

ART AFTER DEMOCRATISM

THE PEDAGOGY OF THE NEW WORLD SUMMIT

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When Christina Aguilera Meets Dinosaurs: Liberal Democracy's Mass Torture

In 2007, philosopher Vincent van Gerven Oei and myself came across a leaked file documenting an interrogation at Guantánamo prison in Cuba, which had been distributed through the website of *Time Magazine*. The log contained a detailed report of three months of interrogation of Mohammed Mani Ahmed al-Khatani, the supposed “20th hijacker” of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001.

The report caught our interest specifically because of the nature of the torture techniques involved. Apart from the terrifying torture method called water boarding, we were struck by the use of popular culture as means of “torturing” the prisoner. The guards severely disoriented al-Khatani by moving him to different closed darkened spaces, which made it impossible for him to grasp the time of day or the direction in which he, as a Muslim, was supposed send his prayers. Subsequently, they deregulated his sleep pattern, upon which his general sense of disorientation became even more severe. This set the theatrical stage for the guards to subject al-Khatani to a complex of contemporary cultural iconography. He was, for example, exposed to loud popular music, such as songs by Metallica, Eminem, and Christina Aguilera’s song “Dirrty.” Al-Khatani was further subjected to images of pin-up girls, non-halal Burger King food, and stroboscope lights. These are all symbols of Western “liberation,” which in the context of Guantánamo obtain extremely oppressive dimensions. Or rather, in this context that the extremely oppressive dimensions already present in these symbols of so-called liberation become unbearably visible.

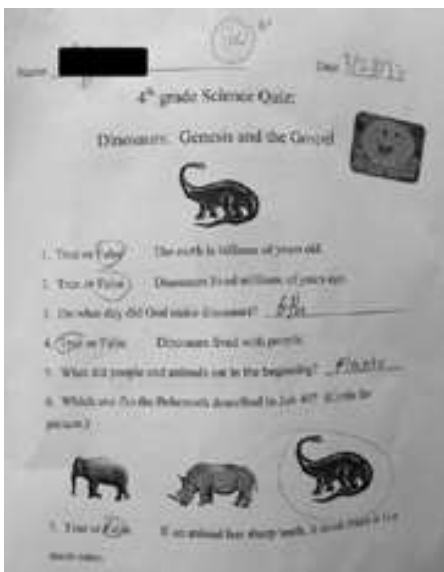
The tragic climax of the interrogation log is the first moment the guards allow al-Khatani a moment of respite. On January 10, 2003, at 22:45, the log mentions: “Interrogator allowed detainee to choose a topic to talk about.” And then, from this obscure dark infrastructure of the state of emergency, the log consequently mentions that the “*Detainee wanted to talk about dinosaurs.*”



Somehow, nothing in the interrogation strikes me as more tragic than this. The resonance of this question in this realm of false symbols of liberation: Christina Aguilera, Burger King, *Playboy Magazine*, all mixed up in a shocking and violent whirlpool. And from this brutal reality this single question emerges, one that attempts to relocate al-Khatani's disastrous present by reaching back into *pre-history*. A talk about dinosaurs as an antidote to the universe of hamburgers and pop-porn stars; the figure of the monumental diplodocus as the last beacon undisturbed by these false symbols of liberation. Al-Khatani seems to aim for a point as radically outside the oppressive symbolic realm of Guantánamo as one can possibly imagine.

However, it is the guard that is in charge of the dinosaurs' history, and his answer is logged as follows:

Interrogator gave history of dinosaurs and talked about the meteor that wiped them out, and *equated this event with nuclear war*. Detainee expresses great ignorance about dinosaurs and space, topics that are taught in U.S. grade schools.'



Now this final statement is of course easily contested by pointing out this 4th grader's test awarding the answer that dinosaurs were created by God on the sixth day with a smiley sticker. The Guantánamo interrogation takes the shape of a similar "test," that demands from al-Khatani to submit himself to the guard's historical narrative, which goes as follows: The dinosaurs were threatened by a meteor similar to Saddam and Bin Laden's threat to unleash nuclear war against the United States: *true or false?* ...

By means of the Guantánamo interrogation logs we are allowed to reach a disturbing understanding of our own culture. For what

al-Khatani is forced to experience as an extreme form of mental torture forms the everyday décor of our own urban existences: everywhere we look the symbolism of disaster surrounds us in day to day life. Only we experience the sound, images, and our general consumption of these as acts of liberation. Al-Khatani makes us sensible once again to the *mass intellectual torture that we endure in the form of liberal democracy*.

Lenin in Japan:

The Discovery of Fundamental Democracy

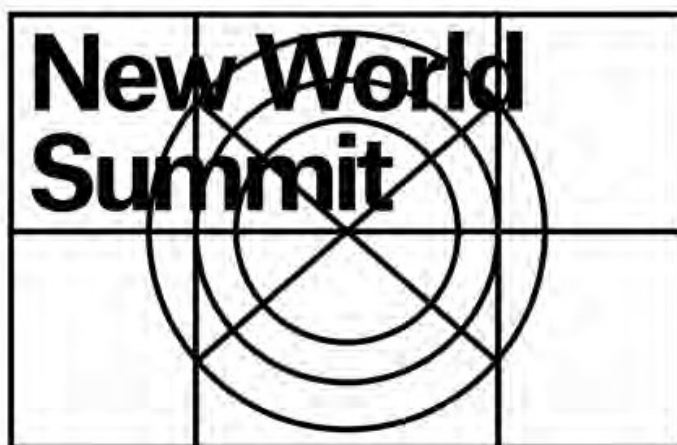
The paradox of the creative industry that surrounds us is that it consists of symbols that we have learned to recognize as the flagships of freedom. Cheap processed food. Pop music. Pin ups. They are the problematic symptoms of what has also been a genuine emancipatory liberating movement. As artists engaged in deciphering and countering these false symbols of liberation, we are confronted with a complex operation. On one hand, we have to recognize what the emancipatory basis of the sexual revolution, of industrialization, and so on, have brought us. On the other hand, we have to liberate ourselves from the past symbols of liberation that today serve in the process of liberal democracy's operation of mass intellectual torture that shows its very core in the Guantánamo interrogation. In a perverse way, an emancipatory understanding of democracy and a repressive understanding of democracy are intertwined, resulting in a situation in which it is difficult to differentiate intellectual torture from emancipatory liberation.

So what we need is a language that allows us to differentiate in between the language of emancipation and a language of repression. Although “democracy” is a single word, we may observe that in the Spanish *Indignados* movement and in the War on Terror with its extraterritorial prisons, which both are legitimized through the word “democracy,” this word is used to legitimate radically opposed operations.

When Lenin visited Japan, he was forced to perform an intervention that today we would recognize as the Deleuzian proposal to “speak of what we know best in a language that we know the least.” Lenin's Japanese was as good as my Albanian is today, and when speaking to the masses, he was forced to make use of a translator. When he came to his fundamental critique of what he considered as “bourgeois democracy,” the translator looked at him in a confused way. It became clear to Lenin that the word “democracy” did not exist in Japanese language, at best, it could be translated as an *ism*: as *democratism*.

Translation here resulted in subversion. The term democracy broke fell apart, and *doubled up*. By speaking the language the least known to him, Lenin was confronted with a choice: the choice between democratism and democracy. In Japanese, democracy was the word that had yet *to be spoken*. For Lenin, similar to our situation today, democracy was a term that had yet to be *imagined in practice*.





Lenin made good use of the term, and after returning to Russia the following lines can be found in his essay “Working-Class and Bourgeois Democracy”:

Besides the interests of a broad section of the landlords, Russian bourgeois democratism reflects the interests of the mass of tradesmen and manufacturers, chiefly medium and small, as well as (and this is particularly important) those of the mass of proprietors and petty proprietors among the peasantry.²

Today, it is this concept of democratism that philosopher Alain Badiou refers to as “capitalist democracy.” And the “liberated” symbols of pop-culture produced by the creative industry should be considered its art and preferred weapons of intellectual mass torture.

Our task, as political artists, is to liberate democracy from democratism. To *reimagine* a translation as fundamental as the one that the Japanese proposed to Lenin. A radical pedagogy in defense of a fundamental democracy that will oppose the democratist disaster that is upon us.

In order to do so, we are in need of an *art after democratism*.

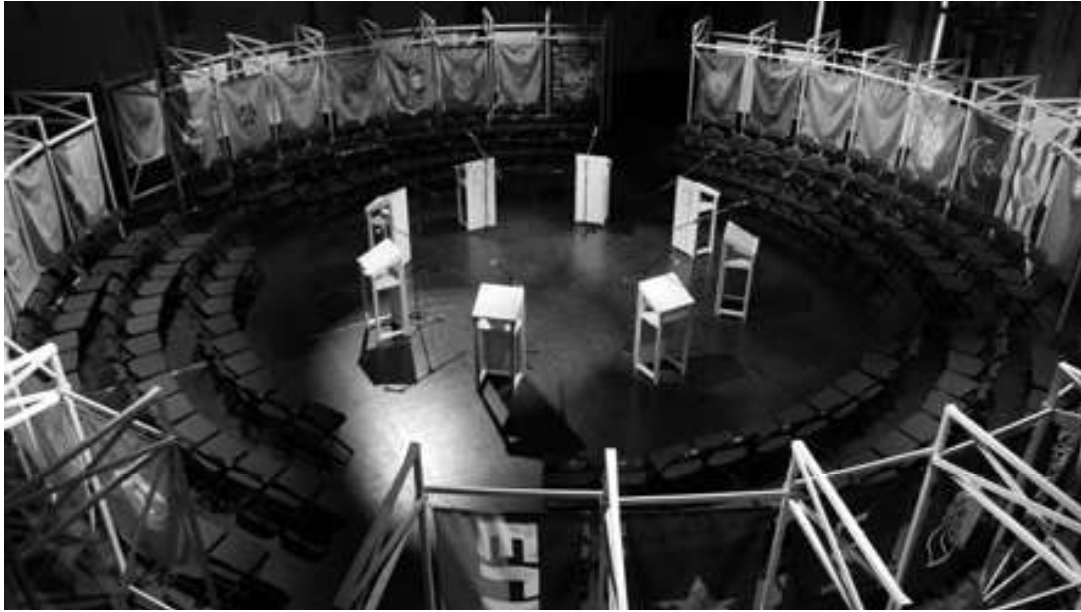
Art after Democratism:

The Pedagogy of the New World Summit

I believe that the first act necessary to free art from the cultural industry of democratism that is keeping it hostage is to rearticulate the political context in which we want art to be operational. This process of re-articulation is not only discursive, but will have to take place *through the practice of art*. Art in defense of fundamental democracy thus means that we demand art to align with the project of progressive, emancipatory politics, but also that art will have to shape this project once again. For progressive art is not simply a product of politics, but a *political force in itself*.

It is for this reason that in the past years I have worked with political parties, non-parliamentary political organizations and social movements: all focused on exploring what a different role of art could be once we situate it in a different political sphere, but also *how this political sphere changes when artists engage with it*.

Allow me to introduce, as a case-study from my own practice, my artistic and political organization entitled the “New World Summit.” Our organization in the past year



Jonas Staal, *New World Summit – Berlin* (2012). Photo by Lidia Rossner.

has developed a series of worldwide “alternative parliaments” for political and juridical representatives of organizations currently placed on so-called international terrorist lists.

The “terrorist lists” comprise organizations that are internationally considered to be state threats. In the European Union, a secret committee, the so-called “Clearing House,” draws up the EU terrorist list. The Clearing House meets bi-annually, in secret and there are no public proceedings of the way decisions are made for the listing of political organizations. One could rightfully say that even by its own standards, the committee that is in charge of placing organizations “outside” of democratism, is itself organized in a fundamentally undemocratic manner.³ The consequences for the listed organizations and people who are in contact with them include a block on all bank accounts and an international travel ban.

As the New World Summit, we attempt to explore at what level art can serve as a tool to bypass these anti-terrorist laws. On one hand, we try to circumvent these laws by operating as a *nomadic parliament*: the New World Summit has no fixed geographical location; it represents no nation state, no properties, or indefinite claims on the right to speak. As such, we can make use of discrepancies in global anti-terror legislation. On the other hand, we make maximum use of the juridical exceptional role of art: the fact that art, even on a constitutional level, is never simply present, *it is always simultaneously questioning the conditions of this presence*. This *radical ambiguity* creates the space where we believe the promise of progressive politics will have to take shape.

So in other words, at the point where our politics fails, where the democratic deficit shows most explicit, we artists should take over. As such, we claim art to be “more political than politics itself.” From the domain of art, a new progressive political project will have to take shape. This is the project that we are dedicated to.

The first installment of the New World Summit took place on the 4th and 5th of May last year in the Sophiensaele, a theater and political platform in Berlin. Invitations to about one hundred organizations mentioned on international terrorist lists were dis-



Jonas Staal, New World Summit – Leiden (2012). Photo by Ernie Buts

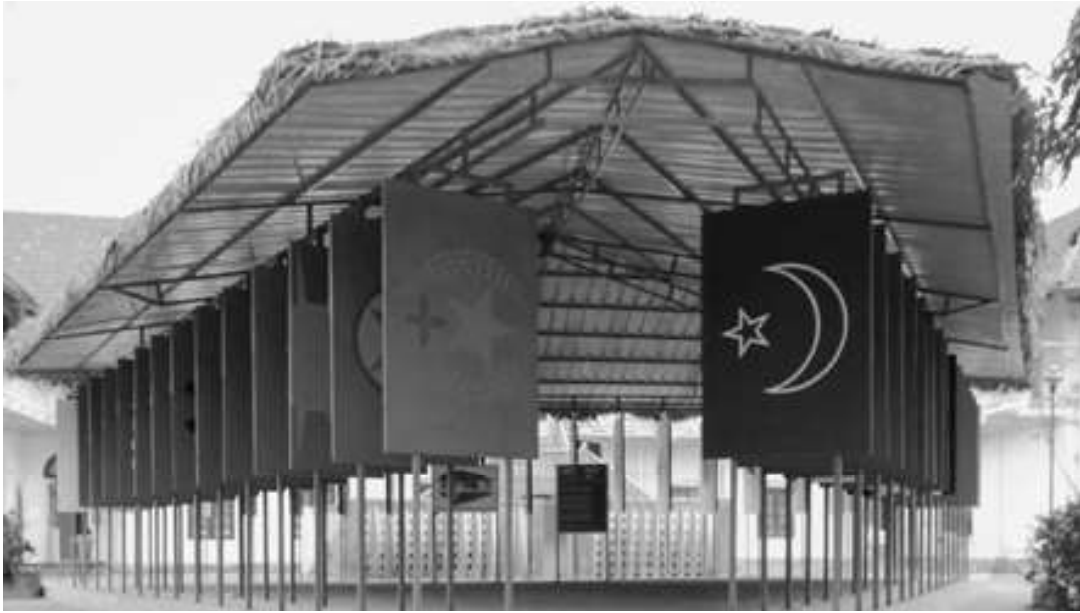
patched. From the respondents we were capable of hosting four political representatives, and three juridical representatives, the lawyers of such organizations. I'll shortly introduce the political representatives present.

Luis Jalandoni spoke on behalf of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing the New People's Army, one of the last standing Maoist insurrection groups with several thousand armed forces stationed throughout the Philippines today – an organization that gained fame for legalizing gay marriage, far before the Filipino government was willing to do so, thus, on this issue, proving itself “more democratic than democracy itself.” The project of radical egalitarianism between classes and gender thus resulted in the conclusion that all exchanges in the field of *love* ought to be just as equal.

Moussa Ag Assarid spoke on behalf of the National Liberation Movement of Azawad, a Tuareg led group of insurgents in Mali that claimed independence for two-third of the country, claiming it as the independent state of Azawad. They did so with weapons they stole from Gaddafi and used these in their struggle for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious secular state. Today they find themselves marginalized after Islamic elements from the organization took over the control of Azawad, leading to the intervention of the French army in Mali.

Jon Andoni Lekue spoke on behalf of the Basque independence movement, and his understanding of the notion of the “Basque” as representative for all suppressed people of the world – a category of “citizenship” no longer limited by notions of ethnicity or territoriality.

Fadile Yıldırım spoke on behalf of the Kurdish Women Movement, which works in conjoint opposition against the Turkish State and male domination within Kurdish revolutionary movement. As a correction to the history of male suppression and enslavement of women, which Yıldırım believes to be the patriarchal basis of constructs of both party and state, she proposes a radical feminist reading of history in order to *liberate democracy from the state*.



Jonas Staal, *New World Summit – Kochi* (2013).

It is this proposition from Yıldırım that lies at the foundation of my choice to continue to build the New World Summit into an actual artistic and political organization, rather than a one-time artistic project. Her proposition seems paradoxical, for is our contemporary notion of democracy not historically tied to the concept of the Athenian city-state? Here, an approach through Marx might be useful. As the Marxist Terry Eagleton tirelessly repeats, Marx was a great believer of the achievements of capitalism, but he believed socialism would be necessary to solve its internal contradictions when it came to guaranteeing equal access to the products of these achievements. In other words, capitalism is not capable of solving its internal dynamics of oppression and exploitation that support a privileged class in enjoying its benefits – socialism, according to Marx and Eagleton, is the name of the radical intervention needed to subvert this logic. If we follow Yıldırım's proposition we are confronted with the necessity of a very similar dialectic approach: the notion of democracy historically became possible through the state, but in order to shape its core principles of egalitarianism – the equal distribution of power and knowledge – we will need to *abolish the current notion of the state* in order to follow these principles to their final consequences.

The guiding principles of the New World Summit as such did not come from the artistic field in any isolated sense, but became possible by creating a space from the field of art which was shaped by forces of non-parliamentary politics. We have continued that effort in the second edition of the New World Summit in Leiden, hosting Professor Jose Maria Sison, the founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its New People's Army, as the keynote speaker, and in the third edition of the New World Summit in Kochi, India. Currently we are preparing the fourth edition in Brussels as well as the first three sessions of the New World Academy, in which artists and art students collaborate together with the organizations from the network of the New World Summit in order to explore the role of art within the field of political struggle today.

Concepts of emancipation, egalitarianism, and democracy, have turned into dead weight in the current dominant democratist discourse – flagged by invisible mass

drone wars, or spoken by worn-out opposition leaders, caught in the idea that politics today is nothing but a choice between the lesser of evils. *They are not to be trusted with the legacy of emancipatory politics.*

I propose a pedagogy of fundamental democracy as its counterpoint, aimed at teaching how to liberate democracy from the state. The revolutionary tool called “art” will be the weapon to bring this pedagogy into practice and fight the representatives of democratism passionately.

And in all this, I hope the New World Summit can be my modest contribution.

Notes

- 1 Vincent van Gerven Oei and Jonas Staal, *us Army Torture Devices* (Amsterdam: Gallery Masters, 2008), 45.
- 2 Vladimir Lenin, "Working-Class and Bourgeois Democracy," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 8 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 72–82.
- 3 "Adding Hezbollah to the EU Terrorist List," Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives (June 20, 2007).