

New World Summits

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Is it possible that we—politicized citizens of countries fighting the so-called War on Terror—have more in common with those against whom this war is waged than with the criminal states that claim to act in our name? Could we imagine recomposing who or what constitutes Us in the infamous Us-versus-Them narrative that legitimizes this never-ending war? And could we conceptualize new spaces of assembly in which such a recomposition might take place?

These were some of the questions that drove the founding of the New World Summit, an artistic and political organization that began its work in 2012. The group consists of a changing roster of people from the fields of art, architecture, design, political theory, progressive diplomacy, and law, brought together with the aim of creating temporary alternative parliaments for stateless and blacklisted organizations. As of today six summits were held:

Berlin, Germany (2012), Leiden, Netherlands (2012), Kochi, India (2013), Brussels, Belgium (2014), Rojava, northern Syria (2015), Utrecht, Netherlands (2016).

We further initiated the New World Embassy project, which created temporary embassies for stateless and blacklisted organizations in Utrecht (2014) and Oslo (2016). The New World Summit also ran its own school for art and activism, the New World Academy, in

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Utrecht in collaboration with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst (2013–16). Last, but not least, the New World Summit created a semipermanent parliament in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, titled Museum as Parliament (2018–) and a permanent public parliament for the autonomous government of Rojava in northern Syria (2018).

Throughout the various chapters and iterations of the New World Summit, New World Academy, and New World Embassy, around fifty stateless and blacklisted organizations participated in assemblies as political representatives, as ambassadors, or as teachers. These included:

Government of West Papua
Aboriginal Provisional Government
National Democratic Front
of the Philippines
World Uyghur Congress
Tamil Eelam
Popular Front for the Liberation
of Palestine
Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran
Baluchistan People's Party
Southern Azerbaijan Alliance
Kurdistan National Congress
Republic of Somaliland
National Movement for the
Liberation Movement of Azawad
Ogaden National Liberation Front
Oromo Liberation Front
Basque Bildu and Sortu coalitions
Popular Unity Candidacy
We Are Here refugee collective

The summits were often planned and programmed in direct dialogue with these organizations, as well as with partners in the fields of progressive diplomacy and law, such as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, which represents about forty groups, and the Progress Lawyers Network.

In ten years, the New World Summit has amassed a body of work with a foundation in both art and politics. Here I want to explore three questions: What in the work is artistic? What are its political components? How do the two intersect? I will do this by elaborating on two different terms: *assemblist imaginary* and *organizational morphology*.

Assemblist Imaginaries

The conceptualization of the New World Summit would not have been possible without my membership in Artists in Occupy Amsterdam, a group of about thirty artists and cultural workers. In fall 2011, during the occupation of the Beursplein, we ran a collective tent in which we held lectures and workshops with the goal of exploring and practicing art in the context of a new

political movement. Judith Butler has written powerfully about the way popular assembly generates new social morphologies and architectures in the form of general assemblies, alternative media platforms, and centers of care.¹ From my experience in Amsterdam and following Butler's work, I started to articulate the notion of "assemblism" in my own artistic practice, focused on the role of art and culture in contributing to the morphologies of popular power.²

It was necessary that the prefigurations of an alternative political horizon that had manifested physically in city squares be translated into new durational infrastructures. We had to move beyond the protest, beyond the model of a counterpower, to enforce a new cultural and political hegemony, to ensure the possibility of egalitarian life forms through alternative emancipatory institutions.³ Could the spaces of culture—contemporary art spaces, the museum, the theater—be sites where such insurgent institutionalities are composed and tested, turning the cultural infrastructure into not merely a mirror of the world but an incubator for new practices of world making?⁴ As our parliaments increasing become dark

New World Embassy – Rojava, City Hall, Oslo, 2016. Produced by KORO Public Art Norway and the Oslo Architecture Triennale.



theaters of war and ultranationalism, could we in turn transform our theaters into parliaments?

These were the questions that drove the first two-day iteration of the New World Summit, held in 2012 in the Sophiensæle theater in Berlin, a venue where the Polish-born German Marxist philosopher, economist, and revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) once gave speeches. The goal was to invite to this first alternative parliament, commissioned by the 7th Berlin Biennale, all the organizations then on international blacklists, no matter their political or ideological backgrounds.⁵ The summit was organized in a circular structure, doubling the semicircle of a traditional parliament. Unlike the latter, where the speaker faces the public, in our assembly part of the public was in front of the speaker and part was behind, making visible how spatial and performative dynamics impact the reception of political discourse. When a political representative sits next to you or in front of you, and stands up to speak, the spatial performativity indicates that they are speaking on *behalf* of you. When such an individual stands up across the room and speaks to you, the spatial performativity suggests that the person is trying to *convince* you, to bring you to their side. Our alternative parliament was aimed at resisting representational exclusion in the War on Terror, but it also sought to explore the morphology and performativity of the concept of the parliament.

The backdrop of the circular structure in Berlin consisted of the flags of all the groups on international lists of terrorist organizations, ordered by color. Together they formed a deeply politicized color scheme, each banner a canvas specific to a history and a struggle. During the summit, seven representatives of blacklisted organizations spoke on behalf of their legal and political struggles. To be blacklisted means that one is not allowed to travel, one's passport is revoked, and all bank assets frozen; one is essentially declared *stateless*. This is deeply perverse, considering that many blacklisted organizations are already stateless, and it creates a double negation: the stateless are declared stateless. Here we touch on the propagandistic dimension of the War on Terror and its use of existential censorship to create an abstract enemy, the terrorist *Them*—rogue actors whose hatred of democracy and the “West” is so fundamental that they are essentially no longer to be considered human. This narrative enables the parallel legal realities of the War on Terror, from blacklisting to interrogation at so-called black sites to extrajudicial drone killings.⁶ But even the War on Terror has its gray zones. Governments often maintain diplomatic channels with blacklisted organizations, meaning that some of their representatives—negotiators—must be permitted to travel internationally; in some cases, these representatives are also the

organization's lawyers. And organizations blacklisted in one country are not necessarily blacklisted in another. We created the New World Summit and its various assemblies by building on these gray zones and legal contradictions.

The organizations that accepted our invitation in no way corresponded to the image of *Them* constructed through the War on Terror. The assembled Basque, Kurdish, Azawadian, and Filipino representatives in Berlin embodied decades-long liberatory and anticolonial struggle. Rather than espousing the “hatred of democracy” attributed to the figure of the terrorist, they conceived of democracy in radically egalitarian ways. In advocating these principles, such organizations pose a threat to the dominant model of capitalist democracy that the War on Terror propagates through its imperialist, state-building endeavors.⁷ One contribution in particular profoundly influenced the development of our organization. Fadile Yildirim was present at the summit representing the Kurdish Women's Movement, which emerged from the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), founded in 1978—an organization that waged armed struggle for decades to create an independent Kurdish nation-state in their historical lands. The Kurdish Women's Movement initiated an internal critique of the male-dominated PKK, arguing that the very idea of the nation-state was structured on a patriarchal, capitalist, and nationalist mentality. The PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, began restructuring the party and its aims in response to this critique from the 1990s onward, replacing the ideal of an independent Kurdish state with a model of *stateless democracy*—a liberation of democracy from the construct of the state.⁸ It was through our contact with Yildirim that we began to understand the potential of our own organization as a *stateless parliament* for stateless democracies.

In 2012 the New World Summit was still very much a “project,” in the way artists make projects, exploring specific themes then moving on. This process risked becoming exploitive, as struggles are not to be thematized: one must engage them through lifelong commitment and friendship. At the first assembly, a clear expectation became manifest; the representatives present began planning the next summit with us. It was clear that this meeting of alternate political imaginaries, of conflicting democracies that challenged the dominance of the Us-versus-Them dichotomy, was beginning to author itself. This meant that we needed to shift toward organization: a structural engagement demanded an *organizational art* rather than an assemblist art.⁹ Here we began to move from the field of assemblist imaginary into that of organizational morphology.



Study sketch of New World Summit – Berlin, 2012.
Drawing by Paul Kuipers and Jonas Staal.

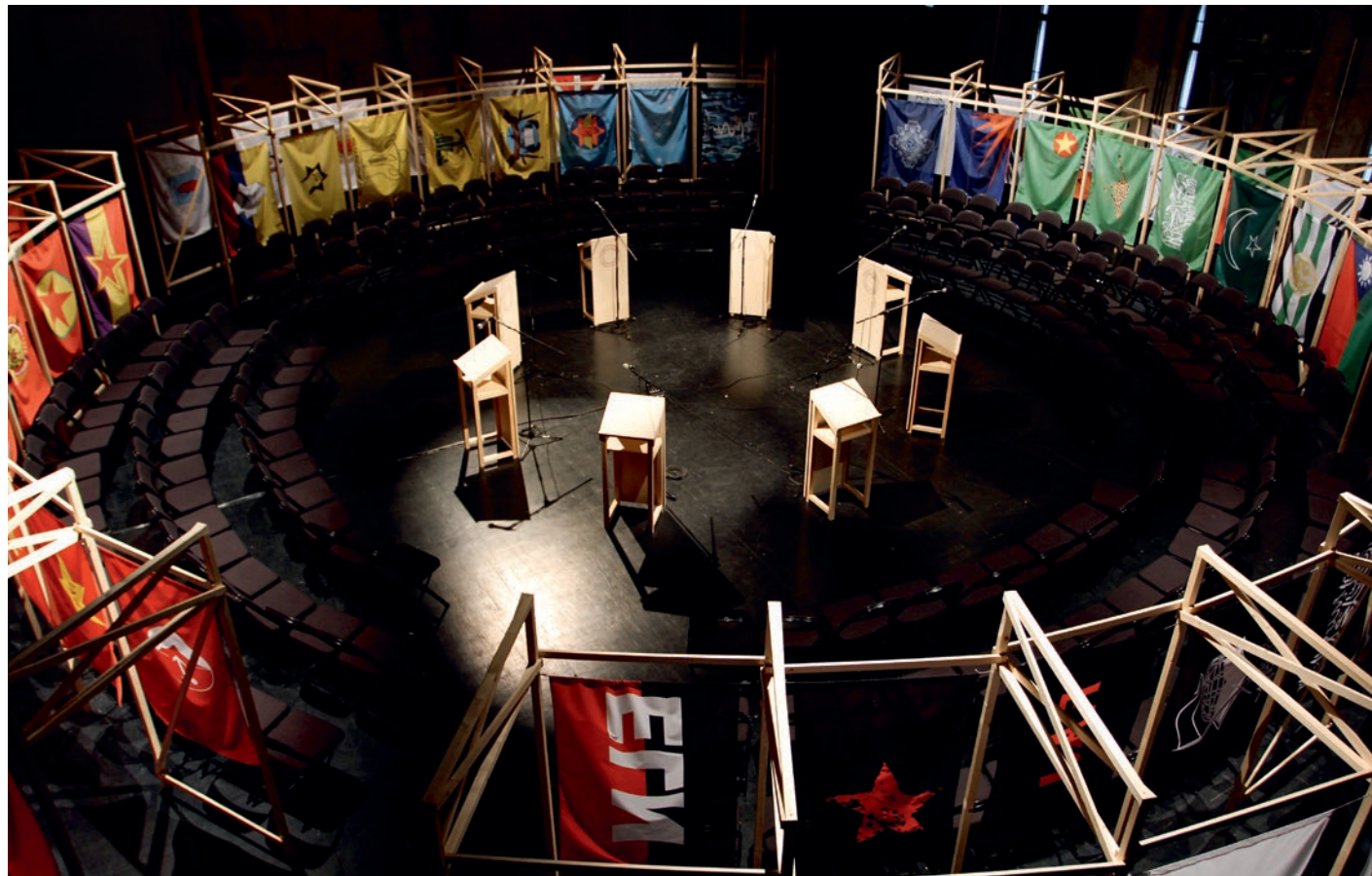
Organizational Morphologies

As Sven Lütticken has argued, to enable the emancipatory dimensions of performance, we need to address preformations: the preexisting infrastructures, narratives, and imaginaries that structure the conditions of performance.¹⁰ A lot of the work of the New World Summit was invested in the preformation of the parliament and the way its morphologies—its architecture, visual, and design components—might shape the assembly or collective. The 4th New World Summit, held at the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels in 2014 and titled *Stateless States*, involved about twenty representatives of stateless and blacklisted organizations and aimed to performatively narrate history according to resistance movements: a mapping of the world not as it is given, structured on colonial lines of division, but rather as a world in struggle, in transformation. It was necessary to recompose the preformed parliament and the preformed world map in response to the insurgent histories and forms of popular power represented by the organizations we worked with.

The oval parliament in Brussels shared some of the spatial performativity of the circular summit in Berlin, with political representatives sitting between groups of the public. But in Brussels the

flags were replaced by maps, each of which we developed with the political organization in question to depict its claim to self-determination. In some cases, as in the unrecognized states of Somaliland or Baluchistan, these took relatively traditional forms, with a clearly delineated territorial boundary and a national flag. Others depicted more complex propositions, like the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, which essentially governs a parallel state through its guerrilla army and therefore simply used the conventional territorial depiction of the Philippines but with a different flag. The Kurdish Women's Movement went even further, refusing to depict a claim to territory. Instead it proposed an ideological map in which its political project of stateless democracy was elaborated (p. 80). Some maps illustrated the historical travels of a people, others its principles or political practice. In this way the traditional understanding of the map was subverted, as the concept was harnessed to represent various dimensions of struggle—ideological as well as territorial. As our conception of the world shifted, so did the tools and forms we used to depict it.

An important morphological component—the bench—was introduced at the Brussels summit. In previous assemblies, chairs and stools had been used



New World Summit – Berlin, Sophiensæle theater, 2012.
Produced by the Berlin Biennale.

to seat the representatives and the public, but it became clear to me that these components could not be regarded as neutral. A chair can only be empty or full, and when it is empty it still consumes our attention: who is absent? The chair is hyper-individuated; it leaves no room for negotiation about its use, like a liberal sovereign. The bench, on the other hand—which has its own utopian history¹¹—is full whether one person sits on it or ten. Its fullness is also negotiable; users can choose to limit their own “private” space by making room for an additional person. With benches there is ongoing democratic deliberation about the way we use and share space, whereas in the case of the chair the division of space preexists the gathering.

This might seem like a minor component of the event, but thinking through the relationship between preformation and performance sheds light on the way visual morphologies shape the possibility of collectivity and shared narratives. It is not just what we say but where and with whom we say it, and through which geometries and spatial configurations. Ideology has a form, and form in turn contributes to particular ideological narratives.¹² For the same reason, lighting at the summit was divided equally between the speaker and the public, enabling the possibility that roles and agencies might shift between representative and the

represented. And there are also the mathematics of egalitarianism to take into account. How many bodies can share a space before the people on the outer edges start to feel that they are not part of a crowd but are instead looking at one? In our experience—having tested various geometries, from circle to oval to triangle—the limit for a sense of inclusion is around 250. Beyond that, those on the fringes begin to perceive the assembly unfolding before them almost as a mediation, a projection, and not an event—a *present*—to which they are contributing.

While the circular and oval shapes of the Berlin and Brussels summits most immediately generate a sense of communality, they are also the most exclusive. For those who are part of a circle from the beginning, the sense of shared embodiment is heightened to the extreme, but those arriving at a circle that is already formed experience a sense of exclusion, a wall of bodies rather than a parliament of bodies.¹³ At the three-day 6th New World Summit, held in 2016 in the main hall of Utrecht University, we attempted to challenge the circular morphology dominant in various of our earlier projects. The Union of Utrecht, generally regarded as a historical milestone in the formation of the Dutch state, was signed in this hall in 1579. Titled *Stateless Democracy*, our summit gathered around twenty blacklisted, stateless,

and undocumented organizations to revisit the formation of the modern nation-state. What other life forms might have been possible, and what remain possible today? We asked these questions in a parliament structured by intersecting triangles stretched over the long hall, creating a fragmented and open-ended assembly that lacked the sense of immediate unification that our circular and oval spaces generated. Over the three days, the area operated much more like a collective public space, a mutable *space in the making* for *people in the making*. Paradoxically, the spatial organizations we associate most directly with collectivity are not necessarily those that enable genuinely collective processes.

Parliament as a Public Space

In the New World Summit, organizational morphology relates as much to the visual forms of the parliament as to those that emerge through the organizational dynamics of the assembly itself. The alternative parliaments we create are not the end form but an intermediate one, between redefining preformations and enabling transformative collective performance. This has manifested most clearly in a project undertaken in Rojava, an autonomous region in northern Syria. (The name Rojava, meaning “west,” refers to western Kurdistan.) Our

dialogue with the Kurdish revolutionary movement continued throughout the various chapters of the New World Summit, leading to an invitation to my team to visit the region in late 2014, two years after it declared itself independent from Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria.

During these and subsequent visits, the region was under attack by the Islamic State and, from 2018 onward, by Turkey, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Nonetheless, the autonomous government had been able to develop its model of stateless democracy to an impressive extent. Local communes are the foundation of self-governance, and while municipal, cantonal, and transcantonal coordination structures were introduced, the communes hold the largest stake in executive power. The commune concept essentially reversed the conventional paradigm of institutional agency: the smaller the political component, the more executive power it has. The decades-long struggle waged by the women’s movement clearly influenced Rojavan models of governance: each organization was co-chaired by a woman and a man, and quotas of 40 percent were instituted to ensure women’s participation in all areas of public life. Women have their own armed forces—the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ)—as well as their own universities, including the Star Academy, which taught jineology, or the “science of women.”¹⁴

Amina Osse, co-chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Rojava, proposed the development of a new

New World Summit – Brussels, Royal Flemish Theatre, 2014.
Produced by the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS).





The values of democratic confederalism are laid over a map of the territory of Kurdistan in a document made for New World Summit – Brussels, 2014. Diagram by Dilar Dirik of the Kurdish Women's Movement, Remco van Bladel, and Jonas Staal.

parliament for the region. Most of the new revolutionary institutions operated in the modernist buildings of the former Assad regime, but Osse aimed to translate the revolutionary ideology of her movement in a new revolutionary architecture. This new parliament, though permanent, would always be stateless, she said, as Rojava rejected the model of the state altogether. And, Osse insisted, it would be a public parliament, not a separate space for elite representatives but a space of collective self-representation. From 2015 to 2018 we worked to create the public dome and surrounding park that would become known locally as the People's Parliament of Rojava. Combining the morphologies of the Berlin and the Utrecht parliaments, its circular central space is surrounded by a fragmented dome, on whose pillars the trilingual principles of the political project of stateless democracy are painted, ranging from democratic confederalism to gender equality to communal economy. The rooftop, formed by fragments of local flags depicting stars and suns, is a hybrid

“ideological planetarium.” The parliament, inaugurated in April 2018, is a sculpture—a monument depicting the symbols and principles that shaped a new political paradigm—but it is simultaneously a concrete space of day-to-day assembly: a space between artistic imagination and political practice.

From Fadile Yildirim to Amina Osse, the New World Summit came full circle—but not a closed circle. Just like the fragmented dome of the Rojavan parliament, it is a circle with various break lines and disruptions, and one that aims not to institute a world in the singular but rather a world of many worlds.¹⁵ Our morphologies do not presume to be final, but are dialogical, shaped between the imaginaries of art and of revolutionary politics. They are coordinates of a possible world, as real as we imagine it to be and as real as we are prepared collectively to act it into being.

- For example, Butler discusses the assembly as “assemblage” and also speaks of the “theatrical” dimension of the assembly and the “morphology” of its social forms. Judith Butler, *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 68, 85, 87.
- For more on this concept, see Jonas Staal, “Assemblism,” *e-flux journal*, no. 80 (March 2017). Whereas the term morphology has significance today in domains as varied as linguistics, biology, and mathematics, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is considered to have defined the term in relation to the study of plants, explaining it as “the science of form [Gestalt], formation [Bildung], and transformation [Umbildung] of organic bodies.”
- “Life forms” is here to be read as “forms of life,” meaning egalitarian political, economic, and cultural models of collective living, and in the broader sense of recognizing our stake in interdependent ecologies that include other-than-human actors, other “life forms.”
- The notion of world making follows the work of Upton Sinclair. Addressing artists in revolution, he expressed the wish that their “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.” Sinclair, *Mammonart* (San Diego: Simon Publications, 2003), 386.
- At the 7th Berlin Biennale, curated by Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza, various other (conflicting) artist organizations also came into being, ranging from Yael Bartana’s—until then fictional—Jewish Renaissance Movement to the neocolonial gentrification organization Institute for Human Activities, founded by Renzo Martens.
- For an extensive mapping of the parallel legal realities of the War on Terror, see Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World* (London: New American Library, 2010).
- Suthaharan Nadarajah, “From Jaffna to Geneva: National Liberation amid Globalizing Liberal Order,” lecture delivered at the 4th New World Summit, Brussels, September 20, 2014; <https://vimeo.com/121240853>.
- Abdullah Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan: Kurdistan, Women's Revolution and Democratic Confederalism* (London: Pluto, 2017). For more on this subject, see Dilar Dirik, Renée In der Maur, and Jonas Staal, eds., *New World Academy Reader #5: Stateless Democracy* (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015).
- Developing “organizational art” in practice led to the first Artist Organisations International, which I created together with curator Joanna Warsza and dramaturge Florian Malzacher, gathering twenty organizations formed and led by artists at HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, January 9–11, 2015. See www.artistorganizationsinternational.org.
- Sven Lütticken, “Performing Preformations: Elements for a Historical Formalism,” *e-flux journal*, no. 110 (June 2020).
- See Francis Cape, *We Sit Together: Utopian Benches from the Shakers to the Separatists of Zoar* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013).
- See Jonas Staal, “IDEOLOGY = FORM,” *e-flux journal*, no. 69 (January 2016).
- This is a reference to Paul B. Preciado’s project *The Parliament of Bodies*, initiated at documenta 14, Athens, 2017.
- See Gönül Kaya, “Why Jineology? Re-Constructing the Sciences Towards a Communal and Free Life,” *New World Academy Reader #5*, 83–95.
- This is a reference to the famous slogan of the Zapatistas. See *Zapatista Encuentro: Documents from the First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism* (New York: Seven Stories, 1998), 29–30.