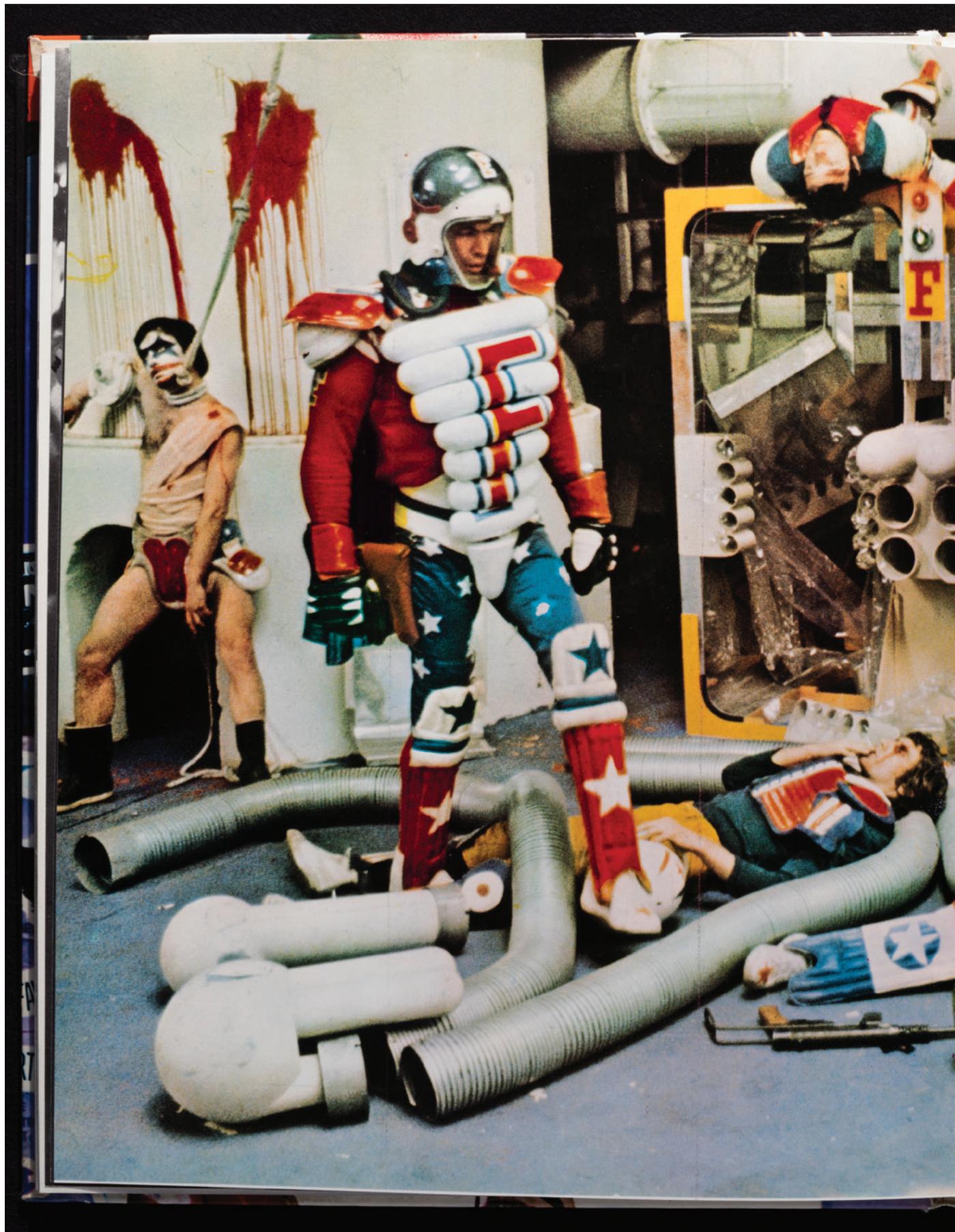
We could phrase it like this: if the concept of propaganda art is constructed in opposition to a reductively framed 'myth' of 'autonomous art', then propaganda art will, on account of its definition, disavow the social and economic conditions of contemporary art, to the extent that those conditions hinge upon a notion of art's autonomy – which, like it or not, they do. And by disavowing them, it renders itself powerless to affect

them. Practically, the problem that a propaganda art faces is consequently that its representations might be dominated by, or inscribed into, the contemporary art world's logic of economic valorisation, and the authorship models and career mechanics that follow from it, so that a skilfully orchestrated media campaign will reflect stronger upon the artist's or curator's credits than upon its propagandistic aims, or so that a meeting around a social issue or a shared concern will, through a kind of reticular mimesis, become a glorifying image of the networked creative economy, more than an opportunity for political organisation.

Why, we might ask, do discussions about the autonomy of art mostly refer to visual art, when the concept itself is not specific to any particular art form? One answer lies in the fact that the economic system of the art world remains structurally committed to an individualised, crafts-based production model, which generates unique, auratic artworks that can be objects of fetishism and economic speculation. On this market, the creation of economic value is not – or is less – dependent on mass production, which means that visual art, in some respects, has been shielded from some of the homogenising effects of the shift to industrial production models in other cultural fields. The positive effect of this is that it has been, and to some extent remains, easier to sustain the notion of art's autonomy in the visual arts field. The negative effect is – among other things – visual arts' increasing alignment with the logic of rampant financialisation.¹⁹

Rejecting the positive effect – art's autonomy – would not entail the elimination of the negative effect, or of the institutional and economic system that generates it. Instead, the question should be how art's autonomy could be institutionalised differently, how it could be given, not an economic purpose, but a social one, attuned to the contradiction inherent in such a notion. There is, as Staal himself suggests, in fact a long history of experimental answers to that question, from the proletkult artists onwards, whose work, he writes, was 'actually [...] more autonomous than that of the modernist propaganda artists', since 'they did not merely operate in a predefined infrastructure, but made artworks as infrastructure' – that is, since they sought to assert art's autonomy against its heteronomous determinations not only at the level of the artwork, but throughout art's apparatus of production, distribution and presentation.²⁰ There is a socialist case for the autonomy of art, in other words. There must be, because a truly progressive reform can only derive from it.

- 1 Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019, p.1. This book is based on Staal's PhD thesis, 'Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century', University of Leiden, 2018.
- 2 *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), S01E06, quote adapted from transcript available at <https://tvshowtranscripts.ourboard.org/viewtopic.php?f=951&t=43542> (last accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 3 J. Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, *op. cit.*, p.2f.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.47.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.9.
- 6 See, for example, Kaspar Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- 7 John Green, *Willi Münzenberg: Fighter Against Fascism and Stalinism*, London: Routledge, 2020.
- 8 Owen Hatherley, 'The Marxist Rupert Murdoch', *Tribune*, 4 February 2021, available at <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/02/the-marxist-rupert-murdoch> (last accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 9 Fredrik Petersen, 'Willi Münzenberg: A Propagandist Reaching Beyond the Party and Class', Ralf Hoffrogge and Normal LaPorte (ed.), *Weimar Communism as Mass Movement*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2017, p.246.
- 10 Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, vol. 2 (trans. Joel Scott), Durham, NC: Duke University, 2020, p.57.
- 11 J. Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, *op. cit.*, p.1.
- 12 Sarah Charlesworth, 'Declaration of Dependence', *The Fox*, no.1, 1975.
- 13 J. Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, *op. cit.*, p.6.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.13.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.71.
- 17 For a recent discussion, see Peter Osborne, 'Theorem 4: Autonomy – Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?', *The Postconceptual Condition*, London: Verso, 2018, p.68.
- 18 Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, p.22.
- 19 Marina Vishmidt, 'What Do We Mean By "Autonomy" and "Reproduction"?', Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*, London: Mute Books, 2016.
- 20 J. Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, *op. cit.*, p.72.

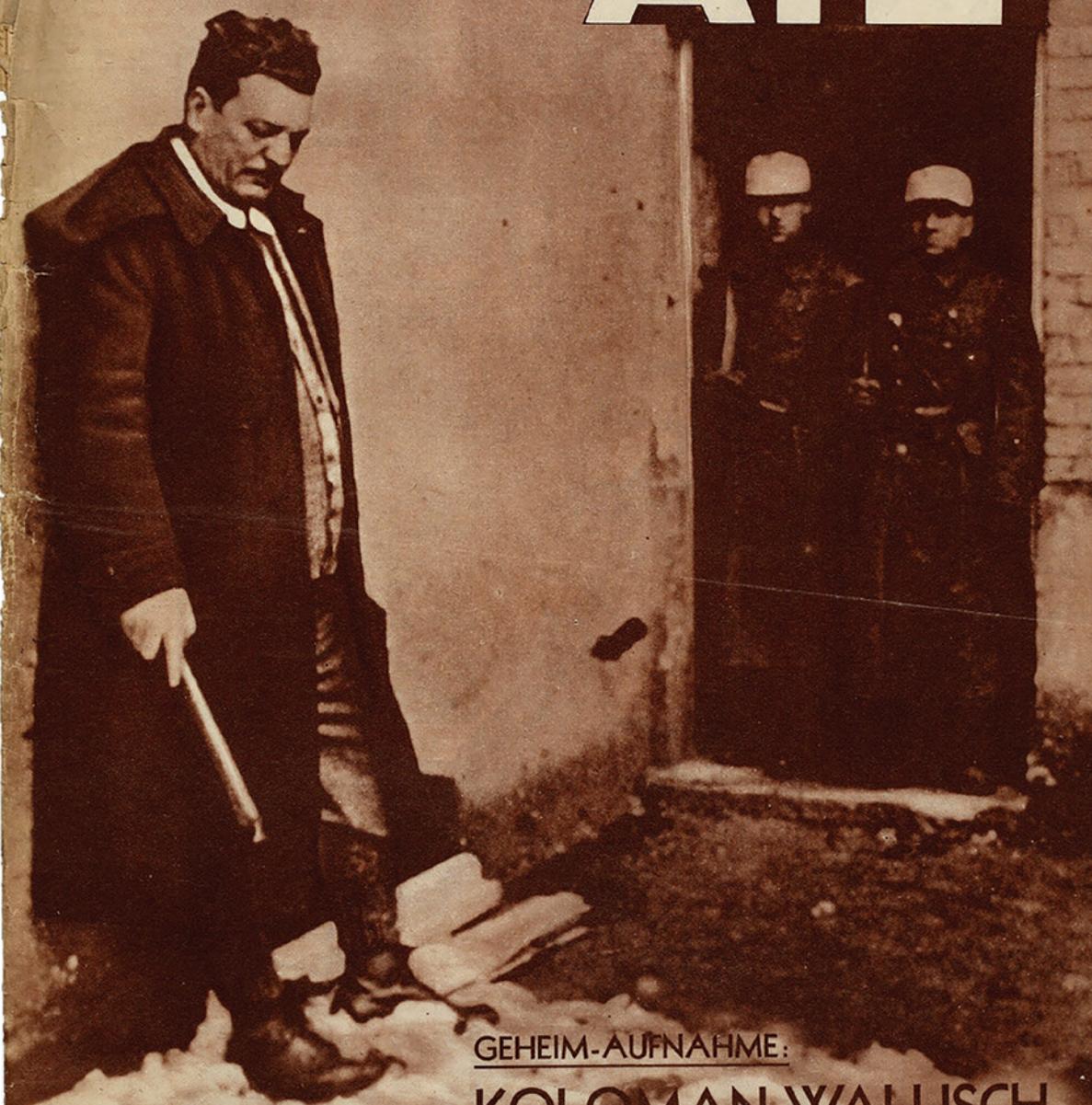


William Klein, *Mister Freedom*,
1970, offset lithograph on paper.
Courtesy Rosemary Furtak Collection,
Walker Art Center Library, Minneapolis



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GEHEIM-AUFNAHME:

KOLOMAN WALLISCH VOR DER HINRICHTUNG

Wallisch, der Führer der Schutzbündler in Bruck a. d. Mur, versuchte nach dem Zusammenbruch des heldenmütigen Widerstandes, sich nach Jugoslawien durchzuschlagen. Er wurde erkannt, verraten, den Gendarmen ausgeliefert, gehenkt. Er starb tapfer und einfach. Den Eisenbahner, der ihn für 5000 Schilling verraten hatte, fand man zehn Tage später erschossen im Wald. — Koloman Wallisch im Galgenhof des leobener Gerichts angesichts des Todes. In der Hand hält er sein Testament, das er, unter dem Galgen stehend, übergab.

'Hjalmar oder Das wachsende Defizit'
 (Hjalmar or the growing deficit),
 photogravure, 38.1 x 26.7cm, back cover
 of AIZ, vol.XIII, no.14, Prague 1934.
 Courtesy Merrill C. Berman
 Collection, Rye, NY



Front cover of AIZ, vol.IX, no.17, Berlin
1930, Photogravure, 38.1 x 26.7cm.
Courtesy of Merrill C. Berman
Collection, Rye, NY



Studio Jonas Staal, in collaboration with DiEM25, *New Unions: DiEM25*, Athens, 2017. Photograph: Jonas Staal, Sporting Basket Arena, Athens. Courtesy the artist

