

Jonas Staal
**IDEOLOGY =
FORM**

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1. 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 Derbisiye, in the Canton of Cezîre.¹ 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.”²

“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*.³ 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.⁴ Through communes, cooperatives, and councils, the performance of stateless 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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 that 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.⁷ 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

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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.⁸ 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 subjects engaged in the terrifying process of emancipation – a rejection of old forms in an attempt to perform new ones.⁹ 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 forces, 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.¹⁰ For regimes such as



Teacher Raperin Derik leads an ideological training for local women organizers of Yekitiya Star in Derik, Cezîre Canton, in the autonomous region of Rojava, 2014. Photo: Jonas Staal.

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.¹¹ The fourth wall of the geopolitical theater that the 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 *transformative 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

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inside our head,” in this case the former Assad regime – but through an attempt to define oneself as both an actor in and cocreator 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.

2. 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?¹² 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



Filmmaker and teacher Khwshman Qado leads a teaching session at the Rojava film Commune in Derbisiye, Cezîre Canton, in the autonomous region of Rojava, 2015. Photo: Ruben Hamelink.



Members of the Rojava Film Commune mobilize workers in the city of Amude, Cezîre Canton, in the autonomous region of Rojava, to attend the screening of the 1921 film *The Kid* by and with Charlie Chaplin, 2015. Photo: Rojava Film Commune

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.”¹³

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.¹⁴

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 literacy 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.¹⁵

But 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 ourselves to a descriptive understanding of what a parliament depicts, we 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 both through a specific spatial configuration, a specific number of actors, 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’s 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

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,

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Drawing of the new public parliament and surrounding park in the city of Derîk, Cezîre Canton, in the autonomous region of Rojava, designed by the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava in conjunction with New World Summit, 2015.

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 “Be realistic, demand the impossible,” Hesso thus refutes 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.²⁰

As a consequence, the transformative base of the practice of stateless democracy affects the conditions of artistic practice. The result is a

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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*.

3. 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



Construction of the new public parliament and surrounding park in the city of Derîk, Cezîre Canton, in the autonomous region of Rojava in early December, 2015. Photo: Ruben Hamelink/New World Summit.



Murals in a destroyed Kurdish cultural center in the city of Kobanê, in the autonomous region of Rojava, have been smeared over by Islamic State militants. The mural in the center of the image depicting a sun and a pen mentions bears the name "Confederation of Kurdish Students" in Kurdish and Arabic; the graffiti by Islamic State militants on the left states "There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God" in Arabic, 2015. Photo: Jonas Staal.

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; and 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's 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, the New World Summit, we were hosted by Amina Osse, the minister of foreign affairs for the Cezîre Canton, and Sheruan Hassan, the international representative 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.²¹ 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 protection units of the region; municipal parliaments 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.

Our 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.²² 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.

What the Democratic Administration of Rojava in collaboration with the New World Summit has begun to construct 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

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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.²³ 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 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 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.

4. Ideology = Form

The eventual 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 Kobanê, 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 ...²⁴

... 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.

×

This essay is dedicated to the artists of Rojava that taught me how to make a world: Nesrin Botan, Abdullah Abdul, Masun Hamo, Diyar Hesso, Onder Çakar, Şéro Hindé and Khwshman Qado. I further thank composer and poet Samuel Vriezen for discussing with me the mathematics of egalitarianism and political transformation, and philosopher Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei for his relentless editorial support in writing this essay.

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Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization New World Summit, which develops parliaments for organizations excluded from democracy, and the New World Academy (together with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht), which invites artists and students to work together with organizations invested in emancipatory politics. He is also the initiator of the Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennale, a free smartphone app that provides insight on the social, political, economic and overall ideological backgrounds of every pavilion in the 2013 biennale. His recent publication *Stateless Democracy* (with Renée In der Maur and Dilar Dirik), deals with the cultural and political revolution in Rojava (northern-Syria), and can be download here () Staal is currently working on his PhD on Art and Propaganda in the twenty-first Century at the PhDArts program of the University of Leiden, The Netherlands.

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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." See <http://www.kominafilmarojava.org/>

2
Interview conducted with Diyar Hesso at the Rojava Film Commune, Derbisiye on October 30, 2015.

3
See *Stateless Democracy*, eds. Dilar Dirik, Renée In der Maur, Jonas Staal (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015).

4
"Social Contract," in *ibid.*, 131–58.

5
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: Afrin, Kobanê, and Cezîre – the political task is that of coordination and international mediation on behalf of the communes and municipal councils. Finally, the trans-cantonal supreme council connects the three cantons and has the task of facilitating communication within this mosaic of political entities.

6
Jonas Staal, "To Make a World, Part III: Stateless Democracy," *e-flux journal* 63 (March 2015) [../journal/to-make-a-world-p-art-iii-stateless-democracy/](http://journal/to-make-a-world-p-art-iii-stateless-democracy/)

7
"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, 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.

8
"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 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/leaked-isis-document-reveals-plan-building-state-syria/>

9
Dilar Dirik interviewed by Jonas Staal, "Living Without Approval," in Dirik et al., *Stateless Democracy*, 48.

10
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.

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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 Democratic People's 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, the

northern part of 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 have collapsed – and arguably, the Paris attacks may never have 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/>

12
In a private conversation on October 17, 2015, in the city hotel of Derik, Amina Osse, the minister of foreign affairs for the Cezîre Canton, 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 Northern 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.

13
Interview conducted with Diyar Hesso at the Rojava Film Commune, Derbisiye 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," <http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/609-0-.htm>. 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.

14
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.

15
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*) and transformation (*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

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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.

16

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)

17

My first attempt to define the practice of art in terms of a morphology was published as “Een wereld maken,” *Metropolis M 1* (2015).

18

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.

19

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

20

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

21

It is important to name the variety of political parties that are, like the PYD, united in the Movement for a Democratic Society (TeV-Dem): an association of political parties and grassroots movements from all over the region. Within the TeV-Dem coalition, women’s organizations are also prominently present, such as Yekitiya Star, which is part of the larger Kurdish Women’s Movement and 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 Star Women’s 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 (TeV-Çand), 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.

22

The main contributors from the Kurdish revolutionary movement to the New World Summit 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), and *Havin Guneşer* of the International Initiative. See the New World Summit video channel for their lectures <https://vimeo.com/user17523939/>

23

Architect Paul Kuipers, a member of the New World Summit, and myself 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, Brasilia: Spiritism – Modernism – Architecture* (Rio de Janeiro/Heijningen: Capacete & Jap Sam Books, 2014).

24

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

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