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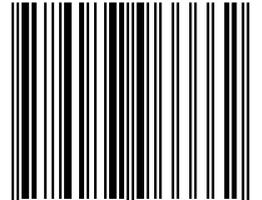
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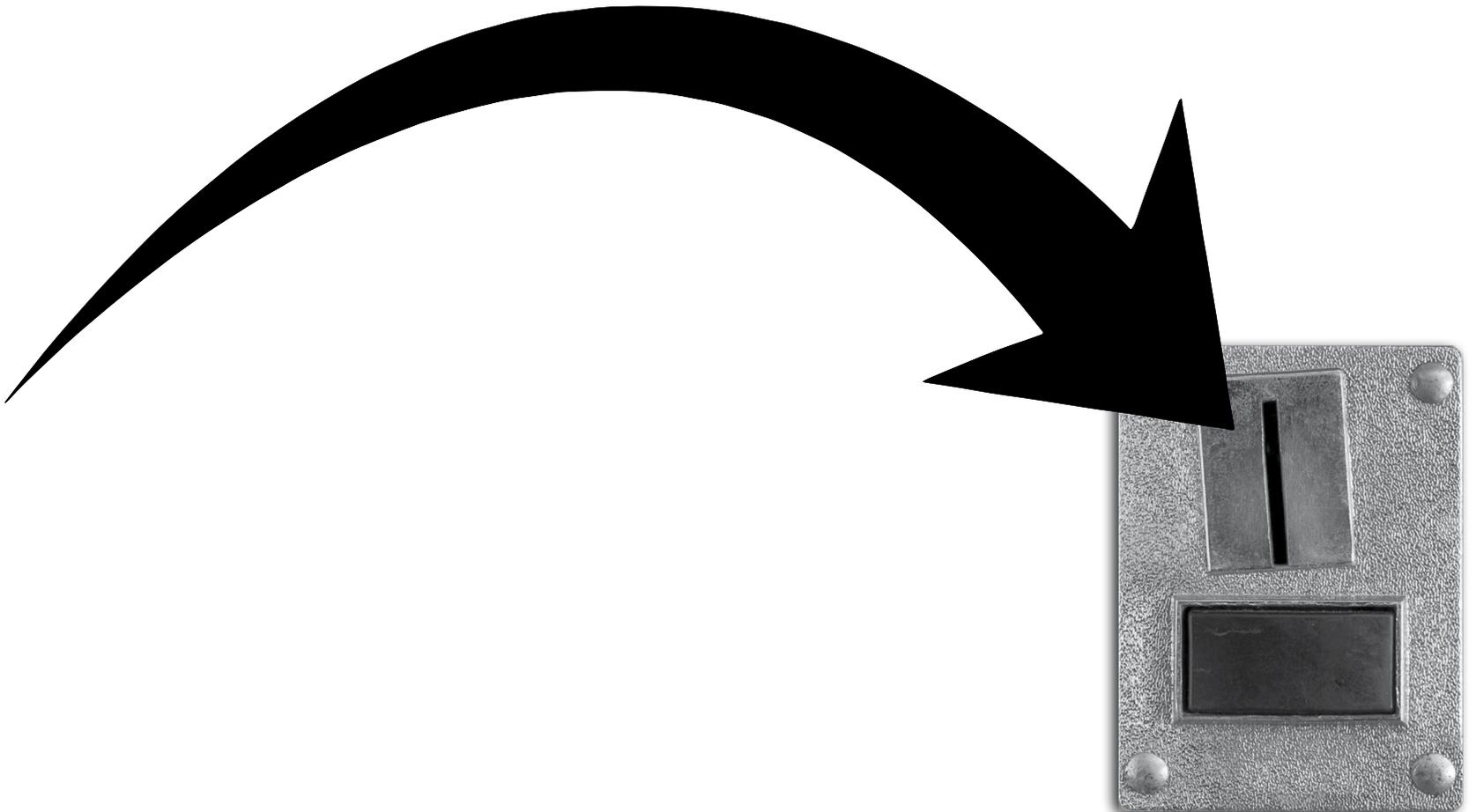
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# PLAY- BOR

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**THERE ONCE WAS A TIME WHEN WORK  
AND LEISURE WERE SEPARATE REALMS:  
YOU WORK OR YOU PLAY. THESE DAYS,  
PLAYING IS WORK AND WORK DEMANDS  
PLAYING. WHO'S FOOLING WHO,  
MAY WE ASK?**

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PLAYIFICATION AND GAMIFICATION INTERVIEW

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# LETTERS FROM THE FUTURE JONAS STAAL

**Instrumentalized, or emancipatory? Politically conscious, or politically active? In the weeks leading to the utopian camp Training For The Future at the Ruhrtriennale, Jonas Staal & Denisse Vega de Santiago exchanged epistulae on the agency of art toward the construction of alternative futurities.**

Rotterdam, July 24, 2019

Dear Jonas,

I am very glad you accepted having this conversation with me. You don't know me in person but I know you. Last year a friend and I attended the opening of your exhibition *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* at Het Nieuwe Instituut, in Rotterdam. We were both very inspired by your lecture arguing for the power of art to act as an emancipatory form of propaganda, and in doing so counter-acting the performance of power of dominant political structures.

This 'emancipatory' proposition of yours, of constructing democracy through art, seems so pertinent and urgent due to the current reality of our world: Trump, Brexit, the rise of the alt-right, the challenge of climate change... However, in this scary scenario one cannot avoid but asking: is the very idea of emancipation and democracy still possible? And is art truly powerful enough to contribute to their realization? Or is all of this a fantasy, a mere illusion we don't want to let go off just yet?

Yours,  
Denisse

Athens, July 24, 2019

Dear Denisse –

Happy to be writing with you. The notion of 'propaganda' is complex, as it has historically been defined so strongly through the heritage of Nazi and Stalinist dictatorship. But the term has many different implications. Already at the end of the 19th century, Filipino anti-colonial reformers declared a 'propaganda movement' against the Spanish occupiers to propagandize Filipino national culture, language, and symbols back into collective consciousness to fuel resistance. Claude McKay and W.E.B. Du Bois spoke of the importance of a (counter)propaganda for black liberation and civil rights movements. In the 70s, Lucy Lippard proposed an "intimate feminist propaganda," and very recently, Donna Haraway argued for a propaganda that would enable multi-species coalition building. So, in a very real way, emancipatory propaganda – a propaganda of egalitarian world-making – has always existed and persisted. And artists were always involved.

For me, what is crucial, is to understand propaganda not just as communication, but as a *performance of power*. An employment of infrastructures to construct a new reality, a new normativity. Propaganda is the field of reality construction and propaganda art plays a key role in visualizing and shaping these new realities. At present, as you noted, we see that effective propaganda practices are mainly in the domain of the right. Whether it has been the devastating propagation of the War on Terror and the perpetuation of its 'Us versus Them' dichotomy, or the white supremacist propaganda of the alt-right with all its cynical, ironic posing and dog whistles.

Progressive politics and artists tend to deconstruct, analyze, and critique – which is all very important – but understanding why something is wrong does not necessarily change it. My work tries to contribute to re-engaging the heritage of emancipatory propaganda and propaganda art to address the real existential crises that we are facing in politics, economy, and ecology. Creating new infrastructures of assembly, spaces of new political imaginaries, and sites of resistance has been my way of trying to contribute to furthering this heritage. Whether emancipation and the very idea of democracy in a time of catastrophe is possible might not be the point exactly: it is necessary, and that is all that matters. Demanding the impossible has always been the only realistic option we have.

Do these ideas resonate with you? Most people turn away the moment the word 'propaganda' is uttered. In that sense, propaganda is not very good propaganda for propaganda!

All my best,

Jonas.

**DESPITE THE DARK TURN OF GAMIFICATION, THE PLAYFUL NATURE OF THE SELF-EXPLOITATIVE SOCIETY ALSO AFFORDS US WITH A SERIOUS OPPORTUNITY FOR EMANCIPATION**

Amsterdam, July 29, 2019

Dear Jonas,

I apologize for my delayed response. It is a bit overwhelming to discuss propaganda art and emancipation with a propaganda artist!

This differentiation you make between propaganda art and 'emancipatory' propaganda art I believe is an important one because it touches upon a central conflict in the understanding of the political in art and the artistic in the political. As a 'young art historian', I often struggle to understand the relation between art, activism, and emancipation. I feel that, sometimes, artistic projects which engage with political content to expose the injustices of our world, are not necessarily very useful to the emancipatory struggle. As Jacques Rancière argues: "Emancipation starts not when revealing inequality but affirming equality." In short, I really believe there is a serious urgency to get more creative about political activism, to expand our understanding of the various forms in which activism through art can take place.

In this sense, to me, notions about identity and subjectivity seem crucial to understanding the political capacity of art today. This is one of the reasons I find your artistic practice very 'affectively' political. Political not in the sense of necessarily being engaged with politics, but also in attempting to create alternative subjectivities. If I think of the

*People's Parliament* you did in Rojava, or of your organization *New World Summit*, or your upcoming speculative camp *Training for the Future*, these projects are not meant to be an exposing of 'inequalities' but an attempt to create different 'equalities' and realities through art. The speculative role-playing utopian dimension of these projects, as well as their implicit alternative identity-making structure, makes them, in my view, highly political projects. Especially because in our increasingly interactive global societies, we are seeing that the flexible logic of its economico-political apparatus has appropriated many of the qualities of art: capitalism today is performative, affective, game-like and playful.

I hope some of these ideas make sense to you. As for me, I feel equally determined to solve my 'struggles' with art and activism, to join your struggle for the construction of democracy through the terrain of the imagination and creativity, and to believe that equality will always be worth fighting for.

Yours,  
Denisse

Chalkidiki, August 2, 2019

Dear Denisse –

Well, let's say an aspiring propaganda artist!

In my view, political activism is an obligation, not just for artists, but for anyone who believes in a common good. And very often activism is not as one-dimensional as people think but part of the complex shared process of shaping a collective world. Our task, as artists and cultural workers, I believe, is to ensure the propagation of an egalitarian, emancipatory governance. Exactly now is not the time to only demand the restoration of a welfare state lost, but to demand the impossible as the only realistic way forward: the Green New Deal, universal basic income, abolition of the prison-industrial complex, collectivization of trillion-dollar companies, prosecution of intergenerational climate crimes – to name a few points to start.

I think such demands relate to what you describe as experimental, speculative, and affective politics. Although, I would not make the separation between politics and the political so harshly. I also work with political parties, just as I do with popular mass movements and autonomist politics. We have to work both through and outside of the institutions to achieve the broadest alliances possible. But indeed, through such coalitions, fueled by a new affective politics, new subjectivities can emerge – and one of the challenges of emancipatory propaganda art is to pre-enact the institutions and spaces and platforms to sustain them.

The *New World Summit*, a series of alternative parliaments, embassies, and schools that I developed with and for stateless, blacklisted, and autonomist groups is indeed an example. In the War on Terror and its 'Us versus Them' dichotomy, the notion of the terrorist has come to designate a threat to democracy. But what if capitalist democracy and its imperialist wars are itself the threat, and the 21st century state terror is what we truly need to be afraid of? When I organized the first summit in Berlin in 2012, various blacklisted organizations joined the assembly, such as the Basque independence movement, the Kurdish Women's movement, and the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines. Each was faced with blacklisting, but each propagated



Inaugural ceremony of the People's Parliament of Rojava in April 2018 in Dêrik, Rojava, as part of *New World Summit – Rojava* (2015-18) by Democratic Federation of North-Syria and Studio Jonas Staal. Photo: Ruben Hamelink

notions of democracy from a history of anticolonial and liberational struggle. Creating a 'stateless parliament' through the New World Summit was a way of re-assembling who exactly is 'Us' in the 'Us versus Them' dichotomy.

As such, I see the role of the parliament-as-artwork as a site where we can recompose the very notion of the people; or better, a site for a people-in-the-making. *Training for the Future* which will take place this year, and which I co-program with Florian Malzacher, aims to add a new step to this process. It is essentially an artwork as utopian training camp; a three-day gathering of about 350 participants who will be trained in alternative future scenarios, ranging from extra-territorial activism (Women on Waves), transnational campaigning (European Alternatives) to redistributing love (Army of Love). As you say, I consider the camp as a political project, not just because it represents a politics as it already exists, but because it tries to train a politics that is yet to be made imaginable.

Finally, I am struck by your reference to the 'game' and to 'play' in general. We lack serious emancipatory play. So much of our games are constructed on win/lose scenarios, repeating predatory and exploitative logics of accumulation and commodification. But now we're entering into your domain: what, in your eyes, is to be the future of play?

And yes, even in catastrophe, equality will always be worth fighting for. That, I believe, is a truth beyond any win or lose scenario.

All my best,

Jonas.



Gold-farmers in China. Image: [www.secondliving.tumblr.com/page/3](http://www.secondliving.tumblr.com/page/3)

Naples, August 20, 2019

Dear Jonas,

I believe we are witnessing an increasing 'ludification' or 'gamification' of our global neo-liberal societies. A growing adoption of game-elements such as feedback, rewards, and points as well as game-mechanics of engagement, interaction, and participation in all realms of culture, economy, and even politics. The fact that economic gamification is working so well today and shaping the logics of the corporate giants; from the 'high-skilled' labor of Silicon Valley to the 'low-skilled' labor force of supermarket warehouses (just in the Netherlands this industry has been the fastest growing in the last couple years), I think is telling of the way power is executed in contemporary societies.

Borrowing your definition of propaganda, as the performance of power, I also understand gamification at work and its resulting 'playbor' as a propagandistic tool for the configuration of a playful self-exploitative society. This new configuration of exploitative power not only contributes to the availability of free labor, but also allows for furthering the development of hegemonic constructs in the world. Examples of this, I believe, can also be found in your research on the role of Steve Bannon in developing online gold-farming practices and in the ultra-nationalist Dutch politician Fleur Agema's architectural project *Closed Architecture*.

Despite this dark turn of gamification, the playful nature of this self-exploitative society also affords us with a very serious opportunity for emancipation. Play is a very emancipatory concept! Historically defined as a free, voluntary, and creative activity, I really believe play can join art in the emancipatory struggle, to envisage alternative realities, through the terrain of the imagination and speculation. The question is how to envisage an *emancipatory propaganda play through art* and an *emancipatory propaganda art through play*? Art is also becoming more participatory, playful, and interactive. A playful experience of art could function as an emancipatory process of subjection which resist the desired exploitative subjectivities. In this sense, I find notions of speculative role-playing and cooperative play very interesting to explore for the counter-hegemonic struggle. Initiatives like your *Training for the Future*, and Yael Bartana's alternative governance project *What If Women Ruled The World?*, I believe are good examples of emancipatory play through art.

For you Jonas, as a propaganda artist 'in-the-making', where does it reside, the potential of play in its relation to emancipatory propaganda art?

Yours,  
Denisse

P.S. Looking forward to *Training for the Future* in one month now!

Rotterdam, September 14, 2019

Dear Denisse –

So, we are dealing with several scenarios of instrumentalized play. This coopted notion of play is part of what Sven Lütticken discusses as the “capitalist cultural revolution”: play turned labor into a perpetual performance, undoing its emancipatory potential in the process. This relates to what you call “playful self-exploitation.”

And then there is a possible even darker use of play. I indeed researched the architectural work of Fleur Agema, MP of the ultranationalist Dutch Freedom Party (PVV). We used to study together at the same art school before she entered into politics. As a student at the architectural department, she developed a project called *Closed Architecture* (2004): an alternative prison model in which detainees are not sentenced to be incarcerated for a fixed period of time, but to a particular phase – or ‘level’. Her prison consists of four of such levels that literally go from dark to light. If the prisoner shows correct behavior, he or she moves upwards to more spacious cells where there is more light and access to consumer products. But incorrect behavior leads to a return to earlier phases, in smaller and dark concrete cells. And who exactly decides the criteria of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ behavior? An activist that would reject the very logic of such a prison, would be stuck in the first level for ever. In this context, we see how a notion of ‘play’ (moving up and down levels), becomes a means of discipline and control. In my own project with the same title from 2011, I reconstructed her prison in detail through architectural models, a video, book, and theater play, exposing it as a contemporary blueprint of today’s control society.

Trump-ideologue Steve Bannon, on which I made the exhibition *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (2018) together with curator Marina Otero Verzier, by far overshadows Agema’s efforts of employing play as a means of control. His work on the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), known as *World of Warcraft*, was aimed at developing a secondary online market through so-called “gold farming.” Low-wage Chinese workers would play the game for hours on end collecting digital assets such as gold and weapons which Bannon then sold online to players who wanted to step in on a higher level. This

experience informed Bannon of the existence of the so-called ‘manosphere’, the predominantly white male gamer community with strong right-wing views and misogynist mentalities, which he would instrumentalize as the troll armies for the 2016 Trump campaign, engineering his own digital alt-right biosphere in the process. And Bannon’s political exploitation of the virtual sphere would continue to take different forms, most notoriously by amassing the personal data from millions of Facebook profiles in his role as Vice-President of Cambridge Analytica.

In these examples we see the instrumentalization of the notion of the game and play for oppressive political and economic purposes. But play is also a crucial part of popular mass movements that have risen to the challenge to defeat neo-liberal and alt-right politics. Of course Occupy, Black Lives Matter, or the Gezi Park protests were not created to ‘play’, but to address brutal exploitation and precarity, often facing the threat of brutal violence. But in their process of enabling new narratives they engage affect, intimacies and passions, desires and imaginations – forms of *serious play* – that open the possibility of constructing our realities differently.

From this perspective, I don’t approach the emancipatory potential of play as a field in and of itself, but rather approach emancipatory play as an inherent component of emancipatory struggles at large. But certainly, there are cooperative gaming models that can contribute to these struggles. Yael Bartana’s *What If Women Ruled the World?* is a great example indeed, as she essentially hijacks what is known as the field of “wargaming,” which are theatrical exercises for military and officials in fictional crisis scenarios. Bartana repurposes the wargame to experiment in future forms of feminist governance. You could say that, in some similarity, Florian and me repurpose the model of the ‘training camp’ in *Training for the Future* not as a site of discipline and control but to distribute tools and embodied knowledges to reclaim collective futures. Although, I would again emphasize that play is not a goal in and of itself but an essential part in the process of reclaiming the means of production of the future and construction egalitarian society.

See you at the camp next week!

All my best,

Jonas.

## AFFECTS, INTIMACIES AND PASSIONS, DESIRES AND IMAGINATIONS – FORMS OF SERIOUS PLAY – CAN OPEN THE POSSIBILITY OF CONSTRUCTING OUR REALITIES DIFFERENTLY



*Closed Architecture* by Jonas Staal (2011) as presented at IK-00: *The Spaces of Confinement*, Casa dei Tre Oci, Venice, 2014. Photo: V-A-C Foundation

Bonn, September 29, 2019

Dear Jonas,

What a great experience to spend my birthday at the camp last week, *training* for alternative futures! Ironically, we didn't experience any training together. So, let me tell you what I learned from my training(s):

#### The Sensorial Body

We were asked to close our eyes. While laying down in the grass temporarily blind, we started to hear sounds approaching: "sssss, ssss", "traa, traa", fingers snapping ... There was something rhythmic about this multiplicity of organic sounds. After some minutes, sound became silence. We knew then, it was our turn. We stood up, while the other group took our place in the grass. We started to perform for them our imperfect harmony: "klaap, klaap", "tuui, tuui", "poom, poomm, poomm" ... We finished by taking their hand, and walking them to the venue. A silent procession of moving bodies, feeling and perceiving each other, the whole world. In this beautiful training, 'Multitudes of Listeners', the statement seemed to be clear: emancipation starts in our own body and through our senses. When we truly pay attention to our collective sensorial experience of the world another reality emerges, where harmonic multi-specie co-existences become possible.

#### Becoming Sardine

In the next training, we had to enact several fictional scenarios of protest, one after the other: we had to run frenetically in order to escape the police, we had to decide as a group whether to give up our IDs or to get arrested together, we had to hold the hands of another 'trainee' and really understand that hand! Its weight, its lines, the stories behind it, and to recognize in that hand that its struggles are also our struggles. It felt particularly liberating to "become a sardine" while crossing an imaginary underwater world, together with my sardine friends. These communal dystopian actions enacted at the training 'We are Nature Defending Itself' by The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, I believe performed as what you have referred as "assemblism of people-in-the-making". Their emancipatory nature resided not only in its implicit resistance character, but also through the playful imagination of the togetherness that was activated.

#### Re-inventing the political through friendship

Perhaps the biggest lesson learned was the realization that the relationship between activism and art is much more complex than I imagined. I realized how our views on activism, just as in art, come from a very personal, emotional, and vulnerable side of us. Whether you are a 'representational-ist' or an 'action-ist', (or a sardine), what all of these positions have in common is the recognition that there is something about art that makes it relevant for the counter-hegemonic political struggle. By sharing and hearing very personal experiences, with a focus on the construction of better futures, a sense of empathy and hope was created. Art and activism became a shared challenge. During the trainings 'I' became a 'We'; and we, my new trainee friends and I, opted to not accept established ways of life, but to invent new and impossible ones, where solidarity, creativity, and friendship establish the basis for the better worlds we want to build.

This is what I learned from the *Training*. What did you learn Jonas?

Yours,  
Denisse



*Choreographies of Togetherness* by Public Movement, produced by Ruhrtriennale as part of *Training for The Future* by Jonas Staal, curated and co-programmed by Florian Malzacher, 2019. Photo: Ruben Hamelink

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Athens, October 3, 2019

Dear Denisse –

Very powerful to read how, for you, the various futurities proposed through each of the trainings mounted to the possibility of a new collectivity, for that is the aim of this organizational artwork. Not to train for a singular future, but to enable an assembly of futurities.

It's interesting that you ask of my training experience. As indeed, although I visualized and co-programmed it, Florian and I also participated as trainees in our own project, an exhausting and extremely hopeful experience. I learned a lot from the way trainers were able to create contexts of engagement that were not purely discursive, meaning, not entirely dependent on speech – which, in the case of the assembly, often tends to happen. Here, many other competences were enabled as well through collective action, dance, and interventionist exercises.

I was personally struck enormously by the work of Arrivati and Schwabingrad Ballet, a collaboration between activist theater makers, undocumented peoples, and refugees. Their training in the technique of the 'swarm' as a protest choreography was extremely powerful – an exercise in collective leadership, in which the bodies in the swarm repeat the movement of the person in front. But as the swarm moves through the street and takes turns, the person in front becomes the person on the side or in the back, and the movements mimicked are that of another person. It creates a singular choreography, but one that consists of many parts, in the way that Black Lives Matter speaks of their organization as a "leaderful" one. Here, I truly felt that political principles translated in a very consequent way to a collective form of practice.

In short, for me, an important step was this: not to be only an initiator/artist, but a trainee of my own work and of the work of others. And while I'm also looking critically at what we could change in a possible next chapter, I was moved by the general sense of determination and dedication to alternate futurities in a time of perpetual dystopia. That we joined the Fridays for Future march on the first day of the training was already a statement of shared commitment and one I felt to be continuous throughout

these three days. But now of course a big question is: how to ensure that the narratives and imaginaries that were trained for are nurtured and put into practice? To enforce structural change we cannot think of these kinds of project as single events, they need to become durable infrastructures to pose a genuine threat to the status quo. The ultranationalists and alt-right have their think tanks and schools. Now, we need a sustainable utopian infrastructure of our own.

All my best,

Jonas.

**THE ULTRANATIONALISTS AND ALT-RIGHT HAVE THEIR THINK TANKS AND SCHOOLS. NOW, WE NEED A SUSTAINABLE UTOPIAN INFRASTRUCTURE OF OUR OWN**