

# THE PROPAGANDA ARTIST

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Jonas Staal on understanding power

Does the world really need more expensive things to adorn its walls or cryptic self-referential installations in museums? For Dutch artist Jonas Staal, the political turmoil and disinformation of late capitalism demands reviewing the purpose of our institutions and the power of art. He uses museums, galleries, and public spaces to stage reimagined state apparatuses like parliaments, schools, and embassies, and has used court appearances as theatrical performances. DAMN° spoke to him about turning his pilot-parliaments into the real thing in Rojava, taking a cultural approach to politics, his unlikely research into Steve Bannon, and why he calls himself a propaganda artist.

TEXT

NADINE BOTHA



People's Parliament of Rojava  
Year: 2015-18  
Artist: Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal  
Photo: Ruben Hamelink  
Description: Day of the opening of the People's Parliament of Rojava in the city of Deirik, West-Kurdistan/North-Syria

**DAMN°:** Since 2012 you have orchestrated six editions of the New World Summit, an organisation that uses art institutions and events as temporary parliaments for 'stateless states, autonomist groups, and blacklisted political organisations'. After Berlin, Leiden, Koci and Brussels, the fifth really took place in a 'stateless state' – Rojava, the Kurdish region in Syria – and resulted in building a People's Parliament of Rojava. How did this transpire?

**Jonas Staal:** Representatives of the Kurdish revolutionary movement, and the women's movement in particular, have participated to the New World Summit from the very beginning. That is how my team and I became familiar with the theories on democratic confederalism – or 'stateless democracy' – by Kurdish revolutionaries such as Sakine Cansiz and Abdullah Öcalan. Since the New World Summit itself aims to be something of a 'stateless parliament', these ideas became an inspiration to further develop the organisation around reimagining alternative transdemocratic assemblies that separate the practice of democracy from the model of the state.



Museum as Parliament, 2018  
Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal  
Reconstruction of the People's Parliament of Rojava in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.  
Photo: Nieuwe Beelden Makers

In 2015, Saleh Muslim, then co-president of the Rojavan Democratic Union Party (PYD), invited us to travel to Rojava in order to document and learn from its practice of stateless democracy. During that visit, Minister of Foreign Affairs Amina Osse became interested in the New World Summit's temporary parliaments, and she proposed that we build a parliament in Rojava for its stateless democracy. In discussion with Osse, the core concepts for the building were clear instantly: that it would be a parliament as a public space, symbolising a new kind of collective space. More than just a symbol of the ideals of the Rojava revolution, it also needed to be a place to put these ideals into practice on a day-to-day basis.

At the time, the frontlines with the Islamic State were still close, but nonetheless, despite the multi-front struggle the Kurds and their Arab and Assyrian alliances were waging, they simultaneously had created new schools, local communal assemblies, cultural institutions that approached art from a stateless perspective, and even a new field of scientific research called Jineology, or 'science of women'. It was clear to us that this was not merely a political struggle, but a cultural one, that aimed at changing the distribution and practice of power in the most fundamental way imaginable.

**DAMN°:** Although the work seems to fulfil its purpose in situ, there is currently an exhibition about the People's Parliament of Rojava in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. What is the role of museums in your practice?

**JS:** The Van Abbemuseum has supported the development of the parliament from the very beginning, including purchasing a model of the parliament that in turn served to partly fund the actual construction in Rojava. At this moment, a near 1:1 scale reconstruction of the parliament is actively used in the institution itself. Museums and contemporary art spaces have played a very important role in my work in that sense. Another example is BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, which co-founded the New World Academy educational wing of the New World Summit. As our actual parliaments are turning into frightening theatres for neoliberal and altright forces, it seems all the more important to transform our actual theatres and museums into new forms of parliaments. Rather than giving into choices between 'the better of evils' – with the neoliberal and austerity establishments on one side and the racists on the other – this insists on the possibility of new worlds. Rojava provides a horizon for that. As the Rojavans say, their revolution is not merely a Kurdish one, but one for humanity.



Museum as Parliament, 2018  
Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal  
Havin Gunesser and Charles Esche lead a public assembly in the reconstruction of the People's Parliament of Rojava in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.  
Photo: Nieuwe Beelden Makers



New World Embassy: Rojava, 2016  
Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal  
Temporary embassy for the autonomous Rojava region in the Oslo City Hall  
Photo: Istvan Virag

**DAMN°:** What is the significance of your role as 'artist' when orchestrating the actual construction of a parliament in Rojava, working with the pan-European platform Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) on the New Unions assemblies, and when you were sued by Geert Wilders, sending invites to your court appearance as if it were a performance?

**JS:** Well, what are parliaments? They are theatres, architectural constructions, spaces of assembled symbols and design elements. Power cannot exist without form, and although we as artists do not have executive power, we have the relative power to give form to power. So instead of making parliaments for a growing authoritarian world order, why not use these artistic competences to create new forms of parliaments, that enable alternative forms of assembly and emancipatory self-governance? To change the world, we'll have to imagine that change first. Art has a transformative potential, if artists are willing to commit themselves to democratisation movements and organisations.



Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective, 2018  
Photo: Nieuwe Beelden Makers  
Overview Room 5 titled "Performing Trumpism" in the exhibition-project Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective in Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam

**DAMN°:** Another of your recent exhibitions seems worlds apart from Rojava - the Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective that you developed with Marina Otero Verzier at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. How do they relate to each other from the perspective of your practice?

**JS:** They are both about propaganda. In the case of Bannon, about an extremely dangerous and oppressive propaganda, that tries to shape the world after his ideological vision of white Christian economic nationalism. In the case of Rojava, as a form of emancipatory propaganda: as a new organisational model of power based on self-governance, feminism and social ecology, in an attempt to redistribute power and make each of its members the propagandists of their own faith and a shared world. Propaganda is associated with Stalinism and Nazism, and for good reasons, but there are many forms of emancipatory propaganda too, for instance the 19th century Filipino revolutionary movement and Lucy Lippard's call for 'intimate' and 'feminist' propaganda in the 70s and 80s.



Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective, 2018  
Photo: Remco van Bladel and Jonas Staal  
Study for an installation of the collected cinematic work of Stephen K. Bannon, commissioned by Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam



The Disappearance of Steve Bannon, 2018  
Image: Jonas Staal  
The Disappearance of Steve Bannon, part of Room 5 titled "Performing Trumpism" in the exhibition-project Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective in Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam

I think that in this time of alternative facts and fake news in the post-truth era, we have two main tasks ahead. One is to research to understand how propaganda shapes our world today, not just in authoritarian regimes, but equally in democracies: from Trump to Orbán and Erdoğan. The second task as I see it, would be to develop new forms of experimental and emancipatory propaganda. To develop fact-based narratives, that mobilise the common imagination, and open pathways to create new worlds. A world of many worlds. My work with Rojava and DiEM25 hopefully can be modest contributions to explore the potentials of such an emancipatory propaganda art.

**DAMN°:** When you say that 'propaganda is power plus performance' and that you are a 'propaganda artist', how do you understand your power?

**JS:** Power is defined by the control over infrastructure on one hand, and the control over narrative on the other. These infrastructures can relate to politics, the economy, the military-industrial complex, and culture. Narrative relates to the manufacturing of consent: the stories, values, and attitudes that sustain 'norms'. In the late 90s, even the most modest statements of today's alt-right would have been reason to exclude them from parliament and prosecute them.



New Unions: DiEM25, Athens, 2017  
 Studio Jonas Staal and DiEM25  
 Yanis Varoufakis leads an assembly in the installation  
*New Unions: DiEM25, Athens*, in the Sporting Basket  
 Arena Athens, co-produced by BAK, basis voor actuele  
 kunst, Utrecht  
 Photo: Jonas Staal

Today, these statements are the standard discourse of conservative liberals and even former social democrats. That shows that the control over both infrastructure and narrative has moved to the right. They are defining the new norms in which we operate. Propaganda is not just about sending a message, it is about constructing reality as such.

**DAMN<sup>o</sup>: In other words, your imaginative power as an artist is a capacity to contribute to infrastructure and narrative?**

**JS:** Yes, power is not singular, just as propaganda is not. The performance of power, which I call propaganda, is different in the context of the Trump administration than in, let's say, the Occupy movement or Black Lives Matter or DiEM25. Although these are examples of groups and movements that might not be in power, they certainly have power – to organise, mobilise, change discourse, and one day, maybe, to establish new forms of emancipatory governance. Authoritarian regimes tend to instrumentalise artists to strengthen their dominant narratives, but in democratisation movements we see something else: from Russian collective Chto Delat to Cuban artist

Tania Bruguera and the US group Not An Alternative, artists work within and alongside popular mass movements. They are neither instrumentalised nor indoctrinated: they contribute their imaginative capacity to a larger freedom – a collective freedom. This is not a position of artistic oppression, but of liberation. It's about the freedom we gain to collectively author our world, instead of it being authored for us.

Museum as Parliament, The People's Parliament of Rojava, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, until 17 March 2019, [vanabbemuseum.nl](http://vanabbemuseum.nl)

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# FIBREPUNKING THE PAST

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Stitching Worlds' tactual tales

TEXT NADINE BOTHA

This summer saw the launch of *Stitching Worlds: Exploring Textiles and Electronics*, a book that is the culmination of a four-year research project led by Ebru Kurbak. One of its central themes is to ask us to imagine electronic objects emerging from techniques such as knitting, weaving, crochet and embroidery. Ahead of a survey of her work at the Istanbul Design Biennial, she talks to DAMN° about how making these imaginaries quite real, redesigns history to reveal that gender divisions and industrial advances weave only partial patterns.





How to Fillet a Swordfish, 2015-2016  
Infrequently Asked Questions  
Photo: kollektiv fischka/kramar

When Ebru Kurbak moved to Austria from Turkey in 2006, she was struck by a peculiar sense of ‘falling behind’. She had taken a position as a lecturer at the University of Art and Industrial Design Linz, after teaching at Istanbul Bilgi University for over five years, and it was not a matter of intellectual or professional proficiency. ‘I didn’t know how to cope with snow, for example,’ she says. ‘You’re socially excluded when you don’t know how to ski. These kinds of very basic things were my daily problems.’ The process of acclimatizing to a new country initiated a process of reflection: ‘I realised how much the Turkish culture influences the way I behave, do things, and I really appreciated this otherness that I faced as something to realise, something like a mirror that reflects on

things that you don’t question.’ Almost 10 years later these reflections on otherness, along with sharing experiences and anecdotes with other migrants, became the impetus for her Infrequently Asked Questions (iFAQs) work. Instead of leaving the learning and catching up to the cultural newcomer, the work highlights some of the skills and knowledge that might be overlooked by a complacent dominant culture.

‘The biggest threat to the limits of what we can imagine is our assumptions. Those opinions, biases, and expectations of which we are unaware or do not question. These could have been shaped by our experiences, beliefs, culture, family, and ultimately, society at large,’ writes Kurbak in the book of *Stitching Worlds*, a four year-long critical research project that she ran at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, funded by the Austrian Science Fund. Looking into the historical role of textiles in the emergence of electronic technology, it considers how our devices and accelerationist culture might be different if it weren’t for the artificial gender division between the domains of what has been deemed ‘women’s work’ and ‘industrial advances’. As befitting such a revisionist project, the results have not been presented in an academic format, but rather in a collaborative exhibition, workshops, and a series of events that challenge our contemporary appreciation of textiles and textile techniques as simply decorative.

We tend to perceive the history of technological developments ‘as a series of causes(s) and effect(s), often as a linear progression...’ Kurbak explains in the book. What *Stitching Worlds* proposes is to not only apply speculative design thinking on the future, but also on rereading our history books. To illustrate the point, over Skype Kurbak highlights that string ‘is actually the first ever technology in a way, before pottery...’ And this also reflects the way the project is deeply influenced by the research and writings of archaeologist and linguist Elizabeth Wayland Barber, who argues that the String Revolution is just as important as the Bronze, Stone or Metal Ages, but has been overlooked because textiles are perishable and have not survived thousands of



Yarn Recorder 2018,  
So Kanno, Ebru Kurbak  
Photo: Elodie Grethen  
© Stitching Worlds

years. ‘Out of one dimension, you develop three-dimensional objects, which is a very sophisticated way of making,’ Kurbak goes on. Moreover, ‘the spindle is the first rotating thing’, giving rise to wheels, gears and all other rotating things that eventually facilitated the Industrial Revolution.

The works in the research project include *Crafted Logic*, in collaboration with *Stitching Worlds*’ key researcher Irene Posch, which presents crocheted electromechanical switches that are the result of experiential research done with traditional Turkish craftswomen in rural Anatolia. The *Yarn Recorder*, a collaboration with Japanese media artist So Kanno, which is an interactive spindle of bobbins and stainless steel thread that can record and playback sound. And the *piece de resistance*, also in collaboration with Posch and many consultants and assistants, *The Embroidered Computer* comprises 369 gold-embroidered electromechanical switches that together function as an 8-bit computer comparable to the massive mainframe computers of the 1950s.

None of these, or the other works in *Stitching Worlds*, are presented as creating solutions to technological accelerationism or propose advances in electronic textiles. Instead they ask us to imagine a different reality and question the present as an unchallengeable given. The genius, as with all Kurbak’s work, is that it uses something so familiar and everyday that we might have started not to see it, and injects a subtle intervention that opens up a world of questions. This impetus dates back at least to her range of ‘spatial couture’, which was made just after the advent of the



Lonely Planet, 2016-2018  
Photo: kollektiv fischka/kramar



The Embroidered Computer, 2018  
Ebru Kurbak, Irene Posch  
Photo: Elodie Grethen  
© Stitching Worlds



The Knitcoin Edition, 2018  
 Photo: Elodie Grethen  
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Talknam Hat, 2008  
 Ebru Kurbak, Ricardo O'Nascimento



Tunable Touch, 2011

iPhone and sought to highlight how our personal space was becoming real estate for commercial and government interests. An earmuff became a Wi-Fi locator, a feathered hat a personal screen that automatically responds to electromagnetic waves in the surroundings, and a pair of magnet-fitted gloves gave wearers the possibility of detecting the electronic aura of devices.

Kurbak looks 'at things in their complexity, as gradients and not as boxes or categories.' And for her, these subtle interventions always work two ways: iFAQs is as much about migrant as dominant cultures; Stitching Worlds as much about domestic craft and gender as electronic technology and neutrality; and the spatial couture as much about personal space and fashion items, as digital networks and control. Implicit in all of these works is Kurbak's urge to surface the political dimensions of design, an impulse she has

acted on since her student days. Even in her revisions of the Lonely Planet guides to Syria and Lebanon, her light touch avoids creating spectacle of this sensitive situation.

'I try to make the smallest change possible in a system to show how disproportionately effective that change could be and how simply it could all be different,' she concurs. After all, it was not a grand design that led us to the present, but multiple small and simple decisions that we all could have made differently.

STITCHINGWORLDS.NET  
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Stitching Worlds is available to order from Revolver Publishing, revolver-publishing.com The book features contributions by Onur Akmehtem, Ekmele Ertan, Lars Hallnaes, Tincuta Heinzl, Mili John Tharakan, So Kanno, Ebru Kurbak, Mark Miodownik, Matthias Mold, Jussi Parikka, Hannah Perner-Wilson, Irene Posch, Fiona Raby, Mika Satomi, Martin Schneider and Rebecca Stewart.