CAPAS

Propaganda for the Interregnum: On Jonas Staal's Climate Propagandas Congregation

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We gathered for two grey days in a dark auditorium at BAK, basis voor aktuelle kunst, a contemporary art space in Utrecht. On the stage, speakers and performers spoke from within a larger-than-life diorama that grafted the heads of revolutionaries—Thomas Sankara, Alexandra Kollontai, Ho Chi Minh—onto the bodies of multi-cellular organisms. We would learn that these creatures' lower halves were the beings that dominated Earth's oceans during the Ediacaran period, now extinct for over 500 million years. The stage's three lecterns each had their own Ediacaran organisms as supports, so speakers too took their place as and among the militant hybrids, their upper halves grafted in an ungainly way onto the prehistoric lifeforms. The audience, facing them, perched on large steps scattered with cushons, some cross-legged, some with their feet on the floor knees hugged up against their chest, a few using the steps like a chair and forcing those in front of them to edge forward. Seen from the stage, the audience too was punctuated by these towering chimeras, Marx and Lenin leaning gravely askew atop their invertebrate bodies.

Varsha Gandikota speaking at Jonas Staal, *Climate Propagandas Congregation* (2024), BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht. Photo: Ruben Hamelink.

We were here for the Climate Propagandas Congregation, a two-day event hosted by BAK and convened by Dutch artist Jonas Staal. The event takes its inspiration from Staal's recent book *Climate Propagandas*. Like

the book, the program promised at once an analysis of the forms of propaganda—liberal, libertarian, ecofascist, and conspiracist, in his taxonomy—that have dominated our understanding of climate change, and a call for more 'transformative,' socialist modes of propaganda that might provide a new ideological-imaginative infrastructure for speaking of environmental catastrophe.

In ways that could not have been clear when the organizers assembled the program, this 'congregation' took place in what felt increasingly like an interregnum. In Syria, Assad had fallen, inexplicably and apparently without warning. The French government, divided almost equally between left, center right, and far right, had collapsed. Trump had been elected to a second term as US President but wouldn't take office until January. War continued in Ukraine and genocide in Gaza, opening with what consequences we knew not yet into a new Trump term. The Netherlands, like an increasing number of countries globally, was governed by a right-wing government that included Geert Wilders's rabidly anti-immigrant Party for Freedom as the largest party. In the US, meanwhile, a dashing young tech bro with vague politics and a rich family had gunned down the CEO of the country's largest health insurance company in broad daylight on a midtown Manhattan street, provoking an outpouring of anti-corporate glee on social media.

Everywhere, the liberal consensus that had governed the world since the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to be fracturing. Antonio Gramsci famously wrote of an earlier crisis of the liberal order that "[t]he crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[1] Or, in Slavoj Zizek's loose but evocative translation, "[n]ow is the time of monsters."[2] Here we were, then, in the time of monsters, trying to fashion our own chimerical revolutionaries to meet Gramsci's promise that in the crisis, "highly favourable conditions are being created for an unprecedented expansion of historical materialism."[3]

One of the moment's morbid symptoms hung over the proceedings with a bleak intimacy: the Climate Propagandas Congregation was to be the last event at BAK. Beginning in 2025, the quarter-century-old cultural institution was being defunded by both the Green Party-dominated Utrecht municipality and the right-wing national Dutch government, the former citing the institution's overreliance on public funding and concerns about the narrowness of its appeal to city residents.[4] The defunding, although shocking for an internationally renowned, highly successful institution like BAK, is part of a wider global crisis for the legacies of Cold War liberalism's cultural politics, which provided public support for a wide range of cultural and educational institutions. In the context of rising populisms of both left and right, as well as lingering neoliberal rationalisation, the promise of public funding for avant-garde art and culture has fallen into crisis.

As the liberal consensus crumbled around us, BAK's impending transformation reminded us that the cultural infrastructure that had emerged under its aegis could not remain untouched. The vision of art as a public good defined by its function as a semi-autonomous sphere of activity that made institutions like BAK possible was a product of Cold War and post-Cold War liberalism, even if—indeed, because—BAK and its siblings often challenged this consensus. Such challenges were accommodated and occasionally even encouraged by the

notion of 'apolitical culture,' which emerged as a core tenet of liberalism in the Cold War.[5] This idea entailed a pluralistic tolerance for certain forms of political art, and made institutions like BAK fundable by the states that they sought, in their contained ways, to challenge and transform. With the collapse of liberal hegemony, these institutions, like the universities whose growth and semi-autonomy was part of the same moment, enter a period of crisis and delegitimization.

Against this backdrop, Maria Hlavajova, BAK's founding general and artistic director, gave poignant opening and closing statements that emphasised the institution's defunding as an opening, a generation of new possibilities. In its wake would follow the founding of the Basecamp for Tactical Imaginaries, a project for reimagining cultural infrastructure in the current crisis.[6] In this moment of crisis, the project for cultural institutions is not to surrender to the notion that they are outdated, but to reimagine how the arts enter society and politics after the liberal consensus. It is a moment, as Hlavajova recognized, of grave and devastating dangers, but also of the possibility for art to move beyond the containment carved out for it by liberal cultural politics.

Staal's Climate Propaganda Congregation turned out to be a fitting bridge between BAK's two phases, and a bracing intervention into the interregnum unfolding around it. Staal styles himself as a "propaganda artist," an audacious epithet that has the ring of an oxymoron.[7] It is one of the artefacts of the now-tottering liberal consensus that many of us have come to define art in opposition to power. This is not quite the same as suggesting that art is autonomous or outside of politics, an idea that has been subject to extensive challenges over decades across the arts. But overwhelmingly, even political art tends to understand itself as opposed to the operations of power. Indeed, for most, art's political force is believed to lay in the realm of critique—in its capacity to operate outside and against society's power structures. This is why to call art political has the ring of approbation in many circles, while to call it propaganda still generates almost universal discomfort. Propaganda is political art that makes a claim to power. It is this, not mere political content, that liberalism has worked assiduously to expel from the realm of the aesthetic, with considerable success.

Staal's career-long exploration of propaganda art represents a protracted experiment in developing new ways of articulating art with politics in order to make a claim on power, heedless of the discomfort implied in the idea of propaganda. The Climate Propagandas Congregation was the latest instalment in a series of events hosted by Staal that sought to make art into a stage for performing power. It mobilized the category of propaganda to refashion what we thought art could be and to think through and against the existing modes of propaganda that structure our relationship to the looming climate crisis. In this sense, it also modeled what a cultural institution might be and become in an interregnum in which its funding and cultural status is increasingly uncertain.

Audience and installation view of Jonas Staal, *Climate Propagandas Congregation* (2024), BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht. Photo: Ruben Hamelink.

As the event unfolded over two days, it moved from an analysis of the modes of climate propaganda against which the congregation sought to position itself to a series of experiments with different combinations of

activism, art, and propaganda. At stake throughout was the contested nature of this relationship. Many of the frictions and debates that emerged over the course of our two days together reflected the difficulty of devising a propaganda art in an intellectual context still shaped by the legacies of liberalism. As Radha D'Souza argued in her intervention, liberalism's long hegemony has created a deep acceptance of its terms. Her talk outlined five fictions of liberalism that were, she suggested, so foundational that we struggled to see them as fictional. The lingering opposition between art and power might have been a sixth liberal fiction, one that persisted even in a context dedicated to challenging such oppositions.

An exchange on the first day brought these stakes into a kind of focus. This day began with four talks: D'Souza's on liberalism's foundational fictions; T. J. Demos's account of the libertarian climate propaganda that contributed to the ongoing genocide in Gaza; Nilüfer Koç of the Kurdistan National Congress on the eco-fascist propaganda that threatened the project of Kurdish independence; and Sven Lütticken's account of conspiracist propaganda. In the discussion that followed, Jolle Demmers, a Dutch academic who chaired the session, pushed the participants to think about words: what terminology we use, and what new narratives we need. Demos objected: we need to organise. D'Souza concurred and demurred: yes, with what kinds of narratives?

The exchange was telling not because it reflected a simple bifurcation between cultural and organizational responses to crisis, but because it revealed the ways in which this articulation remained unsettled. After all, Demos is an art historian, and his talk had been framed by the work of Palestinian artist, Vivien Sansour. It began with an image taken from her Instagram of a dead child's hand, covered in rubble, still holding a green shoot, and ended with her creation of a Palestinian seed library and travelling kitchen, art projects that sought to keep Palestinian life and culture alive through the persistance of food and its rituals. In this sense, Demos was more the cultural thinker than D'Souza, a legal theorist. But the choice is not between art and politics, culture and law, but rather a larger question of how propaganda—art calibrated to producing power—might be mobilized for a left in crisis. Part of that question, inevitably, is how to keep the power of language and images in focus, without succumbing to an idea that either alone will be sufficient for political change.

Immediately after this conversation, two 'rituals' led by Jay Jordan and Isabelle Fremeaux of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (labofii) attacked the category of art from a related angle. In a preamble to their interventions, Jordan contrasted ritual with art—the latter a "toxic patriarchal colonial invention" built on the heritage of ritual—and suggested that their practice was an attempt to recover an older way of understanding cultural practice, which did not recognise divisions between art, magic, and activism. To take this idea seriously would be to locate the power of all three in their capacity to anticipate new worlds in the process of bringing them into being. Implicit in this vision was the claim that capitalism, modernity and liberalism, with their shared mania for taxonomy, have produced the idea of art by quarantining its practices within discrete spaces and modes of action, stripping it of its capacity to act meaningfully (not merely symbolically) in the world.

Labofii's playful performances countered this vision of art by asking the audience to participate in witchy rites. The first sought to prevent Geert Wilders from perpetrating further harm through the power of dance; the second to summon the power of the Zad—the *zone à défendre*, an expanse of land in Brittany where Jordan and Fremeaux now live, which was until recently slated as the site of a planned airport, and which has for over forty years been occupied by farmers and activists dedicated to preserving it as a commons—to envision victory for the left. Together, these rituals implied a theory of art that, dissolving its opposition to magic, sought its power in a mode of collective imagination that abandoned causality.

Against Labofii's dissolution of the category of art, one of the last interventions on the final day offered a (no doubt unintentional) dramatisation of the liberal theory of art against which their rituals, and many of the other contributions, positioned themselves. This intervention, listed in the program as Annotations to the event, recapitulated the contents of the two days in the form of an extended found poem read by Clara Balaguer and Alexandra Martens Serrano, members of BAK's in-house team. Reading from their selected and recombined notes, taken over the course of the congregation, Balaguer and Serrano gave the audience back our own experience as poetry. It was a curious exercise in the transformation of this politically charged—even politically fraught—event into an object for aesthetic contemplation, its rendering as poetics effecting a kind of withdrawal from political power. It offered, it seemed, a kind of worked example of the mode of art against which the event had pitched itself.

Balaguer's contribution set itself up in direct opposition to a talk by Julie de Lima, chairperson of the Negotiating Panel of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines and a long-standing member of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). De Lima's talk—which launched a book collecting the writings about ecology and the environment of her late husband and leader of the CPP, José Maria Sison—and subsequent conversation with Jodi Dean concluded the first day. Offering an overview of Sison's trenchantly Marxist-Leninist environmentalism, which sought a balance between ecological and developmental concerns through a reading of Marx's later works, de Lima's talk was the first sustained theoretical intervention into a left climate propaganda offered at the event.

In her 'annotations' to this talk, Balaguer—a Spanish-Filipina daughter of the Lobregat political dynasty in Zamboanga City, where there is an active insurgency by a coalition of communist and other forces—mocked de Lima's politics as outdated and propagandistic. Moving briefly outside the poetic register of her intervention, she quoted extensively from libertarian Oglala Lakota activist, Russell Means, to argue, rather ahistorically on a global scale, that Indigenous and anticolonial politics is definitionally anti-communist, a cultural and spiritual project of national independence foundationally opposed to Marxism. Her claim sought to co-opt Indigenous politics as such for precisely the depoliticizing culturalist project that would aestheticize politics in order to defang them. Indeed, her own practice had experimented with a similar dynamic, with a former project, The Office of Culture and Design, staging art workshops in the Zamboanga City region, in an attempt to neutralise the "political and economic conflict"—presumably, the armed insurrection that includes

de Lima's communist party—by "teaching art and showing contemporary art" in order to "lead people to change the way they think."[8] This project of depoliticisation by aesthetics was a mainstay of postwar liberal ideas of art, and it lay behind much of the suspicion that art and related ideas attracted over the course of the congregation.

If propaganda is not to be merely this mode of aestheticizing the political, where does its power come from? One popular account of art's political potential emphasises the importance of language or narratives in constructing reality. This notion seemed to structure a certain strand of inquiry on the first day, but the simple version of the claim—that by controlling language, the powerful produce the world they want—was troubled in a series of interventions that came most clearly to the fore on the second day. Political theorist Jodi Dean took up the question in her reading of Andrei Platonov's novel *Chevengur* as staging a degree-zero of comradeship that emerges among the Chevengurians, those who have lost everything, at the onset of the Russian Revolution.[9] In Dean's reading of *Chevengur*, the new Bolshevik terminology registers for these ultimate comrades as the strangeness, the weirdness of the present, the moment of disjuncture produced by revolutionary transformation. The new language heralds change but it does not produce it; it's unable to guarantee that the world will change in determinate ways.

In Dean's talk, the stronger guarantee that things are changing came not in the emergence of new words—not even a word like "comrade," which she has powerfully and influentially theorized in her book of the same name—but rather in the changed relations that these words registered, the new configuration of the Chevengurians *as* comrades. That is, it arises from a reorganization of social relations: its power is organizational at least as much as it is cultural. That transformation, for Dean, appears in the realization that as comrades we are objects, our personal subjectivity subordinated to our usefulness to a broader collective project. We therefore gain strength in the development of a comradely relationship as that between objects. In the second half of her talk, she turned to the stick wielded by Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar against IDF drones and weapons in the final moments of his life. The stick, she suggests, gets its power as that which was to hand: an object that became a comrade in a moment beyond hope. Language might register these transformed relations, and it might create new possibilities for transformation, but it cannot directly control them. Merely calling Sinwar's stick a comrade does not make it so, though its redescription in these terms might help us to see it anew, make it available for new and comradely relations.

Because language is not determinative, propaganda cannot be either. Across Urok Shirhan's two Eco-Sonic Propagations, this claim emerged as the insight that makes resistance possible. Shirhan's striking interventions combined musical performance with a reading of a dystopian short story, in which an unnamed land is subjected to increasingly draconian and repressive censorship. As first everyday words, then emotions, colours, and the acts of remembering or projecting a future are banned, the unnamed regime seems to foreclose on possibility itself. But precisely because what can be said is not fully coextensive with what the people know, feel, or see, resistance in this story remains possible. It is above all in music where this resistance is preserved

—in songs sung by women that encode alternative modes of propaganda in non-linguistic syllables inserted between the lyrics. Through this act of resistance, Shirhan concludes, "every day, walls disappear." The opening that preserves this possibility for transformation, for the disappearance of walls even under conditions of extreme authoritarian control, lies in the ability to develop an alternate propaganda—cultural, artistic, expressive—that depends on language's real but incomplete capacity to shape a world. The extra syllables's power capitalises on the false belief that the non-semantic elements of music, presumed to be strictly aesthetic, lie safely outside power. Becoming language only in the hands of comrades, they show ways in which art as propaganda can create these new openings by mobilising the presumption that art and power repel one another.

In part, this is because although, as Staal writes in *Climate Propagandas*, the work of propaganda is the work of making worlds, this does not imply the generation of these worlds *ex nihilo*.[10] One of D'Souza's observations earlier in the congregation was that propaganda must not lie: it is a process of selection, one might say interpretation, but not of the generation of a world from scratch. Its power is not unconnected from its truthfulness; it lies not in its creation of a world apart, but in its building a new world within the one that already exists. This insight—that propaganda is at its most effective not when it insists on creating a parallel world, unconnected from our shared reality, but when it offers new ways of understanding and acting within this reality—animated the most ambitious attempts to generate a socialist climate propaganda that were presented at the event.

This claim underpinned the artistic and theoretical structure for the event as a whole. In a video screening on the first day and a talk by Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei on the second, Staal and his collaborator van Gerven Oei developed the theoretical claims of the Ediacaran revolutionaries who had accompanied us through the two-day event. The Ediacaran period, in this account, offers a counterpoint to one of capitalism's foundational myths, which argues that complex life itself develops with the evolution of predatory life forms during what is called the Cambrian explosion. According to this neo-Darwinian narrative, competition and the ruthless pursuit of self-interest are in the nature of life itself; capitalism therefore realizes life's true nature, it represents the inevitable telos of evolution itself. For Staal and van Gerven Oei, the Ediacaran period, which immediately predated the Cambrian explosion, counters this capitalist myth-making with the discovery of an earlier period in which life was defined not by competition and self-interest but by mutuality and peaceful cohabitation. The Ediacaran organisms that furnished the lower halves of the revolutionary chimeras that loomed over the congregation represented a counter-mythology, a vision of life as inherently collectivist, rather than inherently competitive. They propagated a vision of human nature, and of the nature of life itself, designed precisely to rewrite capitalism's naturalizing dreams: a vision that Staal and van Gerven Oei call "proletgeology."

Van Gerven Oei's presentation was followed by a related attempt to theorise the intersection of science and propaganda. This intervention developed the concept of "red natural history," an idea produced by the art activist collective Not an Alternative, under the aegis of *The Natural History Museum*, a project designed to intervene in the museum sector. Steve Lyons, a member of Not an Alternative, opened this presentation by

proposing that red natural history be understood not as itself a form of climate propaganda, but as "the epistemological substrate for emancipatory climate propaganda." Where many critiques of natural history's colonial foundations tend towards the conclusion that the idea itself—perhaps even science as such—needs to be abandoned, red natural history argues that these fields of knowledge are neither neutral nor inherently reactionary, but constitute fields to be struggled over, modes of knowing that can be mobilised in the service of left politics, just as they can be mobilised against it. Andrew Curley, a Diné geographer and Red Natural History Fellow, then demonstrated what red natural history might look like, showing how a critical Indigenous perspective on the Colorado River reveals how the commoditisation of water and the settler colonial attempt to settle a desert at scale had combined to produce an environmental crisis. Red natural history, for Curley, offered a way of reclaiming an Indigenous perspective on water infrastructure, within and against the institutions of colonial science.

Andrew Curley (Diné, right) and Steve Lyons speaking at Jonas Staal, *Climate Propagandas Congregation* (2024), BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht. Photo: Ruben Hamelink.

In *Climate Propagandas*, Staal points to three core components of propaganda: infrastructure, narrative, and imagination.[11] In the book, the focus falls on the latter two, as it did in most of the interventions and talks I have discussed to this point. But perhaps the most important supplement that the Climate Propagandas

Congregation offered was its emphasis on the third leg of climate propaganda, that of the infrastructures that enable the circulation and effectiveness of propaganda. Over the course of the two days, the focus on organization regularly morphed into a focus on propaganda infrastructure. Julie de Lima, speaking as a representative of the Communist Party of the Philippines, made an implicit case for the role of the party in developing and circulating climate narratives, such as those José Maria Sison unfolded in the posthumous collection being launched at this event. With a radically different political orientation, Nilüfer Koç pointed to the experiments in grassroots democracy and non-state pluralism that provided the infrastructure for Kurdish liberation. In the lobby, publications by Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned long-time leader of the Kurdish political party, the PKK, were available for free as part of the wind-down of BAK's publications program.

Perhaps the most influential infrastructural model to emerge from this event, however, was not the party but the network. A panel on the evening of the first day by True Counterpower, a coalition of local Dutch activist groups led by Serda Demir and Iliada Charalabous, dramatised the potential of this group. Demir and Charalabous were joined on stage by representatives from the Coloured Qollective, a queer of colour activist organisation; the Sudanese Refugee Collective; Woonopstand, who work for housing justice in the Netherlands; and XR Justice Now, a branch of Extinction Rebellion focused on articulating climate justice with other political struggles. These groups discussed how their individual issues resonated with and were brought, via True Counterpower, into constellation with others, showing how a left politics, broadly conceived, implicates climate and environmental concerns, and vice versa. In a similar manner, Varsha Gandikota of Progressive International gave a remarkably dynamic presentation outlining her organisation's work as a conduit for transnational organising, bringing together various progressive groups from around the world to mobilise global strikes against Amazon, under the banner of Make Amazon Pay; to produce Covid vaccines for the Global South; or to halt shipments of arms to Israel.

For such networks—and unlike the CPP or the PKK—there is no "party line," no official position to hew to. As infrastructures for propaganda, they therefore provide something more nebulous, a coalitional rather than strictly comradely politics. For these groups, the possibility for a transformative climate propaganda emerges in and through the negotiations between positions, in and through the search for common ground, and the frictions and crises that such a search throws up. The framing perspective—and this is as true for Not an Alternative's red natural history as for Progressive International or True Counterpower—emerges as a way of "demarcating our side of the split," in Lyons's words, not just in natural history but in the politics of climate more broadly.

The Climate Propaganda Congregation itself functioned as this kind of infrastructure for propaganda, an orientation and framework within which, again to quote Lyons, "our fight is a fight among comrades." From within this fight, it sought to produce the seed, the opening from which new climate propagandas, on the same side without being identical to one another, could germinate. As BAK and all of us find ourselves launched into the deepening crisis of the interregnum, with its crumbling infrastructures and fracturing liberal

assumptions, Staal's project insisted on the need for new creative infrastructures and new infrastructures for creative resistance. It asked us to imagine the chimerical forms—aesthetic, political, organisational, narrative—that can transform our time of monsters into a new world.

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Footnotes

1. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 276. ↩
2. Slavoj Zizek, "A Permanent Economic Emergency," *New Left Review* 64 (July/August 2010). ↩
3. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 276. ↩
4. Gemeente Utrecth, "BAK, basis voor aktuele kunst," 2024. ↩
5. See, for example, Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and post-war American Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2002). The canonical account of this process in the visual arts is Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Visual Arts*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), though the Congress for Cultural Freedom model, which, unlike abstract expressionism, accommodated cultural expression with often explicitly political content, offers a clearer lineage for the kinds of contemporary political art and theory that BAK represents. ↩
6. BAK Online, "BAK announces Basecamp for Tactical Imaginaries: Building Cultural Infrastructure Anew". ↩
7. Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019): 1. ↩
8. Clara Balaguer, quoted in Kara Ortiga, "Can culture and design change the world?," *Philstar*, April 29, 2011. ↩

9. Published in fragments in 1928 and 1929, it was not published as a novel until 1972, in a partial French translation, and first appeared in full in a 1978 English translation. ↩

10. Jonas Staal, *Climate Propagandas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024), 15. ↩

11. Staal, *Climate Propagandas*, 16. ↩