

Jonas Staal
**To Make a
World, Part III:
Stateless
Democracy**

Continued from “The Make a World, Part II: The Art of Creating a State”

*Bepey tazetirîn polîn, Kurdekan
Ser be regazî ballinden
Awetane Leser parey zard û drawî mejû
Koçer in û be karwanî sefer da enesreynawe*

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According to recent classification
Kurds belong to the species of birds
Look at them. Here they are! On the slowly
disappearing and torn pages of history
They are the migrants that are only
recognized over the long distances their
caravans travel.
– Keyal Ahmed¹

In one of the many streets of Qamishli, full of seemingly unfinished, concrete, and tarnished buildings, I’m guided down a small flight of stairs into a basement. Printing house Algad is stacked with machinery, some of which is reminiscent of a time when they were used for political posters stenciled by hand. In the neon-lit space I meet Yahiyu Abdullah, who is busy feeding data into a five-meter-wide plotter through a small built-in computer. A young boy is sitting in front of it, trying to keep up with the feed of images emerging from the printer, cutting out the pictures from the large, plasticized printed surface.

I recognize some of the imagery from the posters and banners on the streets: young men and women, surrounded by logos of their militia, each of them portrayed before they joined their comrades on one of the many battlefields of the region. They look straight into the lens, occasionally smiling or with a raised fist, but more often with a defiant look, calm, determined in their controlled anger. I observe the feed of silent gazes merging into each other.

Celebrated as heroes, the looks of these martyrs defy glorification. They belong to a collective body of resistance: the Rojava Revolution. And against the losses of this revolution, the printer runs: it is a feed of history being made at the very moment. The front line is only a few kilometers away, and here, in the basement, the printer runs against time; against forgetfulness.

1. The Rojava Revolution

We are in the independent canton Cizîre in Rojava, which means “west” and refers to the western part of Kurdistan. It’s one out of three territories in the northern part of Syria which are currently under the control of a transitional, autonomous government consisting of all ethnic components in the region. The social movement

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Jonas Staal, from the series *Anatomy of a Revolution – Rojava*, 2014. Printing house Algad in Qamishli produces the martyr images for the autonomous regions of Rojava.



Jonas Staal, from the series *Anatomy of a Revolution – Rojava*, 2014. Entry of a training camp of the People's Defense Forces (YPG) and Women's Defense Forces (YPJ) after crossing the border from Iraqi-Kurdistan to Syrian-Kurdistan into the autonomous canton of Cizîre.

of Rojava in the form of self-organized academies, cooperatives and peoples councils, is allied in the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) with the the prominent Democratic Unity Party (PYD) as its driving force. In order to secure a balanced political representation of the region, Kurds, Arabs and Assyrians, which form the largest communities in the region, are limited to a quota of 30% political representatives. Smaller communities are tied to a quota of 10% political representatives. Political representation thus attempts to reflect directly the diverse social texture of the region. The other two cantons are Afrin and Kobanê; the latter acquired fame as the most important front in the Kurdish resistance against the Islamic State. Whereas Cizîre borders on the east with Turkey and Iraq, Afrin and Kobanê border only with Turkey: from the Syrian side they are surrounded by forces of the Islamic State and the Assad regime.² They are thus territorially isolated. The total Kurdish territory is about two-thirds the size of Belgium, and according to recent estimates, the population has grown to a 4.6 million due to the many refugees from the Syrian civil war³; there are large-scale refugee camps such as Kampa Newroz that host, among others, Yazidi communities that the YPG and YPJ saved from massacre by the Islamic State.⁴

The Rojava Revolution runs parallel to what became known as the Arab Spring of 2012, although its roots in recent Syrian history go back to the 1960s, when Syrian Kurds were massively stripped of their citizenship.⁵ An even more recent precedent for the Rojava Revolution was the Qamishli uprising in 2004, during which the ruling regime of Bashar al-Assad killed dozens of Kurds who displayed their flags and other signs of national and cultural identity. So when the Arab Spring hit Syria in 2012, they were ready. Dilar Dirik, academic and activist of the Kurdish Women Movement, describes the foundation of the Rojava Revolution as follows:

The Assad regime engaged in heavy clashes with the Free Syrian Army, the main opposition group, in areas like Damascus and Aleppo. As a result, the regime withdrew from the Kurdish areas in the northern part of the country, and the Kurds took their chance to take over: they at once seized control of the cities; they got rid of the institutions of the regime and established their own system. On July 19, 2012 this was declared as the Rojava Revolution.⁶

In early 2014, the Geneva II Conference on Syria was announced in an attempt to stabilize the Syrian war. Dirik recalls:

The situation grew increasingly difficult, as the whole world was being dragged into the war: the US, Europe, Russia, the Gulf Countries, Turkey, Iran ... It became something of a second Cold War. Assad fighting the rebels was just a microcosm of all the international interests that were invested in the region.⁷

In the context of this “second Cold War,” representatives of the Rojava Revolution were not invited to join the convention, as the Turkish government was afraid of the effect Kurdish autonomy in Syria would have on the large – and historically severely repressed – Kurdish community and their revolutionary forces in Turkey, which are directly linked to those in Rojava. The Syrian Opposition Coalition was invited, but the Rojava Revolution refused to partake in this alliance, as they feel that Kurdish rights are not clearly acknowledged in coalition’s political aims, and fear that the coalition is vulnerable to being used as a Western proxy. Instead, the three interlinked but independent cantons declared themselves fully autonomous. As Dirik points out, in the face of the states gathering in Geneva, the Rojava Revolution displayed an act of autonomy that took the form of “living without approval.”⁸

Despite the fact that the Rojava Revolution is led by Kurds, the political institutions that they have developed resist an ethnic monopoly over the region. The three autonomous cantons of Rojava are founded on what on January 29, 2014 was officially announced as “The Social Contract” – in reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous text from 1762 – cowritten by all peoples living in the region: Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens. Its opening lines state:

In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society. It protects fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples’ right to self-determination. Under the Charter, we, the people of the Autonomous Regions, unite in the spirit of reconciliation, pluralism and democratic participation so that all may express themselves freely in public life⁹

“The Social Contract” features a series of ideological principles that are fundamental to



Jonas Staal, from the series *Anatomy of a Revolution – Rojava*, 2014. Classroom for ideological education of the People's Defense Units (YPG).



Jonas Staal, from the series *Anatomy of a Revolution – Rojava*, 2014. Special forces of the Women's Defense Unit (YPJ) look over their training camp situated near Qamishli.

understanding the politics of the three autonomous cantons of Rojava. From the contract and related texts that I will discuss later in this essay, I have distilled the following six defining points:

The first is that of a radical secular politics, meaning that religious interests are separated fully from governance affairs.

The second is the requirement that presidencies over public institutions are always occupied by representatives of different ethnicities in order to avoid cultural hegemony.

The third is the principle of gender equality, enforcing a minimum of 40 percent participation of both women and men in political life, and the demand for co-presidencies of one woman and one man in all public institutions.

The fourth is that of communalist self-government, meaning that centralized structures of administration are reduced to the absolute minimum, whereas local councils and cooperatives that are self-governed are given maximum political agency.

The fifth is the principle of confederalism: the cantons are defined as “autonomous” because they are self-governed by their radically diverse communities. Most stunning is that rather than forming a “reformist” attitude towards the nation-state and its politics of cultural unification and centralist administration, the Rojava Revolution rejects the model of the nation-state all together. The model of “democratic confederalism” and its aim of establishing “democratic autonomy” – two concepts central to the Rojava Revolution – strive to *practice democracy without the construct of the nation-state*.

The sixth is the principle of social ecology: the idea that the organization of power based on secularism, gender equality, communalist self-government, and confederalism represents an egalitarian model capable of self-rule without a dictatorship of minorities over majorities or the other way around. This last notion of social ecology attempts to define an understanding of power based on principles of coexistence and radical diversity, instead of unification and assimilation – it forms the fundament of the politics of the Rojava Revolution.

Whereas the world in 2012 was mainly concerned with toppling Assad, today its eyes have focused on the rise of the so-called Islamic State, which holds large pieces of territory under its control in both Syria and Iraq.¹⁰ The rise of the Islamic State has allowed Assad to rebrand himself as a supposed “lesser evil” in a region over which the international community is clueless about how to maintain control. This situation, of course, is deeply tied to the history of colonialism and military intervention by that

very same community: the history of the British mandate in Iraq, its instrumentalization in the Iran-Iraq War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the dismantling of Hussein’s Sunni-led government in favor of the Shia majority, the CIA blacksites where Iraqi citizens were tortured and Islamic State militants recruited, and so on.¹¹

The Islamic State stands in stark opposition to the only three-year-old Rojava Revolution and its stateless democracy. The Islamic State’s ambition for an endlessly expanding caliphate – its *total state* – in its terrifying conquest and brutal patriarchal policies of cultural assimilation, subjection, and enslavement of women seems to form the bizarre mirror image of the total state of the security apparatus of the Coalition of the Willing’s never-ending War on Terror and its radical and violent disregard for other states’ and peoples sovereignty. Against the state terror of both Islamic State and the Coalition of the Willing, the Rojava Revolution forms an alternative that it has termed its “third way,” in an echo of the project of Third Worldism, not as a source of tragedy to be scavenged by governments’ oil, mineral, and state-building projects masked as “development,” but as an actual, radically new political and internationalist – transnationalist – paradigm.¹²

Anthropologist and political activist David Graeber compares this ideological clash to the 1936 Spanish revolution in Catalonia: “If there is a parallel today to Franco’s superficially devout, murderous Falangists, who would it be but Isis? If there is a parallel to the Mujeres Libres of Spain [the anarcho-feminist movement], who could it be but the courageous women defending the barricades in Kobane?”¹³ Graeber rightfully points to a parallel with the anarchist, “libertarian-socialists” of Catalonia, who for two years were able to maintain a communalist autonomous region while squashed between the armies of Franco and the Soviets, which they both opposed while being severely critical of the Republican government.¹⁴ In a similar manner, the Rojava Revolution and its coalition of multiethnic, multireligious peoples criticize the Western coalition as much as they resist Assad and the militants of the Islamic State. And in both revolutions – that of 1936 and that of 2012 – women militants, ideologues, and politicians formed a key role in redefining the revolutionary project. Rojava is the battlefield for the question of whether the very concept of democracy can be recuperated as a radical, emancipatory political and cultural practice. In order to understand why and how, we need to understand the specific anatomy of the revolution as it is found in the decades-long – if not centuries-long – struggle of the Kurds for their right to self-determination.

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2. Anatomy of a Revolution

Kurdistan, which covers part of the Mesopotamian region, was divided in the seventeenth-century by the Ottoman and Persian Empire. In the early twentieth century the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and European governments and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's army fought over the remainders. The subsequent Sykes-Picot Agreement drew harsh borders across the region, creating different spheres of influences controlled by the British and French colonial powers. This partition of the region after the First World War led to the fragmentation of the Kurds across four different states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

The Kurds had hoped to gain cultural and political rights in the newly founded Republic of Turkey, but these were never granted. This denial was later repeated when the Kurds of Iran joined the 1979 revolution but were afterward confronted with a fatwa against them. In each of these states, under different conditions, the Kurds faced severe repression. While culturally acknowledged in Iran, political organization has continuously been punished by imprisonment and torture, if not outright murder; in Syria and Iraq, the Kurds were faced with the policies of forced Arabization of the Ba'athist regimes of Assad and Hussein. After the Ottoman Empire crumbled, the Turkish Republic took on the task of constructing its national identity, and thus erroneously designated the Kurds as "mountain Turks," repressing their language, culture, and all forms of political organization. From the very first Kurdish uprisings during the years 1925–38 in the southeastern part of the country, the Turkish Republic engaged in violent crackdowns buttressed by special terror laws that allowed all references to Kurdish language, culture, or history to be prosecuted as "separatism" and "terrorism." Kurdish uprisings were explained by the Turkish government in terms of economic deprivation and educational backwardness, never as a cultural and political resistance.

In the 1970s, the international rise of anticolonial resistance and socialist movements resonated with the Kurdish community. The fact that the Turkish left was unwilling to make Kurdish cultural and political rights a priority provided the foundation for the "largest people without a state" to imagine the establishment of an independent progressive nationalist state of their own. In the course of the '70s, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries group emerged from a fragmented left consisting of Kurdish Socialist, Maoist, and Leninist parties, and in 1978 it was officially declared the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The first six key points of its founding manifesto were as follows:

a. Our era is the era of transition from

capitalism to socialism and proletarian revolutions.

b. Kurdistan is an inter-state colony.

c. A national liberation struggle is an unavoidable duty in order to gain the freedom and independence of the Kurdish people.

d. The Kurdistan revolution shall be a *national and democratic* one, and the ultimate end would, in long term, be the *socialist revolution* with an uninterrupted transition to a "classless and non-exploitative" society.

e. The revolution's political objective is to establish an *independent, united and democratic Kurdistan*.>

f. The revolution must be led by a revolutionary party of the proletariat which needs to be initiated by a "minority" composed of patriotic youth and intellectuals (enlightened) who are disassociated from material production.¹⁵

The founders and driving organizers of the PKK hailed from university circles, through which they had direct access to revolutionary liberationist theory. As Sakine Cansiz – one of the early PKK founders, who was shot dead in Paris on January 9, 2013 along with two other female Kurdish activists, Fidan Doğan and Leyla Şaylemez – recalled the years preceding the PKK:

In a short time, our movement became a political power, it went beyond a youth movement in '75, '76 and '77. At first, our movement had mainly an influence on the student youth movement, then the qualified and militant youth at schools and in all areas we were active in. It changed the environment at schools ... We grounded our movement on ideological and political struggle and revolutionary violence. Necessary defense was actually a way of struggle that our movement [was] based on since the very beginning.¹⁶

The guiding force and most prominent representative of the PKK was Abdullah Öcalan, who had arrived in Ankara from a humble background at the edge of the Kurdish region in southeast Turkey. During his studies he became involved in Turkish and Kurdish leftist groups. In 1972, he was arrested for participating in a protest and imprisoned for several months. In prison, he was exposed to discussions with several key organizers of the revolutionary left, and once out, he worked toward the establishment of the PKK, which after its founding in 1978 soon became the leading revolutionary Kurdish party.

Only one year after founding the PKK, Öcalan moved to Syria, aware of a pending new

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Jonas Staal, from the series *Anatomy of a Revolution*, 2014. A classroom in the Women's Academy Star in Ramelan, displaying portraits of women martyrs in the background. The slogan "sembola jinên şoreşger" translates as "symbols of women warriors," the portraits above depict revolutionaries Fidan Doğan, Clara Zetkin, Sakine Cansiz, Rosa Luxemburg and Leyla Şaylemez. Right above the Maria statue is Arin Mirkan, who detonated herself to cover her retreating comrades and avoid capture by Islamic State militants.



Jonas Staal, from the series *Anatomy of a Revolution*, 2014. An old fountain of the Assad regime in Qamishli has been turned in to a monument to the Rojava Revolution, painted yellow-red-green – the colors of the flag of the independent cantons – carrying several martyr portraits of deceased revolutionaries from its defense forces.

military coup that would take place in 1980 as a response to the threat posed by the Kurdish leftist militants to the monocultural Turkish project, as well as in reaction to a devastating economic recession. While the military government engaged in a violent crackdown – arresting, torturing, and killing many of the members of Kurdish leftist factions – Öcalan established a safe haven for the PKK in Syria, building an international network in order to prepare his militia. The PKK cadre was trained by Yasir Arafat's Fatah, George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Samir Ghosheh's Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, and the Lebanese Communist Party in the basic techniques of guerrilla warfare. In 1984, Öcalan declared the party ready to reenter Turkish territory in order to establish a new revolutionary Kurdish government in the southeast. This was the beginning of the war between the PKK and the Turkish Republic, which would continue until the first substantial truce in 1999.¹⁷

The mountains of southeastern Turkey formed the perfect terrain for a guerrilla war, and from an elite cadre the PKK transformed into a mass movement. Many Kurds from rural areas joined as fighters or as civil militia that provided hiding places, food, and information. By 1992, "PKK rebels numbered about 10,000 total ... and they claimed to have about 60,000 armed civilian *milis*, about two thirds the strength of the Turkish soldiers normally stationed in the region (excluding police, special forces, and village guards)."¹⁸ At this high point of the movement, it had established a parallel government including security forces, an information network, newspapers, a taxation system, training camps in neighboring states, and a well-organized diaspora.¹⁹ The PKK had been transformed into a transnational movement.

Drawing from Leninist avant-garde theory, the cadres of the PKK had been structured rigorously and hierarchically. Öcalan's leadership was absolute, and militia members were prohibited from having any private property, engaging in any sexual relationships, and having partners or children. Under the conditions of harsh repression by the Turkish state, loyalty to the party and discipline in the ranks needed to be absolute.

This absolute loyalty and hierarchical structure, however, became mitigated by the internal rise of the Kurdish women's movement. Already within the original group of students that founded the PKK there had been important female members. According to Sakine Cansiz, the party had been "giving an ideological struggle from the very beginning against denial, social chauvinistic impression, primitive and nationalist approaches."²⁰ This related to the

"feudal" conditions in which many Kurdish communities were forced to live and the nationalism of the Turkish Republic that kept Kurdish communities structurally underdeveloped. Women fighters standing equally amongst men became examples of self-determination and independence. For many young women, joining the PKK and its militant female ranks was a liberation.

According to many PKK members, the role of women in the movement became threatened in the years of the party's conversion to a mass movement, mainly due to men from rural areas joining the fight but refusing to recognize women as equals.²¹ Due to the daily pressure of the war, the goal of female emancipation risked becoming a secondary issue. However, in the 1990s, the women of the PKK, encouraged by Öcalan, started to actively organize themselves in order to put their liberation from patriarchy within the party on the agenda – as a demand equally as important as the acknowledgment of Kurdish history, culture, and language. This development ran parallel to a series of crises within the PKK, partly due to Turkey's wish to get rid of the semiautonomous PKK region as soon as possible: "By 1995, Ankara was spending as much as \$11 billion a year to fight the war ... Turkey also deployed some 220,000 troops in the region – tying up a quarter of NATO's second largest army in a domestic battle."²² By the time Öcalan was captured by Turkey in 1999, the PKK was on the defensive and lost much of its territorial control. But the PKK's guerrilla war was only the first part of a liberation movement that would be prominently directed, ideologically and militarily, by its women's militia.

3. The Kurdish Women's Movement

Dilar Dirik describes how this parallel process of autonomous women's organizing against male patriarchy within the party informed the growing critique of the very aim of establishing a nation-state as such:

The PKK experienced many ups and downs, related to the guerrilla resistance against the Turkish army, the fall of the Soviet Union, the collapse of many leftist liberational movements, and Öcalan's capture in Kenya on February 15, 1999, organized by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization in collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency of the US. It was in this context in the course of the late nineties that the PKK began to theoretically deconstruct the state, fueled by the Kurdish Women's Movement, coming to the conclusion [that] it is inherently incompatible with democracy.²⁵

What is crucial here is that through the newly emerging autonomous women's movement, the PKK, which started with the aim of creating an independent Kurdish nation-state, was forced into a structural self-critique. Although many of the young women had joined the PKK in order to escape being forced into servitude, they were confronted with similar power structures within the hierarchies of the PKK.²⁶ In response to this, Öcalan theoretically strengthened the coherence between the emerging autonomous organization of the women's movement, the PKK's opposition to colonialism and capitalism, and its claim from the first manifesto that its resistance would be dedicated to a classless society.²⁷ According to Öcalan:

The male monopoly that has been maintained over the life and world of woman throughout history, is not unlike the monopoly chain that capital monopolies maintain over society. More importantly, it is the oldest powerful monopoly. We might draw more realistic conclusions if we evaluate woman's existence as the oldest colonial phenomenon. It may be more accurate to call women the oldest colonised people who have never become a nation. Family, in this social context, developed as man's small state. The family as an institution has been continuously perfected throughout the history of civilization, solely because of the reinforcement it provides to power and state apparatus.²⁸

Öcalan's argumentation is a further development of the resistance against chauvinism-primitivism-nationalism that Cansiz regarded as the foundation of the PKK, but through the autonomous development of the women's movement this analysis is brought to its full consequence: not just in the rejection of the nation-state as such, but in a rejection of the very nature of the power structures that support the nation-state:

Firstly, family is turned into a stem cell of state society by giving power to the family in the person of the male. Secondly, woman's unlimited and unpaid labour is secured. Thirdly, she raises children in order to meet population needs. Fourthly, as a role model she disseminates slavery and immorality to the whole society. Family, thus constituted, is the institution where dynastic ideology becomes functional.²⁹

The critique by the women's movement thus

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brings Öcalan to redefine the relation between family, state, and capital, concluding that the underlying patriarchal model of power can never be fully liberatory – not just for women, but for any constituency that challenges its normative paradigm. What needs to be overcome is the very articulation of power structures underlying the national liberation struggle.³⁰

Öcalan's attempt to define a new historiography that redefines the very nature of power is what finally brings him and his party to the total rejection of the nation-state project as a whole:

The nation-state needed the bourgeoisie and the power of capital in order to replace the old feudal order and its ideology which rested on tribal structures and inherited rights by a new national ideology which united all tribes and clans under the roof of the nation. In this way, capitalism and nation-state became so closely linked to each other that neither could be imagined to exist without the other ... It is often said that the nation-state is concerned with the fate of the common people. This is not true. Rather, it is the national governor of the worldwide capitalist system, a vassal of capitalist modernity which is more deeply entangled in the dominant structures of capital than we usually tend to assume: It is a colony of capital.³¹

Öcalan's thoughts on women's liberation and the autonomous women's movement redefined the foundations of the PKK struggle, providing the basis for what today, after many different name changes, is known as the Women's Communities of Kurdistan (KJK), founded in 2014. The KJK connected women's branches of political parties, cooperatives, and councils all over the region as well as internationally.

In prison, Öcalan's study was fueled by works such as that of philosopher Michel Foucault and political scientist Noam Chomsky. But the most important influence was Murray Bookchin, from whom Öcalan distilled the key aspects of the new power paradigm he envisioned. As Bookchin writes:

A free ecological society – as distinguished from one regulated by an authoritarian ecological elite or by the "free market" – can only be vast in terms of an ecologically confederal form of libertarian municipalism. When at length free communes replace the nation and confederal forms of organization replaces the state, humanity will have rid itself from nationalism.³²

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What Bookchin describes as an “ecological society” and “social ecology” is what Öcalan translates into the notion of an “ecology of freedom,” a new power paradigm that would take the Kurdish women’s movement’s rejection of the nation-state as its primary point of departure.³³ Öcalan not only borrows this general paradigm of power from Bookchin, but also the foundational political principle of “communalism” (essentially decentralized communism, or communism without the state),³⁴ the organization model of “confederalism” (interrelated, coexisting, and mutually dependent but self-governed political entities), and the decision-making model of “direct democracy” (locally organized majority rule by confederal communities).³⁵ In 2005, Öcalan declared the conjunction of these concepts in the context of the Kurdish struggle as the project of “democratic confederalism.”³⁶

Essentially, Öcalan proposes a form of autonomy through practice, a series of interlinked structures of self-governance that operate independent of, but parallel to, existing states. The objective of the PKK thus switched from attaining recognition by Turkey and the international community, to self-recognition through practice.

While this theoretical shift was hard to communicate to the mass movement that had by now rallied behind the PKK³⁷ – thousands of whom had lost their lives in the exhausting years of guerrilla struggle driven by the ideal of an independent state – the solid, disciplined core of the movement and its absolute loyalty to its leader made it possible to reorient the struggle ideologically. The party itself started to restructure with an emphasis on autonomous democratic structures, and its affiliated political wings implemented so-called “co-presidencies” in the process: political positions, such as that of the mayor, were now required to have both a male and a female representative operating on the basis of absolute equality – a concrete achievement of the newly autonomously organized Kurdish women’s movement.³⁸

The fact that realizing this decentralized model of self-governance required highly disciplined, hierarchical, and militant cadres is not necessarily a paradox, but will possibly have to be explored as a prerequisite. The essential change was that the ideal of an ever-expanding cadre that would evolve into the leadership of an independent nation-state now became an instrument in service of a new emancipatory mass movement.³⁹ The full implementation of democratic confederalism and the practice of democratic autonomy would take hold with the start of the Rojava Revolution.

4. “Power is everywhere, but the state is not”

It’s already evening when I visit the Star Academy in Ramelan, the ideological heart of the Rojava Revolution. The academy is organized by the Yekîtiya Star, the umbrella group of the women’s movement in Rojava. I observe a silent classroom filled with young women soldiers and community organizers. The walls are covered with maps of Mesopotamia and Kurdistan, and images of past and present martyrs, including Arin Mirkan, who detonated herself to cover her retreating comrades and avoid capture by Islamic State militants. The images are organized around a small wooden shelf, on which a Maria figure is placed – one of the very rare religious objects in the radically secular iconography of the Rojava Revolution.

In the lecture of the teacher, Dorsin Akif, I recognize the basic terminology that drives the revolution: democratic confederalism, democratic autonomy, communalism, women’s liberation, cooperatives, councils – key terms that have been repeated to me by student organizers, teachers, soldiers, politicians, farmers, judges, and artists during my days travelling throughout the canton. Akif’s speech is only interrupted for a brief moment by the sound of shots and an explosion. Later on I am told that the Islamic State has moved within three kilometers of the school, but the students don’t flinch for a moment. Their revolution takes place both in ideological education and armed struggle. After at least thirty days of ideological training, many of these young women will join the fight against the Islamic State, but not before they know what political model they are fighting for. When I speak with Akif after class, she says:

Women have progressed much. For example, during the revolution of the French commune, women had a prominent role. Women led that revolution, but in the end: who remains without rights? Women. The nation-state has organized itself as such that women rights are not recognized.⁴⁰

In an extension of the rejection of the nation-state and its patriarchal foundations, the main task of the academy is to break the ties between the state and science, not in a rejection of science as such, but of the specific power structure underlying it. The alternative takes the form of “jineology,” meaning “women’s science,” – *logy* referring to the Greek “logos” (knowledge) and *jîn* referring to the Kurdish word for woman.

Journalist and representative of the women’s movement Gönül Kaya writes that “in history, rulers and power holders have

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established their systems first in thought. As an extension of the patriarchal system, a field of social sciences has been created, which is male, class-specific, and sexist in character.”⁴¹Based on this analysis, Kaya calls for a “women’s paradigm,” described as a rejection of the relation between the woman-object (slave) and the male-subject (master), which she considers inherently intertwined with modern science and which has in turn had a severe impact on social life, with nurture or domestic work – framed as part of feminine “nature” – not considered “labor,” but instead articulated in terms of “service” to the masculine master.

Jineology rejects these “natures” as social constructs, but without rejecting the difference between the male and female subjects – what it rejects is the premise of the social construct that articulates differences in the context of patriarchal society. Jineology explores feminine, colonized history and science as knowledge that can sustain Rojava’s “ecology of freedom,” as Öcalan adapted Bookchin’s concept of “social ecology.” On the curriculum are not only the works of Öcalan and Bookchin, but also those of Foucault and Judith Butler, forming philosophical pillars in this political and scientific struggle. As Kaya writes:

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Important tasks await us in the 21st century: the philosophical-theoretical and scientific framework of women’s liberation, the historical development of women’s liberation and resistance, mutual complementary dialogues within feminist, ecological, and democratic movements, the renewed description of all social institutions (e.g. family) according to liberationist principles ... The field of a new social science for all those circles that are not part of power and the state must be built. This is the task of all anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist, anti-power movements, individuals, women. We refer to these alternative social sciences as the sociology of freedom. Jineology can build and develop the ground base of these social sciences. It is a vanguard in this regard. It will both construct the sociology of freedom and be part of this sociology itself.⁴²

Zîlan Diyar, a female guerrilla fighter, ironically comments on Western media outlets that, rather than exploring the ideological dimension of the struggle, “are so inspired by the clothes that the



Jonas Staal, from the series *Anatomy of a Revolution – Rojava*, 2014. Candidates from neighborhood councils and cooperatives present themselves to become co-chair of the People’s Council of the city of Qamishi. The slogan “Her Tist Jibo Jiyanek Azad û Avakirina Civakek Demokratîk” translates as “Everything for a Free Life and the Foundation of a Democratic Society.” On the right, a portrait of the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan.

women are wearing, that they want to start a new fashion trend!”⁴³ Dilar Dirik considers this side-stepping of ideological struggle for the benefit of the orientalist, sensationalist imaginary as the very problem the Kurdish women’s movement was founded to struggle against:

Rather than trying to understand the phenomenon in all its complexity, these articles often resort to sensationalist statements to exploit the audience’s astonishment over the fact that “the poor women in the Middle East” could somehow be militants. Hence, instead of acknowledging the cultural revolution that the actions of these women constitute in an otherwise conservative, patriarchal society, many reporters fall for the same used-up categories: while state media, especially in Turkey and Iran, portray female guerrilla fighters as “evil terrorist prostitutes,” family-hating, brainwashed sex toys of the male fighters, Western media often refers to these women as “oppressed victims looking for an escape from their backward culture,” who would otherwise face a life full of honor killings and child marriage.⁴⁴

In other words, the patriarchic, mediatized gaze claims that Kurdish women guerrillas are not truly fighting for a new definition of political power for women and men alike (i.e., women’s liberation entails the liberation of men, albeit from themselves), but are “forced” to behave as such because their chances for a peaceful, “regular” household life are impossible (and supposedly, this is what they really desire). When considered from this perspective, patriarchy is thus essentially a mechanism of the status quo: even when we show that things can be different, it allows them to be interpreted to the contrary. This brings us back to Sakine Cansiz’s description of the necessity of revolutionary violence as self-protection: this self-protection turns out to be as much about survival as it is about safeguarding the possibility for a political imaginary to become reality, which would otherwise be historically, politically, and culturally negated.

This is why the pillars of the autonomous cantons of Rojava enforce secular politics, gender equality through quotas, and the reduction of centralized structures to a minimum. These pillars are not derived from the model of the nation-state; they are the pillars of a new political imaginary that has yet to be developed in full, a political imaginary aimed at transforming our very practice and understanding of power through a history that the Star Academy is writing as we speak: “Power

is everywhere, but the state is not everywhere. Power can operate in different ways.”⁴⁵ Stateless democracy is based on the profound processes behind the Kurdish movement’s decades of struggle and sacrifice, with women in front. This struggle has not only made it possible for power to operate in different ways; it has made *difference itself* possible.

5. Theater of the Stateless

In October 2014, artist Hito Steyerl – whose works *November* (2004) and *Lovely Andrea* (2007) are situated around her friend Andrea Wolf, a human rights activist and sociologist who became a PKK fighter and martyr after she was killed in 1998⁴⁶ – writes on the battles waged by the Rojava revolutionaries and the US air force against the Islamic State in the autonomous canton of Kobanê:

Turkish armed forces fire flares to add to the confusing scene of giant smoke plumes, ambulance horns, and faces illuminated by mobile phone screens. At the Cultural Center, a brilliant, all-female group of culture workers and municipality officials discusses the role of art with me. I plan to frame resident refugees observing F-16 jets circling above. What is the task of art in times of emergency?⁴⁷

Interestingly enough, Abdullah Abdul, an artist who I meet in Amude, answers this question by returning to the history of the region. His small studio is located next to his house, where his young children are climbing on and off an enormous archive of objects – sculptures – lined up alongside his wall and floors. An unsuspecting visitor might think he had walked into an archeological exhibit. Instead, Abdul is creating a museum for a lost history: “Mesopotamia has a history of over five thousand years in which many peoples have lived here; there was a highly advanced civilization which was the source of world civilization.”⁴⁸ Similar to the work that jineology does in recuperating a colonized science, Abdul is trying to retrieve the remnants of a colonized history of art and culture.

In the Mitra Hasake cultural center in Qamishli, among students practicing musical instruments and paintings mounted in the scarcely lit central hall, I have the chance to speak to Nesrin Botan, vocalist for the musical group Koma Botan – named after its founder, a musician who became a martyr in the armed struggle:

We have an important role in the revolution ... This revolution gives us the opportunity to express our culture, art, and folklore that

used to be suppressed. We are now working hard for our culture and identity ... Like a musician receives education from school, our fighters learn the art of fighting in the People's Defense Force (YPG). Like a teacher of art, our warriors show performance on the battlefield.⁴⁹

Later on, in the guest house of the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), I see Botan appear in a music video on the Ronahi TV channel, the media outlet of the revolution which forms the permanent backdrop for those residing in the common room. Botan's video consists of a collage of film footage from PKK fighters as well as YPG and YPJ defense forces of Rojava surrounded by traditionally dressed singers; this is where both singer and soldier "show performance." I'm reminded of early media reports that repeatedly mentioned that fighters were singing in between their battles at the front.

The small cities and villages of concrete and brick buildings in the canton are separated by large swaths of farmland and oil fields, the jack pumps largely gone silent since the retreat of Assad, who took most of the crucial machinery for running them with him. The colors disrupting these sober landscapes are either those of the yellow, red, and green flag of the Rojava Revolution, or those of the martyr photos, which also display the names memorialized in the songs that fill the air wherever we go. Old monuments, fountains, and statues of Hafiz al-Assad, father of Bashar al-Assad, have been thrown off their pedestals. They have been repainted in the colors of Rojava, surrounded by flags of its defense forces and women's organizations, covered with martyr photos – all printed in a basement in Qamishli. These first monuments of the revolution bring a new memory into the public domain: that of those "performing" on the battlefield, the part of the collective revolutionary body that is re-inscribing its history – bloodily erased, repressed, blacklisted – into the imaginary of a radically new and different present.

When I attend the people's council of Qamishli, candidates are presenting themselves to obtain the position of new co-chair. Each of the city's neighborhood councils and cooperatives have brought their candidates forward. A long strip of yellow-red-green cloth serves as backdrop upon which is written: "Everything for a Free Life and the Foundation of a Democratic Society." In the front, the candidates enter and leave the stage, next to two tables with the elected selection committee keeping track of procedure. To the right of the stage is a photo of Öcalan on a modest, draped pedestal. But most importantly – as I realize

while observing the packed space – the people's council is a *theater*. It is a theater of the stateless, where the Rojava Revolution is condensed down to its ultimate performance: the practice of self-governance, of self-determination, performing life without approval. In the face of our global crises in politics, the economy, and ecology, Rojava's stateless democracy proposes a political horizon that concerns us all.

What is the task of art in times of emergency? The artists and educators of Rojava seem to provide an answer. To write, imagine, and enact history according to the stateless – not only peoples *forced* into statelessness, but in the case of Rojava, those who have *decided to live without the state*.

X

The year-long Stateless Democracy research project conducted by New World Summit and New World Academy is being realized in collaboration with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht.

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1 Keyal Ahmed, "Benderî Bermûda" (1999).

2 Solid data regarding the changing territorial constellation of the war is generally hard to find due to its daily developments. This Wikipedia map was recommended to us by one of Rojava's administrators http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Syrian_Civil_War_detailed_map#Xorxor.C3.AE

3 "Rojava's population has nearly doubled to about 4.6 million. The newcomers are Sunni and Shia Syrian Arabs who have fled the scorched wasteland that Assad has made of his country. They are also Orthodox Assyrian Christians, Chaldean Catholics, and others, from out of the jihadist dystopia that has taken up so much of the space where Assad's police state used to be." Terry Glavin, "In Iraq and Syria, it's too little too late," *Ottawa Citizen*, Nov, 14, 2014

4 "The unexpected and quick defeat of the Kurdish peshmerga forces in Sinjar, which was until recently populated mainly by followers of the ancient Yazidi Mesopotamian faith, prompted the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to jump into the scene ... 'After IS stormed Sinjar and the peshmerga withdrew from there, a security vacuum emerged and the Yazidis faced the threat of a huge massacre. So, we decided to move in," said Redur Khalil, YPG's spokesman ... The YPG and PKK have even formed a special force, the Sinjar Defense Units, to defend Sinjar." Mohammed Sali, "PKK forces impress in fight against Islamic State," *Al-Monitor*, Sept. 1, 2014 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/pkk-kurdish-fight-islamic-state.html#ixzz3Rx4Xf8ot>

5 "In the 1960s, some 120,000 Syrian Kurds were stripped of their citizenship, forcing them to live in a sort of grey zone where they could not own property, were banned from certain professions, could not own cars, and could not get passports to leave the country. Syria also banned Kurdish political parties and put limits, similar to its neighbor Turkey, on Kurdish-language publications and education." Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 61.

6 Interview conducted with Dilar Dirik in De Balie, Amsterdam on October 22, 2014.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 "The Social Contract," January 29, 2014 https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/english-version_sc_revised-060314.pdf

10 Exactly how much territory and how to define this in terms of monopolized violence – implied by the term "state" – is highly contested. The *New York Times* created this "visual guide to the crisis in Iraq and Syria" in an attempt to provide data on the origins of Islamic State fighters as well as the areas currently under their control http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/06/12/world/middleeast/the-iraq-isis-conflict-in-maps-photos-and-video.html?_r=0

11 A relevant article reconstructing the rise of the Islamic State consists of interviews with a senior official militant – nom de guerre Abu Ahmed – who was imprisoned in the US-led Camp Bucca, where the current leader of the IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was incarcerated as well, and where the main recruitment of his cadre took place. Martin Chulov, "Isis: The Inside Story," *The Guardian*, Dec. 11, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/sp-isis-the-inside-story>

12 Curator Vivian Zihlerl speaks of the term of "Third Worldism" as a history that has to be continuously rewritten, thus questioning dominant linear – modernist – narratives that laid the foundation for colonization as such. One such attempt at an alternative historical exploration of Third Worldism can be found in Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

13 David Graeber, "Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?," *The Guardian*, Oct. 8, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>. See also "No. This is a genuine revolution," David Graeber interviewed by Pinar Ögünç about his travel to Rojava, *ZNET*, Dec. 26, 2014 <https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/no-this-is-a-genuine-revolution/>

14 On the 1936 Spanish revolution, see Murray Bookchin, *To Remember Spain: The Anarchist and Syndicalist Revolution of 1936* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1994); for a more extensive historical examination of the concept of libertarian socialism, see *Libertarian Socialism: Politics in Black and Red*, eds. Alex Prichard, Ruth Kinna, Saku Pinta, David Berry (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

14/15

e-flux journal #63 — march 2015 Jonas Staal
To Make a World, Part III: Stateless Democracy

15 Amil Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 87.

16 "The PKK Foundation in Sakine Cansiz's words," written on November 25, 1978 <http://rojhelat.info/en/?p=6832>

17 This truce was far from permanent, and in fact marked the beginning of the dominance of armed struggle in the Kurdish liberation movement: "At the start of June 2004, KONGRA-GEL [the organizational name of the PKK at the time] declared the undeclared five-year unilateral cease-fire 'obsolete' as they claimed that Turkey's military operations against the limited remaining guerrilla forces within the borders had been accelerated since early spring. In fact, there existed no five-year ceasefire but an end to the 'armed struggle'." Amil Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 214.

18 Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 179.

19 Ibid., 230.

20 "The PKK Foundation in Sakine Cansiz's words."

21 Abdullah Öcalan recalls: "Young women fighters in particular, whose participation should have been understood as an important enrichment of the movement, were treated disparagingly as a burden, punished for their love of freedom and forced into the most primitive patriarchal relationships." A. Öcalan, *Prison Writings II: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2011), chapter "The PKK."

22 Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 249.

23 Official website of the Kurdish Communities of Women (KJK) <http://www.kjk-online.org/hakkimizda/?lang=en>

24 Gönül Kaya, "Why Jineology? Re-Constructing the Sciences towards a Communal and Free Life," *Kurdish Question*, Dec. 28, 2014 <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/north-kurdistan/why-jineology.html>

25 Interview conducted with Dilar Dirik in De Balie, Amsterdam on October 22, 2014.

26 Kurdish Women's Movement

representative Fadile Yıldırım recalled on this issue that "the enemy is not just outside, we also have an enemy inside ... The Kurdish women's freedom movement started inside the national liberation movement." Fadile Yıldırım, "Women and Democracy: The Kurdish Question and Beyond," lecture at the first New World Summit, May 4, 2013, Sophiensaele, Berlin <https://vimeo.com/65049118>

27 Öcalan's most elaborate attempt to articulate a social, historical, cultural, and political analysis of the roots of the Kurdish Question – narrating the birth of subsequent tribalism, statism, capitalism, and patriarchy – in order to provide a viable scenario for an autonomous and democratic Kurdish movement can be found in his *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2007).

28 Abdullah Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne: International Initiative Edition/Neuss: Mesopotamian Publishers, 2013), 35.

29 Ibid., 36.

30 See Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the project of Radical Democracy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012).

31 Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2011), 10.

32 Murray Bookchin, *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (New York: Verso Books, 2015), 138.

33 Bookchin's most elaborate description of the ecological society is to be found in *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982). Janet Biehl, a long-time collaborator with Bookchin, reported on the exchange between Öcalan and Bookchin during the conference "Challenging Capitalist Modernity," Feb. 3–5, 2012, Hamburg. See J. Biehl, "Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy," *New Compass*, Feb. 16, 2012 <http://new-compass.net/articles/bookchin-%C3%B6calan-and-dialectics-democracy>

34 Bookchin defines this concept as following: "Communalism draws on the best of the older Left ideologies ... From Marxism, it draws the basic project of formulating a rationally

systematic and coherent socialism that integrates philosophy, history, economics, and politics ... From anarchism, it draws its commitment to antitotalitarianism and confederalism, as well as the recognition that hierarchy is a basic problem that can be overcome only by a libertarian socialist society." *Ibid.*, 15.

35
On the relation between confederalism and participatory democracy Bookchin writes: "A confederalist view involves a clear distinction between policymaking and the coordination and execution of adopted policies. Policymaking is exclusively the right of popular community assemblies based on the practices of participatory democracy. Administration and coordination are the responsibility of confederal councils which become the means for interlinking villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities into confederal networks." *Ibid.*, 75.

36
Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden distinguish three interrelated projects: "A democratic republic, democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. The democratic republic seeks to redefine the Republic of Turkey, by disassociating democracy from nationalism; democratic autonomy refers to the right of people to decide on their own priorities and policies, to determine their own future; and the project for democratic confederalism is to serve as a model for self-government, its concrete realization sought through the political organization of society at four different levels, namely, communes in villages and districts, the organization of social groups (such as women and youth), organization on the basis of cultural and religious identities, and civil society organizations." "Understanding Today's Kurdish movement: Leftist Heritage, Martyrdom, Democracy, and Gender," *European Journal of Kurdish Studies* 14 (2012).

37
Academic Amil Kemal Özcan attributes the capacity of the PKK to communicate Öcalan's new ideas of radical democracy to its policies of "micro-education" – a tireless if necessary one-to-one model of communication with its constituency. Further, Özcan states that "the PKK-led 'cause' of the Kurdish populace in the Republic of Turkey is not a national one but an archetype of 'identity liberation movement' for which a nation-state is not *sine qua non* but a forthcoming peril. It is thus, in spite of Öcalan's bold 'surrender' (the total abandonment of aims and objectives of a classical nationalist movement such as independence, federalism or

semi-autonomous rule, the unkind and undisguised opposition to the Kurdish autonomization in northern Iraq), that the undeniable majority of the Kurdish masses continue to back the PKK – under any name – and the 'president Öcalan.'" Amil Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 219.

38
"Since 2005, the PKK and all affiliated organizations have been restructured on the basis of this project under the name of KCK (Association of Communities in Kurdistan-Koma Civakên Kurdistan) which is a societal organization presented as an alternative to the nation-state. The KCK has aimed to organize itself from the bottom to the top in the form of assemblies. 'KCK is a movement which struggles for establishing its own democracy, neither ground on the existing nation-states nor see them as the obstacle.' In its status, called KCK Contract, its main aim is defined as struggling for the expansion of radical democracy which is based upon peoples' democratic organizations and decision-making power." Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the project of Radical Democracy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012).

39
"In the light of lessons we have learned from the latest international experiences, not being a party force which stands completely above the people but which becomes the servant of the people, and not being a dysfunctional assembly but an innovation of an assembly which is functioning and *determining everything* is the most fundamental – and distinguishing – task that we will fulfil for socialism. The success that we achieve in this respect will at the same time be the success of socialism." From a speech by Öcalan in 1995, quoted in Amil Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds*, 140.

40
Interview with Dorsin Akif conducted in the Star Academy in Ramelan on December 23, 2014.

41
Kaya, "Why Jineology?"

42
Ibid. For a critical account, see Janet Biehl, "Impressions of Rojava: a report from the revolution," *ROAR Magazine*, Dec. 16. 2014 <http://roarmag.org/2014/12/janet-biehl-report-rojava/>; and J. Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 29.

43
Zilan Diyar, "The Whole World is

Talking About Us, Kurdish Women," *Kurdish Question* <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/woman/the-whole-world-is-talking-about-us-kurdish-women/516-the-whole-world-is-talking-about-us-kurdish-women.html>

44
Dilar Dirik, "The Representation of Kurdish Women Fighters in the Media," *Kurdish Question* <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/woman/the-representation-of-kurdish-women-fighters-in-the-media/115-the-representation-of-kurdish-women-fighters-in-the-media.html>

45
Janet Biehl, "Revolutionary Education: Two Academies in Rojava," *Ecology or Catastrophe* (blog), Feb. 7, 2015 <http://www.biehlonbookchin.com/revolutionary-education/>

46
Pablo Lafuente, "For a Populist Cinema: On Hito Steyerl's *November and Lovely Andrea*," *Afterall* 19 (Autumn/Winter 2008) <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.19/populist.cinema.hito.steyerl.s.november.and.lovely>

47
Hito Steyerl, "Kobanê Is Not Falling," *e-flux.com*, Oct. 10, 2014. <http://announcements/kobane-is-not-falling/>

48
Interview with Abdullah Abdul conducted in the artist's studio in Amude, December 18, 2014.

49
Interview with Nesrin Botan conducted in the Mitra Hasake cultural center, December 20, 2014.