

ASSEMBLY-AS-ECOLOGY

Jonas Staal in conversation with Filipa Ramos

Artist Jonas Staal has been making artworks that imagine and propose modes of interplanetary alliance to deal with our present-future of environmental transformation. Often collaborating with others, namely with the lawyer and social justice activist Radha D'Souza and artist Laure Prouvost, Staal declares comradeship as an artistic method to devise systems of collective regeneration. In this conversation with writer Filipa Ramos, he discusses his interests, aims, and proposals for new forms of togetherness, namely his projects *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* and *Interplanetary Species Society*, exploring how they bring together assembly-as-ecology and ecology-as-assembly.

Filipa: Comrades are roommates, they share a camera, a chamber. I love how with the title of this project, *Comrades in Deep Future*, you are highlighting that to be alive is to exist in spatial and physical relation to all manifestations of the living—we share the same chamber Earth. My impression is that your work has always been rooted in the critical examination of human public affairs. I am therefore curious to learn about how, why, and when nonhumans started populating it. Can you tell me more about this event?

Jonas: Having been involved in many social and liberation movements over the past ten years, I realized that whenever I created spaces to bring people together, there were always other presences assembling as well. My Kurdish friends, for example, never forget to acknowledge the mountains connecting North-Kurdistan (Turkey), East-Kurdistan (Iran), South Kurdistan (Iraq), and West-Kurdistan (Syria) in their famous saying: “Kurds have no friends but the mountains.” In decades of struggle for self-determination, the mountains were a hiding place, a source of nourishment, protectors, and, if necessary, a means of self-defence against the violence of occupying armies. The mountains are friends, comrades. Not just the place where one lives or belongs, but a place that

belongs with you, that speaks with you, struggles with you.

In my work with lawyer, academic, writer, and activist Radha D'Souza titled *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, or “CICC,” we deepened this understanding of non-human comradeship further. Our project is an alternative court to prosecute intergenerational climate crimes committed by transnational corporations and states, not just in the past and present, but also in the future. Although Radha never wants to speak of “rights,” as she considers them inherently proprietary. Nature, she argues, is not an externality, but a *relation*. If you harm a river through pollution, you harm not just the river, but all plants, animals, and humans that live in interdependency with that river, as well as unborn plants, animals, and humans that would have lived with the river in the future. So interdependency and intergenerationality come to replace the notion of rights. Comradeship across human and non-human ecosystem workers becomes the paradigm to redefine our struggle for the collective regeneration of “chamber Earth,” as you phrased it so beautifully.

Filipa: Yes! The work's title declares that such relationality concerns not only the past-present but first and foremost the future. It is the preventive nature of such a Court that I find so compelling: its possibility to induce change. Working with Radha D'Souza allows you to cross the realm of the artistic with her own areas of knowledge and action and to enlarge the operativity and potentiality of your own work, and of art overall. In what ways can we envisage such a Court to activate concrete procedures beyond the fundamental ones that will be set in place through the exhibitionary apparatus?

Jonas: The first iteration of the court took place in Amsterdam, through four public hearings against Unilever, ING, and Airbus, all transnational corporations registered in the Netherlands, as well as the Dutch State itself. We gathered witnesses, prosecutors, and judges, which — together with the public jury — were tasked with evaluating the testimonies based on The Intergenerational Climate Crimes Act, the legal foundation of the court drafted by Radha, and passing judgement on the accused.

The concrete workings of the court are manifold. Our public hearings aim to strengthen existing campaigns and legal cases brought forward by our witnesses, such as Kenya Land Alliance, Oyu Tolgoi Watch and Pueblos Indígenas Amazónicos Unidos en Defensa de sus Territorios. But we believe there is also importance in the embodied performative work with the public-turned-public jury to plant the *possibility* of intergenerational climate justice. We know our court does not have the executive power of the courts that enable and legalize ecocide at present. But institutions are performative: courts are theaters and the law is a script that only operates as long as we are willing to perform its legitimacy. In other words, our CICC is as real because we are collectively willing to act it into being. In that sense, I would say my work with Radha tries to manifest in the transformative space between the real and the possible.

Filipa: I'd say that the public is not only turned into a jury but also into witnesses, as they have been given access to proof of the criminal wrongdoings of those brought to court. Therefore there is forensic performativity that constitutes a growing community of witnesses who know and can attest to what these corporations are doing.

From that moment onwards, your decision as a viewer-turned-witness is an active one: even if you decide to ignore what you know, you will still have to make that decision consciously.

This is a powerful gesture that bypasses many expectations of an encounter with art but it is a violent gesture too, as you are willingly disturbing visitors with knowledge and affects that they may have not expected to be faced with.

I guess this leads me to two different questions here. The first concerns how you deal with this ambiguity between fighting for important causes and upturning people's lives while the second relates to how you prevent these important struggles from being commodified by the institutional and commercial apparatus of art?

Jonas: Yes, you are very right — the public as jury is also the public as witness. To recognize, in the context of climate crimes, lives and times lost. To commit time to the time of

another. To carry each other's time, facing a future that might not have much history left to bear. Witnessing, in this context, is an intimate act of collective solidarity.

Indeed, my works risk immersive imposition, although I always try to propose a clear social contract at forehand. And for me there is a simultaneous violence in the idea of the "visitor" as an agent of perpetual mobility, for whom doors are always open, which they can pass without obligation or commitment. But worlds commit themselves to us just the same, we don't just choose our world, but are equally chosen, cared for, confronted, tasked with struggle, solidarity, and comradeship — if we are response-able. I think Radha and my collaborative work is driven by that paradigm of interdependency.

Your question concerning the commodification of struggle is of course one that haunts many of us, who consider themselves critical and engaged cultural workers. Working with cultural institutions in the context of neoliberalism, means that whatever engagement with the world we enter into, is translated — one way or another — into cultural capital. Simultaneously, that is never the whole story. I have had the privilege of working with many comrades in unexpected places, in museums and art institutions as well as in the political realm, who are forced to navigate the increasing influence of corporate and market forces, but try to repurpose means and infrastructures to make transformative and solidary cultural work possible. We are in between worlds: the world as it is, and the world that we try to imagine and organize into being.

Filipa: It's interesting that you mention inter-worldliness in relation to reality and desire. It takes me to another work of yours, *Interplanetary Species Society*, the environment-biosphere-assembly hall you made in the Reaktorhallen, a former nuclear facility in Stockholm.

I really like the way its architecture was intentionally conceived to bring people together, closer, to help them spend time discussing and conceiving other modes of togetherness with life on this planet in the best possible conditions. This is because when we think of coded gatherings such as tribunals,

assemblies, or parliaments, so much of their efficiency relies on spatialization: on how they were physically conceived and designed.

I would love to know more about the actual spatial arrangement of the *Interplanetary Species Society*, and in general, about your vast experience in conceiving places of collective gathering that stand across activism, design, architecture, and art.

Jonas: The *Interplanetary Species Society* was a response to our becoming-interplanetary in the coming decade or so, an endeavour led by corporate companies like SpaceX that speak shamelessly of “space colonization” and a new generation of “space pioneers,” declaring other planets and their resources a new *terra nullius*. The alternative biosphere aimed to challenge this neo-colonial, extractivist narrative, and proposed interplanetary *cooperation* and *greeting* instead. And, most of all, it tried to create a space to deepen our intra-planetary bonds on, in, and with earth. This also signifies a historical reversal: the former nuclear center was once built underground to protect the surface from radiation, but as global heating intensifies, we will be forced to go underground to protect ourselves from the radiation of the surface — becoming intra-planetary.

The installation consists of multiple interconnected spheres, each occupied by a different assembly. In the hole where the nuclear reactor used to be, three meteorites gathered, some dating to 4,5 billion years ago, preceding the very formation of the planet on whose inner surface they were now situated. Another sphere gathered images of “proletarian plants,” depictions collected from socialist posters in which it is not heroic workers that lead the revolution, but plants and crops themselves who raise the banner of revolution. And there is a sphere of neo-constructivist ammonite fossils, an extinct family of octopus and squid that perished in the fifth mass extinction, just as we are facing the sixth. They are fossils, and we are fossils-in-the-making. And they are literally the fossils in fossil fuels: millions of years of earth memories that racial capitalism burns to accelerate movement in the present, undoing the possibility of futures in the process.

I really like your use of the term “environment-biosphere-assembly,” because indeed, before any human assembly, there is an ongoing assembly already taking place, a gathering of the world within and around us through which we think and breathe, and that breathes and thinks through us. Both the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* and *Interplanetary Species Society* emerge visually and spatially from this idea of assembly-as-ecology, or ecology-as-assembly, in which extinct non-human comrades — earth workers — gather across different time and space to propagate deep futures.

Lisbon-born **Filipa Ramos**, Ph.D., is a writer and curator whose research focuses on how culture addresses ecology. She is Director of the Contemporary Art Department of the city of Porto. She is Curator of Art Basel Film and founded the online artists' cinema *Vdrome*. Ongoing and upcoming projects include the arts and science festival *The Shape of a Circle in the Mind of a Fish* (since 2018) and “Persones Persons,” the 8th Biennale Gherdëina (2022), both with Lucia Pietroiusti. In 2021, she co-curated “Bodies of Water,” the 13th Shanghai Biennale. In 2019, she curated “Animalesque” at Bildmuseet Umeå, Sweden, and BALTIC, UK. Ramos was Editor-in-Chief of *art-agenda/e-flux*, Associate Editor of *Manifesta Journal*, and contributed to *Documenta 13* and *14*. She authored *Lost and Found* (Silvana Editoriale, 2009) and edited *Animals* (MIT Press, 2016). She is Lecturer at the Master Programme of Institute Art Gender Nature FHNW Academy of Arts and Design, Basel, where she leads the Art and Nature seminars.