

Abstract

Exemplified by four of his collaborative artistic-political projects, here Jonas Staal claims that, despite the fact that we tend to understand it as a catastrophic logic underlying systemic economic crisis—a maddening and criminal system of abuse and exploitation, a sadistic game played by few upon the lives of the many—speculation simultaneously might be part of the answer to this condition. Speculation is also part of what we can term the radical imaginary of both politics and art.

The Speculative Art of Assemblism

JONAS STAAL

Jonas Staal (1981) is artist and founder of the artistic and political organisation New World Summit (2012-ongoing) and the campaign *New Unions* (2016-ongoing). Staal's work includes interventions in public space, exhibitions, theatre plays, publications and lectures, focusing on the relationship between art, democracy and propaganda. Recent solo exhibitions include *Art of the Stateless State* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2015), *New World Academy* (Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 2015) and *After Europe* (State of Concept, Athens, 2016). His projects have been exhibited widely including at the 7th Berlin Biennial (2012), the 31st Bienal de São Paulo (2014) and the Oslo Architecture Triennial (2016).

Recent books by Staal include *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (2014) and *Stateless Democracy* (2015), and he is a regular contributor to *e-flux Journal*. Currently, Staal is finalising a commission for the design and construction of a new public parliament assigned by the autonomous Rojava government (northern Syria), part of his long-term PhD research *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* at the PhDArts programme of the University of Leiden.

TODAY, WE TEND TO understand speculation as a catastrophic logic underlying systemic economic crisis: a maddening and criminal system of abuse and exploitation, a sadistic game played by the few impacting upon the lives of the many. Speculation as such has turned into a structural threat to our common systems of life support: we bail out the speculators while running several jobs, being evicted as a result of the subprime mortgage schemes, and trying to maintain some sense of solidarity with those who have even less than ourselves.

But speculation simultaneously might be part of the answer to this very crisis; speculation as part of what we can term the radical imaginary of both politics and art. The first one and a half decades of the twenty-first century have not only marked the age of the War on Terror and the rise of a new authoritarian world order, but also a great variety of social movements throughout the world, all too often as a response from the class-in-the-making that we call the “precariat”. Assembled in squares throughout the world, those whose life supports have been threatened or simply destroyed assemble, and from this “assemblism” alternative speculative realities emerge: precarious infrastructures ranging from public parliaments of self-government, soup kitchens and food distribution centres, alternative media stations and public libraries, fuelled by alternative

experiments and growing conviction for the need for trans-democratic practices.

These sites of assembly are not an answer to the crisis of speculation, but signs of the severe damage done by political and economic elites. A damage that forces us to articulate precarious alternative institutional models of survival; damage that forces us to speculate on—and practice—radical and necessary alternatives to these regimes of exploitation. Our collective speculation-in-practice opens a space for the popular imaginary: what if these speculative spaces actually form our only realistic alternatives?

The works that I have developed over the past years, in collaboration with progressive political parties, stateless and autonomist political organisations, take these practices of assemblism as their departure point: the creation of spaces in which we perform the popular to compose our understanding of being a people differently. Spaces that emerge from deep and tangible crises, which similarly evoke radical speculative imaginaries towards their alternatives. That is how our “parallel parliaments”, our “stateless embassies” and our “trans-democratic unions” emerged, spaces in which we speculate in order to enact the possibility of new future forms of emancipatory governance: from speculation to emancipation.

Title: Beyond Allegories

Year: 2014, Artists: Carolien Gehrels, Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal, Photos: Studio Jonas Staal

An assemblism realised in collaboration with the Amsterdam Labour councillor for art and culture Carolien Gehrels and artist Hans van Houwelingen in the municipal parliament of Amsterdam. For eight hours, progressive artists and politicians presented resolutions on the role of art in political governance,

mobilisation and action. The result of a speculative alternative composition of the parliament, including politicians, artists, journalists, students, activists, refugees, unions and transparency platforms.



Carolien Gehrels, Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal introduce Beyond Allegories.



Artist Ahmet Ögüt (Silent University) and activist Yoonis Osman Nuur (refugee collective We Are Here) present their resolution "Political Representation Beyond Citizenship".

Title: Congress of Utopia

Year: 2016, Artists: Lara Staal and Studio Jonas Staal, Photo: Ernie Buts

An assemblism realised in collaboration with curator Lara Staal in Frascati Theater Amsterdam on the occasion of the quincentenary of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The installation is a 1:1 reconstruction of a fragment of Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys's *New Babylon*: a speculative future city model across

the planet, constructed on pillars, in which technology becomes socialised and traditional labour is abandoned. Rather than reflecting upon utopia, the space proposed to occupy Constant's utopia as a space not of speculative imagination, but of speculative practice.



Rotterdam-based collectives Freehouse and Leeszaal debate during the Congress of Utopia.



Artist Patricia Kaersnbout (left) performs her work Stitches of Power, Stitches of Sorrow with audience members of the Congress of Utopia.

Title: New World Embassy: Rojava

Year: 2016, Artists: Democratic Self-Administration and Studio Jonas Staal, Photo: István Virág and Ernie Buts

An assemblism realised in Oslo City Hall in collaboration with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, the autonomous Kurdish-led government in northern Syria. Having rejected the model of the nation-state, the Rojavans introduced a model of “stateless democracy” as theorised by Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Öcalan. This model, based on self-governance, gender

equality and communal economy, embodies what for decades has been a speculative reality of libertarian socialism, but is enacted “without approval”, in the words of Dilar Dirik, as the only possible realistic option in the context of the Kurdish revolutionary movement. The creation of a “stateless embassy” extends the practice of Rojavan assemblism into the domain of trans-democracy.



New World Embassy: Rojava in Oslo City Hall.



Rojava ambassador Sinam Mobammed debates with fellow panellists in the New World Embassy: Rojava.

Title: New Unions—Berlin

Year: 2017, Artists: Studio Jonas Staal, Photo: Dorothea Tuch

An assemblism realised in collaboration with a diversity of emancipatory political parties, platforms and movements that have emerged as radical counterparts to the current crisis of the European Union. A map picturing an alternative European constellation of trans-democratic organisations forms a speculative

ideological mapping, based on which a variety of alternative scenarios for new future unions are proposed: a Feminist Union, a Stateless Union, a Communalist Union. The speculative space of the HAU Theater in Berlin turns into the stage of a series of “what-ifs” to fight the imaginary crisis of the present-day Union.



New Unions assembly installation in HAU Theater, Berlin.



Mireia Vebí and Quim Arrufat (Popular Unity Candidacy, Catalunya) present their scenario for a Communist Union during the New Unions assembly, Berlin.