

Features



Less than two months ago, I found myself on the banks of the river Tigris, ready to cross from Iraq into Syria. I was part of an international delegation including writers, artists, activists, European parliamentarians and a few journalists.

We had been invited by the artist Jonas Staal to participate in a summit to be held in a parliament he is building in Rojava. This is the name that Kurds have given to the autonomous region they have established in north-eastern Syria.

The delegation's leaders had haggled with the Iraqi Kurdish border guards all day, so it was night by the time we stepped on to the boat with our suitcases and made our way towards the searchlight under which the Dutch artist, his team and our Kurdish hosts were waiting for us on the opposite bank.

This was the fifth edition of the New World Summit, a transnational organisation for stateless people, which builds parliaments "that are not limited to the rules of states, but are shaped by the rights of peoples", as Staal puts it.

The first edition of the New World Summit took place during the 2012 Berlin Biennale, hosting representatives of organisations designated as "terrorist". The second summit took place in Leiden, in the Netherlands, re-enacting the legal and political positions taken in the international trial of Jose Maria Sison, the founder of the Filipino Communist Party and its armed resistance.

The third edition was intended to take place in Kochi, during the city's first biennial, but the Indian authorities intervened before the banned political outfits could convene. The fourth summit was a grand affair hosted by the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels, discussing the "Stateless State", with participants from all over the world.

The theme of October's event in Syria was

THE ARTIST GIVING STATELESS SYRIANS A VOICE

The Dutch artist Jonas Staal is working in Syria's autonomous Kurdish region, alongside freedom fighters whose philosophy includes a radical feminist rejection of the state, in an attempt to challenge the accepted view of democracy and the role of the artist within it. By Robert Kluijver



The Dutch artist Jonas Staal. Below, the open-air parliament built for the ill-fated third New World Summit, in Kochi, southern India

democratic confederalism, or stateless democracy, such as that practised in Rojava. The Syrian state withdrew its troops from this area to engage in the civil war elsewhere in the country in 2012. Instead of joining the war, the citizens of Rojava declared their autonomy and set about constructing a socio-political system based on communal self-organisation, participatory democracy and a radical feminist rejection of patriarchal systems such as the state.

This system, remarkably, ensures the peaceful coexistence in Rojava of the majority Kurds and the Arab, Assyrian-Christian, Yazidi and other minorities. It has also produced the only armed forces – the YPG – that have managed to push back Isis militants. The YPG and the women-only YPJ are people's protection units based on the same principles of communal self-rule.

These ideas and their underlying political philosophy originate from the prison writings of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and a figurehead of the Kurdish struggle over the past decades. At the request of the Turkish government, the PKK is banned as a terrorist organisation in Europe, the US and other countries. As a result, Rojava is not recognised by any international organisation. Its revolution is quarantined to such a degree that even I, a specialist on the Middle East, had not heard of it before Jonas Staal brought it to my attention.

Staal, who was born in Zwolle, in the Netherlands, in 1981, first came to Rojava in 2014. He is living here temporarily until the construction of the parliament is completed. The building will be bequeathed to the region, unlike the elaborate but temporary parliamentary structures that hosted the previous New World Summits.

These spatial configurations of democratic

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experiments are the main physical artistic output of the project: the scale models of the parliaments are exhibited together with photographs and documentary video recordings of the summits.

Revolutionary ideas

The fifth summit took place on 16 and 17 October. The three previous days were spent visiting the community organisations – media outlets, cultural centres, self-defence units, academic institutes, refugee camps and city councils – that have run Rojava since it became autonomous.

It was confrontational. I was stunned by the vitality, the innovations and the apparent success of these communities practising self-rule – but should I give in to the pull to join the revolution, to subscribe to its tenets, to commit myself ideologically? Should I relinquish my cherished position as a neutral observer and join the fray?

This is what Staal seems to have done. The decor he constructed for the summit was replete with flags, banners and slogans. For two days, we absorbed long speeches extolling counter-hegemonic ideologies or constructing counter-narratives, painstakingly translated from Kurdish and Arabic into English.

The New World Summit describes itself as an "artistic and political organisation", but one may wonder what, exactly, is the artistic content. Staal does not seek to transform the event into a work by, for example, controlling the content so that it reads as a performance. In truth, the summit and the days preceding it seemed like an exercise in propaganda.

Staal does not refute this accusation. The point of departure for his artistic practice is the relationship between art and power; in his pamphlet *Post-Propaganda*, he claims that art has always

