

PIERRE BERGÉ'S  
RARE BOOKSYves Saint Laurent's partner  
sells world-class library to  
fund new museumsFeatures  
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been used for propaganda purposes by the powers supporting it. He adds that the democratic state's support of the arts can be seen as a continuation of the support previously offered by the bourgeoisie, the monarchy or the Church, and is similar to the support given to the arts by the totalitarian regimes of our age. He writes that the freedom enjoyed by Modern and contemporary Western artists should epitomise the open, tolerant and free nature of our democracies, and that this was the objective of the CIA's support for US Abstract Expressionist painters during the Cold War.

**A**vivid expression of this conundrum came in Staal's public work for Dutch Liberation Day, in which a plane trailing the message "Be free" was followed by another with the warning "...or else". Rather than trying to escape this relationship with power, Staal's approach as an artist is to tackle it head-on. If all art is propaganda, he reasons, I should decide on the message myself. He embarked on a PhD arts programme at Leiden University to elucidate the relationship between propaganda and art.

Western propaganda, as exercised by "power monopolies", he notes, shapes a normative sense of reality. In popular terms, this amounts to the belief that "there is no alternative", or "however bad the current system, anything else would be much worse". Staal juxtaposes with this a form of progressive or emancipatory propaganda (there is an alternative). This can only work, he argues, if the public is not the object of propaganda, but itself defines, refines and propagates this message.

This indicates what the role of the artist can be – an enduringly vexed question. Instead of being the decorator or jester of the powers-that-be, the artist can build coalitions with progressive forces in society and engage in awareness-raising to spread an alternative message.

For many years, Staal engaged with the Dutch government and public authorities, making them protagonists in his work. Take, for example, his project *Art, Property of Politics*, which included a range of activities: curating exhibitions to show the art collected by Dutch political parties, developing the prison model advocated by the far-right parliamentarian Fleur Agema and prompting closed-door marathon sessions with artists and politicians about their mutual relationship.

The Dutch government, apparently wishing to project an image of being progressive, pluralist and open at a time of cuts to cultural budgets, supports most of these projects. The parliament built in Rojava is also supported by the Mondriaan Fonds, the main public institution that funds the arts in the Netherlands.

Staal eventually turned his attention beyond the Dutch political landscape, and towards the notion of democracy. He started by contrasting



"democratism", which he describes as an ideology propagated by power monopolies to ensure their continued rule, with "democracy", which he sees as an ideal, as yet hardly realised in the world.

Next, he identified the shadow side of democratism: groups labelled as terrorist, stateless individuals and, at the international level, unrecognised peoples. These are all denied participation in the public sphere, so Staal resolved to provide them with a platform: the New World Summit.

#### Struggle for freedom

During the opening of the summit in Rojava, addressing a room packed with representatives of the local community, Staal said: "You may ask yourselves, what does art have to do with these stateless political struggles?" He went on: "We believe that if we want to create a different world, we will need a different imagination of what that world should look like. As such, every political imaginary needs an artistic imaginary as well."

One of the characteristics of the history of Western art is a continuous struggle by artists for more freedom. In liberal democracies, where such freedom became a foundational concept, this led to a paradox. The field of art is constructed as a glass house within which artists can do anything they want, in full view of the public, but whatever happens in this glass house is safely separated from the real world by the tag of art.

Staal reacts to this depressing situation not by breaking down the walls – as artists using "institutional critique" or those artists grouped under relational aesthetics in the 1990s have tried to, with varying success – but by leaving the comfort zone of the Western art world, identifying causes he wishes to support and putting his artistic imagination to their service. As he puts it,

*The appeal of Rojava's revolution is being compared with that of Republican Spain, 80 years ago*

**Clockwise from top left (facing page): a public presentation on the site of Rojava's unfinished parliament, a symbolically circular and open-sided building created as part of the fifth New World Summit; Staal addresses delegates; and a debate at the summit in Brussels**

he is creating a new arts infrastructure.

In the Netherlands, Staal has worked closely with the Pirate Party and the stateless group of refugees *We Are Here*, as well as being involved with recent student protests. He travelled to the Philippines to visit the grassroots organisations of the (banned) National Democratic Movement, and his team filmed their way through the desert of Mali, hosted by the rebel Tuaregs or Amazigh. Representatives of the World Amazigh Conference and of the National Democratic Movement were invited to speak in Rojava.

From a political viewpoint, one might wonder about some of Staal's choices. Old Marxist guerrilla movements and a splinter faction of the Tuaregs fighting for independence for their homeland may seem mired in 20th-century politics at best, and, at worst, tainted by the crimes they have committed in their armed struggles.

But in Rojava, Staal has found a perfect partner. The appeal of its revolution is being compared with that of Republican Spain at the onset of the civil war, 80 years ago. Few progressive organisations could object to the enlightened philosophy that inspires the democratic experiment, even though it was written by Öcalan, who is serving a life sentence in solitary confinement for treason against the Turkish state. It seems that the transnational movement of stateless people finally has a home, at least as far as the New World Summit is concerned.

The parliament that Staal's team is building in the town of Derik reflects the democratic ideals that inspire both the Rojava revolution and the New World Summit project. The structure is round, symbolising unity, and open on all sides, thus fully transparent. It is surrounded by a public park, embedding it firmly in the local community, and can be used for any public function.

The floor consists of descending concentric circles, like an ancient forum, creating ample seating space. The central circle is raised, so that speakers can use it as a lectern. This also means that no single person can occupy the centre. Three sets of six iron arches support three partial domes, which overlap to provide protection from the elements. The arches are inscribed in Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac with the six principles of the Rojava revolution: democratic confederalism, gender equality, secularism, self-defence, communalism and social ecology. The roof panels will be decorated with the insignia of the grassroots organisations driving Rojava's social and civic transformation.

From his small office in Derik, Staal is preparing the final phases of the project, a summit in Utrecht, involving all the social movements that have accompanied the New World Summit throughout its four years, and then a grand finale in his completed parliament building in Rojava.

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