World-Making as Commitment

Jonas Staal (in conversation with Maria Hlavajova)

MH: I would like to begin by discussing your conceptual premise “new world.” It seems to me this has been the key philosophical (and ideological) foundation for the series of projects you have presented at an unrelenting pace over the last couple of years. Some of these projects have brought us together, not only in thought-provoking, ongoing conversation, but also in collaborations convening projects-turned-institutions, such as the New World Academy (2013–2016), New World Embassy: Azawad (2014), and the latest iteration of the New World Summit (2016). Your departure point is a claim made in the early 1920s by writer and political activist Upton Sinclair:

The artists of our time are like men hypnotized, repeating over and over a dreary formula of futility. And I say: Break this evil spell, young comrade; go out and meet the new dawning life, take your part in the battle, and put it into new art; do this service for a new public, which you yourself will make . . . that your creative gift shall not be content to make art works, but shall at the same time make a world; shall make new souls, moved by a new ideal of fellowship, a new impulse of love, and faith—and not merely hope, but determination."
While I am intrigued by it, I don’t readily see the choice of a “new world” anywhere among our options. I will offer another quote, an epigram of Jacques Mesrine, with which The Invisible Committee begin their 2014 book To Our Friends: “There is no other world. There’s just another way to live.” Both statements are but tools with which to think the notion of “instituting otherwise” under the conditions of the present—and the place of art in it, in the possibility, as you often say, of “future history.”

JS: When I founded the New World Summit as an artistic and political organization in 2012, I thought of the concept of the “new world” in its variety of contradictory and oppositional usages. There is the new world of the European colonizers. There is the new world of Sinclair, which is the new world of revolutionary socialism; a future world of collective ownership: a world we ourselves will make, a world we authorize collectively. There is also the radical, paranoiac vision of the new world order that has resurfaced in the mass support for Trumpism in the United States. And there is the new world of Subcomandante Marcos: the world that he describes as “many worlds.”

I myself am a Swiss-Dutch artist, and a child of empire. An heir to those who claimed the right to declare the world their new world, and consider themselves to be its sole authors. It’s a violent claim to inheritance that remains present in today’s neocolonial wars in the form of the War on Terror. When George W. Bush revived the neo-Orientalist trope of the us/them dichotomy, he reinstated the “right” of a class of citizens to narrate the history of—and for—a class of “non-citizens.” The War on Terror is thus a renewed class war on a planetary scale. Bush reinforced the absolute division between the so-called western democratic citizen and the non-western non-citizen; the latter being the “barbaric terrorist” that supposedly desires only to return to the year zero of his or her prophet. The War on Terror and the us/them dichotomy aim to stop us from “hearing beyond what we are able to hear,” as Judith Butler has written so powerfully. Critical academics, journalists, lawyers, writers, artists: if you are not on the side of the War on Terror, you are conspiring terrorists, cultural relativists, and apologetic “excuseniks.” This is why lawyer Nancy Hollander, a representative of several organizations and individuals prosecuted as terrorists, and a contributor to a number of New World Summits, declares herself a “terrorist lawyer.” For after September 11, even defending the legal rights of so-called terrorists has been considered an act of terrorism in itself. It shows us a near-Stalinist erasure of history, in which defending the law as it was before the World Trade Center attack is taken for treason. Invoking history differently becomes an act of terror; only the dichotomy of a terrifying present remains. Hollander has been accused of supporting terrorism because she invokes the law as a principle that allows her to hear beyond what we are able to hear, represent beyond what we are able to represent, namely, the
struggles of her clients: from author Mohamedou Ould Slahi, recently released after 14 years of imprisonment in Guantánamo Bay, to whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

In the New World Summit, the “new world” relates to the meeting point between those in whose name the War on Terror is waged, albeit against their own convictions, and those against whom it is fought. As you know, New World Summit began by inviting organizations placed on designated lists of so-called terrorist organizations: groups and individuals considered threats to democracy, which leads to the removal of their passports, and the cancellation of their rights to travel or hold bank accounts. Being placed on a blacklist thus literally means being declared stateless. A people in a democracy are defined by their statehood, by their citizenship. A stateless person is not a citizen, and thus cannot be recognized within democracy, at least not in what we have come to term “democracy” in the War on Terror. When we organized our first summit, in the form of a temporary parliament at Sophiensäle in Berlin in 2012, the organizations confronted with blacklisting that accepted our invitation were far from “anti-democratic.” Jon Andoni Lekue from the Basque independence movement, Fadile Yildirim of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, Moussa Ag Assarid from the National Liberation Movement of Azawad, and Luis Jalandoni of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines—organizations that you, by now, know well—all belong to histories of anticolonial and liberation struggle. Many of them—Azawadians, Basques, Kurds—are, albeit to different degrees, stateless peoples, making the blacklists a means of enacting a double negation: the stateless are declared doubly stateless through blacklisting. The different political philosophies of many of these groups reside in a radical and principled take on the notion of democracy, often articulated as democracies of peoples rather than citizens. Meaning that we are talking here about a notion of “a people” that cannot be equated with the category of “citizenship.” Thus we touch upon the possibility of democracy as practice rather than as a form of representation. One should not conflate these struggles, and the specificity of their historical, cultural, and geographical backgrounds, but I dare to say that, in the first alternative parliament of the New World Summit, we observed that the global politicized civil society, which emerged in protest against the illegal invasion of Iraq, shares more with those who are violated through that war than with those who perpetrate it.

The alternative parliament of the New World Summit in Berlin was thus aimed at creating a space that would resist and overcome the us/them dichotomy of the War on Terror, and that could identify the threat of this war as a type of state terror that forms the actual common and existential threat to all of us, citizens and non-citizens alike. Many citizens of politicized civil society have learned in the 15 years since September 11 that their so-called rights are relative to their support of what is defined as “us.” The whistleblowers, immigrant communities, people of color, activists, intellectuals, artists: many have learned that the radical erosion of civil rights has allowed the concept of statelessness to be far from an exceptional position, and to become more and more a normative threat against dissidents or supposed others. The result is that the gap between us and them is actually, paradoxically, reduced through the War on Terror, although the rhetoric of its protagonists encourages us to think otherwise.

New worlds emerge when we create forms of assembly in which we renegotiate our dependencies, our bonds, our common struggles—it’s a line I take from Butler’s writings on the theory of performative assembly. These propositions and imaginaries of new worlds emerge when we recognize that the radical precarity of the so-called terrorist relates, albeit in an unequal way, to the precarity of those whose civil rights are trampled. And when I refer to the trampling of civil rights, I don’t only refer to the erosions or privacy or racial profiling, but also to less evident forms of precarity that the War on Terror legitimates. Who cares about climate change when a terrorist can blow up our cities at any moment? Who looks at the origins of economic crises when a weapon of mass destruction is about to go off? Who looks at structural discrimination when the clock is ticking for the next beheading? The perpetual image of imminent destruction propagated by War on Terror propaganda desensitizes us to the actual existential threats we face. Anthropologist and social scientist Joseph Masco notes, for example, that when Hurricane Katrina left its trail of devastation, the media tended to frame it within the possibility of a terrorist attack: If we cannot even prepare for a “natural” disaster, how can we ever defend ourselves from the terrorists? The image of imminent destruction is so strong that we cannot recognize actual crises, even when they are right in front of our eyes.
The precariat manifests itself in many different ways, and it would be incorrect to suggest that prosecuted activists or people living the slow death of austerity endure a condition of oppression comparable to that of those prosecuted as terrorists or fleeing war. But the truth of the matter is that these different conditions of precarity resonate with one another far more than they do with the powerful elites who wage war in our name; sell resources in our name; destroy our livelihoods in our name; or, if not in our name, then in the name of “democracy.”

What I’m trying to say is that if we wish to invest in the very possibility of a future history, then we need to reassemble. We need to break ties with those who wage war in our name, securitize in our name, privatize in our name, etc., and reassemble peoples—ourselves—on the basis of our different experiences and conditions of precarity. I would hope the parliaments of the New World Summit form together a modest contribution to that endeavor: the attempt to engage the imagination of art to create new social constellations, in order to enact a different understanding of what defines a people, and the many new worlds that emerge from these encounters—the new world of many worlds.

MH: You appeal to art for its critical faculty of imagination. I could not agree more with this, but I would like to push it a bit further. Given the depth of crises and devastation—social, political, environmental—in the world at this point in history, imagining things otherwise might not be enough. I think you gesture toward this doubt when you call for engaging the imagination of art to create what you name spaces to assemble. That is already a call, in my view, to not just produce the imaginaries of a different world, but to act them out, to inhabit and embody them. In other words, the idea of art as a space, both conceptual and physical, which contains the possibility of being together otherwise, even if or when it is unthinkable elsewhere, seems to me at the core of your artistic effort. In my understanding, this is where there is a radical potential for alternative political, social, and cultural projects in the present.

What I am interested in is the paradoxical use of what is left of artistic autonomy. The projects with undocumented, undeportable refugees in limbo in the Netherlands, or with the rebels from Azawad, to name but two examples from our recent collaborative endeavors, have only been possible because they have taken place in the context of art. Or, better yet, because they have taken place “in the name of art,” or even as “art projects.” This means stepping into a complex, contested territory, and, I wonder, could you speak to your understanding of this practice a bit more?

JS: You are right, calling solely on the notion of art as the domain of the imaginary can also be a way of making it even more powerless: it leaves art to imagine everything but change nothing—in order for it to remain art. My particular question is how the imagination of art and its morphological understanding of the world—analyzing and organizing the world through and as form—relates to the notion of assembly. With “assembly,” I don’t only mean people gathering on squares or in parliaments. I also think of models of education, the model of the union, the assembly of knowledge and bodies in the library, the political party, the “movement.” Butler effectively pushes this even further by speaking of the assembly in the form of the hunger strike: bodies that cannot inhabit the same space, but engage in the same gestures of protest, assemble across different locations or even geographies—an assembly that is partly also a protest against the impossibility of assembly. All of these forms propel an imaginary of a form of communality, although that does not mean this is a communality of sameness. There is a potential in each of these forms to gather the largest possible collectivity through a common denominator.

The imagination of art here for me relates to engaging and rearticulating these forms as emancipatory sites of assembly. Take the library, for example, which we tend to glorify in a European discourse as a symbol of enlightenment; knowledge and education are considered as inherent parts of the common good. But libraries are also sites that give testimony to violence; much of “their” knowledge has been stolen and abducted from others. They are sites of a secularized and rationalized fortification of knowledge. But the library can be many other things as well. The Glasgow Women’s Library, for example, engages in what Adele Patrick, one of its co-founders and organizers, calls a “feminist methodology of archiving”: adding on a regular basis new terms—inserted by library users or library workers—to reorganize knowledge, and, as such, continuously question where and to whom knowledge belongs. It’s a library that acknowledges that knowledge is not neutral, but inherently carries within it certain biases and exclusions. I think the fact that Patrick frequently involves artists in helping to develop the Glasgow Women’s Library as a site of permanent self-questioning is significant here—from the design of the structures of categorization to the sites of gathering within the library itself. To imagine an open library also demands an imaginative effort of visualizing and morphologically structuring this library.

For me, a similar question relates to the parliaments of the New World Summit: they are structures that continuously ask what a parliament is, to whom it belongs, who has the right to speak, and why. Our parliaments do not base themselves on the representation of existing states, but on new states in the making—states of mind, often, rather than formal models of the nation-state. And that endeavor depends in a large part on a morphological understanding of the parliament: the parliament as sculpture, as installation, as theater, as a site of collective experiments in performativity. The parliament in our case does not merely represent a people, it produces an ongoing series of imaginaries and performative understandings of what a people is, could, or should be.
collective We Are Here, the National Liberation Movement of Azawad, or the Kurdish Women’s Movement—if they did not recognize art as a site of struggle, then these collaborations would never have taken place. To be sure, it is not just the institution of art that grants space to emancipatory politics; it’s through emancipatory politics that the legitimacy and relevance of art is determined.

In order to repurpose the autonomy of art, we need to be part of a larger politics that recognizes and supports that politicized autonomy in the first place. By the time the ranks of the French National Front (FN), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) have joined the “illiberal democracy” regimes of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the Polish Law and Justice party already in power, there will be no artistic autonomy left to repurpose. So, an important part of art’s role in redefining the model of assembly is to build the broadest possible alliance around art as well: from stateless and liberation movements to progressive and emancipatory political parties, academics, students, journalists, activists, and so on. The assembly must not only challenge and question power, but produce new notions and practices of power through which we can organize our world differently. Only when the imaginaries of emancipatory art and politics stand in a structural relationship with one another do we have a chance to not merely claim power as it is, but to produce new understandings and practices of power in which alternate futures become reality.

MH: How does this figure into the initiative New Unions that you have just launched, which seems to refocus your work in our own backyard, as it were, the European continent, and driven by a clear understanding of how entangled the realities of the postcolonial, the post-communist, and former west actually are, cutting transversally across the global political economy?

JS: New Unions is planned as a long-term artistic and political campaign, with the aim of establishing alternative models of transdemocratic unions through the domain of art. Essentially, it takes the form of a series of Europe-wide assemblies that depart from Europe’s current political, economic, and humanitarian crises. It is designed to gather the imaginaries of alternative unions that have emerged in response to these crises, from the work of the Popular Unity Candidacy in Catalonia to the Feminist Initiative in Sweden to the Common Weal in Scotland—organizations that are invested in creating transdemocratic unions that depart from traditional notions of state and capital. We are asking all of these different parties to join artists and cultural workers in the assemblies, and present their scenarios for what these future transdemocratic unions could look like.

I see the New Unions campaign as a response to the crisis of the European imaginary. The so-called Brexit vote is paradigmatic here. A choice proposed to the peoples of Wales, England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland that was no choice, for it came down to either legitimizing the unelected elites
JS: Indeed, the concept of art contains many things at once. It can relate to the notion of the imaginary or the morphological, and it can be understood as part of an ongoing historical class war—the “velvet chains” that Jean-Jacques Rousseau has spoken of when it comes to art’s dependency on the elites of the past and present. I follow Sinclair’s proposition in this regard, not merely to repurpose the autonomy of art, but to define the importance of the imaginary and morphological capacity of art within a larger transdemocratic struggle for political autonomy. Only when the interests of art become the interests of a larger collectivity—a collective autonomy—can we come to an understanding and practice of art that does not merely question the world as it is, but engages a collective process of world-making. For me, the assembly, as an emancipatory site of gathering and action, is the core of that process. If we follow Butler, then it would be possible to think the work you and I are doing, this “undercurrent of art,” as you call it, as a practice of performative assembly.

MH: Despite your work consisting of many projects—disguised, if you will, by different titles to appear as individual works of art—together they seem more like iterations of one immense, ongoing project; a continuous mission that gathers strength—and ever more substantial, durable assemblies—as it evolves over time. One should perhaps engage in rethinking our vocabulary, for it seems to be more a commitment than a project you have undertaken; a commitment with multiple public interruptions, conceptualized as collective negotiations of how to recompose and inhabit and live the imaginaries of the (new) world at present. Do you see it this way? Can you think of your own work as a practice moving us toward a kind of manifesto of commitment?
Performing the Institution “As If It Were Possible”

Athena Athanasiou

My question in this text is: How might it be possible for subjects who are produced by and within certain instituted regimes of subjectification to engage in acts and arts of resistance? This is a question that allows us to reflect upon and theorize the forms of political subjectivity that are—or seek to become—possible in these times of autarchic governmentality. More than 25 years after the “end of history” and the demise of actually existing socialism, TINA (There Is No Alternative) aspires to become a new canon, affirming the axiomatic inevitability of global capitalism and precluding the possibility of alternative sociopolitical becomings. Therefore, I propose that instead of treating the interminable question of the capacity to act in terms of “possible versus impossible,” we examine what it might mean to institute “otherwise,” politically and performatively, “as if it were possible.”

For this task, I draw upon philosopher Jacques Derrida’s commitment to the irreducible modality of “im-possibility”: the possible as impossible that requires “a new thinking of the possible.” I will explore the unconditionality of thinking politics as an art of the impossible.

I want to dwell on the institution as a condition of possibility for un/common space in the former West in light of present conditions of impossibility—capitalist crisis, securitization, and the post-colony. I see the