New Worlds

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The Democratic

Self-Administration

of Rojava

&

New World Summit

(Studio Jonas Staal)

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Content

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Sheruan Hassan, Jonas Staal:

New Worlds—Introduction

The Rojava Revolution

At the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Kurdish revolutionaries reclaimed the northern part of Syria, known as Rojava, which means "West" in Kurdish and refers to the western part of Kurdistan. In 2012, the peoples of the region declared their Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, aimed at bringing about a new political model known as democratic confederalism. This model was described by Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Öcalan as "democracy without the state," an ideal based on local self-governance, gender equality, communal economy, secularism, and cultural and religious diversity.

The Rojava Revolution is widely known for its effective resistance against the brutal violence of the Islamic State. The Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and People's Protection Units (YPG)—the self-organized people's armies of Rojava—have proved most successful in liberating land that was under the control of the Islamic State, and subsequently securing the rights and protection of religious and ethnic minorities in the region.

However, the revolution of Rojava is not just a military struggle. It is also a cultural struggle, a struggle to "change mentalities," as Amina Osse, Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê in Rojava, puts it. With this change of mentality, Osse refers to the ideological awakening of Rojava through the practice of stateless democracy. The old model of the nation-state, Osse explains, is not capable of representing a diversity of peoples, due to its centralized and homogeneous

identitarian politics. The nation-state further operates as a vehicle for global capital, privileges, and patriarchal relationships, and stands in conflict with ideals of a sustainable ecological society. In that light, the ultrafundamentalist and hyperpatriarchal Islamic State, which emerged from a history of violent imperialist politics in the region, stands in epic contrast to Rojava's ideal of a non-state democracy, championing women's rights and cultural diversity.

The Rojava Revolution is thus important for reasons that go beyond the enormous sacrifices at the frontlines against the Islamic State. It is also a struggle for a new society and a new democratic ideal. The Rojava Revolution brought about local parliaments, councils, and communes, which form the heart of the project of political self-governance—the heart of the Democratic Self-Administration. The revolution brought about new academies, such as the Women's Star Academy in Rimelan, which developed a new scientific paradigm based on women's perspectives, known as "Jineology." The Movement for Culture and Arts, Tev-Çand, established cultural centers in all of Rojava's villages and cities and organizes exhibitions, music events, theater, film screenings, and the cultural education of children and young adults. Moverover, it brought about the Rojava Film Commune, which is producing the first films by and for Rojavans on their history and revolution.

The Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and the New World Summit

It is the intersection between culture and politics in the Rojava Revolution that brought about the collaboration between the Democratic Self-Administration and the New World Summit, an artistic and political organization founded in 2012. The New World Summit aims to create temporary parliaments in theaters and art spaces all over the world, where it invites representatives of stateless and blacklisted organizations to speak. The organization aims to explore the space of art and culture to create new models of democracy that aim for equality between state and non-state actors. Six summits have been organized so far,

including in Berlin (2012) and Brussels (2014) and involving more than forty stateless and blacklisted organizations from around the world.

In 2014, the Democratic Self-Administration invited the New World Summit team to travel to Rojava and witness the development of their new civil society. It was during this visit that Amina Osse proposed to the New World Summit to contribute to the Rojava Revolution with a project: the creation of a new public parliament in the city of Dêrik in Canton Cezîrê, Rojava. A parliament as a public artwork, a sculpture, and symbol inspired by the Rojava Revolution, which at the same time would operate as a political space for the communes of Rojava to gather. This invitation resulted in a series of different collaborations. The construction of the public parliament began in August 2015, and an international delegation of representatives of stateless political organizations, politicians, academics, journalists, artists, and students travelled to Rojava in October 2015 to witness the achievements of the Rojava Revolution and celebrate the start of construction on the new parliament, which is aimed to be inaugurated early 2017. In January 2016, the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and New World Summit collaborated on a temporary parliament in Utrecht, inspired by the ideal of stateless democracy. Currently, a new project is underway in the form of a temporary embassy of Rojava in the City Hall of Oslo: the *New World Embassy: Rojava*.

To us, this collaboration between the realms of revolutionary politics and art emphasizes the importance of cultural struggle within political struggle. Rojava inspires new political movements and artists all over the world to re-imagine the world differently, to confront the major crises in our politics, economy, and ecology, to change mentality, and embrace a democratic paradigm that allows for power and resources to be shared by a diversity of peoples. It is not just one new world that Rojava is making possible; Rojava inspires many new worlds in the making, and invites artists and thinkers to contribute their imagination to make these many new worlds a reality—in the same way that the Rojava Revolution has made their new world of stateless democracy a reality for its peoples.

Projects and Texts

This publication gathers the three main collaborative projects between the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and the New World Summit: the *New World Summit–Rojava* (2015–17), the *New World Summit–Utrecht* (2016), and the *New World Embassy: Rojava* (2016). It further includes texts from key thinkers and political figures of the Rojava Revolution, in the form of an introduction to the philosophy of democratic confederalism by Amina Osse, an interview with Co-Chair of the Rojavan Democratic Union Party (PYD) Salih Muslim, and an interview with academic and representative of the Kurdish Women's Movement Dilar Dirik—followed by a text on the meaning of the collaboration between the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and the New World Summit.

These projects show us that with a new vision of politics also comes a new art. New worlds only become reality when the imaginary of politics and the imaginary of art meet. We hope that these collaborative works are a modest contribution to that process.

Acknowledgements

Anatomy of a Revolution— Rojava

2015   **Jonas Staal**

When first invited to travel to the autonomous region of Rojava with the New World Summit, artist Jonas Staal documented the emerging new infrastructures of stateless democracy—from the symbols of the revolution in the form of new flags and monuments, to the self-organized Women's and People's Protection Units that protect Rojava from attacks of the Islamic State, to the creation of new schools and academies. Together, the photographs propose a reading into the anatomy of the Rojava Revolution. A revolution that is as much about armed struggle and self-defense, as it is about the creation of new political, educational, and cultural infrastructures to make the practice of stateless democracy a reality.

Special forces of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) look out over their training camp situated near Qamişlo.

Entrance to a training camp of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and People's Protection Units (YPG) at the border between Iraq (South Kurdistan) and Syria (West Kurdistan).

Page 13: Posters of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) on the streets of Qamişlo.

Page 13: An old fountain of the Assad regime in Qamişlo has been turned into a monument of the Rojava Revolution, painted yellow-red-green—the colors of the flag of the Movement for a Democratic Society, the unofficial flag of the autonomous region—carrying several martyr portraits of deceased revolutionaries from its protection units.

Classroom for ideological education of the People's Protection Units (YPG).

A classroom in the Women's Star Academy in Rimelan, displaying portraits of women martyrs and revolutionaries in the background. The slogan "sembola jinên şoreşger" translates as "the symbolic revolutionary women."

Living room in the headquarters of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Amûdê.

Page 17: Plants in living rooms serve as commemorative objects of martyrs from the Rojava Revolution; each leaf carrying a portrait, together forming the foundation of what the autonomous cantons have termed their "ecology of freedom."

Page 18–19: Members of neighborhood councils and cooperatives present themselves as candidates for the position of Co-Chair of the People's Council of the city of Qamişlo. The slogan on stage "Her Tist Jibo Jiyanek Azad û Avakirina Civakek Demokratîk" translates as "Everything for a Free Life and the Foundation of a Democratic Society."

New World Summit–Rojava

2015–17   **Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava
            and Studio Jonas Staal**

In 2014, the New World Summit was commissioned by Amina Osse, Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê, to develop a new parliament for the autonomous region of Rojava.

Amina Osse, Democratic Union Party (PYD) representative Sheruan Hassan, and artist Jonas Staal conceptualized the design as a public parliament—a parliament as a public space surrounded by a newly developed park, symbolizing the Rojavan ideal of politics as common property. The location of the parliament was decided to be the city of Dêrik.

The circular space of the parliament can accommodate about two hundred and fifty people, the average size of a local commune in Rojava. The center of power remains purposely unoccupied, emphasizing the egalitarian ideal of stateless democracy as collective self-governance. Around the circular space, arches are constructed on which key concepts of Rojava's Social Contract are written. The roof consists of hand painted fragments of flags representing local political organizations.

On October 16–17, 2015, a two-day summit was organized in the local cultural center of Tev-Çand in Dêrik to celebrate the start of construction, where Rojavan representatives spoke side by side with representatives of other stateless movements and progressive political parties from all over the world.

Team: Sheruan Hassan, Amina Osse, and Jonas Staal (concept); Younes Bouadi (production); Renée In der Maur (program and international project coordination); Ossama Muhammad (local project coordination Rojava); Paul Kuipers (architectural design); Remco van Bladel (visual identity); Hussein Adam; Dejle Hamo (urban planning); Tamer Kandal, Newzad Mohammed, Ibrahim Sado, and Zozan Hassan (construction and development); Ruben Hamelink, Michiel Landeweerd, and Komina Film Rojava (video documentation); Ernie Buts (photography); Kasper van Dun (digital rendering); Stijn Toonen (architectural modelling); Suzie Herman and Janos-Zsolt Hermán Mostert (delegation hosts).
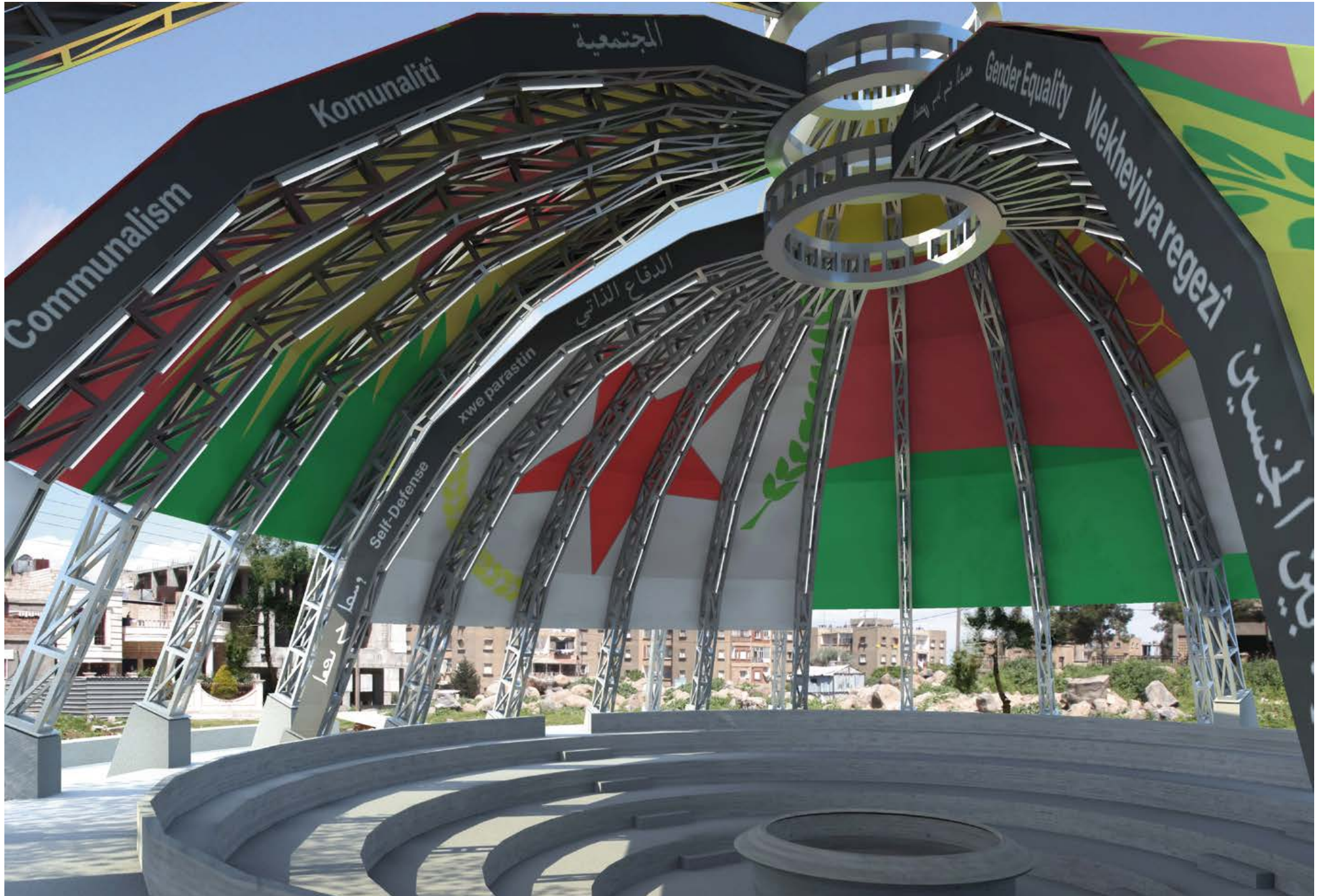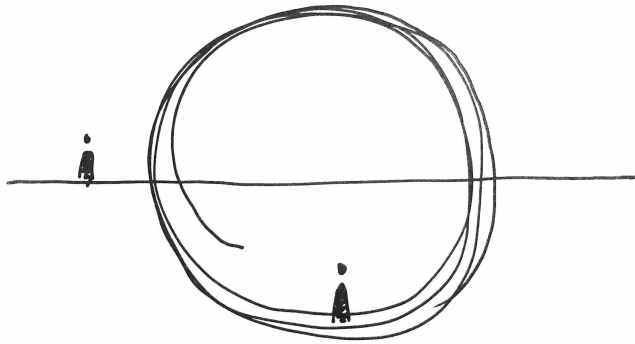
Page 21–23: Three-dimensional drawings of the *New World Summit—Rojava*, and the surrounding park.

Architectural model of the *New World Summit—Rojava*.

Preliminary drawing of the design for the *New World Summit—Rojava*.

Design of the inside of the roof of the new parliament, clockwise from the top these are the flags of the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, the Syriac Union Party (SUP), the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tev-Dem), the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Rojava Democratic Youth Union (YCR), and the Star Union of Women (Yekîtiya Star).

Page 26–29: Construction of the parliament in the period of August–October 2015.

Artists Ahmed Shamdin and Abdullah Abdul working on the design of the parliament roof.

Page 30—33: Celebration of the start of construction on the parliament with the international delegation and the Rojavan communities.

Overview of the two-day assembly *New World Summit—Rojava, Part I*, gathering Rojavan
representatives with representatives of other stateless and progressive political organizations
from all over the world in the cultural center of Tev-Çand in Dêrik, on October 16—17, 2015.

Democratic Confederalism, lecture by Amina Osse (Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê, and co-initiator of the New World Summit in Rojava).

Page 37: Audience questions by Berivan Xalid (Chair of the Committee of Culture of Canton Cizîrê).

Page 37: *Self-Defense*, lecture by Hisên Şawîş (People's Protection Units, YPG).

New World Summit–Utrecht

2016   **Studio Jonas Staal**

The New World Summit—Utrecht was developed in collaboration with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, the Utrecht University, and Centraal Museum Utrecht, in the form of a three-day assembly to discuss uncoupling of the practice of democracy from the construct of the nation-state. The alternative parliament of the New World Summit was constructed in the central aula of the university, where the Union of Utrecht was signed in 1579—often considered a historical moment in the foundation of the modern Dutch nation-state.

The second day of the summit, entitled *Stateless Democracy!*, was programmed in direct collaboration with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, bringing together Rojavan representatives with other stateless movements and progressive political parties from all over the world. The symbols surrounding the space represent the different local organizations of Rojava that engage in the day-to-day practice of self-governance. In the design of the space, the Rojavan symbols stand in a continuous dialogue with each another, forming a confederate composition—the basis of the model of stateless democracy.

The main ideological map in the back of the space was designed by academic and Kurdish Women's Movement representative Dilar Dirik in collaboration with designer Remco van Bladel. It explains the principles of the model of stateless democracy central to the Rojava Revolution.

Team: Jonas Staal (concept); Maria Hlavajova (curator); Younes Bouadi (production); Renée In der Maur (program); Paul Kuipers (architectural design); Remco van Bladel (visual identity); Suzie Hermán (communication); Ruben Hamelink (film documentation); Ernie Buts (photography); Landstra & de Vries (construction); Riwi Collotype (printing); Stijn Toonen (architectural modelling).

Page 40–41: Overview of the parliament of the New World Summit in the Utrecht University on the second day, entitled *Stateless Democracy!*, displaying flags of Rojavan organizations, such as the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the Kurdistan Communities of Women (KJK), the Union of Revolutionary Young Women, the Star Union of Women (Yekîtiya Star), the Democratic Self-Administration, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tev-Dem) as well as the ideological map of stateless democracy by Dilar Dirik.

Page 42–43: Chair Joost Jongerden (academic and writer) welcomes speakers and audience.

Page 44: Opening lecture by Dilek Öcalan (Peoples' Democratic Party, HDP) on the history of stateless democracy.

Sadet Karabulut (Socialist Party, SP) responds to Dilek Öcalan.

Lecture by Zuhat Kobanî (Democratic Union Party, PYD) on stateless democracy and self-defense.
Gorka Elejabarrieta (Sortu, Basque Country) responds to Zuhat Kobanî.

Leila Khaled (Popular Liberation Front of Palestine, PLFP) responds to Zuhat Kobanî.
Jennifer McCann (Sinn Féin) responds to Zuhat Kobanî.

Jodi Dean (political theorist and writer) responds to Dilek Öcalan.

Lecture by Dilar Dirik (Kurdish Women's Movement) on stateless democracy as transnationalism.
Mireia Vehí and Quim Arrufat (Popular Unity Candidacy Catalunya, CUP) respond to Dilar Dirik.

Angela Dimitrakaki (academic, novelist, and propaganda worker) responds to Dilar Dirik.

Kill the dominant male. —Abdullah Öcalan

Kill the dominant male. —Abdullah Öcalan

Collective dinner in the Utrecht University, in the background a citation by Abdullah Öcalan.

New World Embassy: Rojava

2016 **Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal**

The *New World Embassy: Rojava* is developed in collaboration with the Oslo Architecture Triennale: After Belonging and KORO/URO, to create a temporary embassy in the Oslo City Hall that will represent, through cultural means, the ideals of stateless democracy developed by the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava. The embassy will consist of a large-scale oval shaped architectural structure, designed as an "ideological planetarium."

The *New World Embassy: Rojava* will operate for two consecutive days on November 26 and 27, 2016, bringing representatives from Rojava together with international politicians, diplomats, academics, journalists, students, and artists. Through open deliberation and public discussion, the *New World Embassy: Rojava* proposes a platform to build new transnational relationships and explore alternative models of people's diplomacy. This includes an analysis of the history, ideals, and implementation of stateless democracy, the successes of Rojava in building a new civil society in a war-torn region, and, finally, the alternative that Rojava proposes in order to confront the crises of democracy seen on a global scale.

Team: Seher Aydar, Refik Gefur, Sheruan Hassan, Amina Osse, Jonas Staal, and Adem Uzun (concept); After Belonging Agency (curators); Younes Bouadi (production); Renée In der Maur (program); Paul Kuipers (architectural design); Remco van Bladel (visual identity); Landstra & de Vries (construction); Riwi Collotype (printing); Stijn Toonen (architectural modelling); Ruben Hamelink (film documentation); Ernie Buts (photography); Aviva Stein (communication); Bo Krister Wallström and Kristine Jærn Pilgaard (KORO/URO) (co-production); Hanna Dencik Petersson (Oslo Architecture Triennial production).
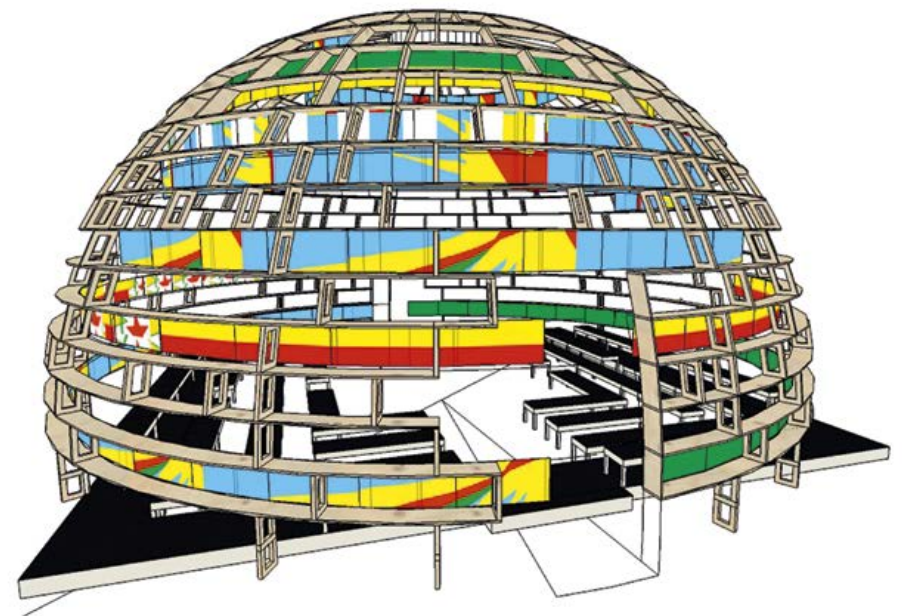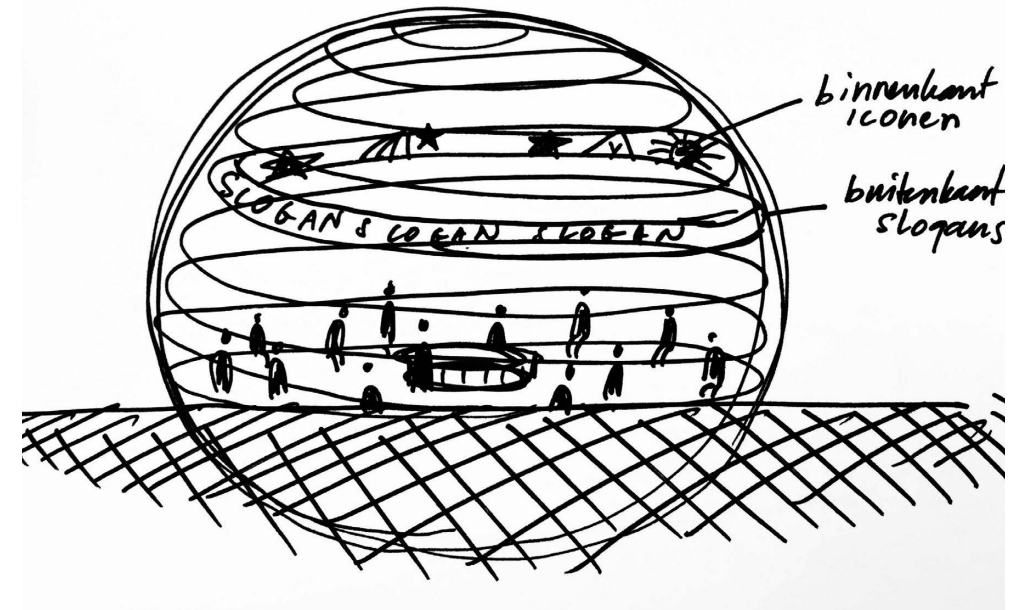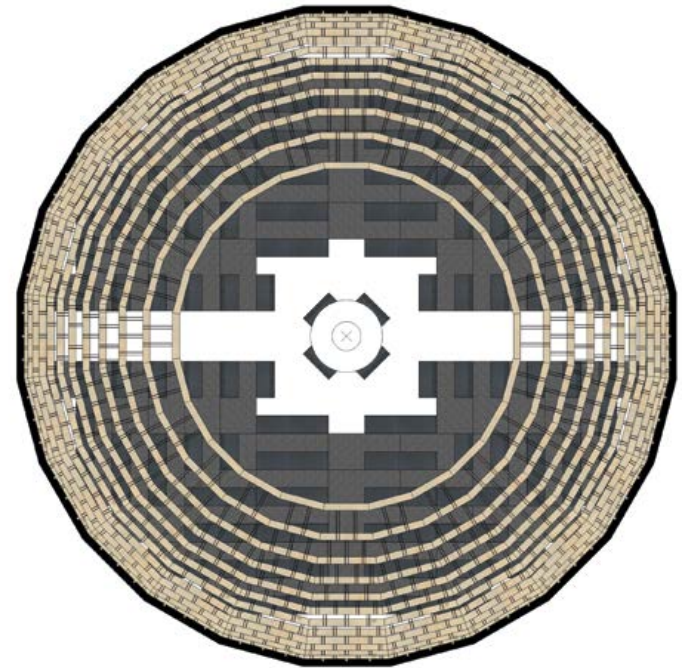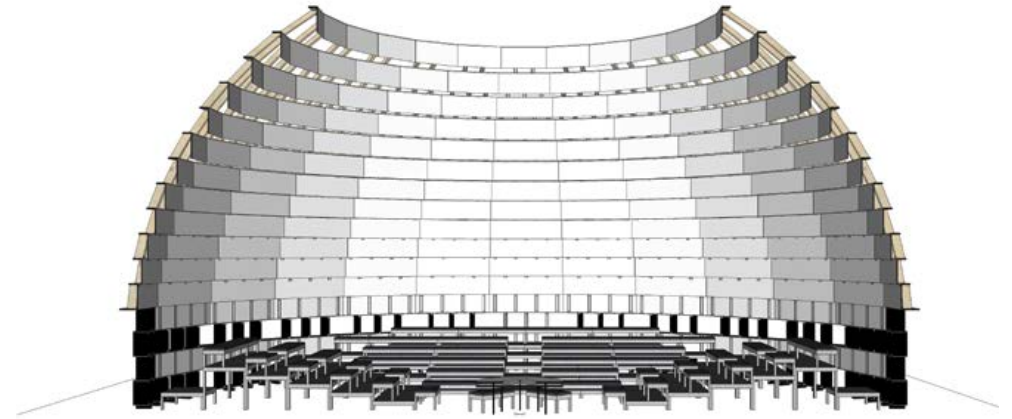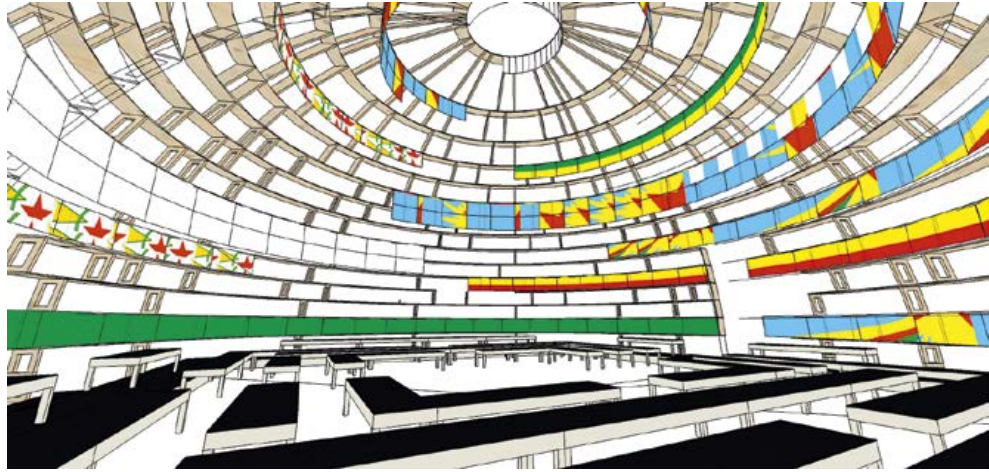
Preliminary designs of the *New World Embassy: Rojava*.

Architectural model as a preliminary study for the *New World Embassy: Rojava*.
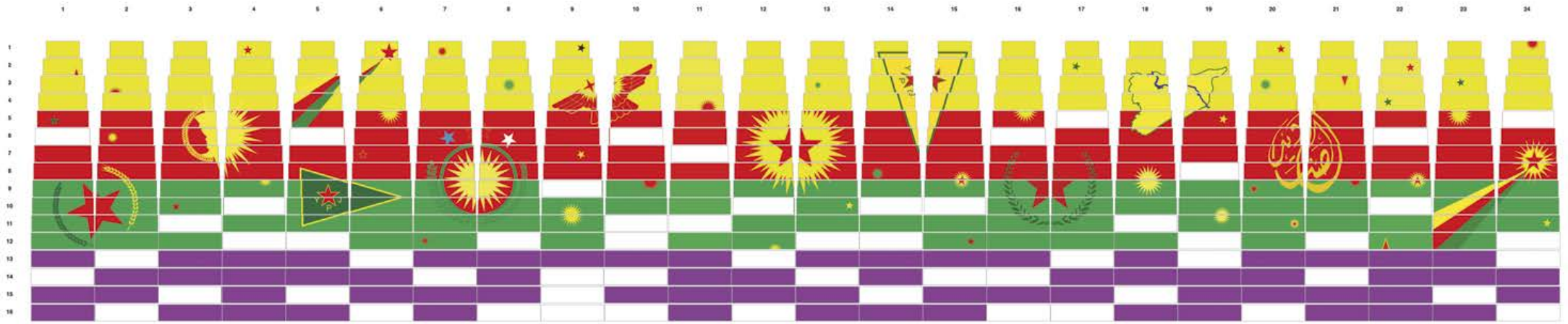
Visual design of the banners covering the inside of the *New World Embassy: Rojava*, from left to right: the flags of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Star Congress of Women (Kongreya Star), the Star Union of Women (Yekîtiya Star), the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the flag of Rojava, the Syriac Union Party (SUP), Rojava Democratic Youth Union (YCR), the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Union of Revolutionary Young Women, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Al-Sanadid Forces.

Amina Osse:

On Democratic Confederalism

This text is an edited version of Amina Osse's lecture at the 5th New World Summit, New World Summit—Rojava, Part I, *in the city of Dêrik, Canton Cizîrê, Rojava, on October 16, 2015.*

The Crisis of the Nation-State

The entire world today is concerned with the Islamic State (IS), the terrible disaster that resulted from the dirty war that is being fought against humanity and nature. In Rojava, we witness the effects of this war on a daily basis. The reasons for and alternatives to this increasing crisis have been analyzed in philosophy, and here I would like to focus specifically on the philosophy known as "democratic confederalism" as proposed by Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan: a solution for the Kurdish people as well as for all other peoples of the Middle East and around the world.[1]

The Middle East was divided by foreign powers, first by force, and later by law—laws that have never fit the specific context of this region. The outcome of these divisions was the establishment of dictatorial and nationalist regimes, enforcing a continuous state of oppression upon the peoples

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1   See: Abdullah Öcalan. [Trans. by Klaus Happel] *Prison Writings I: The Roots of Civilisation.* London: Pluto Press, 2007; Abdullah Öcalan. [Trans. by Klaus Happel] *Prison Writings II: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century.* London: Transmedia, 2011; Abdullah Öcalan. [Trans. by Havin Guneser] *Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations.* Cologne: International Initiative, 2012; Abdullah Öcalan [Trans. by Havin Guneser]. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume I. Civilization. The Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings.* Porsgunn: New Compass, 2015.

of the Middle East. However, as these regimes became more powerful, the determination of the peoples that were forced to live under their rule was also strengthened. When we overturned these regimes, our people immediately showed the desire for and determination needed to attain freedom. In Rojava, this took the form of the Rojava Revolution at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, during which we reclaimed our original Kurdish land. Today, we see how Kurds, Arabs, and Assyrians live together in Rojava in a way that can be a model for other struggles of liberation.

The nation-state regimes in the Middle East were formed under the banner of secularism, but in reality, none of them were actually secular. Under the banner of secularism, the peoples of the Middle East were subjected to oppression and injustice. We can give an example of this type of nation-state: the country we live in, Syria. The country was run by only one party—the Ba'ath Party—through force, under a regime that claimed that all of Syria was Arab. It was a rule of one ethnicity, one language, one culture—and anybody rejecting this doctrine was punished.

A nation-state like Syria, with such policies of homogeneity, can never stabilize a country. It can never provide a solution for a diversity of peoples. This is why the peoples of Syria became afraid and divided, leading to religious and nationalist conflicts. None of the tyrannical regimes that were established in the Middle East have ever created solutions; instead of addressing essential issues, they created models that only increased sectarian tensions and laid the basis for the explosion of the entire region.

The tension between the homogeneous policies of the nation-state and the diversity of its peoples is also the main reason behind the start of the so-called Arab Spring, which is known to us as the Spring of Peoples. This Spring has not succeeded in all parts of Syria because nationalist and tyrannical regimes manipulate the peoples' minds. They convinced many that only the Assad regime could keep them safe and that any alternative to the regime is terrorism. This type of regime claims that they themselves are the only key to security and that all other alternatives to them are terrorism. Our model of democratic confederalism,

which takes the form of what we call a Democratic Self-Administration, is a very different one. I will introduce some of its different key elements.

Towards an Ecological Society

We, the society of Rojava, see that it is important to have a realistic perspective when it comes to representing the diversity of the communities that make up our society. But we also address larger concerns for a durable and peaceful future, such as the damage that is being done to our environment. The regime imposed upon us has not only strayed from human values, but also from the basic values one can derive from the larger ecological environment of which we are a part.

We see ecology as the basis of society. We even regard ecology as the science of society, and as the basis of democracy. Contrary to what many think, we do not consider technology necessarily opposed to ecology; it depends on the kind of technology we are talking about. For example, ecology plays an important role in the rebuilding of our war-torn society, but we base the technology needed for the rebuilding of society on the principle that human beings are an inherent part of nature. Even manufacturing productivity can be improved if it is considered from a perspective of ecology. This perspective is beneficial for all parts of human society, and to nature as a whole.

If our Self-Administration fails to build a strong relationship with nature, it cannot secure its existence, much less its values and morals. The ongoing conflict brings serious danger to both human beings and the environment, and we aim to end this conflict. This requires action—or a campaign—in order to change the values of society, and to realize its greater goal: to establish an ecological society. If a community cannot be ecological, it cannot secure and defend its existence. Therefore, we must regard ecology as an ideological matter. It functions as a bridge between philosophy and morality.

Democratic Confederalism

To counter the doctrinal and violent policies of the nation-state, the

principles of an ecological society form the basis for the political alternative we know as democratic confederalism. This alternative has been put into practice by the Rojava Revolution. The need to establish an alternative ecology goes beyond the importance of finding a balance between society and nature, for this alternative ecology must also include confrontation with other forms of oppression.

For example, patriarchal policies that oppress women are engrained in the model of the nation-state. The freedom of women is thus an essential goal for our cause and an important step in establishing an alternative ecology. Another issue relates to religious and cultural diversity, which is another crucial part of establishing an alternative ecology. This is why the banners of Rojava are being raised by all the peoples of the region. Many countries talk about freedom, socialism, and democracy—and attempt to achieve it—but the model of the nation-state is insufficient. This is why we struggle for an ecological society; one that includes an awareness of nature on one hand and aims at changing social relations on the other. It is of crucial importance to us to realize this ecological society here, in a place of incredible historic inequality. It is in the heart of that inequality that we are establishing our new democratic ideal.

Democratic confederalism in the form of self-administration starts with organizing society's smallest cell: the village. This model is not new or imaginary; its principles were already present in Sumerian societies and Athenian democracy. In our legislation, we consider it fundamental to take the smallest elements of the community as our starting point in order to establish a system of self-governance for a diversity of peoples. We have done so by establishing municipalities everywhere, councils for neighborhoods and parliaments that engage in political issues on a local level. All of these councils and committees are independent. Together, they form an ecological confederate system: the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava.

Democratic confederalism is thus not a centralized mechanism of decision making and forming policies, but rather a decentralized form of local self-administration made up of councils, municipalities, and commutes. These councils' decisions are decentralized and are based on self-sustainability. Democratic confederalism connects and coordinates the three cantons of Rojava and simultaneously develops deeper connections between them. As a whole, they form the larger ecology within which we practice democratic confederalism.

The project of democratic confederalism does not recognize the political borders that were drawn by regimes and imposed upon the land and its peoples. Instead, it accepts all of the peoples, religions, communities, and beliefs within its cantons. The nation-state embraces only one nation, one culture, while the system of the democratic confederalism embraces an ecology of diversity.

World Confederalism

From the perspective of the Rojava Revolution, democratic confederalism has the potential to be a model that can address a variety of problems in the Middle East. We have created the conditions for stateless people here to organize themselves. This can be applied not only to new conflicts, but possibly to long-standing ones as well, such as the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Similarly, this model can be used in the twenty-two Arab countries of the world. Turkey could also apply this democratic confederal system. When democratic confederalism is implemented, it breaks apart the logic that allows one nation to control and impose itself through the nation-state model on all other nations in the same region. We believe our model can bring about a truly democratic nation instead.

The relationships between all components of society must be based on equality, friendship, and kinship. The model of democratic confederalism in the form of self-administration can prevent bloody conflicts and bring an end to tensions. All of the vast conflicts that have taken place thus far in the region have been the consequences of not solving the issues of peoples: of neglecting their diversity. Ethics and morality are essential matters when it comes to establishing such an alternative system—not only in Rojava, but also in all countries suffering from

conflicts and for everybody who wants to live in freedom. They will bring out the richness of the mosaic of cultures of the Middle East.

The solutions thus far offered by dozens of countries have only brought sectarian and nationalist conflicts. Every day, this bloody, centuries old conflict will continue, for it is a conflict inherent to the model of the nation-state. The Kurdish people in the four parts of Kurdistan can lead the way in offering an alternative—starting here, in Rojava. It is important to say that this does not mean embracing only Kurdish people. This project embraces all components, all peoples who live in the region of Kurdistan. Together we are building a democratic system: a diverse democratic nation.

Our model has its shortcomings and mistakes, and we may face many great difficulties. However, our hope, our belief and our work will guide us to success.

Interview with Salih Muslim,
Co-Chair Democratic Union Party (PYD), by Jonas Staal[1]:

A Revolution of Life

Jonas Staal: In your lecture today you made clear that the battle in Rojava is not just about fighting against the Islamic State; it is also a fight *for* a specific political idea: the model of democratic autonomy. What exactly is this model of democratic autonomy that lies at the heart of the Rojava Revolution?

Salih Muslim: The reason we are under attack is because of the democratic model we are establishing in our region. Many local forces and governments do not like to see these alternative democratic models being developed in Rojava. They are afraid of our system. We have created, in the middle of the civil war in Syria, three autonomous cantons in the Rojava region that function by democratic rule. Together with the ethnic and religious minorities of the region—Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians, Christians and Kurds—we have written a collective political structure for these autonomous cantons: our Social Contract.[2] We have established a people's council with 101 representatives from all cooperatives, committees, and assemblies running each of our cantons. And we have established a model of co-presidency—each political entity always has both a female and a male chair—and a quota of a minimum of forty percent gender representation of each gender, in order to enforce gender equality throughout all forms of public life and political representation. We have, in essence, developed a democracy

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1   This interview took place after a lecture by Muslim in Amsterdam, on November 10, 2014. It was first published on Tenk.cc.
2   The Social Contract was republished in Dilar Dirik, Renée In der Maur and Jonas Staal (eds.). *Stateless Democracy*. Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015.

without the state. That is a unique alternative in a region plagued by the internally conflicted Free Syrian Army, the Assad regime, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Another way of referring to this concept of democratic confederalism, or democratic autonomy, is *radical democracy*, where people are mobilized to organize themselves and to defend themselves by means of people's armies like the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ).[3] We are practicing this model of self-rule and self-organization without the state as we speak. Other people will speak of self-rule in theory, but for us, this search for self-rule is our daily revolution. Women, men, all strands of our society are now organized. The reason why Kobanî still stands is because we have built these structures.[4]

JS: In your lecture, the words "democracy," "freedom," and "humanity" came up very often. Could you explain what you regard as the fundamental difference between capitalist democracy and what you have just described as democratic autonomy?
SM: Everyone knows how capitalist democracy plays for the votes; it is a play of elections. In many places, parliamentary elections are just about propaganda; they only address the direct self-interest of a voter. Democratic autonomy is about the long term. It is about people understanding and exercising their rights. To get society to become politicized is the core of building democratic autonomy. In Europe, you will find a society that is not politicized. Political parties are only about persuasion and individual benefits, not about actual emancipation and politicization. Real democracy is based on a politicized society. If you go now to Kobanî, and you meet the fighters of the YPG and the YPJ, you will find

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3   The model of democratic confederalism is explained by Abdullah Öcalan in, among others, Abdullah Öcalan. *Democratic Confederalism.* London: International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Ocalan-Peace in Kurdistan," 2011.

4   At the time of this interview, the Women's and People's Protection Units (YPJ and YPG) were defending Kobanî against the invasion by IS that started in September 2014. At the end of October, only 20 percent of the city was under the control of the YPJ and YPG, yet in November, they slowly started to gain more terrain. Kobanî was liberated by the YPJ and YPG on January 27, 2015.

that they know exactly why they are fighting and what they are fighting for. They are not there for money or interests. They are there for elementary values, which they practice at the same time. There is no difference between what they do and what they represent.

JS: So how does one politicize a society to that level of political consciousness?
SM: You have to educate—twenty-four hours a day—to learn how to discuss, to learn how to decide collectively. You have to reject the idea that you have to wait for some leader to come and tell the people what to do and instead learn to exercise self-rule as a collective practice. When dealing with daily matters that concern us all, they have to be explained, criticized, and shared collectively. From the geopolitics of the region to basic humanitarian values, these matters are discussed communally. There has to be collective education so we know who we are, why we are facing certain enemies and what it is we are fighting for.

JS: In a community that is at war and facing humanitarian crisis, who is the educator?
SM: The peoples themselves educate each other. When you put ten people together and ask them for a solution to a problem or propose to them a question, they collectively look for an answer. I believe, in this way, they will find the right one. This collective discussion will make them politicized.

JS: What you are describing as the heart of democratic autonomy is in essence the model of the assembly.
SM: Yes, we have assemblies, committees; we have every possible structure to exercise self-rule throughout all strands of our society.

JS: What do you consider the conditions for such a democratic experiment to be able to take place?
SM: It is a long-term process. I myself have been involved in this movement for decades, in this fight—I have been in jail; I have been tortured. So the people of my community also know why I do what I do. I am not

there to collect money or to benefit personally. At the time, the reason the Syrian government captured and tortured me was that I was educating the people. And I am just one person; so many friends have gone through the same. Many have become martyrs as they died as a result of the torture of the regime. Democratic autonomy is not an idea to be realized in one day; it is an approach, a process that takes explaining, education—it is a revolution that takes a lifelong commitment.

JS: There are many students, intellectuals and artists who are looking to Rojava, who are looking to Kobanî, and who recognize that, in a way, the promise of stateless internationalism has found its way back in our time. What do you say to these people who are not in Rojava but who see its revolution as a horizon. What can they do?

SM: Well, go to Kobanî. Meet the people and listen to them, understand how they have brought their political model about. Speak to the YPG, the YPJ, and learn what they are doing—ask them questions, meet their society. In the near future, the conditions will allow you to go, and you can learn about the model of democratic autonomy that was defended in the worst imaginable conditions, with threat to life, with a lack of food and water. Go and speak to the people and you will understand how and why they did it. And what our society looks like as a result of it.

JS: Do you believe that democratic autonomy could be a model enacted on a global level?

SM: I believe that the democratic administration that we have established is one that everyone feels they are sharing in, so yes, that is a model for the world. There were many prejudices about our revolution, but when people from outside visited and sat down with our communities, they started to believe that democratic autonomy was the right thing. We had people joining our revolution even from Damascus. Everyone can come and see for themselves that our revolution is being fought and realized every day. It is a revolution of life, and as such, our struggle is a struggle for humanity.

Living Without Approval

Jonas Staal: You are an academic researcher but also an activist of the Kurdish Women's Movement. How exactly would you describe the nature of this movement, both geographically and organizationally?

Dilar Dirik: One could start off by deconstructing the words "Kurdish," "women," and "movement." Many people think that a national cause—a national liberation movement or nationalism—is incompatible with women's liberation. I agree, because nationalism has many patriarchal, feudal, primitive premises that in one way or another boil down to passing on the genes of the male bloodline and reproducing domination, to pass on from one generation to another what is perceived as a "nation." Add to that the extremely gendered assumptions that accompany nationalism, which affect family life, labor relations, the economy, knowledge, culture and education, and it becomes evident that it is a very masculinized concept. The Kurdish Women's Movement is named as such because of the multiple layers of oppression and structural violence that Kurdish women have experienced precisely because they are *Kurdish* and because they are *women*.

The Kurdish people have been separated historically over four different states: Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. In each of these states, Kurdish

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1   This is an edited version of the interview that took place on October 22, 2015, at de Balie in Amsterdam. It was revisited by Dirik and Staal in February 2015 and first published in Dilar Dirik, Renée In der Maur and Jonas Staal (eds.). *Stateless Democracy*. Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015.

women have suffered not only from ethnic and socioeconomic discrimination, but also suffered as women because of the patriarchal foundations of these states. At the same time, they have suffered oppression from within their own communities. The focus on their identity as Kurdish *women* hence draws on the violence directly related to this multiple marginalized identity. That is why the point of reference for the Kurdish Women's Movement has always been that there are different hierarchical mechanisms, different layers of oppression, and in order to live with ourselves in a genuine way, we cannot liberate ourselves as women without also challenging ethnic, economic and class oppression on all fronts.

In Turkey, for example, just as in the other countries, Kurdish women are often excluded from feminist movements. Turkish feminism was essentially founded on the secular nationalist model of the Turkish Republic: one flag, one nation, one language. So, despite having achieved many victories for Turkish women, Turkish feminists still subscribe to the nationalist dogma of the state, which does not accept the reality that there are non-Turkish people in the region as well. Kurdish women were consistently portrayed as backward and undeserving of the same type of education as Turks if they chose not to subscribe to the dominant nationalist doctrine. As a result, the Turkish state debased the struggle of Kurdish women by combining sexism and racism, claiming that women are used as prostitutes by the movement. It also proactively used sexualized violence and rape as systematic tools of war against militant Kurdish women in the mountains or in the prisons. Sabiha Gökcen, the adopted daughter of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, is exemplary of this contradiction. Though she is praised for being the first female pilot in Turkey, she is also the woman who bombed Dêrsim (now called Tunceli) during the massacre on Kurdish Alevis in 1937–1938.

The word "movement" makes it clear that this is not just one party, one organization—it is everywhere. The most important part of this mobilization is its grassroots element, but it also has strong theoretical components: the Kurdish Women's Movement is active where it needs to be active, without geographic restrictions. Part of its aim is also to mobilize different women in the region—to mobilize Turkish women, Arab women, Persian women, Afghan women, and so on. In 2013, the first Middle East Women's Conference was initiated by the Kurdish Women's Movement in Amed (Turkish: Diyarbakır), southeastern Turkey, a region that the Kurds call Bakûr, meaning North Kurdistan. Women from across the region, from North Africa to Pakistan, were invited to build cross-regional solidarity. The Kurdish Women's Movement is an idea; it is an idea to make sure that women's liberation should not have boundaries but be regarded instead as a principle, as the fundamental condition for one's understanding of resistance, liberation and justice.

JS: Do you see a universal dimension to the struggle of the Kurds?
DD: Terms such as "Kurds," "Arabs"—these are open for contestation. Many people have argued about what makes a Kurd. Is it the language? The geography? In my eyes, Kurdish people, and in particular Kurdish women, embody the multi-layered oppression of many peoples who have been subjected to various forms of colonialism. So the oppression of the Kurds is shared by many other peoples, but the Kurds have dealt with the exceptional marginalization of their peoples by not one, but four states. The Kurds, apart from those in Iraqi-Kurdistan, have had little to no international support—I refer here mainly to the leftist, radical wing of the Kurdish movement. Not only have the Kurds expressed their solidarity and support for many other stateless struggles in the world, but also their own extreme oppression and resistance appeals to colonized and oppressed peoples all over the world in an almost universal sense. The ways in which communities across all continents have claimed the resistance of Kobanî as their own cause, for instance, demonstrates the universal character that this struggle can take.

JS: What is the foundation of colonialism in the region and how did this inform the critique of the state in the Kurdish Women's Movement?

DD: There have historically been different systems sharing the same hierarchical premises of subjugation, domination and power prior to the current nation-state system. The concept of the modern nation-state is still relatively new; it is only a few hundred years old. In the Middle East, there used to be empires, different sorts of regimes, but not in the sense of the nation-state as such; people of various religious and ethnic groups lived together, with different hierarchies and social orders in place. The world's current dominant system is rather primarily based on people forming one collectivity, unity, through monopoly, established and restricted through the terms and borders determined by the nation-state, and having emerged in parallel to the rise of capitalism and the stronger, formal institutionalization of patriarchy.

Indeed, European colonialists forced the concept of the nation-state upon the Middle East, but the notion also resonated with certain elites in the region who saw it as an opportunity to assert their power by breaking with former hierarchies and elites. I will henceforth focus on the region of Mesopotamia where the Kurdish people live. Before the establishment of current state borders, which are less than one hundred years old, there were the Ottoman and Persian empires. In the seventeenth century, Kurdistan was initially divided between these two. In the early twentieth century, when the Ottoman Empire began to collapse and the European governments were fighting *Atatürk*'s army, the Sykes–Picot Agreement[2] divided borders along colonialist interests. Some of these borders were literally drawn with rulers, thus blatantly illustrating the arbitrary imposition of imagined constructs like the nation-state, which violate and deny the more fluid and organic realities on the ground.

This is colonialism: the forced imposition of borders that do not reflect the realities, loyalties, or identities on the ground, but are based solely on Western (or other non-local) interests. It was done in a very insidious way,

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2 The Sykes–Picot Agreement, signed on May 16, 1916, was an undisclosed agreement between the governments of the United Kingdom and France, with the support of Russia, which mapped out the respective governments' proposed spheres of influence in the Middle East. The agreement was made in anticipation of the Triple Entente's defeat of the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

because those living in the region were made to believe that they themselves would rule these newly carved out regions. This is an example of colonialism that operates by giving colonial power to somebody else who will colonize the people by proxy. From a distance, it will appear as if the people of the Middle East are determining themselves.

In 1923, following the decline and eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic was founded. When plans were being developed to found this new republic, the Armenian Genocide took place to essentially clear space for this new state. The Kurds played an active role in the genocide, and this is something they have to come to terms with. The Kurds were promised rights in this new state, but were later struck by the same oppression.

The creation of the Turkish state was an attempt to copy the French model of the secular republic. Yet this was not secularism in the true sense of the idea, as Alevis, Christians, and Yezidis in the region were subjected to assimilation, discrimination, and massacre by the Turkish state. The Sunni-Muslim national identity was predominant, in spite of the secularist pretensions of the republic. This nationalist conception of modernity exposes the real backwardness and oppressive, fascist foundations of the Turkish state. This alleged modernity was built on blood: systemic ethnic cleansing, historical denial and forced assimilation.

The Turkish Republic wanted to wipe out the identity of the Kurds and thus removed all references to Kurdish culture and Kurdistan from its history books. This occurred hand in hand with psychological warfare, with the state alleging that there are no Kurds, that the Kurds are in fact "mountain Turks." It was a politics of denial, and when the Kurds inevitably rose up against it, they were met with harsh measures.

JS: What was the position of the Kurds in other states, like Syria and Iran?
DD: In countries like Iraq and Syria, both ruled by Ba'athist regimes, there was an active politics of Arabization in place. These states did not deny the Kurds in the same way as Turkey, but they oppressed them nonetheless by taking away their rights to citizenship, forbidding their

language and repressing all political activism. Areas historically inhabited by Kurds were resettled with Arabs. The Kurdish language was not taught, meaning that in order to be literate and educated, Kurds had to learn Arabic. Several massacres were committed by these states, the most notable one being the chemical weapons attack ordered by Saddam Hussein in 1988 on Helebce (Arabic: Halabja), during which 5,000 people lost their lives within a short few hours.

Many Kurdish parties were also active during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. They wanted to be part of the revolution, which was initially vanguarded by leftist student groups that opposed the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. But when Ayatollah Khomeini took over, he issued a fatwa against the Kurds that made it permissible to kill them. Thus, like other oppositions, the expectations of the Kurds were hijacked during the revolution.

The Iranian state is nonetheless extremely multiethnic. The "minorities" in Iran are huge, and they consist of several millions of people—the Ahwaz, Azeri, Kurdish, and Baluch peoples, among other groups. This is why Iran cannot simply deny all of these different peoples and their different languages, at least not in the same way as Turkey has. The politics of Iran are based on a very chauvinist Persian doctrine. The Iranian regime did not deny the identity of the Kurds, but considered itself superior to them. Compared with Kurds in other regions, the Kurds in Iran were better able to preserve most of their culture, heritage, and art, because the Iranian state never denied them these cultural rights. Rather, they deprived Kurds of political rights: the right to politically organize and the right to political representation. Iran regularly executes political prisoners of different ethnic groups, including many Kurds. Women suffer another layer of oppression due to the theocratic nature of the Islamic Republic.

JS: This systemic denial of political rights has created the base for a strong Kurdish nationalist movement.

DD: Most, if not all, of the Kurdish parties in the four regions started with the aim of an independent Kurdish state. The idea was that we

suffer this oppression precisely because we are stateless, and so if we—the "largest people without a state"—have a state of our own, our people would no longer encounter such large-scale systemic violence.

This kind of nationalism often emerges in colonial contexts. However, state nationalism is very different from anti-colonial movements that claim a national identity in order to assert their existence in the face of genocide. I am critical towards those who place Turkish, Iranian, or Arab nationalisms on the same level as Kurdish nationalism; you cannot claim this without taking into consideration the radically unequal power relations that are at the foundations of this conflict. Yet this does not mean that nationalism is the solution or that a Kurdish state would pave the road towards genuine self-determination.

JS: This idea also contributed to the creation of the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978, which led to the necessity of waging armed struggle against the Turkish government's repression of the Kurds. At a certain stage, the PKK's leadership changed its ideas concerning the goal of achieving an independent state.

DD: Indeed, the PKK started out with the aim of an independent nation-state as a reaction to state violence and systemic denial, assimilation, and oppression. It emerged at a very conflict-ridden time in Turkey. In 1980, four years before the PKK began its armed struggle, a military coup d'état in Turkey had tried to wipe out the left and other oppositional groups. The PKK experienced many ups and downs, related to the guerilla resistance against the Turkish army, the fall of the Soviet Union, the collapse of many leftist liberation movements, and Öcalan's capture in Kenya on February 15, 1999, organized by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization in collaboration with the United States' Central Intelligence Agency. It was in this context, during the course of the late nineties, that the PKK began to theoretically deconstruct the state, fueled in part by the Kurdish Women's Movement, having come to the conclusion that the state is inherently incompatible with democracy.

Statelessness exposes you to oppression, to denial, to genocide. In a nation-state oriented system, recognition and the monopoly of power is reserved for the state and this offers some form of protection. But the point is that the suffering of the stateless results from the system being based on the nation-state paradigm. When you have the monopoly on power, your problems are not instantly solved. Having a state does not mean that your society is liberated, that you will have a just society, or that it will be an ethical society.

The question is more systemic: should we accept the premises of the statist system that causes these sufferings in the first place? Could we have a nation-state, a concept inherently based on capitalism and patriarchy, and still think of ourselves as liberated? In the Middle East, absolutely no state is truly independent. China, Russia, the US, and European governments: they are the ones hierarchically controlling the international order.

This shift away from desiring a state was an acknowledgement that the state cannot actually represent one's interests, that the monopoly on power will always be in the hands of a few people who can do whatever they want with you, specifically because the state is implicated in several international agreements, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. That is why the PKK began to understand the importance of rejecting top-down approaches to power and governance. They concluded that there needed to be political structures that could serve the empowerment of the people, structures that would politicize them to such a degree that they internalize democracy. The work of the Kurdish Women's Movement was pivotal in that process. Patriarchy is much older than the nation-state, but nation-states have adopted its mechanisms. That is why the disassociation of democracy from the state is also a disassociation from patriarchy.

JS: When I first met Fadile Yildirim, an activist of the Kurdish Women's Movement, at the first New World Summit in 2012, she said that the struggle of the Kurdish Women's Movement is twofold. On one hand, it is a struggle against the Turkish state and its repression of Kurdish culture and history; on the other hand, it is a struggle within the PKK itself for the acknowledgment of women as equal fighters to men.

DD: In national liberation movements, there is always the danger that women's rights will be compromised following liberation. Women were part of the PKK from the beginning. Some of its key founders, like the late Sakine Cansiz, were women. The PKK started out in university circles, where people were exposed to socialist ideas; such circles easily accepted the concept of women's liberation. When the PKK started to wage its guerilla war in 1984 and its grassroots element began to take full force, many people from the villages and rural areas—people with little to no education—joined the struggle. The presence of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds exposed many class divisions at the early stage of the movement. Moreover, due to their different backgrounds, the people who came from the villages were more reluctant to accept women as equals to men.

As a result, women were pushed a big step back. While in the beginning the mobilization was very ideological and theoretical, when the war intensified, its ideological and educational elements were often pushed to second place. At that time, women actually began to cut their hair very short to appear more masculine: the idea was to copy men in order to prove that they were equally capable.

In the nineties, with encouragement from Öcalan, women who experienced discrimination within their own ranks began to mobilize. Öcalan has always been supportive of women's liberation and has contributed significantly to the theoretical justifications around the autonomous organization of women within the PKK. Because of this, however, he has also faced opposition. The nineties saw only the initiation of the Kurdish Women's Movement; in the last ten years, the movement has gained much more strength. Contradictions such as class divisions have been tackled and new approaches towards women's liberation have been adopted in order to transform women's liberation from an elitist ideal to a grassroots cause.

In 2004, the PKK experienced a major backlash, with many people actually talking about the end of the organization. This was at the same time when major international offensives against the PKK began. Further, Öcalan's brother, Osman Öcalan, caused a major split in the movement by taking a feudal-nationalistic line. One of Osman Öcalan's slogans was "We want to be able to marry too," because in the PKK, the cadres and the guerillas are not allowed to marry or have sexual relationships due to their militancy.

Osman Öcalan's stance was perceived as an explicit attack on the women's movement. Many women broke away from the PKK, and some married men in the circles around Osman Öcalan. The morale of the women's movement suffered severely at this time because of the perception that Kurdish women should just behave like "normal" wives. To be clear, the women's movement doesn't oppose marriage as such; the problem was the way that Osman Öcalan tried to undermine the women's movement by saying that their militancy, and thus their liberation, was not "normal."

Ever since, the women's movement has restructured itself to create new organizations. Now, its main body is the Women's Communities of Kurdistan (KJK). The aim is to form an umbrella organization, rather than a sole, decisive party. This could be the women's branch of a particular party, a women's cooperative, or a women's council in Europe, to name but a few possibilities. Regardless of the forms such cooperating institutions might take, they are all part of one large movement. Today, due to this massive mobilization, the whole world is talking about the Kurdish Women's Movement, not least because of its resilience against the Islamic State.

JS: You have described how the Kurdish Women's Movement and Abdullah Öcalan critiqued the state as being inherently anti-democratic, due to the patriarchal relations it embodies and its complicity in the structures of global capital. In Öcalan's prison writings, he refers to the political alternative as "democratic confederalism," which is essentially a form of democracy without the state, and based instead on self-governance, communal structures, and gender-equal political representation. How did the Kurdish movement respond when he articulated this radical proposal?

DD: Öcalan declared the ideal of democratic confederalism in 2005, while still in prison. As I said, at that time, he had already rejected the strife for the Kurdish nation-state. For a movement comprising millions of people who anticipated an independent state, this concept of democratic confederalism was initially very difficult to grasp. It is difficult to reach the grassroots with the idea of a democracy without the state. In fact, many have accused Öcalan of abandoning the cause of "independence," because they understand independence only within the framework of the state. It is very important to bear in mind the different realities and consciousness of people within the movement. In recent years, however, and through active practice, the notion of democratic confederalism has begun to resonate with many people.

The PKK and affiliated organizations managed to introduce the concept of democratic confederalism through council movements, autonomous organizations, communities and alternative schools in Turkey. In other words, models of self-organization—central to the idea of democratic confederalism—were used to communicate that very same concept to the masses. Through active practice, they showed that an alternative to the state was in fact possible. Essentially, this boils down to teaching politics through practicing politics—to radically overcome the separation between theory and practice.

You need to cooperate with all people who are interested in democracy, because the concept of democratic confederalism is not just to liberate yourself by establishing autonomy in spite of the state, but also to democratize existing structures. For example, in Turkey, despite state repression, the Kurdish movement established the principle of co-presidency: the idea that each political organization should have a male and female representative. Gender equality on all levels is one of the foundations of democratic confederalism, but one can put it to practice directly

not only in autonomous regions, but also in existing political structures. You have to lead the way through practice.

JS: At what level is democratic confederalism a political blueprint, and what were its inspirations?

DD: Öcalan reads a lot in prison. It was there that he encountered, among others, the work of the American anarchist and radical ecologist Murray Bookchin, who had developed the concept of "communalism" as self-administration without the state, in rejection of centralized structures of power, reminiscent of the early Soviets and the 1936 libertarian-socialist Spanish Revolution in Catalonia. Öcalan recognized that Bookchin's concepts, such as that of "social ecology," resonated with the Kurdish quest for alternatives to the state. This was not just an ecology in terms of nature, but also the ecology of life: the foundation of non-centralized, diversified and egalitarian structures of power that link to questions of economy, education, politics, co-existence and the importance of women's liberation. What is explicit in both Bookchin and Öcalan's thoughts is the idea of working "despite of" what is happening around you—in other words, to act through practice. But Bookchin is not the only foundational thinker who shaped Öcalan's thoughts; in his writings, he references Michel Foucault, Immanuel Wallerstein and Noam Chomsky, among many others.

Democratic confederalism is built on the work of many thinkers, but it is customized to the particularities of the oppression that takes place in Kurdistan. It considers the question of how to build an alternative to the state—for and by the people—independent of the international order, while also taking into account the specific oppressive regimes of the region. This is why the insistence is always on regional governments and regional autonomy, even though the model of democratic confederalism is proposed for the entire Kurdish region. Each region has to discover what works best for it, all the while adhering to the principles of gender equality, ecology and radical grassroots democracy. These are the pillars of democratic confederalism that stand beyond dispute.

JS: The model of democratic confederalism has recently found its full implications in the northern part of Syria, in the Rojava Revolution, led by Kurdish revolutionaries. Could you explain what the Rojava Revolution is?

DD: Rojava is the Kurdish word for "West," referring to West Kurdistan, or if we look at the present geopolitical map, it is the northern part of Syria, which knows a large population of Kurds. The Rojava Revolution was triggered by the so-called Arab Spring uprisings of 2012, but the origins and background of the movement go back much further. The Kurds had opposed the Syrian regime for a long time. Already in 2004, there was the Qamişlo massacre, during which Assad's regime killed several Kurdish activists involved in an uprising. Under the Assad regime, the Kurds had no rights to citizenship and they were not allowed to speak their language. In many ways, their situation was much worse than the Arab opposition, and so they naturally took part in the general uprising in 2012. The Kurds soon realized, however, that the opposition would not necessarily provide them with better alternatives, as they were manipulated by western and non-western actors, who were driven by their own self-serving interests in the fall of Assad rather than a true investment in a Syrian democracy or aiding the liberation of the people. As a result, more and more radical fighters were supported and imported by foreign forces. Today, we know them as part of IS.

The Assad regime engaged in heavy clashes with the Free Syrian Army, the main opposition group, in areas like Damascus and Aleppo. As a result, the regime withdrew from the Kurdish areas in the northern part of the country, and the Kurds took their chance to take over: they at once seized control of the northern cities, and replaced the institutions of the Assad regime with their own new system. On July 19, 2012, the Rojava Revolution was declared. Turkey was very angry, not only because it has a long border alongside the Kurds in Syria, but even more so because the Rojava Revolution is ideologically linked to the PKK. At that exact moment, the Turkish government announced that they would start peace negotiations with the PKK—they had to respond to the pressure.

Then, on January 9, 2013, three female Kurdish activists were killed assassination-style in Paris; they were Fidan Doğan, Leyla Söylemez and Sakine Canzis, the latter being a co-founder of the PKK. For the Kurdish community, it was clear that the murders were a desperate attempt by Turkey to weaken the Kurds' negotiation power, to show that they could serve a blow to Kurds even in Europe. Meanwhile, the Rojava Revolution faced several enemies. First, it was the regime of Assad and then emerging jihadist groups, such as the Jabhat al-Nusra, or al-Nusra Front, an organization explicitly supported and funded by the Turkish state to undermine the autonomous structures of the Kurdish resistance. After that followed the organization that calls itself the Islamic State.

Towards the end of 2012, despite the fact that they had to fight these jihadist forces, the Kurds started to found their own autonomous administrations and councils and built alliances with parties from all over the region. In November 2013, the Rojava Revolution declared its autonomy; it no longer operated within the state.

The situation grew increasingly difficult, as the whole world was being dragged into the war: the US, Europe, Russia, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Turkey, Iran… It became something of a second Cold War. Assad fighting the rebels was just a microcosm of all the international interests that were invested in the region. Due to Turkey's NATO membership and their interests in toppling both Assad and Kurdish autonomy, the Kurds were not invited to the so-called Geneva II Peace Conference on Syria in January 2014, which was supposedly intended to find a solution for the conflict in Syria. If this had really been a genuine attempt to bring different parties together to find a solution, it would have been a no-brainer that the Kurds, who make up 10–15 percent of the population and who emerged as key actors in the war, should be invited. The so-called opposition was hand-picked by the powers that wanted to get rid of Assad. This is not meant as an apology for Assad—Assad had to be toppled—but one cannot simply construct an opposition for one's own interests. The results of the conference, similar to many other major international decisions, did not at all reflect the will of the Syrian people

and certainly did not aim at a democratic solution.

The independent cantons of the autonomous region of Rojava, modelled after democratic confederalism, were announced at the same time that the Geneva II convention took place. So, basically, the response of the Rojava Revolution was: "Well, if you don't invite us to Geneva II, to this major international conference, we will announce our cantons; we claim our full independence with or without your approval." This is the general stance of democratic confederalism, this is what it is all about: to work together and move forward no matter what is happening around you.

After this, jihadist attacks on Rojava only intensified. There were reports of jihadis being treated in Turkish hospitals. Had the world listened then, several massacres could have been avoided. Salih Muslim, the Co-Chair of the main political party of Rojava, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), was denied visas four, five times to travel to the US to explain the threat of state-sponsored terrorism in the region. Sînem Mohammed, another prominent PYD representative, did not receive a visa to the United Kingdom—all because of outside political interests. On top of all of this, there are several economic and political embargoes on Rojava. In 2014, even the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq collaborated with Turkey in an attempt to marginalize the Rojava Revolution, because they wanted to be the dominant Kurdish force in the region. It is remarkable that the Rojava Revolution even happened and persisted in spite of these obstacles. Such obstacles actually account in part for why Rojava has been so successful, for had it been co-opted by a wider force, with very undemocratic interests, it might not have become a genuine revolution.

JS: That is to say that the revolutionary conditions that made it possible for the Rojava Revolution to develop were also partly due to the denial of the international order, which forced the cell-like structures of the Kurdish resistance to strengthen and become even more sophisticated?
DD: Exactly. It was a completely self-sustained effort—there was no support from anywhere. The revolution had to work in spite of this war

and embargoes, so people had to come up with creative solutions. The People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the self-organized armed forces of Rojava, even had to build their own tanks! The Syrian regime often used to say that certain products cannot grow in Rojava, but through experimentation, people learned that many vegetables actually grow very well in Rojava and have since created sustainable agricultural projects. This general self-reliance proved successful over the course of the revolution, especially as the fighting forces of Rojava handled their defense by themselves rather than relying on weapons or instructions from abroad.

Of course, it would have been great to have had support, but only from the right places—from leftist movements and parties, for example. Yet the fact that there was no outside support also nurtured the politicization of the people, who learned to do everything on their own. But the costs and sacrifice were very high.

JS: In every revolution, however tragic, there seems to be the necessity for the creation of a situation in which there is collectively nothing left to lose: a total break with the structure that is oppressing you.
DD: What is unique about the Rojava Revolution is that it already had a solid ideological base. It was built on the ideas of democratic confederalism, of self-sustainability, self-governance, autonomy, true independence—not through the state, but in the sense of living without approval. This is in fact the legacy of the Kurdish movement philosophically affiliated with the PKK. It is something that the actors of this revolution will tell you themselves, but it is hard to accept for those who appropriate Rojava's resistance against IS for their own ends. Before Rojava, there were the autonomous councils created by the PKK in Turkey, for example, for which many people were imprisoned. The people of Rojava were not scared, because they knew the costs of their revolution, the cost of establishing something in spite of the oppressive dominant system and its attacks. That is why the resistance in Kobanî was so difficult for many people to grasp. That people would continue to resist right down

to the last bullet, all for a different life—this philosophy and collective mobilization cannot be treated in isolation from the military victories against IS.

JS: How is democratic confederalism practiced in Rojava today?
DD: The Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava is founded on the Social Charter, also referred to as the Social Contract. It was collectively written by all peoples inhabiting the region: Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens. It contains the pillars of the model of democratic confederalism, a secular model of politics that guarantees gender equality, upholds the principles of social communalist, collectivist practice—meaning that centralized powers are reduced to a minimum, and that local communities, the grassroots components, uphold maximum political agency. The three cantons of Rojava—Afrîn, Cizîrê and Kobanî—are affiliated, but they organize their affairs autonomously. One of the principles is that each region will understand its realities best. Kobanî, for example, is mostly inhabited by Kurds, while Cizîrê has a very multiethnic population.

Each canton has 22 committees, or ministeries; each committee has one chair and two deputies. If the chair is Kurdish, then the two deputy chairs must be filled by one Arab and one Assyrian—and at least one of them has to be a woman. Each canton is chaired by one woman and one man. Parallel to the cantons is a social movement called Tev-Dem, the Movement for a Democratic Society. Their task is to link the administration and the people, to guarantee that the grassroots assume a leading role in all matters. In spite of the canton administrations, which were regarded as necessary measures to address several geopolitical threats during this transitional moment, Rojava is essentially run by councils—neighborhood councils, village councils, and city councils—where people make decisions together and form committees to implement these decisions. It is important to know that the administrative body of Rojava is not separate from civil society: that is what the Rojava Revolution is trying to do, to reshape governance into a collective issue.

The women's movement is also autonomously organized in the form of the coordinating body Yekîtiya Star[3], of which the YPJ is a part. Yekîtiya Star decides on women's affairs, in matters such as, for example, who should be co-chair of a certain canton. They are also the body that pushes women's liberation as central to understanding and instituting democracy. Many cooperatives have been founded to guarantee the systemic integration of women in politics and economy. Autonomous women's councils exist parallel to the general people's councils on all levels, from neighborhood communes to the canton level. They have the power to unconditionally veto the people's councils.

Certain operational mechanisms such as quotas and co-chairs might seem very bureaucratic, but these are mechanisms to help guarantee that true change is implemented. The real social work, the real struggle, is to ensure that these widely advocated liberation principles become accepted and internalized across society, to understand that if we want to be a society in which different people can live together peacefully, then we must all govern this society collectively and equally. If we truly appreciate women, then we need to set in place quotas to guarantee that women are fully recognized for their potential. It might be that, one day, quotas are no longer needed. And this goes both ways. For example, there are now many areas where women dominate, so a 40 percent quota was recently introduced in these regions so as to avoid an overwhelming presence of women in one committee. This is also to make sure that men do not avoid certain aspects of political and social life, as in the case of family-related committees, in which men must also take part and assume responsibility.

The intensity of the war—especially in Kobanî, which has been at the forefront of the fight against IS—has forced many aspects of the political project to be slowed down. In spite of this, however, democratic confederalism and its aim of democratic autonomy have continued to develop and flourish, particularly in Canton Cizîrê, which is the largest

and safest area, situated in the eastern-most part of Rojava. Not long ago, an alternative university, the Mesopotamia Academy of Social Sciences, was founded despite the ongoing war. There, dominant assumptions and methods around concepts such as knowledge and science are challenged and reinvigorated. One of the things people have learned in the process is that if you do not establish something parallel to your armed struggle, everything will crumble. The social revolution in Rojava is also a guarantee for the fight. It means that you establish something, you create structures that people are willing to protect because they represent a perspective that they desperately need.

Very often, the idea of radicalism is understood as needing something very opposed to what is happening around you at the moment. My understanding of what constitutes radicalism, or radical feminism in the case of the Kurdish issue, is that women are now recognized as equally capable of running life alongside men; that they have an autonomous organization, even an army; that they are teachers in schools; that they actively participate in the economy; that patriarchy is no longer seen as the norm; that women's liberation has become a cherished aim of a revolution that seeks to change the mentality of society. And all of this in a region where the fact that a twelve-year-old girl could be married off to a seventy-year-old man used to be tolerated.

You do not defeat IS or change society through individualistic actions that may appear radical because they are shocking, which is how radical feminism has been perceived in recent times. On the contrary, you challenge society by truly—collectively—attacking the roots of oppression and radically empowering and politicizing grassroots communities.

The Islamic State is in many ways just an extension of what is happening in the world at large. Its systematic attacks on women, its femicide, finds its nemesis in the Kurdish Women's Movement. Further, one has to ask why they call themselves the Islamic *State*. What have they seen in the concept of the state that appeals to them? The mechanisms of domination that the state very effectively perpetuates in this world—that is what. In many ways, IS is a product of the world order in

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3   In August 2016, Yekîtiya Star (Star Union) changed its name to Kongreya Star (Star Congress).

which we live, actively exploiting the existing conditions, while at the same time being a result of these very conditions. That is why the Rojava Revolution is not only an alternative in opposition to IS, but is also an opposition against the policies of that region and the mechanisms of the global order more generally.

For instance, the United Nations focuses only on state-actors; states will receive aid, states will receive support, states will receive acknowledgement. This is why not much humanitarian aid reached the people in Rojava, because the cantons are not acknowledged as states, even though the Syrian regime no longer applies there. Legally, it is a no man's land. Because of these absurd bureaucratic policies, refugees in Rojava continue to starve.

JS: What you are describing seems to have everything to do with defining in practice a genuine cultural and democratic revolution. This is apparent not only in the way that the Rojava cantons organize themselves, how they confront their opponents, such as IS, a product of imperialist politics and radical, patriarchal, totalizing state policies—but more crucially—in how Rojava cantons operate in the face of a geopolitical order that is not able to think through the radical premises of democracy, of liberating democracy from the structure of the state.

DD: The Rojava Revolution, in Kobanî, for example, is very often reduced to a fight that is only about self-defense, as if it were only about toppling IS, which is indeed a major issue or else people would face genocide. But the system that is being implemented in Rojava, its structure and mentality—that is what really frustrates IS and the international order alike. In a sense, this is self-defense also in a philosophical way, of setting the terms of your existence.

Turkey calls the PKK, PYD, and IS all terrorists. The word "terror" is a very sensitive one for the Kurds, because our communities have been criminalized as terrorists for so long. But it is clear that these two "terrorist systems" are not the same to Turkey, already because the PYD, for instance, did not receive funding or support or at least silent approval

from Turkey, while IS did. At the same time, the international order has remained willfully blind to the threat of IS for two years, despite repeated warnings from the Kurds.

JS: At the end of the day, the geopolitical order seems more afraid of a democracy that is capable of organizing itself outside of the state—critiquing and undermining the that very order—than the idea of so-called terrorism.

DD: It is very interesting indeed to see how nobody wants to acknowledge the cantons, despite it now being very clear to everyone that the Kurds in Syria are the strongest opponents of IS. What would be a better way of supporting the resistance than acknowledging its administration? There is no challenging the system. Even the ideology with which women are battling IS is labeled as terrorist. To acknowledge Rojava would mean to confront NATO-member Turkey, to hold several Gulf countries accountable, to admit that Western foreign policy has failed, to expose the global arms trade. All that would cause a dramatic chaos.

JS: So, what you are saying is that when you acknowledge Rojava, you have to go through a similar process of confronting one's own internal oppressive structures, as those leading the Rojava Revolution have done themselves in order to arrive at the model of democratic confederalism.

DD: Why on earth would the Islamic State emerge to begin with? Why did states exploit the genuine desire for social change in Arab countries? Why did states promote new tyrants to take their place in these governments? Why did they support sectarianism? Why are so many young people in Europe joining IS? Why is the Rojava alternative, which looks like a potential perspective for the region, so marginalized?

The answer lies in the fact that the global system is inherently flawed. That is why Rojava will continue to fight the system.

Jonas Staal:[1]

Ideology = Form

We Are All Terrorists Here

A young cat is curling around the legs of Diyar Hesso—filmmaker, teacher, and one of the main organizers of the Rojava Film Commune in the city of Derbêsiyê, in Canton Cizîrê.[2] As I watch the animal play, I hear Hesso say, "He's Terrorist." I look up confused. "His name," Hesso explains, "the name of the cat is Terrorist." And with a smile, "Because we're all terrorists here."[3] "Here" is the autonomous region of Rojava (West Kurdistan), located in what many will know as northern Syria. In 2011, Kurdish revolutionaries, in alliance with Arabs, Assyrians, and other peoples from the region, declared Rojava independent from the Assad regime and established a system that they refer to as "democratic confederalism," or *stateless democracy*.[4] This practice of democracy without the state is structured by a collectively written social contract that defines the key principles of the revolution: self-governance, gender equality, the right to self-defense, and a communal economy.[5] Through communes, cooperatives, and councils, the performance of stateless

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1   This essay was first published in e-flux Journal #69. January 2016.

2   An undated press release from the Rojava Film Commune, founded in 2015, states: "The most valuable outcomes of the cinema will be delivered to the peoples of Rojava in their own languages. We shall not allow the cinema to be simplified to become an industrial tool, or a consumable and exhaustible object. The squares of our villages will become our culture and art centers. Our factories and our restaurants will become cinema halls. Our vibrant streets will be our films sets."

3   Interview conducted with Diyar Hesso at the Rojava Film Commune, Derbêsiyê on October 30, 2015.

4   See Dilar Dirik, Renée In der Maur, and Jonas Staal (eds.). *Stateless Democracy*. Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015.

5   "Social Contract," in ibid.: 131–58.

democracy has now taken shape over three years. Its primary aim is the development of a system of thought and political practice that structurally undermines the monopolization of power. These decentralized structures are referred to as the "Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava," which comprises the total assemblage of self-governing political entities from this autonomous region.[6]

I have previously written about the practice of stateless democracy in the context of the Rojava Revolution, and here I will engage two related concepts: the *form* and the *performance* of stateless democracy.[7] The nation-state is a structure that demands of its subjects a specific self-consciousness as "citizens." Abiding by the monopoly of power enforced by the state takes the form of a series of performative acts that are demanded of citizens—from paying taxes to voting—through which the form and legitimacy of the state is strengthened. As such, one could argue, the form of the state embodies a *script.* Those who perform this script are granted a certain privilege for their service in maintaining the state's legitimacy. This is different in the case of those who are deemed irrelevant as potential citizens (undocumented migrants, refugees, and so forth) or who attempt to challenge, alter, or rewrite the scripts through which the *stage* we call the state directs us (social movements, whistleblowers, liberation organizations, i.e., "terrorists," and so forth). In the case of stateless democracy, the form of the nation-state is rejected and replaced by a performance based on an ideology of self-governance at all levels of society. This performance brings about a proliferation of new forms, rather than being subjected to a single given one. The success of stateless democracy relies on what the Kurdish revolutionaries

refer to as the "mentality" of the individuals constituting the communal organizations that perform self-governance at the base; one could also say that it concerns the *state* we are in—both literally in terms of the state as a structure of governance, and metaphorically in terms of our "state of mind." The manner in which the ideology of stateless democracy is internalized defines whether or not its performance can be successful.

In this light, Hesso's joke—"We're all terrorists here"—rings very true. We are not talking about terrorists in the sense of the sheer physical violence perpetuated by the Islamic State on whoever does not abide by its brutal Saudi-exported and US-armed Wahhabi doctrines, but rather people who are terrorists by default, because the Kurdish revolutionaries have separated themselves from the form of the state as such.[8] While an imperialist state such as the US employs non-state or extraterritorial entities such as drones, extralegal prisons, and proxy armies (out of which the Islamic State emerged), this love for extraterritoriality embodies a mere wish to expand the state, rather than a liberation from it. Unsurprisingly, the imaginary of the Islamic State—the "rogue" proxy-child of foreign intervention and financing—cannot but strive for yet another state. While its rhetoric focuses on the establishment of a worldwide caliphate, recently leaked documents, such as those that became known as the "ISIS Papers," show a rigid but rather conventional blueprint for a new nation-state.[9] According to Dilar Dirik, representative of the Kurdish Women's Movement, non-state entities that truly "live without approval" are of a different kind, as they are sub-

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6 My own research in the autonomous Rojava region taught me the following: the foundation of the practice of stateless democracy is located in the commune, of which there are dozens in every small city. The city municipality has the responsibility to meet the communes' infrastructural demands, but cannot enforce its own will upon the communes. For the cantonal council—three in total, from the east to the west of Rojava: Afrîn, Kobanî, and Cizîrê—the political task is that of coordination and international mediation on behalf of the communes and municipal councils. Finally, the trans-cantonal council connects the three cantons and has the task of facilitating communication within this mosaic of political entities.

7 Jonas Staal. "To Make a World, Part III: Stateless Democracy." *e-flux journal* #63. March 2015.

8 "Turkey's role has been different but no less significant than Saudi Arabia's in aiding ISIS and other jihadi groups. Its most important action has been to keep open its 560-mile border with Syria. This gave ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other opposition groups a safe rear base from which to bring in men and weapons […] Most foreign jihadis have crossed Turkey on their way to Syria and Iraq […] Turkey […] sees the advantages of ISIS weakening Assad and the Syrian Kurds." Patrick Cockburn. *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*. New York: Verso, 2015: 36–7.

9 "The document—written as a foundation text to train 'cadres of administrators' in the months after Isis's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared a 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria on 28 June 2014— sketches out how to organise government departments including education, natural resources, industry, foreign relations, public relations and military camps." Shiv Malik. "The Isis papers: leaked documents show how Isis is building its state." *The Guardian*. December 7, 2015.

jects engaged in the terrifying process of emancipation—a rejection of old forms in an attempt to perform new ones.[10] The notion of "changing mentality" names that terrifying process, for we are not merely speaking of a changing of guards from Assad's soldiers to Kurdish defense units, but of a rejection of the internalized guards and the oppression the old regime represented within the individual performer. Non-state entities that change mentality move beyond the usual script imposed upon them through the form of the nation-state. Consequently, they live a dual form of terror: the terror of liberation, and the state-terror that is employed to punish those that engage in this process.[11] For regimes such as Erdoğan's in Turkey, the true terrorists are those that Hesso describes: the humans and cats that decide to go off-stage—or better, *off-state*—altogether.[12] The fourth wall of the geopolitical theater that the

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10 Dilar Dirik interviewed by Jonas Staal, "Living Without Approval," in this publication: 71.

11 I write this in line with a series of conversations with writer Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei on the subject of "progressive terrorism." With this term we do not refer to what is generally considered "terrorism" in terms of the violence of non-state actors, which, as we discussed, can differ from being the (necessary) result of a liberation struggle (e.g., the PKK) or embody a mere oppressive mimicry of the violence of the state (e.g., Islamic State). With "progressive terrorism", we specifically relate to a *terror of form,* meaning the existence or emergence of forms that existing structures—such as that of the state—cannot contain, and thus must refer to as "terrorism." For example, the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz—an essential reference for both Van Gerven Oei and me—in many ways dedicated his lifework to confronting the internal formlessness of any structure of governance, thought or sexuality; the terror of form in Gombrowicz's work embodies the necessity to recognize one's own authorship in confronting this essential formlessness, rejecting any glorification of form as "natural" or "authentic" in its supposed "mature" authority. "Living without authority" in that regard interrelates with Dilar Dirik's definition of autonomy as "Living without approval"—both name the terror and necessity of liberation.

12 Especially from the perspective of Turkish President Erdoğan, the existence of the autonomous Rojava region represents a threat to his increasingly dictatorial policies. The rise of the progressive Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which unites both progressive Turks and the Kurdish movement, and which managed to pass the high electoral threshold in the last two elections, has increased the regime's fear that Rojava will attempt to unite with Bakûr, North Kurdistan, which Erdoğan considers to be southeastern Turkey. Erdoğan's regime even tolerated the fundamentalist Islamic State's use of its borders in order to get rid of the Kurdish autonomists, and Turkey's strong position in the NATO alliance has been exploited by all possible means in order to gain international support to renew the war against the PKK and block humanitarian corridors or even economic exchange with the Rojava region. A recent article by anthropologist David Graeber gives a clear overview of Erdoğan's use of the Islamic State for his own purposes: "Had Turkey placed the same kind of absolute blockade on Isis territories as they did on Kurdish-held parts of Syria, let alone shown the same sort of 'benign neglect' towards the PKK and YPG [the Kurdish militant organizations from North and West Kurdistan] that they have been offering to Isis, that blood-stained 'caliphate' would long since

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Kurds are dismantling consists of performing the fact that life beyond the state is possible, even though no one yet knows exactly which form this life will take.

What we can say with regard to the new forms that the Rojava Revolution has developed so far is that the assemblage of radical institutions gathered in the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava is essentially the "form"—or the trans*form*ative base—of stateless democracy. The formation is transformative in that its decentralized, conflicting, and complex structures are hard to unify even in thought. As such, they interrogate the very idea of what the form of a nation, people, or community is supposed to entail in terms of a homogeneous entity. The heterogeneous, self-assessing nature of power performed through the disciplined practice of stateless democracy attempts to undermine any monopolization of power by all possible means. While "discipline" might be considered a problematic term for some, for the Rojava revolutionaries the capacity to collectively govern goes hand in hand with the governance of the self. This governance no longer takes place through an external actor—the "cop inside our head," in this case the former Assad regime—but through an attempt to define oneself as both an actor in and co-creator of the collective script entitled stateless democracy: a script that is performed off-state and thus, inevitably, a script that has to be performed as a terrorist.

Revolutionary Realism According to the Rojava Film Commune

The term "discipline" in this context can be understood in two ways: discipline in terms of a capacity to self-regulate one's performance in order to develop the common script of stateless democracy, but also discipline in terms of one's field of expertise. How, in this regard, does the discipline of performing stateless democracy relate to the discipline of form, the discipline of art?[13]

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have collapsed and arguably, the Paris attacks may never happened." David Graeber. "Turkey could cut off Islamic State's supply lines. So why doesn't it?" *The Guardian*. November 18, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/18/turkey-cut-islamic-state-supply-lines-erdogan-isis/

To answer this question, I will return to Diyar Hesso of the Rojava Film Commune. When I asked him about the specific relation of the nation-state to the form of art, he explained:

If you look at the history of art from the perspective of statehood, we see the emergence of an art that I would call "unrealistic." With that I mean that we see ourselves faced with an art that is consciously separated from societal developments, what is called "art for art's sake." In the context of the Rojava Revolution we aim to develop a realistic art that is of a specific use, one could say a "useful art."[14]

With this notion of "realism," Hesso does not refer to a figurative realism, an art that derives from the mimicry of natural appearances. Rather, Hesso speaks of a *revolutionary realism*, meaning the kind of reality that becomes possible through a revolutionary practice but is not yet present. Revolutionary realism means that we reject the scripts

that define what is realistic and what is utopian, what is proper citizenship and what is a terrorist act. Revolutionary realism focuses on shaping new possible realities once we have rejected the forms that structure our current performance, in this case, specifically controlled within the stage of the nation-state.[15]

The question, from one artist to another, is how the transformative practice of stateless democracy and the new forms of self-assessing power that it tries to establish relate to the morphology of art. With the term "morphology," originally derived from biology, I refer here to what I believe defines the concept of art: the knowledge and practice of visual literacy.

Visual literary means our capacity to "read" form, but also to create form. For example, one can look at the depiction in a painting (it shows Marat in a bath after having been stabbed by a political opponent), but one can also read its construction, the anatomy of its form: its materiality, its accumulated layers of paint resulting from a series of performative acts—brushstrokes. The morphology of art contains at least as much information as a description of the image that a given artwork depicts.[16]

However, this analysis and understanding of morphology is not limited to the confines of a painting or museum; one could, for example, engage in a morphological analysis of a parliament. If we would limit

13 In a private conversation on October 17, 2015, in the city hotel of Dêrik, Amina Osse, the Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê, elaborated on what she referred to as "democratic discipline." With this term, she named not the role of the state in enforcing democracy upon its subjects, but rather the necessary moral and ethical compass of an individual in bringing about the collective performance of stateless democracy. In a democracy without the state, the capacity to outsource responsibility to an external structure of governance disappears, meaning that we essentially "self-govern"—both in relation to our individual role in the performance of stateless democracy, and that of the community in which we partake. This is effectively summarized by the political group TATORT in their assessment of the practice of stateless democracy in North Kurdistan, when they say, "Popular participation generates a politicization of society, in which each person may become an autonomous political actor." See TATORT Kurdistan. *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan.* Porsgrunn: New Compass, 2013: 21.

14 Interview conducted with Diyar Hesso in the Rojava Film Commune, Derbêsiyê on October 30, 2015. One will note how Hesso's introduction of the notion of "useful art" resonates with what artist Tania Bruguera has termed "Arte Útil," following her creation of the *Arte Útil Association* in 2011: "Arte Útil aims to transform some aspects of society through the implementation of art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor and proposing with their activity some solutions for deficits in reality [...] Arte Útil practices try to address the levels of disparities of engagement between informed audiences and the general public, as well as the historical gap between the language used in what is considered avant-garde and the language of urgent politics, science and other disciplines." Tania Bruguera. "Glossary." Bruguera's frequent collaborator, theorist Stephen Wright, elaborates further that "usership [...] names not just a form of opportunity-dependent relationality, but a self-regulating mode of engagement and operation. Which makes usership itself a potentially powerful tool. In the same way that usership is all about repurposing available ways and means without seeking to possess them, it can itself be repurposed as a mode of leverage, a fulcrum, a shifter, and as such, a game-changer." Stephen Wright. *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013: 68.

15 In the process of editing this text, Brian Kuan Wood noted in this regard that "'realization' here is a key term alongside realism when it comes to form. To be realist assumes a position with regard to the real, where to realize is to alter the status of the real." Personal e-mail exchange, December 2015.

16 Whereas the term "morphology" today has significance in domains as different as linguistics, biology, and mathematics, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is considered to have defined the term in relation to the study of plants, rejecting examinations of plant organisms in the tradition of Linnaean taxonomy: "The close proximity of Goethe's perception of art and his study of nature suggests that the choice of the same methods for both fields is based on similar intentions. In several essays, Goethe wrote about his aims as a scientist [...] His intensive visual examination of natural phenomena, his efforts to objectify empirical observations, to use comparisons, and to establish series of observations, formed the basis for his project of morphology. Goethe defined morphology as 'the science of form (*Gestalt*), formation (*Bildung*) and transformation (*Umbildung*) of organic bodies.' Morphology was based on careful examination of forms and their modifications under different external circumstances, as well as on intuition in order to find archetypes (*Typen, Urphänomene*) and fundamental rules of their (trans)formation." Johannes Grave. "Ideal and History: Johann Wolfgang Goethe's Collection of Prints and Drawings." *Artibus et Historiae* 27.53. 2006: 183.

ourselves to a descriptive understanding of what a parliament depicts, we would learn that it is a place where politicians and the government assemble. A morphological reading of a parliament, on the other hand, will tell us more: it shows us the parliament as an arena, as a theatrical space, where power is performed through a specific spatial configuration, a specific number of actors and a composition of symbols, as well as an overall choreography. From a descriptive perspective, it is only of relative importance whether the parliament is circular, square, or triangular—the only thing that is important is that it is a parliament, and functions as such: people assemble, debate, vote, and this has a certain impact on the external world. From a morphological perspective—from a perspective that reads into the form of the parliament—we understand that a square parliament creates a different spatial and social dynamic than a circle, to the point that the form and choreography of the assembly affect the outcome: an open-air parliament might produce a radically different outcome than a covered one; a parliament with benches might produce a radically different outcome than a parliament with chairs.[17] Each spatial configuration, each object, each choreography inscribes a set of ideas into the performance of its actors. So while the nation-state is a construct that demands a specific performance, so do the shapes and forms through which its power is articulated and inscribed upon those speaking in its name. Ideology, in other words, has a material reality, which one can understand through morphology—through art.[18] The discipline of the revolutionary practice of stateless democracy thus also affects the possibilities of the discipline of art to engage new, yet unscripted morphologies.

Upon a superficial reading, there might appear to be a relation between the ideal of "revolutionary realism" as derived from Hesso's

words, and what in the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union became known as "socialist realism." In his "Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers," cultural minister Andrei Zhdanov stated that "in our country the main heroes of works of literature are the active builders of a new life—working men and women, men and women collective farmers, Party members, business managers, engineers, members of the Young Communist League, Pioneers." Zhdanov explained that the task of the artist was "knowing life, so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as 'objective reality,' but to depict reality in its revolutionary development."[19] Art historian Boris Groys explains that this notion of "realism" in "socialist realism" had indeed little to do with the idea of an accurate representation of objective reality, but was rather "oriented to that which has not yet come into being but which should be created."[20]

The main difference between the two realisms is located in the collective dedication to the *possibilities* of a revolution (revolutionary realism) on the one hand, and the brutal singular enforcement of a decision of what a revolution is *dictated* to be (socialist realism) on the other. Socialist realism relies on the idea that the crystallization of the will of the proletariat finds its absolute form in the creation of a "socialist" state with a single author, in this case Stalin. The tragic role of socialist realism in that context is to depict a future society which, by definition, cannot be realized though the schizophrenic and violent state machinery developed around this single leader. Revolutionary realism, on the other hand, engages with an ideal of politics in which power is in a continuous process of self-assessment; its "realism"—in its most ideal outcome—is one that engages the new formations that come as a result of the collective, common performance of stateless democracy. Echoing the famous '68 dictum of "be realistic, demand the impossible," Hesso thus refutes

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17 A relevant study in this regard was developed by architect Francis Cape, who analyzed the role of the bench in different communalist groups in the United States. The "utopian bench" in his analysis becomes the visual and ideological foundation for communalist politics: the surface on which we organize and articulate what a community is, should or could be. Francis Cape. *We Sit Together: Utopian Benches from the Shakers to the Separatists of Zoar.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013.

18 My first attempt to define the practice of art in terms of a morphology was published as "Een wereld maken." *Metropolis M.* 2015.

19 Andrei Zhdanov. "Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers." *Art in Theory 1900–1990,* eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell: 420.

20 Boris Groys. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond.* New York: Verso, 2011: 24.

the idea that realism is defined by what is currently present rather than by what is possible:

We as the Rojava Film Commune try to represent the dreams and imaginary of this revolution. We believe in an art that connects the historical culture of society with a new revolutionary morality and politics. Our cause is society's cause—but not the society that is already present, the society that we're constructing as we speak.[21]

As a consequence, the transformative base of the practice of stateless democracy affects the conditions of artistic practice. The result is a highly speculative form of revolutionary realism: a formation of art based on the "imaginary and dreams" that are already present, albeit not in a fixed form, but in a process of permanent transformation. As such, the practice of stateless democracy reintroduces, both in politics and in art, the idea of a permanent revolution of *form.*

Ideology Materialized

When Rojava was declared autonomous and announced its commitment to stateless democracy, this changed the whole infrastructure of the region, as the material remnants of Assad's regime were suddenly declared stateless—or, following Hesso's joke, these infrastructures became "terrorist"; their existing morphology began to mutate.

What used to be the northern region of Syria and is now Rojava consists of many government buildings, monuments, and parliaments built by the former regime. But with the Rojava revolutionaries' rejection of the nation-state paradigm, they also lost the overall form that maintained their unity. Suddenly, the government buildings, monuments, and parliaments were left formless. That is to say, for those non-state subjects that embody the revolutionary cadre of the autonomous region, these infrastructures had abdicated their previous construction of power. They were no longer acknowledged in their authority,

as the form of the nation-state as such was no longer recognized. The practice of stateless democracy stripped government buildings of their power; it reduced public monuments to isolated islands no longer capable of enforcing their historical narratives; it handed over the exclusive space of the parliament to communal councils and assemblies. Ideology changed the nature and meaning of form, even though this is not yet the same as creating new forms in the way that Hesso and the Rojava Film Commune are investing in a transformative culture that takes the imaginaries of the revolution as its point of departure.

So what kind of morphology can we observe emerging? In many ways, Rojava can be seen as a gigantic squat. It is a squatted country, which, due to the ideological perseverance of the Kurdish revolutionaries, has begun to alter the meaning of the remnants of the nation-state that were left behind. When I visited the region for the first time in 2014 with my organization, New World Summit, we were hosted by Amina Osse, the Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê, and Sheruan Hassan, the member of the International Representation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). They were the ones who introduced my organization to the altered and new institutions that the Democratic Self-Administration was constructing all over the region.[22] Old monuments portraying Assad and his father were appropriated into monuments for martyrs and thinkers of the new revolution; old military buildings now house schools or centers for the ideological training of the self-organized defense units of the region; municipal parliaments

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21 Interview conducted with Diyar Hesso in the Rojava Film Commune, Derbêsiyê on October 30, 2015.

22 It is important to name the variety of political parties and organizations that are, like the PYD, united in the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tev-Dem), an umbrella movement, of political parties and grassroots movements from all over the region. Parallel to the Tev-Dem coalition, women's organizations are also prominently present, united in Kongreya Star (previously Yekîtiya Star), which is part of the larger Kurdish Women's Movement, chooses its own women representatives and runs autonomous cooperatives and communes. Each of these organizations also runs its own academies, such as the Tev-Dem and PYD academies, but also the Women's Star Academy, where *jineology* (the science of women) is taught. Throughout the Rojava region, the cultural dimension of the revolution is shaped by the Movement for a Democratic Art and Culture network (Tevgera Çand û Hunera Demokratîk), which consists of cultural institutions in each village and city that organize theater and musical performances, but also exhibitions and education for children and adolescents—the Rojava Film Commune being one of them.

are now occupied by communes and cooperatives that have begun to govern their own neighborhoods, villages, and cities. Democracy had become liberated from the nation-state, although the practice of stateless democracy still struggles to reshape the old remnants of the regime to benefit revolutionary transformation.

The New World Summit has been working with the revolutionary Kurdish movement since 2012. Its representatives were among the first contributors to the temporary parliaments that our organization developed in theaters, art institutions and public spaces in Berlin, Leiden, Kochi and Brussels.[23] As an artistic and political organization, our idea has been to reclaim the concept of the parliament as a temporary and public space, where we invite those dealing with parliamentary exclusion, such as blacklisted and stateless political organizations, to appear. Over the course of two years, our parliaments have hosted more than thirty organizations: representatives of liberation movements from the Basque Country, Catalonia, Kurdistan, Azawad, Ogadenia, Oromia, Tamil Eelam, the Philippines, West Papua and East Turkestan. But here, in Rojava, our imaginary of a stateless parliament was no longer an object of speculation; in Rojava, all parliaments are stateless.

When Amina Osse and Sheruan Hassan suggested that we organize one of the New World Summit parliaments in Rojava, a fundamental separation between the imaginary of art and the imaginary of politics—as Hesso had named it—was overcome. The revolutionary imaginary of politics reached out to that of the arts. Ever since, my organization has worked with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava to develop a new, public parliament: a stateless parliament for a stateless democracy. Its construction is an attempt to engage what Hesso described as the useful art of revolutionary realism: a parliament that both expresses a political vision, but at the same time serves as a tool to bring this vision into practice.

23   The main contributors from the Kurdish Revolutionary Movement to the New World Summits outside of Rojava have been Rojda Yildirim and Dilar Dirik of the Kurdish Women's Movement, Adem Uzun of the Kurdish National Congress (KNK), Dilşah Osman of the Kurdish Democratic Society Movement in Europe (KCD-E), Havin Guneşer of the International Initiative, and Zuhat Kobanî of the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

What the Democratic Administration of Rojava has begun to construct in collaboration with the New World Summit is essentially an architecture that connects the material reality of the creation of a space with the aim of transforming mentalities along the lines of the practice of stateless democracy—transforming the state not just in terms of its infrastructure, but also in terms of the specific "state of mind" that the performance of the nation-state implies. Rather than occupying an existing building, we began to construct a public parliament that from beginning to end was shaped by the ideological propositions of stateless democracy. We approached the notion of ideology as a material form; we approached ideology as a morphology.

For example, Rojava claims to be recuperating democracy's origins as found in the form of the *agora* (assembly) of ancient Greece, the space where the theater of politics began. The fact that Rojava's parliament is designed as a public space is a result of the declaration of Rojava's stateless democracy, which by definition turned all parliaments into public, communal domains. The circular shape of the parliament derives from the shape of the assembly and its attempt to dislocate power from a clear center and instead engage in an egalitarian social composition in which the distance between people is equalized. The circular arches represent the foundational pillars of the practice of stateless democracy, each carrying one of the key concepts of the collectively written social contract that forms the basis of the autonomous Rojava region. The trilingual representation of words on the arches, such as "Confederalism," "Gender Equality" and "Communalism," is an expression of the cultural diversity of the region; the Democratic Self-Administration always communicates simultaneously in Assyrian, Arabic, and Kurdish. The large canvasses that cover the roof of the parliament are hand-painted fragments of flags representing organizations that play a key role in the Democratic Self-Administration, together giving shape to a new confederate whole. Revolutionary practice and a revolutionary imaginary created the ideological design of the parliament; its morphology is ideology materialized.

The Constructivist aesthetics of the parliament engage the principle of a permanent self-interrogation of power in the practice of stateless democracy. The spherical shape of the parliament is no perfect circle; it does not commemorate a successful revolution of the past, but one that is enacted continuously in the present. The pillars of the parliament and the principles they represent are not necessarily in unity; they seek for connections, and in the process, often stand in public conflict with one another. The decentralized placement of the arches that form the parliament as a whole further strengthens this sense of a parliament that is in *permanent construction*, even when it is finished.[24] The permanent construction of the public parliament thus also aims at a permanent aesthetic and ideological self-interrogation, a parliament in a state of self-critique—a hybrid architectural manifesto that can only be completed through the ongoing engagement of its users. This ideal of permanent construction relates directly to the self-assessing structures of power employed by the Rojava revolutionaries; its morphology thus cannot but engage these same principles in the domain of aesthetics.

The parliament, as the Democratic Self-Administration and the New World Summit intend it to be, is ideology materialized. Not just as a mere form, but also as a form to be performed, and a performance aimed at self-interrogation and transformation. Rojava has shown that revolution is first of all a performance of ideology. The Rojava Revolution is not one that hopes for a different world in an unknown future when statehood is

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24 Architect Paul Kuipers, a member of the New World Summit, and I have based a lot of our collaborative work on Russian Constructivist art and architecture, but we have also taken a lot of influence from Brazilian architects: of course Niemeyer, Lucio Costa, and Burle Marx, but even more Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992), who further translated the European modernist paradigm of the infamous Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) into the specific context of contemporary Brazilian society. Bo Bardi took the step of developing a modernism that in many ways ran counter to the European administrative and formalist paradigm by investing far more in the sociabilities of architecture and its relation to other cultural domains, such as art, music and theater. Her work formed a key reference in developing the interrelating political and social dimensions of the parliament, from its function as a space of political assembly to its cultural manifestation and—through the surrounding park—its role as a recreational space. Part of my research on Brazilian architecture that informed the construction of the Rojava parliament was published as *Nosso Lar, Brasília: Spiritism—Modernism—Architecture*. Rio de Janeiro/Heijningen: Capacete & Jap Sam Books, 2014.

achieved and utopia has developed properly and linearly, as our revolutionary textbooks have taught us. Rather, it is revolution as a painstakingly won process of building a new society through a change of mentality and a change of performance—through a change of form. The Rojava Revolution proposes a different performance of politics, and as such, also a different performance of art.

Ideology = Form

The evental moment of the Rojava Revolution has liberated the performance of democracy from the construct of the nation-state. Rather than performance following the prescribed scripts of the state, the revolutionary break from old oppressors and masters allows for ideology to be performed differently, to take a different form. Concepts of self-governance, long in the making through decades of guerrilla struggles in the mountains of Bakûr, are liberated from their bondage to a structure of governance that was never their own.

Revolutionary realism—the one and only true realism—thrives, and the formula that structures the paradigm of a new world is spelled as follows: Ideology = Form.

…Out of old monuments, new shapes grow: the images of father and son Assad disappear, and a multiplicity of faces emerge, those of the martyrs of the Rojava Revolution. A swarm of fighter-portraits consuming the pedestals one piece at the time…

…In Kobanî, for months the epicenter of the struggle between the Kurdish revolutionaries and the Islamic State, reconstruction is in full swing. Despite Erdoğan's refusal to allow for a humanitarian corridor, soberly built foundations of new houses have emerged all over. Just one neighborhood remains in ruins. No one touches a single stone or bombshell there: the ruins have been declared a monument—an enormous, permanent, and open scar in the heart of the city…

…On the first floor of a bombed cultural center, where children play with half-melted guns, a series of murals is still visible. Despite the bullet holes and the black graffiti of Islamic State militias smeared on the

walls, the depictions of traditional Kurdish instruments and covers of books by local poets have remained…

…A few streets from the bombed cultural center, a new one has opened. A sharply dressed teacher sits in the garden with his students, playing traditional folk songs. Songs of defiance, performed in defiance. Stubborn forms that will be performed, again and again, despite everything, against everything, for resistance is life[25]…

…During a conference, a Kurdish party leader lectures in Arabic. While having fought for the right to speak Kurdish, now she decides not to. She was a former minority, now a majority; her Arab listeners were a majority, now a minority. She could perform power, but decides not to…

…A former guerrilla fighter is now a minister. She has been offered a private car and driver; she is offered the services of waiters and cooks; she is offered a bodyguard and bulletproof glass. Instead, she does the dishes for her assistant, she cooks for her team, she walks home alone. She performs differently…

…In Rojava, cats silently move through ruins and new building sites; they stand guard with fighters and rest with artists. Even the cats have changed form—even cats are terrorists here.

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25   One of the most well-known Kurdish slogans: *Berxwedan Jiyane,* "Resistance is Life."

Dilar Dirik is an activist of the Kurdish Women's Movement and a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department of the University of Cambridge. Her work examines the role of women's liberation in articulating and building freedom in Kurdistan. The Kurdish Women's Movement has been prominent from the early days of the Kurdish resistance. Rejecting the state as a patriarchal, imperialist and capitalist construct, the women's movement and their development of Jineology (a women-centered science paradigm) formed a key factor in developing the philosophy and practice of stateless democracy in Bakûr and Rojava. She regularly writes on the Kurdish freedom movement for the international audience.

Sheruan Hassan has been a member of the International Representation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Rojava since 2014. As the largest political party of the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, the PYD plays a leading role in the establishment of the international representation of Rojava. Since its foundation the Democratic Self-Administration has opened offices in Berlin (Germany), Moscow (Russian Federation), Paris (France), Prague (Czech Republic), Stockholm (Sweden), and The Hague (The Netherlands). Together with Amina Osse and Jonas Staal, Hassan co-conceptualized the parliament currently being built in the city of Dêrik, Canton Cizîrê, Rojava.

Salih Muslim is the elected Co-Chair of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Rojava since 2010. He was one of the founding members of the PYD in 2003. The Assad regime regarded the party as a particular threat due to its ability to mobilize discontent and therefor regularly prosecuted its members before the start of the Rojava Revolution in 2012. Currently, the PYD is the largest political party of Rojava and plays an important role within both the Democratic Self-Administration and the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tev-Dem), the umbrella movement of revolutionary political parties and civil society organizations in Rojava.

Amina Osse has been Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê, Rojava, since 2014. She has also been a member of the party leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) since 2012. As such, she has represented the PYD at several international peace conferences, including the Syrian Opposition Conferences in Cairo and Moscow in the summer of 2015. Osse commissioned and co-conceptualized with Sheruan Hassan, and Jonas Staal the parliament currently being built in the city of Dêrik, Canton Cizîrê, Rojava.

Jonas Staal is the founder of the New World Summit. His studio in Amsterdam runs the New World Summit and related organizations and projects, and further consists of producer Younes Bouadi and programmer Renée In der Maur. Long-term New World Summit collaborators include, among others, architect Paul Kuipers and designer Remco van Bladel. Staal exhibits, lectures and publishes widely on the relation between art, democracy and propaganda, and is a researcher at the PhDArts program at the University of Leiden, as well as a member of the Academy of Arts in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

This publication gathers the collaborative works of the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava in northern Syria and the artistic and political organization New World Summit. Together, they develop alternative parliaments and embassies inspired by Rojava's vision of a new model of stateless democracy. Through text and image, this book forms an introduction to the politics and art of Rojava's new worlds in the making.

The Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava is the autonomous government of the Rojava region in the northern part of Syria. Declared in 2012 at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War by Kurdish revolutionaries and their Assyrian and Arab allies, the Democratic Self-Administration continues to develop a new model of stateless democracy: a practice of democracy without the state, founded on principles of self-governance, gender equality, self-defense, and communal economy.

New World Summit is an artistic and political organization founded by artist Jonas Staal in 2012, dedicated to developing alternative parliaments for stateless and blacklisted organizations. New World Summit runs through Staal's studio, which includes producer Younes Bouadi and programmer Renée In der Maur, as well as ongoing collaborators such as architect Paul Kuipers and designer Remco van Bladel.