



New Unions: Campaigning for plurality or how to get on with democracy

LENA JOHANNA REISNER on March 20, 2017 at 5:51 AM

Set amidst massive black stars flung out of their circular arrangement as known in the European flag, *New Unions: Act I-IV* took place over three days this past January at Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in Berlin. Related to ongoing *New World Summit* efforts, *New Unions* was developed by Studio Jonas Staal in collaboration with frequent collaborators such as architect Paul Kuipers, designer Remco van Bladel and the HAU Hebbel am Ufer curatorial team. *New Unions* began with a critique on the functionary elite that on the one hand has used the European Union for its austerity politics while on the other hand rejects an ultranationalist call for individual nation-states. Against this dichotomy, which seemingly offers only a choice between the the lesser of these two evils (an 'in' or 'out' mentality that so fatefully framed the Brexit referendum), *New Unions* defines itself as an artistic and political campaign advocating for another set of options.¹

For each of the five acts, *New Unions* assembles a representative from an emancipatory political party or platform from across Europe. Additionally, five respondents who are based in and familiar with the local context (in this case Germany) allow for the discussion to be grounded geopolitically where the event takes place. This first of (at least) five iterations², organized in the framework of the HAU festival *Utopian Realities – 100 years of Now with Alexandra Kollontai*, pays respect to the revolutionary feminist with no less than seven women among the eleven guests thus presenting a process of political and social reorganisation as an essentially female endeavour. At a moment in many places when misogyny again seems to become an admissible stance in populist rhetorics and the politics of decision making, this fact should certainly not go unnoticed. Artist Jonas Staal and the moderator of the event, Margarita Tsomou, guided the audience through the series of presentations asking questions, summarizing, and providing their ongoing reflections to continue a conversation with the audience present during the three days and to offer points of entry for the attendants joining in



Jonas Staal introduces New Unions: Act I-V

later.

New Unions: Act I Feminist Union



New Unions: Acts I-V are now available to watch online.

In the first act, Baharan Raoufi, representative of Feministiskt Initiativ (F!), a political party formed in Sweden in 2005, gave an account of the party's programme while developing her thoughts around the notion of a *Feminist Union*. F! advocates for equal rights in education, on the labor market, and in access to welfare and culture, as well as support for the integrity of body and mind. A broad and inclusive anti-racist feminism serves as its premise, following an intersectional approach thus opposing all forms of discrimination. With reference to Guy Standing, Raoufi brought into play the term of the precariat, an emerging social class marked by a decrease of socio-economic security. She stressed the importance of engaging these groups while criticising the corresponding economic principles as a prior condition for democracy at work. In response, LaToya Manly-Spain, founding member of Schwabinggrad Ballett and ARRiVATi who lobbies on matters of asylum and migration, challenged Raoufi with a question concerning the diversity of the political party itself. She further reminded us of the necessity to reorganise the syllabus, to rewrite history as it is told in schools, towards increased awareness and knowledge about manifold colonial legacies and postcolonial realities.

Despina Koutsoumba, speaker for the second act on a possible *Internationalist Union*, has been campaigning against austerity politics and the capitalization of historic monuments in Greece. She is a representative of ANTARSYA, a coalition of radical left political organisations in the southeast European country that was founded in 2009 at the onset of the debt crisis. The crisis itself, along with the way it was handled by European institutions, to many reveal the EU's systemic lack of democracy and a hyper-conservative economic agenda. Against this background, ANTARSYA calls for exiting the European Union, dropping the Euro currency, defaulting on Greece's debts, and for the nationalization of major industries without compensation while also proposing concrete measurements for improving labour conditions. A campaign for leaving the EU in central and western European countries often comes along with a right-wing, isolationist and nationalist agenda. However, it should be noted that a legitimate critique of the EU is also being voiced by the political left, infected though with a vision for an alternative future that does not pick up on a romantic idea of the nation-state. Koutsoumba's presentation was followed by Anna Stiede's response who, with Blockupy, stood against austerity and the authority of the European regime over the debt crisis and, in 2015, protested against the opening of the new European Central Bank in Frankfurt am Main.

One aspect that became apparent throughout the five acts is that the crisis of the EU is intrinsically linked to a crisis of democracy. In the third act, *Stateless Union*, Seher Aydar, a Kurdish-Norwegian politician for the socialist party Rødt in Oslo and chair of the organization Solidaritet med Kurdistan, contributed to the conversation on forms of self-governance. Democratic confederalism is a form of democratic self-administration which builds upon the writings of Abdullah Öcalan and includes some criticism on the concept of the nation-state.³ It has been put in action in the region of Rojava, that is, Western Kurdistan, where a democratic organisation builds up from the smallest entities upwards to allow for an "ecology of diversity" instead of the one nation model.⁴ In the context of the *New World Summit*, the case of Rojava's stateless democracy has been thoroughly engaged and studied, research that has



Baharan Raoufi (Feminist Initiative, Sweden) presents Act I: Feminist Union

fed *New Unions*. However, Sebastian Jünemann, initiator and coordinator of the Berlin based NGO CADUS, raised his concerns for the transferability of the model to countries like Germany who are equipped with a preexisting, powerful state apparatus responsible for a huge amount of administrative tasks that make it difficult to imagine them to be taken over by civil society because of the sheer scale that project management would require. Nonetheless, one could observe that nearly all of the representatives and initiatives present gave strong emphasis on liaising with grass-root organisations and practice a bottom-up mentality.

Mireia Vehí and Quim Arrufat whose presentation evolved around to the notion of a *Communist Union* in the fourth act equally raised questions of self-governance. Governemnos, Catalan for “we govern ourselves,” is one of the taglines of the Candidatura d’Unitat Popular (CUP), a left-wing political party active in the Catalan Countries in Spain which advocates for an independent Catalonian republic. As an alternative to the political systems in place in Spain and France, CUP proposes, and likewise enacts, a form of participatory democracy – namely libertarian municipalism. A disagreement with the management of the elites, stated Arrufat, can not be solved by replacing the very elites in question but only by changing the game. In consequence, CUP consists of autonomous local assemblies representing towns and neighborhoods with citizens as active political agents (instead of passive customers). The speakers reported on the Catalonian project of independence and how they understand a referendum as a tool for an impeachment of the Spanish government. Referring to 15-M (also known as Los Indignados), an anti-austerity movement during which

protests occurred throughout Spain, Catalonia and the Basque Country as a reaction to the devastating economic situation in 2011, the respondent Raúl Zelik points out that an impeachment of the EU was not only a Greek project.

The question of whether or not a successful democracy is a matter of scale came up several times during the event. Robin McAlpine, the director of the Scottish think tank Common Weal, a campaigning and advocacy organisation, news service, and network of local groups that emerged during the Scottish independence referendum campaign in 2014, elaborated on an *Asymmetrical Union* in the final act, putting the concept of place centre stage. He mentioned Iceland's pots and pans revolution as an example for a successful democracy and seemed to agree with the assembly that the size of a 'region' would offer the best conditions. The notion of the citizen of the world would hide the fact that other people would do the cleaning up, that is, ensure a democracy at work and a functioning infrastructure of services based in a place. Moreover, every topography had its own issues and, for example, a giant agriculture like that of France could by no means be compared to that of Scotland. The EU has a hopeless position in trying to cope with these differences. A trans-democratic Union should thus see these differences not as problems to be overcome, but productively work with these asymmetries.



Despina Koutsoumba (ANTARSYA, Greece) presents Act II: Internationalist Union

Among the many points of resonance between the initiative's and parties' programs represented at *New Unions Act I-V* was not only the rejection of patriarchal forms of dominance but also a commitment to ecologically sustainable models and forms of eco-

socialism, the latter of which was hardly addressed. For a three days assembly it might have been too much to discuss, but eco-socialism is an aspect worthy of learning more about when it comes to defining common ground and developing alternative unions. For the upcoming programmes of *New Unions* – and even more for its medium and long-term development – it will be interesting to see how Studio Jonas Staal moves forward with the notion of this campaign. How might, for example, the project extend beyond the form of an assembly to become a platform for liaising and sharing knowledge. One point frequently brought up by the moderator Margarita Tsomou was the necessity for the political left to find a common language, a language that also fits a popular imagination.⁵

The positioning of *New Unions* between politics and the arts allows it to engage with the networks and structural givens of both spheres and creates room for alternative ways of thinking and enacting forms and formats. As an artistic initiative dedicated to politics, it is not structured as a political party itself and allows for a diversity and experimentation with campaigning toward an envisioned plurality.⁶ Similar to the *New World Summit*, *New Unions* performs like a mobile platform for a trans-democratic conversation to facilitate the evolution of alternative unions. It bears all the characteristics of an artistic project, in terms of how it circulates, while it disperses knowledge through its very mechanisms, the art sphere and its institutional arena. Jonas Staal appeals to the specific potential of the arts when he speaks about a crisis of our political imagination and the power of art to liberate our creative abilities, but more importantly what he builds upon is a political understanding of art's role in society, the responsibility of cultural institutions to serve as an agora and employ their faculties and resources for the common good.

As the precarious political situation under which we are currently operating becomes more and more of a global condition, developing these potentialities has a greater urgency than ever before. One movement, *Hands Of Our Revolution*, launched by an international group of artists and cultural workers in February, was formed to oppose the rising rhetoric of right-wing populism and stress art's duty to use its "own particular forms, private and public spaces, to engage people in thinking together and debating ideas, with clarity, openness and resilience." We are all politically-challenged, Bruno Latour states in his introduction to *Making Things Public*⁷, therefore it is necessary to assemble to engage with the issues that make us gather – reinventing our democratic conceptions in the process and practicing those conceptions through enacting them.

1. *New Unions* follows a number of initiatives in the artistic sphere that turned up in recent years addressing the European crisis while experimenting with forms of political presentation – *The new abduction of Europe: debt, war, democratic revolutions* was a conference held at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 2014; A *Charta for Europe* developed in the course of several workshops served as a critique of the European project currently at play; and *The Art of Being Many*, a project by geheimagentur realised in collaboration with Kampnagel in the same year, dealt with forms of assembling and the aesthetics of political resistance proposing a programme of performances and discussions. Additionally, The European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics has been working on creating new public spheres going beyond a conservative, hegemonial discourse of cultural identity and representation since 2002. [↗](#)
2. Four additional programs will be realised in collaboration with Council (Paris), CCA Glasgow, State of Concept (Athens) and BAK, basis voor aktuele kunst (Utrecht). [↗](#)
3. The fifth *New World Academy* invited members of the Kurdish Women’s Movement. The academy was accompanied by a reader which contains articles, interviews and excerpts of Abdullah Öcalan’s writings, 2015, available via <http://newworldsummit.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NWA5-Stateless-Democracy.pdf> (retrieved March 13, 2017). [↗](#)
4. Amina Ose, “On Democratic Confederalism,” In: Renée in der Maur et.al (Eds), *New Worlds – The Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava & New World Summit (Studio Jonas Staal)*, Oslo 2016. [↗](#)
5. On February 26, 2017 the Greek former Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis launched the Dutch branch of the pan-European Movement DiEM25 – Democracy in Europe Movement 2025. Stage set and intermezzo were organized by Jonas Staal, in cooperation with architect Paul Kuipers and designer Remco van Bladel, as part *New Unions*. In the use of design and architecture one can recognize some of the efforts toward a (visual) language that fits a popular imagination. Jonas Staal’s speech for the event may be read here: <https://diem25.org/new-unions-diem25/> [↗](#)
6. In his recent article on *Assemblism* Jonas Staal uses the term “emancipatory propaganda” with reference to Lucy Lippard. Jonas Staal, *Assemblism*, e-flux Journal #80 – March 2017, available via <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/> (retrieved March 13, 2017). [↗](#)
7. Bruno Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public,” in: Bruno Latour, et.al (Eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2005, available via <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/96-MTP-DING.pdf> (retrieved March 13, 2017). [↗](#)

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