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Ahmet Ögüt (*The Silent University*) speaking at Artist Organizations International.

## Artist Organizations International

SARRITA HUNN on February 16, 2015 at 12:14 PM

The lobby was full and bustling with activity when I arrived the first evening for Artist Organizations International (AOI), a “congress” initiated by artist Jonas Staal and curators Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza at Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in Berlin, Germany. There was some confusion about who had tickets and where they were located and what lines to be in, when someone stood on the stairs and call to everyone’s attention. “Some of us,” he stated, “feel like 33 euros is too much to pay for an event about artist organizations.” He then asks all those who would like to try and negotiate discounted tickets to move to the back side of the lobby.

Upon entrance to the theatre I was handed a double-sided letter that sarcastically congratulated the organizers for their “genre-fiction” of political art through institutionalizing the term ‘artists organizations international.’ After a 30 minute delay, it appeared that everyone in the lobby had been granted entrance and allowed to fill the spaces in the balconies behind the speakers (which was supposedly not part of the original plan).

Initiator and artist Jonas Staal began by quoting from Asger Jorn’s Opening Speech at the First World Congress of Free Artists in Alba, Italy 1956:

*“Create, artist, do not speak.” This speech has been made to us all too often by people who claim to speak for us, think for us and act for us: politicians, intellectuals, industrialists, teachers, art critics and others. And we have always been betrayed.*

Staal explained this event was in part a call for artists “not to betray ourselves” and take back control of our occupied place in the world. Further, he explained this event was a response to the noticeable rise in the number of artist organizations, particularly those dealing directly with social and political structures. He ended by saying, “We have three days to make a world.”

Over the next two and a half days, divided by thematic blocks, there were a lot of great presentations, some great discussions, and few surprisingly antagonistic moments – between the audience and the organizers, between the audience and some panelists, among some audience members and even between some organizers and some panelists. These points of tension mostly remained in the realm of tolerable, and, when not, were quickly moved over. However, a big source of confusion I felt was from a conflation related to the second two ‘definitions’ of artist organizations proposed by the event which insisted on their tendency to “propose social and political agendas.” At the very least, this is a narrow definition of artist organizations that ignores (through definition and also invitation to the event) all those organizations that do not explicitly propose social and political agendas. But for this context, it more problematically conflates one conversation around the fact that forming a artist organization is inherently a political act in itself and a second conversation which seeks to define the relationship between art and politics (or more specifically activism). Considering the proposal of the event, I found the latter discussion to be somewhat beside the point and grew tired of the ongoing (sometimes implied, sometimes explicit) debates about whose crisis was more impending – global climate change or an upcoming election in Greece, exploitative labor in Congo or artists in Rojava, and so on – when I am way more interested in hearing about the political efficacy of artist-founded organizations themselves.

But the general discussion around ‘What is a crisis? How is it defined?’ ended up actually being pretty informative. Maria Hlavajova (who was really amazing) began the second day by asking: What is a real crisis? In an attempt to answer, she quoted from Gramsci (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 1971):

*The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.*

Hlavajova claimed this is our present moment, caught between the legacy of Modernism and its unfulfilled promise of better future. However, we can't, she argued, get rid of all the tools we gained in understanding the world. We must instead repurpose them – repurpose ideas like critique, betterment, authorship, spectatorship and ownership. She thinks artists organizations may be part of that shift.

What I found most significant was that she described this shift as one from 'critique' to 'proposition.' She explained our new reality is marked by global class recompositions (forever changing the 'viewer' and the 'general audience'), emerging collectivities, mutualized lifetime learning as a critical (art) practice (which asks both For whom? and With whom?), artists organizations (who both challenge institutional hierarchies and connect care to power) and finally, as proposed here, a congress of artists themselves (with "non-artists speaking nearby").

One notable dissent on this whole conversation about 'crisis' was from Jan Ritsema of Performing Arts Forum (PAF) in St. Erme, France, speaking from the Learning & Unlearning block. He pointed to capitalism as the source for all this perceived scarcity. He said in fact we live in abundance, if we would just step out of our capitalist crisis mode to experience it. This position is well-explained in a recent essay from *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* (December 2014):

*Capitalism is fueled by crisis. Whether persistent or recurring, local or global, environmental or financial, crisis drives capitalism. It strengthens it, enabling it to adapt. Some view the uprisings that have exploded in recent years as signs of a new global resistance. They are mistaken. The uprisings index the global force of capitalism. For the most part, they are reactive expressions of hardship and declining expectations.*

– Not an Alternative, "Counter Power as Common Power"

Strangely, Jan Ritsema's comments went largely unaddressed by everyone at the event.

What was especially notable about the first two days, however, were those who were not able to attend. On the first evening, Tania Bruguera was meant to speak for her project *Immigrant Movement International*. Despite her situation in Cuba, the organizers were able to call her via iPhone in place of her presentation. Her questions were interesting – Can we agree about solidarity? Does art have agency? – but the bad connection and her accent made understanding difficult. She also was interrupted multiple times (for which she apologized multiple times) and then she was abruptly cut off and unreachable.

The next day we were told (via an email) what had happened. While on the phone an official came to her house to summons her for an ‘interview’ (i.e. interrogation). It was not until after she got off the phone with AOI and re-read the form she had signed that she realized the interview was suppose to take place 10 minutes after she signed it. Of course, she missed that time but did go the police station where she waited for many hours. At that point, she was set to have a court date on the following Monday to determine if she was going to be fined or jailed for her accused crimes. She ended her email by saying that throughout the terrible process the thing she is holding on to is her optimism, because this is the one thing they cannot take from her.

On Saturday, instead of representatives from “Artists of Rojava” (who were also unable to attend) we were shown a short video edited for the event about their situation in Syria and their struggle for “stateless democracy.” The video is available through the live stream recording of the event which can be seen here starting at 1:18:30:

VIDEO: <https://vimeo.com/116434699>

The remaining videos from the AOI event can be viewed on this vimeo channel as well.

Of all the presenters, I empathized most with the last, Berlin's own *Haben und Brauchen* [To Have and To Need], founded in 2011 to advocate for the, "recognition and preservation of a self-organised artistic practice that has grown out of the specific historical conditions in Berlin." Represented by Sonja Augart, Tatjana Fell, Alice Münch, Ina Wudtke and Inga Zimprich, they gave their address from the audience toward the stage: "You have purchased 33 euro tickets to watch a performance of political activism played out in a theatre." They argued that a conversation about artist organizations should be self-organized, non-curatorial and free. They asked where were projects like W.A.G.E. who represent real efforts to unite: "Was this conference meant to provoke us?"

*We do not believe in politics and economics, but let us at least believe in artists and their ability to provide hope.*

I am not sure if we were able to "make a world" in three days, but in all fairness the weekend proved to very informative. The final 'debate' included calls for a translocal (as opposed to 'international') approach toward "normalizing anti-capitalism." I was especially impressed with John Jordan (who represented *The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination*, and whose inspiring work includes collaborations such as *Beautiful Trouble*, *We Are Everywhere* and *Paths through Utopia* – vimeo) who summarized it best – the biggest question we have to reconcile is the relationship between local and global efforts. (see 1:49:55)

VIDEO: <https://vimeo.com/118486463>

However, everyone wanted to leave with something a bit more tangible and a vague plan was made to create a contact group of those who were interested by emailing the event's address: [info@artistorganisationsinternational.org](mailto:info@artistorganisationsinternational.org). Dmitry Vilensky (of *Chto Delat*) laughed. He said this is how every meeting he has ever attended in Berlin has ended, yet nothing further happens. In truth, I emailed my interest to that contact right

after the event and have yet to hear anything back. However, like the political act of forming an artist organization itself, *hopefully* this event will prove to be one more step in a much larger movement.

<http://temporaryartreview.com/artist-organizations-international/>