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## **Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century**

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INTRODUCTION:  
MY NAME IS JONAS  
STAAL, AND I AM  
A PROPAGANDA  
ARTIST

BECOMING A PROPAGANDA ARTIST  
 PROPAGANDA RESEARCH  
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 “WE”

BECOMING A PROPAGANDA ARTIST

My name is Jonas Staal, and I am a propaganda artist.<sup>1</sup> This is not a confession, although it can easily come across as one. Why? Because the notion of propaganda art has itself been subject to propaganda, which tells us that propaganda art can only be one-dimensional, totalitarian, and at permanent risk of serving to legitimize crimes of genocidal proportions. Whether in the context of a journal article, or a review at art school: being labeled a propaganda artist is never a formal description, but by definition a negative judgment that expels the artist and artwork in question to the dark histories of authoritarian regimes and dictatorships.

I know this from first-hand indoctrination. Arriving at art school at the age of nineteen, it was quickly made clear to me that the purpose of art was to hold up mirrors to the world and show the ambiguity of the human condition. Everything could be questioned and all taboos could be broken, except one: not just to reflect on the world, but to aim to change it. Art that served political messages was the equivalent of “advertisement” or “activism,” and both were considered derogatory terms. Politics consisted of tedious and banal daily governance, best narrated by an increasingly sensational mass media. We, as artists, were supposed to elevate ourselves beyond such temporary current affairs. We were to dedicate ourselves to the ambiguities and anxieties of the human condition. The idea of changing the world was left to demagogues and idealists, whereas our task was to reflect upon it.

Around us, the world changed but the art school did not. When the Twin Towers collapsed, a large screen was set up in the media department. I witnessed students applauding when the buildings came down while they commented on the rather poor camera work. When the Dutch populist right-wing leader Pim Fortuyn was murdered one year later, we told each other “good riddance,” although we had no idea about his political platform or the reasons for his widespread support. If we voted at all, we voted for the left, without giving much thought to it. In retrospect, I would say that our attitude was itself the product of a deep propagandistic logic. The idea that art needs to be outside politics to be art is exactly what has led not only to its powerlessness, but also to its cynicism and devastating neoliberal nihilism.

When I finished my studies in the Netherlands and the United Sta-

1 I borrow this phrasing from Stephanie Bailey, who at the *Synapse 2: Rethinking Institutional Critique – A View from the South* conference in Athens on Apr. 16, 2016 opened her closing remarks with the sentence: “My name is Stephanie Bailey, and I’m a neoliberal.” Evidently, Bailey was not saying that she wanted to be a neoliberal, but that, in her current predicament, she could not but acknowledge how the condition of neoliberalism structured and acted in her practice.

tes, I moved to the harbor city of Rotterdam. With its center bombed by the Nazis, Rotterdam is the result of an exceptional urban experiment that provided the first large-scale experience with post-war modernist city planning in the Netherlands. A variety of plans was executed simultaneously. If you ask a citizen of Rotterdam to tell you where the center is, the chances are high you will get about five different answers, as there are about five different places that could be considered its “center.” The late Fortuyn was a Rotterdam citizen, and had managed to mobilize its workers into massively abandoning the former ruling Labor Party. Fortuyn’s anti-immigrant message resonated in this city, where more than fifty percent of residents had a migrant background, recruited in Turkey and Morocco as “guest workers” to take on unwanted jobs during the city’s post-war reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> The presumption that these migrant workers would return “home” proved mistaken – home was now the Netherlands. In time, the lack of infrastructure provided by the political and business elites to support these migrant communities would prove disastrous. Already in the 1970s Rotterdam witnessed race riots in its Afrikaanderwijk neighborhood – shamelessly named after the first generation of Dutch colonizers in South Africa – when white workers literally threw migrant workers out of their houses.

Fortuyn’s murder in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks formed a fundamental breaking point in Dutch 21st-century society, even though the fact that his killer had been a white animal rights activist did not match with the underlying desire to frame migrant communities – Muslims in particular – as a new existential threat to the “West.” This would change on November 2, 2004, when the anti-Islamist filmmaker and polemicist Theo van Gogh was murdered by Mohammed Bouyeri, a member of the later blacklisted Hofstad Group organization. Van Gogh’s collaboration with Dutch–Somali MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali of the liberal-conservative VVD on their film *Submission* (2004) had been Bouyeri’s trigger. He argued that the Dutch “masters” had found in her “an ally in their crusade against Islam and Muslims.”<sup>3</sup> Bouyeri’s murder of Van Gogh would subsequently lead to the rise of the Dutch ultranationalist movement, which today has equivalents all over Europe.

2 Inge Jansen, “Volgend jaar is de helft allochtoon,” *NRC Handelsblad*, Feb. 20, 2015, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/02/20/volgend-jaar-is-helft-allochtoon-1467853-a573815>. Considering that this is a thesis on propaganda, it is relevant to highlight the highly problematic Dutch use of the word *allochtoon*, meaning as much as “of foreign soil.” This, however, doesn’t stop people from applying it to Dutch citizens even when they are born in the Netherlands. This has led to necessary debates that have introduced the alternative designation of “Dutch citizens with an immigrant background.”

3 The original quote in Dutch is as follows: “U steekt uw vijandigheid tegen de Islam niet onder stoelen of banken en hiervoor bent u door uw meesters beloond met een zetel in het parlement. Zij hebben in u een medestander gevonden in hun kruistocht tegen de Islam en de Moslims.” Source: R. Peters, addendum to specialist report “De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling van Mohammed B.” (2003–2004), p. 35.

In the aftermath of Van Gogh’s murder, Hirsi Ali’s fellow VVD MP Geert Wilders left his party, arguing that it was incapable of responding accurately to the existential threat of Islam. Through his own Freedom Party (PVV) – of which he is the sole member – he has called for the prohibition of the Quran and headscarves, closing down all mosques, pre-emptively bombing Iran, and building a Dutch-style Guantánamo Bay prison. Wilders’s proposals led to threats on his life and his being surrounded by permanent state security, but also rallied millions to his support. This resulted in his informal participation in the Rutte I government of 2010–2011.<sup>4</sup> But most of all, Wilders changed the vocabulary and identity of Dutch politics. The myth of the country’s liberal-democratic “tolerant” profile was shattered. Instead, a fundamentalist interpretation of the freedom of speech opened the way for blatant and systemic racism, not just propagated by the ultranationalist parties, but also formerly progressive ones.<sup>5</sup> Wilders’s dark vision of a renewed “clash of civilizations” between the “democratic” West and “backward” East turned into the dominant political narrative that it still is today. Through his alliances with Marine Le Pen’s Front National in France, Belgium’s Flemish Interest, the Italian Lega Nord, and Austria’s Freedom Party, Wilders became one of the leading figures of a new “Nationalist International.”<sup>6</sup>

This thesis deals mainly with the analysis of propaganda *art* in the 21st century. It therefore seems crucial to emphasize that the Dutch “clash of civilizations” narrative is grounded in the body of a murdered *artist*: Theo van Gogh, great-grandson of Theo van Gogh, the brother of painter Vincent van Gogh. As clear from his last book, *Allah Knows Better* (2003), Van Gogh was an artist who supported the policies of George W. Bush and applauded the invasion of Iraq; he wallowed in anti-Semitic remarks, and spouted his blatant Islamophobia in obscene tirades against public figures, such as Dutch Labor Party repre-

4 This was known in Dutch as a “gedoogconstructie,” which means in this case that the official government coalition consisted of the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), while Wilders’s Freedom Party (PVV) formally remained in the opposition, but with the pledge to support core policies the three parties had agreed on. This made Wilders’s party a de facto part of the ruling government.

5 During Wilders’s closing statement during his court case for inciting hatred and violence in 2016, the politician quoted the former Labor party leader Diederik Samson and Labor chair Hans Spekman, who had claimed Moroccan–Dutch had an “ethnic monopoly on violence” and that “Moroccan’s are to be humiliated.” The fact that the Labor party, which used to rely in a large part on an electorate with a migrant background, had moved so far to the right due to influence of Wilders thus turned into a key argument for the politician’s demand for acquittal. See: Geert Wilders, “Laatste woord Geert Wilders – Rechtbank 23 november 2016,” *Website Freedom Party*, Nov. 23, 2016, <https://pvv.nl/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/9369-laatste-woord-geert-wilders-rechtbank-23-november-2016.html>.

6 These parties are allied in the European Alliance for Freedom faction in the European Parliament, termed by the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) a “nationalist international.” See: DiEM25, “DiEM25’s European New Deal: A Summary” (2017), [https://diem25.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/170209\\_DiEM25\\_END\\_Summary\\_EN.pdf](https://diem25.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/170209_DiEM25_END_Summary_EN.pdf).

sentative Fatima Elatik.<sup>7</sup> He was an artist that I ideologically oppose in every possible way. His murder, just like the murder of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists on January 7, 2015, in Paris by Islamic State affiliates, is a form of existential censorship. But we should also refrain from relativizing Van Gogh's call for the illegal invasion of Iraq and the hundreds of thousands of civilians that were murdered as a result, when assessing the cultural and artistic inheritance he left behind.

The fact that the rise of ultranationalism was facilitated by the body of a dead artist also contributed to my own politicization and evolution into a propaganda artist. The doctrines of art with which I had been educated and which claimed that the only way to be an artist was not to desire to change anything politically became untenable. And did Van Gogh and his allies – Fortuyn, Hirsi Ali, Wilders – not engage in a full-scale *culture* war? Even Wilders himself would transform into an artist of sorts, when he followed up on Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali's *Submission* with his own blatantly racist and anti-Islamic film pamphlet *Fitna* (2008). These artworks perpetuated the new cultural mythologies of our time, that it was possible to return to a fictional democratic Dutch nation of the past, founded on humanist and Judeo-Christian principles, free from Islamic influence.<sup>8</sup> Even though ultranationalism strongly relies on cultural mythology and visual representation to propagate its core narratives, somehow we as artists were supposed to stay at a distance in order for our work to remain art, while our artistic competences were appropriated right before our eyes. This was the fundamental contradiction faced by engaged artists in the early 21st century in the Netherlands. Our politicians were turning increasingly into dubious artists and obscure actors – even filmmakers – but we, as artists, were not supposed to intervene for the sake of art's perceived purity.

It increasingly became clear to me that exactly this narrative was the real propaganda at stake. Propaganda art was not the problem; it was the *propaganda against propaganda art*. The construction of reality was to be left to the adults in the room.<sup>9</sup> Artists were supposed to be beautiful and shut up, summarized in the famous dictum *Sois belle et tais-toi*. But the reality that we were told to stay clear of included the Dutch

support to the bombing of Afghanistan and invasion and occupation of Iraq, later to be expanded into foreign missions to Mali and bombings in Syria. It also included the rise of violent Islamophobia and racism at home. And this new, violent reality was constructed by cultural, if not artistic, warfare. Is the imagination of art, our capacity to think, stage, compose, choreograph, and construct the world differently not of crucial importance for the opposition against the construction of ultranationalist social reality? And should our task as artists, as those who have trained and specialized in *representation*, not be to join forces with those who demand a different conception of society: a society not divided by ethnic or class warfare, but assembled through a common imagination of equity? To contribute to a defiant imagination of a different world, a world as real as we are able to imagine it to be – this is what began to crystallize for me as the clear artistic task ahead. It took the body of a murdered artist for me to realize that these words had to be uttered: *I am a propaganda artist*.

This thesis departs from a single question: *Is the term propaganda still applicable to the 21st century, and if so, what are its implications for the domain of art?* After the research that I conducted for this thesis, I have come to the conclusion that modern and contemporary propaganda can be defined as a *performance of power*. Performance here has a double meaning. The first is performance as “enactment,” in the practical sense that powerful infrastructures such as the mass media or military-industrial complex are able to enact (perform) power to shape reality. The second is performance in the context of performance art and theater, where we speak of a bodily and often imaginative enactment. This is a performance not only of power as it exists, but as we could imagine it to be. Performance is not merely an aspect of propaganda, it is what defines propaganda: propaganda *is* the performance of power. We will thus not speak of the “performance of propaganda”, but of propaganda *as* a performance, which contains both a political and artistic component. When I claim that the aim of such a performance is to construct reality, that does not mean that propaganda equals reality, but that it aims to shape and form reality as such. For example, the War on Terror – which we will discuss at length in the third and fourth chapter – might have started as a representation of a new “clash of civilizations.” But the strength of its propaganda ensured that this representation became a material reality, whether in the form of military invasions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, or in the form of the massive erosion of civil rights in the name of “national security” in the western world. Propaganda makes use of representation, but its core aim is to alter material reality as such.

7 Van Gogh famously referred to Muslims as “goat fuckers” in the post-September 11 era: “Ever since 9/11, you know, the knives have been sharpened and the Fifth Column of goat-fuckers is marching forward relatively unhindered.” Original quote in Dutch: “Sinds 11 september, u weet wel, zijn de messen geslepen en marcheert de Vijfde Colonne van de geitenneukers betrekkelijk ongehinderd voorwaarts.” Source: Theo van Gogh, *Allah weet het beter* (Amsterdam: Xtra – Rechtdoorzee Mijl op 7, 2003), p. 14.

8 In this context, it cannot be emphasized enough that the Dutch colonization of Indonesia had once provided the Kingdom of the Netherlands a territory where the majority of the population was Muslim.

9 A reference to Yanis Varoufakis's *Adults in the Room: My Battle with Europe's Deep Establishment* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017).

As we will see throughout this thesis, what we call reality from the modern age to the contemporary, includes a plurality of propagandas, each of which aims to inscribe their interests into our present and future. The uncontrollable interaction between these different propagandas, in combination with complex social, economic and ecological processes, is what defines reality. Never does a single propaganda define reality as a whole, for nearly always competing propagandas exist, even if they are more liminal or embedded in a given regime of power. Of course, this leaves the question if there is such a thing as reality *unaffected* by propaganda. Philosopher Jacques Ellul for example argues that small communities, separated from what he terms “technological society,” are amongst the last to withstand the effect of propaganda. But in this thesis, we will see how modern and contemporary propaganda have impacted many “autonomous” communities, and how these communities in their turn, have developed alternative propagandas in response. My research is directed at the dominant propagandas that have enormous impact on the construction of our present-day reality, and on the question what alternative propagandas are emerging which aim to challenge and change its narratives. In other words, I aim to discuss not the world as it “is”, but as it is *made* and *changed* through propagandas and propaganda art.

Propaganda art is the result of a process through which the performance of power manifests itself in the domain of form: the visual construction and composition of our reality.<sup>10</sup> The aim of propaganda is to construct reality according to the interests of specific power structures. Structures of power can be extremely oppressive in nature, think for example of what we will discuss as the “expanded state” in the War on Terror, the merger of public and private infrastructures – state and corporate power – that operate largely outside of democratic control. But power structures can also be the result of emancipatory ideals and aims, as is the case with a variety of popular movements and alternative forms of governance, from the worldwide Occupy movement to the stateless democracy established in Rojava (Northern Syria). In other words, just like power structures are different, so is their performance as propaganda and propaganda art. As a result, I argue that we should always speak of propaganda in the plural: *propagandas*. Hence propaganda art differs depending on which performance of power it is defined by and the kind of reality it aims to construct. The point is not to reject the notion of propaganda art as such, but to reject *specific forms*

<sup>10</sup> We will discuss the notion of morphology through the work of Judith Butler in more detail in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis. See also: Jonas Staal, “Ideology = Form,” e-flux journal, No. 69 (Jan. 2016).

of *propaganda art*, while investing in others, depending on the kind of reality we aim to construct. Simply put, artists instrumentalized in the War on Terror produce a form of propaganda art that is distinctly different from artists involved in popular movements that oppose the War on Terror. Their different claims and understanding of power generates different morphologies – different artistic forms.

In the following sections I will summarize the research methodology and historical narrative that led to these conclusions, but allow me first to elaborate how my own artistic practice has led to, and has further been shaped through this research. For this is not a thesis by a political scientist or an art historian. It is a thesis *on propaganda art by a propaganda artist*. As such, this thesis may be considered the result of *artistic research*, a term to which I will return below. The present document is unthinkable without my intimate experiences with researching and developing artworks within different structures of power. To understand the specific knowledge that I add to this research through my own artistic practice, as well as my biases and blind spots, it is therefore crucial to explain clearly what *kind of propaganda artist* I consider myself to be.

## PROPAGANDA RESEARCH

My increased politicization in the period after 9/11 attacks, the start of the War on Terror, and the rise of the ultranationalist movements in the Netherlands and Europe have defined the foundation on which I have articulated my own practice as a propaganda artist. My aim has been twofold: to *research the instrumentalization of art as propaganda* (propaganda research), and to develop *emancipatory models of propaganda art* (propaganda work).<sup>11</sup>

The focus of my propaganda research has been on the way in which *dominant* structures of power, such as ultranationalist movements, contemporary forms of high finance capitalism or authoritarian regimes of different forms and kinds, perform power as art with the aim of constructing reality after its own interests.

A concrete example departing in the Dutch context is the *Freethinkers' Space* (2010) project. The Freethinker's Space was the first exhibition space in parliament founded and curated by Dutch political parties. In 2008, the liberal-conservative VVD and the ultranationalist

<sup>11</sup> An earlier endeavor is my publication *Post-propaganda* (Amsterdam: Fonds BKVB, 2009), which focuses on the post-WWII development of Dutch state subsidies for arts and culture in the context of “democratic propaganda.”

Freedom Party responded to a series of controversies of supposedly “Islamic” censorship of artworks by opening their own exhibition space in their party headquarters. Their departure point was that contemporary art institutions, due to their leftist cultural-relativist bias were not capable of protecting the freedom of speech in the context of a renewed clash of civilizations.<sup>12</sup> Instead, their Freethinker’s Space – as a contemporary version of the *Salon des Refusés* – aimed to uphold the liberal-democratic values of the West in the face of increasing Islamic censorship. At the center of the exhibition was the work of Theo van Gogh, whose family and friends attended the opening. And indeed, one can argue that killing an artist – no matter how problematic the context of their work – is a fundamental and existential form of censorship. But alongside the work of Van Gogh there were several other, more peculiar works of art, such as the paintings of Ellen Vroegh. Her work gained notoriety when her painting *Danseuses Exotiques* (2007), which was exhibited in the town hall of Huizen and was an orientalist depiction of nude tropical dancers, was moved due to complaints of a citizen with a presumably Islamic background. In the growing political and media hysteria after the murder of Van Gogh, this act of supposed “censorship” was mediated nationally through the right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf*, as if removing the work of this amateur painter had in any way the same significance as the killing of Van Gogh. The Freethinkers’ Space thus formed a strange hybrid of art-related media scandals, a staged cultural frontline aiming to reinforce the narrative of a clash of civilizations through art. When the two parties that initiated the Freethinkers’ Space entered government in 2010, the exhibition space was closed, as party representatives claimed that freedom of speech would now be secured through government. Censorship by the leftist elite was no longer to be feared.<sup>13</sup>

My propaganda research consisted of mapping the history of the *Freethinkers’ Space*, the artworks that had been selected, the backgrounds and motivations of the exhibited artists, the admission criteria for work to be exhibited, as well as the artistic background of the curators, in particular Freedom Party MP Fleur Agema and current Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the VVD. This resulted in a publication on the Freethinkers’ Space and an exhibition in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. The museum subsequently purchased the work and as

12 Wilders famously called Dutch contemporary art subsidies a “left-wing hobby,” in other words, a form of leftist state propaganda. Initially the quote was wrongly attributed to Freedom Party ideologue Martin Bosma. See: Jonathan Witteman, “Wie gebruikte de term linkse hobby’s het eerst?,” *De Volkskrant*, Jan. 7, 2011, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/politiek/wie-gebruikte-de-term-linkse-hobby-s-het-eerst-a1789750/>.

13 For the history of the Freethinkers’ Space, its participating artists and curator biographies, see: Jonas Staal, *Freethinkers’ Space* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2010).

such continues to maintain the heritage of what I believe is a crucial landmark of ultranationalist propaganda art in recent Dutch history.<sup>14</sup>

The influence of right-wing or ultranationalist contemporary propaganda art in constructing reality was equally at stake in my subsequent project *Closed Architecture* (2011), which comprised research into the artistic background of Freethinkers’ Space co-curator Fleur Agema. Today Agema is second on the list of Wilders’s Freedom Party, but in the early 2000s she studied art and architecture at the AKI Academy of Fine Art in Enschede, where I was educated myself. The contrast between this anarchist bastion of art education where students had applauded the attack on the Twin Towers and congratulated one another upon hearing of Fortuyn’s death and Agema’s later career as one of the key representatives of Dutch ultranationalism could not be more extreme. In the archives of the HKU University of the Arts in Utrecht, where Agema would eventually graduate, I was able to retrieve her graduation thesis from 2004, a 344-page document with the title *Closed Architecture*, containing detailed sketches and descriptions of a new prison model. Agema and myself had lived through a similar educational trajectory, but ended up at radically different sides of the political spectrum: the political artist on one side (myself), the artist-politician on the other (Agema). My propaganda research consisted of a publication, a film, an architectural model, and a theater event in which I reconstructed, as detailed as possible, Agema’s exact prison design, with the aim to analyze the model both in relation to the prison policies of the Rutte I government which was supported by the Freedom Party, as well as an ideological model of her vision of society.<sup>15</sup>

In her thesis, Agema introduces a prison model in four consecutive phases. The first phase is called “The Bunker,” the last “The Light.” Designed through a modular computer-game logic, one could consider these different phases of Agema’s prison to be “levels.” The prisoner – depending on the severity of their sentence – is placed in one of these four levels. Subsequently, depending on good behavior, the prisoner may enter a next level, or is moved back to a previous one. The core idea is that the prisoners must *liberate themselves* through the prison model. In Agema’s vision, this game-like model is to replace the existing prison system, which – in the context of the Netherlands – guarantees that being sentenced to ten years of prison does not suddenly

14 When in 2012 the municipal Democrats 66 politician Rogier Verkroost and Green Party MP Jesse Klaver called for the Freethinkers’ Space to reopen, the project was continued in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, de Appel in Amsterdam, and KuS in Heerlen, where Verkroost, Klaver, Amsterdam Labor Party alderman Carolien Gehrels, and municipal Socialist Party politician Ron Meyer each created their own Freethinkers’ Space. The project, curated by Christiane Berndes and Nick Aikens, was titled *Freethinkers’ Space Continued* (2012).

15 See: Jonas Staal and Fleur Agema, *Closed Architecture* (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2011).



turn into twenty years. In Agema's model, liberation fully depends on the level at which a prisoner is willing to re-engineer their behavior by meeting certain learning objectives. A rejection of the education that would allow passing on to a next level could mean being stuck in the lower levels forever.<sup>16</sup>

Holding the middle between Dante's *Inferno* and Deleuze's definition of the "control society," the first levels of the prison are dark with little room to move, placing the prisoner in full isolation.<sup>17</sup> The second phase of the prison adds an extra window to the cell, its walls turn into a lighter shade of grey, and certain commodities, such as a private shower, become available. By the time the prisoner enters the fourth phase, the prison has completely changed. It is modeled after a suburban middle-class neighborhood, the guards have disappeared, and prisoners live in what look like private apartments. Twenty-four-hour camera protection is installed, and large recreational facilities are introduced. Mimicking a *Truman Show*-type logic, the prisoners might not even be aware that they are *still in prison*. Psychologically, the cameras no longer serve to monitor the prisoner. Instead, they now provide a service *to the prisoner*, protecting them from possible forms of violence or intrusion – very similar to the role that video surveillance has for those predominantly white middle- and upper class-citizens who consider themselves as part of the social "norm." One could ask how different Agema's fourth phase is from the gated communities emerging throughout the Netherlands and all over the world. Agema's model is possibly best understood not as a prison design, but a design of *society as prison*.<sup>18</sup> The ultimate iteration of Deleuze's control society, in which self-monitorization results into a self-regulated citizenry.

Agema's artistic imaginary has become a political imaginary. No longer focused on singular artworks, her emphasis has shifted to designing the infrastructures of power that define society itself. Society as prison is something of a "Total Work of Art" of ultranationalist propa-

16 A repercussion of Agema's model may be found in a proposal of former State Secretary of Security and Justice Fred Teeven (VVD), in which he opted to subject "misbehaving" prisoners to the most austere regime allowed by law. As a Dutch newspaper reported: "A detention plan will be drafted for all detainees, featuring all kinds of behavioral characteristics. Those who end up in jail for the fourth or fifth time will automatically be treated under the most austere regime. The State Secretary 'does not consider it justifiable to continue investing' in repeat offenders. During the drafting of the plan, those convicted for heavy criminal or sexual offenses will be granted less privileges." Kim van Keken and Remco Meijer, "Soberste regime voor gevangene die zich misdraagt," *Volkskrant Magazine*, Jun. 4, 2011, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/magazine/soberste-regime-voor-gevangene-die-zich-misdraagt-a2441131/>.

17 As Deleuze notes: "In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation. See: Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, Volume 59 (Winter 1992): pp. 3–7, at p. 5.

18 *Society as Prison* was simultaneously the title of the theater play developed around a life-sized reconstruction of Agema's prison model in Theater Frascati in Amsterdam, Dec. 21–22, 2011.

ganda, in which the construction of a completely alternate reality – and the regulation of the behaviors of its citizen-prisoners within it – is the ultimate outcome.<sup>19</sup> Power shapes artistic and architectural forms, in some cases the form of the artwork, in other cases the form of society as such. Thus, the artwork becomes equivalent to the construction of a reality.

The dual operation of propaganda art in both the *form of the artwork* and *infrastructure as form*, was at stake in the *Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennial* (2013), a free smartphone app that I developed with different scholars, designers, and programmers, with the aim of providing insight into the political, economic, and ideological backgrounds to each national pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennial. Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennial was modeled after the World Fair, large-scale events in which predominantly colonial powers displayed their technological and cultural innovations to one another through national pavilions. What is unique in the case of Venice is that contrary to the World Fairs, which take place every so many years in different countries, the Venice Biennial is a World Fair that *never left*. During more than a century, nation-states have bought their own permanent pavilions in Venice, the first being the colonial powers of Belgium, Germany, and the United Kingdom in 1907.<sup>20</sup> The Giardini, the central location of the Biennial and famous for its display of grand luxury and cultural omnipotence, are the prime real estate location for these national pavilions. A majority of former colonial powers reside here and the spatial organization of these pavilions thus often reflects not of the world order as it currently is, but as they desire it to be. That the national pavilions of Israel and the United States are placed right next to one another may be one of the most concrete examples of the Giardini operating as a phantasmatic representation of this idealized global political order. As such, the national pavilions at the Venice Biennial can be considered as a sort of an *alternative world map*, an allegory of the successful worldwide emergence of the nation-state during the 19th to the 20th centuries, culminating in the ever-expanding infrastructures of the Venice biennial.

19 The Total Work of Art, or "Gesamtkunstwerk," was developed as an artistic concept by composer Richard Wagner in his two 1849 essays *Art and Revolution* and "The Art-Work of the Future," inspired by the Revolutions of 1848: "Only on the shoulders of this great social movement can true Art lift itself from its present state of civilized barbarism, and take its post of honour. Each has a common goal, and the twain can only reach it when they recognize it jointly. This goal is the strong fair Man, to whom Revolution shall give his Strength, and Art his Beauty!" Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 56.

20 For a more detailed analysis of the history of the World Fair and the Venice Biennial in relationship to the *Ideological Guide*, see: Jonas Staal, "Art. Democratism. Propaganda," *e-flux journal*, No. 52 (Feb. 2014).

The *Ideological Guide* took this notion of the Venice Biennial as an alternative world map as its point of departure, offering users the option to plan routes between pavilions based on geopolitical alliances, such as the G8 or NATO, or military coalitions, such as the Coalition of the Willing that led the 2003 invasion of Iraq. What becomes clear from this spatial and infrastructural analysis is that many of the most powerful alliances can be located back to Giardini, whereas a route based on the Non-Aligned Movement largely includes pavilions outside of this center of global power. In other words, power relations – and *desired* power relations, predominantly serving the policies of the West – are written into the very infrastructure of the Venice Biennial. In that context, the pavilions themselves could be considered as *cultural embassies*, showcasing artworks that benefit the narration of their respective state interests. In the *Ideological Guide* users could further find detailed and critical information about each pavilion: the background of the artists, the curator they worked with, the market value of their work, the galleries that represented them, the ideological and political makeup of the country in question and its implication in political and economic alliances, current conflicts, and more.

The aim of the *Ideological Guide* was essentially to make its users recognize themselves as actors in a larger performance of power. Our bodily presence within the alternative world map of the Biennial affirms the geopolitical power relations that it portrays. Starting one's visit to Venice in the Giardini is a performative affirmation of the central importance of present-day or former European centers of power – China for example, is missing in Giardini – and only a minority of visitor-actors engage in the painstaking work of locating underfunded and marginalized stateless pavilions that are part of the “collateral” program, such as Iraq or Palestine, in the back alleys of Venice. Our movements narrate the desired power relations underlying the alternative world map of the Venice Biennial, our physical enactment re-affirms the world not as it could be, but as dominant structures of power desire it to be. The *Ideological Guide* allows both the infrastructure of the national pavilions and artworks displayed within them to be understood as forms of contemporary Propaganda Art.

These three examples outline what I believe is at stake in propaganda research, namely the *use of art* to map the process in which dominant structures of power are *performed as art*. The core objective is to understand how and through what means and narratives, propaganda art constructs our present-day reality: either through the curation of a propaganda art institution (Freethinkers' Space), the creation of art in the form of infrastructure (Closed Architecture), or a combination of both (Ideological Guide). Propaganda research is evidently not li-

imited to the representation of nationalist and ultranationalist power structures. Other works, such as *Monument to Capital* (2013) and *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (2014) deal with the performance of power as art in the context of high-finance capitalism and urban development respectively.<sup>21</sup> A crucial dimension of the propaganda research is the fact that each of these projects investigate propaganda art but are also *forms of propaganda art in and of themselves*. Propaganda research by a propaganda artist appropriates one form of propaganda art and turns it into another. In my own practice, I do this with the aim to propagandize an awareness of the role of propaganda art in dominant structures of power that define the construction of our reality.

## PROPAGANDA WORK

In the case of my propaganda work, the focus has been different, namely on the performance of *emerging structures of power* as art, with the aim of constructing reality after the collective interest. One can think here of the role of art within emancipatory political organizations, popular mass movements, or stateless insurgencies. If, as I have just argued, there is a structural relation between power and form, then the creation of art cannot be considered outside of the powers that define its conditions of production, circulation, and presentation. In other words, the counterpoint to an ultranationalist form of propaganda art is not to abandon the notion of propaganda art as such; art must always be understood in relation to specific constructs of power. But there are different forms of power and artists must decide within or in support of what power structures they wish to operate.

In the case of “emerging” forms of power we are dealing with power structures that are not yet fully established, and which are in the process of producing a counter-narrative to dominant power structures. As a result, my propaganda work has taken the shape of direct collaborations with stateless nations, social movements, and pan-European platforms. In each of these specific emerging power structures I have experienced and witnessed how my work was both informed and shaped by these powers, while at the same time contributing to them. A crucial observation regarding propaganda work in the context of emerging forms of power is that art should not be understood merely as an *instrument* of power. Rather, propaganda art in this context acti-

21 The project *Nosso Lar, Brasília* was a multi-year research project on the relationship between spiritism and modernism in Brazilian architecture, and the role of city models influenced by these particular ideologies. It was an early study in artistic research developed during the writing of this thesis, consisting of the positioning of an artwork (the merger of two city models) parallel to an academic study (theorizing what other knowledge the artwork could produce). See: Jonas Staal, *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (Rio de Janeiro: Capacet and Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2014).

vely shapes the process in which emerging power manifests itself into form, and impacts the way in which we understand power through form: not merely as a tool to represent the world as it is, but as a way to present the world as it could be. In other words, art in the context of emancipatory politics is a *transformative* form of propaganda, as it propagates not that what is, but that what is possible if we can *imagine* it to be possible.

A concrete example of this propaganda work is my artistic and political organization *New World Summit* (2012–ongoing), which aims to develop alternative parliaments for stateless and blacklisted political organizations. Involving the domains of art, architecture, and design, the majority of these “alternative parliaments” took the form of temporary architectural installations in theaters, art institutions, and public spaces. They were not conceived to represent existing states but stateless and blacklisted organizations, groups that have been excluded from our current practice of democracy.<sup>22</sup> Created in the age of the War on Terror, the New World Summit develops spaces for political assemblies between civil society in whose name the War on Terror has been waged and stateless and blacklisted organizations against whom the War on Terror is waged. In other words, it introduces a space for “performative assembly” as philosopher Judith Butler termed it – what I call “Assemblism” – in which the common interests of both constituencies that might have more in common with one another than with the states that respectively claim to act in their name or fight directly against them can be explored.<sup>23</sup>

The *New World Summit* created a total of five temporary parliaments in Berlin (2012), Leiden (2012), Kochi (2013), Brussels (2014), and Utrecht (2016), one permanent parliament in Rojava (2015–17), two temporary embassies in Utrecht (2014) and Oslo (2016), and for a period of four years, its own school (2013–16). In the process, this “artist organization” – a concept that we will discuss in detail in the fourth chapter – involved more than fifty stateless and blacklisted organizations from all over the world including the Basque Country, Samiland, Somaliland, Ogadenia, Oromia, Azawad, Rehoboth, Kurdistan, Baluchistan, Southern-Azerbaijan, East-Turkestan, Tamil Eelam, West-Papua, the Philippines and the Aboriginal Nations. Apart from proposing a space of assembly for politicized civil society and stateless and blacklisted people, the New World Summit has been also a space of diplomatic exchange through our collaboration with the Unrepre-

22 For more detailed explorations of the concept of blacklisting and its relation to statelessness, see the New World Summit reader: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei (ed.), *New World Summit (Leiden: Utopisch Nest, 2012)*.

23 Jonas Staal, “Assemblism,” *e-flux journal*, No. 80 (Mar. 2017).

sented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), and provided judicial support through our involvement of groups such as the Progress Lawyers Network and the Berghof Foundation. In other words, it aims to operate between the *real* and the *possible*, between concrete support to the struggles of stateless and blacklisted people, and the imaginary of a possible new assembly – across stateless and “stated” people – to emerge.<sup>24</sup>

Instead of investing in strengthening dominant structures of power, the New World Summit – through the space of art – has aimed at narrating a *history of the world, according to the stateless*.<sup>25</sup> Not the world as we know it, but the manifold worlds that are struggled for and emerging as we speak. The New World Summit may be considered to be the inverse of the Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennial. Whereas the Ideological Guide aimed to show how dominant structures of power narrate themselves through art, the New World Summit aims at narrating often invisibilized, emerging forms of power through art. In the case of the Ideological Guide, art is understood as an instrument of dominant power, in the case of the New World Summit as the collaboration and assembly of emerging forms of power.

The exchange between the New World Summit and the organizations participating in its summits was not limited to mere facilitation. The conceptualization of the alternative parliaments was part of this exchange as well. In the case of the *New World Summit – Brussels*, for example, large-scale maps were developed with each participating organization to depict their claimed territory or the political model they aimed to establish. This resulted in a lengthy communication with the Baluchistan People’s Party (BPP), as their exact claims to ancestral land were disputed within the organization. This led to several border lines being changed back and forth many times over. Another example was the map of the Kurdish Women’s Movement that is active in North- and West-Kurdistan, and who reject the form of the nation-state, instead proposing a form of “democratic confederalism” or “stateless democracy.” This led not to a territorial but an “ideological map.”

In the case of the *New World Embassy: Azawad* and *New World Embassy: Rojava*, such collaborations went even further. Aimed at developing a form of “stateless diplomacy,” the design of these embassies were conceptualized and approved in lengthy discussions with the res-

24 With the term “stated” I refer to those administered in the context of the state, versus the stateless who are not. I will further discuss this term in the third and fourth chapter. I further discussed the particularities of what to be considered as stated and stateless in relation to the Islamic State, see: Jonas Staal, “Empire’s Double: The Many Pavilions of the Islamic State,” *e-flux journal/Supercommunity* (Jul. 2015).

25 This was the point of departure of the New World Summit – Brussels (2014) that took place in the Royal Flemish Theater (KVS) in Brussels, Sep. 19–21, 2014 under the title “Stateless State.”

pective representatives of the stateless nations in question. While this may be interpreted as an instrumental role of art in relation to politics, I would – from my personal experience – describe these collaborations as forms of *mutual instrumentalization*. The New World Summit is instrumental for the creation of forms of mediation that support the narratives of stateless and blacklisted organizations. But conversely these organizations are instrumental for the New World Summit to rethink the role of art, architecture, and design through alternative (art)historical narratives that can challenge the dominant, statist conception of art. Through these collaborations, my team and I became aware of the long history of art and culture in stateless political struggles. Due to the absence of an independent state structure their histories and languages were memorized and transferred from one generation to the other through art – visual symbols, music, literature, theater. Instead of being an instrument of the state, in these cases art can be considered as an *alternative to the state*; a cultural body that defines a “people” or “nation,” and as such strengthens and legitimizes their claim to self-determination in the form of a state or autonomous region.<sup>26</sup>

This profound role and agency of art within stateless political struggles was most apparent in the New World Summit’s collaboration between the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava. Rojava, an autonomous region in northern Syria that we will discuss at length in the final chapter, was declared a stateless democracy by an alliance of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and other people from the region.<sup>27</sup> On invitation of Saleh Muslim, co-president of the Rojavan Democratic Union Party (PYD), I traveled in December 2014 with my New World Summit team to the region with the aim to document the process of building stateless democracy and to interview artists involved in the process. However, a proposal of our host, Minister of Foreign Affairs Amina Osse, turned this into yet another project, when we started conceptualizing a new parliament for the stateless democracy of Rojava, not a temporary, but a permanent one.

More than in any other collaboration this work of New World Summit was shaped through the ideas and practices of its collaborator. Commissioned by Osse, the design of what would become the *New World Summit – Rojava*, locally referred to as the “People’s Parliament of Rojava,” was discussed with all local communes for approval, and the building and design process would include exchange with local artists, engineers, and builders. Our aim was to represent, through the

parliament, the model, and ideals of stateless democracy by following the decision-making processes of stateless democracy. Osse and my team approached the notion of Rojavan ideology as a material form – we approached ideology as a morphology. Of all the works of the *New World Summit*, this one is the most crucial for understanding the exact interchange between emerging power and artistic imaginary in exploring the possibility of a transformative propaganda art.

Osse’s idea that it was to become a public parliament – the parliament as a public space – cannot be separated from Rojava’s claim to recuperate democracy’s origins as found in the form of the *agora* of ancient Greece. The parliament’s circular shape derives from the form of the local communal assemblies, which often take the shape of informal circles. It dislocates power from a clear center in favor of an egalitarian social composition in which the distance between participants has been equalized. The large canvasses that cover the parliament’s roof 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 revolutionary imaginary created the ideological design of the parliament through art. Its morphology is ideology materialized, emerging power becoming form. The People’s Parliament of Rojava is a spatial manifesto, it is a sculpture of an emerging power in the making, and it is a space to transform these imaginaries into concrete daily practice. It brings into being what historian Henk te Velde has called “the theater of politics,” connecting the history of political performance with art, and the theater with the parliament.<sup>28</sup>

The work of the New World Summit also shows a series of structural imbalances and inequalities. Not only am I inheritor of the Dutch colonial empire – whose heritage drives many stateless insurgencies up until today – but also much of the funding and cultural infrastructure that is available to me as a Swiss–Dutch artist is unavailable to my collaborators. Aiming to overcome the imbalances between the stated and the stateless does not change the fact that such historical and contemporary inequalities are present in the process. Nonetheless, I would strongly oppose the idea that the blacklisted and the stateless should be reduced to a position of powerlessness and victimhood. Yes, statelessness includes brutal oppression and downright murder of people

26 I have discussed this on several occasions as the “art of the stateless state,” see: Jonas Staal, “Ultranationalism and the Art of the Stateless State,” *e-flux journal*, No. 57 (Sep. 2014).

27 My first political and cultural inquiry into stateless democracy was Jonas Staal, “Stateless Democracy,” *e-flux journal*, No. 63 (Mar. 2015).

28 Henk te Velde, *Het Theater van de Politiek* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2003). Another 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).

and erasure of their histories, but as Rojava has shown me, statelessness through stateless democracy can in many ways also be claimed as a power in its own right.

These examples outline what I believe is at stake in propaganda work, namely to actively participate in the performance of emerging power as art. The core objective is to understand how and by what means, narratives, and forms propaganda art can contribute to the construction of reality through the demands of emerging powers. The examples of my own propaganda work highlight the relationship between particular forms of emerging power and the way they make new artistic and political forms possible: the stateless parliament, the stateless embassy, the stateless school.

The New World Summit is, however, not the only example of my propaganda work in relation to emerging power. Another one is my collaboration with former Labor alderman of art and culture Carolien Gehrels and artist Hans van Houwelingen in the form of our *Allegories* project (2011–ongoing), in which we aimed to create new coalitions between artists and progressive politicians. Another case is my work in the *New Unions* campaign (2016–ongoing) within the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), which aims at establishing a new Pan-European democracy.<sup>29</sup> Each of these projects attempts to connect the imagination of emancipatory politics with an emancipatory art, to translate emerging structures of power into new emerging forms of propaganda art.

#### METHODOLOGY OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Above I have laid out the basic conditions of the methodology of artistic practice applied to this thesis. I believe this methodology is best explained through the following equation :

$$\textit{propaganda} = \textit{power} + \textit{performance}$$

This means that I define propaganda as a performance of power with the aim to construct reality for its interests. Propaganda equals the performance of power, but the aim of constructing reality does not equal propaganda to reality as such: reality includes a plurality of competing propagandas, although one propaganda might have *more* impact on reality than another. My aim is to trace and apply the role of propaganda art in this process, both as an instrument of dominant power and

as a transformative practice that translates emerging power into new artistic forms. My methodology may in that sense be understood as a comparative study and practice, that begins from the claim that different powers perform themselves as different propagandas and different forms of propaganda art.

Part of this thesis starts from propaganda research, and another part from propaganda work. The research component of this thesis can be best explained through my proposition to define propaganda as a “performance of power.” To arrive at this proposition, I departed from a multidisciplinary body of existing propaganda studies that has been developed in the domains of politics, the military, sociology, psychology, and mass media, among others. This is even more so the case in relation to the term “art,” in which case I rely on art historical sources, many of which are from the field that I have termed “Popular Art History,” on which I will elaborate in the final chapter.

But the aim of this thesis, to expand a 20th-century definition of propaganda and propaganda art into the 21st century, cannot rely on existing research alone, partly since the very term “propaganda” – as I will explain in the first chapter of this thesis – has fallen largely out of use in favor of terms such as “advertisement” and “public relations.” My approach to this terminological problem has been twofold. First, I introduce literature and research of authors who, although outside the field of propaganda studies, address issues pertinent to the study of propaganda in the 21st century. Second, I have relied on my own projects and experience as a propaganda researcher and propaganda artist to gain an understanding of the process through which contemporary power is performed as contemporary art. This means that my own experience as a propaganda artist has resulted into an attempt to define several categories of contemporary propaganda art, employing sources – artists, theorists, philosophers – that have so far been excluded from the domain of propaganda studies proper. In some cases, I discuss artists and movements of whose existence I was unaware until the moment I conducted my own fieldwork as a propaganda artist in contexts such as the Philippines, Azawad, and Rojava.

The scope of this thesis is broad. It aims to redefine modern propaganda and modern propaganda art, and to expand these definitions into the field of contemporary propaganda and contemporary propaganda art. This broad scope may lead to question the core of the “knowledge” that underlies my artistic practice. There have been far more detailed works written on the role of propaganda in the First and Second World War, on Adorno’s concept of the cultural industry, or the employment of modern art as a weapon of the Cold War – all topics that I will discuss in this thesis. But my modest contribution, I

<sup>29</sup> I describe the New Unions campaign and the political concept of “transdemocratic unionizing” that resulted from it in: Jonas Staal, “Transdemocracy,” *e-flux journal*, No. 76 (Oct. 2016).

hope, has not been to rewrite histories already written, but to propose *categories of propaganda art* that can be applied to understand propaganda and propaganda art in the context of our 21st century. These are categories that may contribute to future histories of contemporary propaganda art. In this respect, my paradoxical and hybrid role as an “artist–historian” hopefully has contributed to the expansion of existing propaganda studies by means of an equal emphasis on research and practice.<sup>30</sup>

This touches on the field that has become known as “artistic research,” and the possibility for artists to participate in practice-based PhD programs. I have been a researcher in one such program and this thesis is its result. If the faculty of humanities were not already scorned by the exact sciences, then the introduction of artistic practice into the university has made sure of it. From an academic perspective, there is an ongoing discussion about what “knowledge” art adds to existing fields of research, such as art history. From an artistic perspective, there is an ongoing question as to why art should enter a space of discursivity at all, with the argument that art deals with experiences and sensibilities are contrary to those of science. I would like to share three aspects of my understanding of artistic research in this context that also apply to this thesis, namely *writing as artistic tool*, *history as material*, and *world-making*.

Writing as an artistic tool has a history of its own in the form of artist manifestoes, statements, and polemics, in which artists intervened into the narratives created around their work by critics, historians, and politicians. In the case of the movement known as Institutional Critique, of which I will discuss some proponents in this thesis, a form of “parallel academia” came into being, in which artists narrated the unacknowledged histories and interests – political, economic, ideological – that define the canon of modern and contemporary art. In that sense, artistic research, and the particular knowledges it produces in the visual, discursive, and performative fields were a reality far before they became partially instituted in the university in the form of artistic research. In that light, there is no necessary conflict between the discursive and the visual. Rather, there might be a difference in the *objective* of the discursive output of an artist.

This touches upon the notion of history as a material. Progressive historians will always emphasize that writing about history also means making history. What is described as history and what is not actively

30 Note that throughout this thesis, I will reference the political or advisory work of several propaganda researchers, to emphasize that there is little neutrality in describing propaganda. Theorizing propaganda also inevitably means to propose and engage with models for its practice.

shapes our understanding of it, and is what makes history paradoxically into a contemporary practice. History is, at the very least, as true to the past as it is to the interests of the present. In the case of artistic research, this notion of history as material is even more prominent. The artist narrates the history in which he or she is participating at the very same time. In that sense, artistic research is the domain of propaganda studies par excellence, as it highlights the influence of a particular artistic interest in relation to the way a historical narrative is constructed to serve a contemporary objective.

Finally, writing as artistic tool and history as material, together translate into an objective of artistic research that is particular to my own practice, namely world-making. It was Upton Sinclair, who will frequently appear in this thesis, who called upon artists not to make art in the world as it is, but to “make a world.”<sup>31</sup> Like progressive historians, artistic research in this case rejects the very notion of history as a frozen *tableau*. In the way that we narrate history, and through the potentials that we unleash by narrating history as a contemporary practice, we make new engagements with our present and futures possible. Writing as an artistic tool means to interrogate, challenge, and activate history as a material not merely to describe the world as it is, but the world as it could be: the world as it *could be* imagined, changed, and made.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This thesis consists of four chapters on propaganda and propaganda art that cover the period of the First World War to the present day.

In the first chapter, *Modern Propaganda*, I will trace the notion of modern propaganda through the work of Philip Taylor, Garth Jowett, and Victoria O'Donnell from the beginning of the First World War, when the first modern propaganda bureau – Wellington House – was established in the United Kingdom. I will emphasize the importance of the British colonial empire in building the technological and industrial infrastructure that made propaganda both possible and necessary, as well as the fact that the birthplace of modern propaganda was not a so-called “totalitarian” state, but a modern democracy. The efforts of Wellington House to employ propaganda to get the neutral Americans to join the war against the “Huns” – a derogative term used for the

31 We will discuss Sinclair's work in more detail in the second and fourth chapter of this thesis. The notion of “world-making” as a verb resulted from a conversation with Maria Hlavajova, see: Maria Hlavajova in conversation with Jonas Staal, “World-making as commitment,” in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2016), pp. 667–77.

Germans – will be helpful to understand democratic propaganda as a largely covert operation that attempts to maintain the idea of an open and free society while altering information at its foundation. Through the work of Michael Sproule, I will try to reconstruct how after the First World War such covert operations of democratic propaganda sparked a debate in the United States on the question whether democracy and propaganda are reconcilable. This will allow me to introduce key proponents of propaganda studies such as Walter Lippman, Edward Bernays, and Harold Lasswell. After the Second World War, the use of both covert and overt propaganda by Nazi Germany indefinitely discredited the term propaganda. Nonetheless, several thinkers and researchers, such as Theodor Adorno, Jacques Ellul, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, would continue to explore the term, not only in relation to dictatorships, but also to modern democracies. I conclude that modern propaganda is not exclusive to totalitarian regimes, but is inherent to all modern societies, no matter the structure or ideology of the state. This of course does not mean that all forms of propaganda are the same. In the same way that power structures differ from each other, so do different forms of propaganda. I will therefore, following Ellul, speak of “propagandas” in the plural. The propaganda model theorized by Chomsky and Herman will prove crucial throughout the later chapters, as they introduce a series of “filters” to understand the process through which dominant monopolies of power aim to manufacture consent among a given population. By combining their model with theoretical insights of other scholars such as Ellul, I will propose a definition of propaganda as a “performance of power” that aims to construct reality after its own political, economic, and ideological interests. In the case of *modern* propaganda, this relates specifically to the deployment of massive technological and industrial capacities which, from the First World War onward, could construct reality on a worldwide scale. This brings me to conclude that *modern propaganda is the performance of power in modern society*.

In the second chapter, *Modern Propaganda Art*, I will apply this definition of modern propaganda to the domain of art. Through the work of Jacques Louis David, Immanuel Kant, and Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, I show how the notion of modern art is the product of a series of political upheavals from the French Revolution onward, which have defined our current understanding of art’s “freedom” and “autonomy.” The paradox is that what we consider autonomous art today is itself the result of the revolutionary politics of the past. I will try to clarify this claim by proposing three different models of propaganda art in relation to three specific power structures. In the context of the Russian Revolution I will propose the term *Avant-Garde Propaganda*

*Art*, in the context of 20th-century dictatorships I will propose *Totalitarian Propaganda Art*, and in the context of the United States during the Cold War I will propose *Modernist Propaganda Art*. For each of these models, I will try to show how different power structures have been performed as art. For example, in the case of Avant-Garde Propaganda Art I will argue through the work of Vladimir Lenin and Anatoly Lunacharsky that the Soviet Union’s early claim to define its own revolutionary modernity approached modern propaganda as a form of mass education in the process of establishing an egalitarian society. This has an enormous impact on artists, and constructivists and productivists began to include forms of technology and mass communication into their artistic practices. In the case of Totalitarian Propaganda Art, I will show through the works of Andrei Zhdanov, Boris Groys, and Igor Golomstock how many of such revolutionary ideals were subsequently co-opted by brutal authoritarian regimes, in which art was reduced to its former role as instrument of ruling powers, such as in the case of Stalin’s

socialist realism. At the same time, I will propose the term Totalitarian Propaganda Art as a propagandistic instrument itself, which aims to define propaganda art as the sole property of totalitarian ideologies, while effacing the historical role of modern democracy as the origin of modern propaganda. In the case of Modernist Propaganda Art, I will trace the role of American modernist art, such as abstract expressionism as theorized by Clement Greenberg, as an instrument of the Cold War. Propagated by means of a clandestine CIA operation in Europe, as analyzed in detail by Frances Stonor Saunders, its aim was to emphasize the contrast between the “free,” non-figurative art of the West and the doctrinal aesthetics of socialist realism created behind the Iron Curtain. The framing of a non-propagandistic modernist art proved to be the ultimate form of democratic propaganda; modernist art is still celebrated as a symbol of the free West today. Theorizing these three specific power structures in relation to their performance as art allows to differentiate different propagandas and different models of propaganda art, which brings me to conclude that *modern propaganda art is the performance of power as art in modern society*.

In the third chapter, *Contemporary Propaganda*, I will explore to what extent the central characteristics of modern propaganda are applicable to the 21st century. I will expand Chomsky and Herman’s propaganda model and its limited focus on dominant structures of power to consider other emerging formations of power that provide alternative forms of propaganda. For example, the War on Terror has been one of the most influential factors that define the conflictual arena of the contemporary, which can be analyzed through Chomsky and Herman’s

propaganda model. But I will also focus on the role of popular mass movements and stateless peoples that oppose this War on Terror, or are (in)directly targeted by this war, which Chomsky and Herman have not taken into consideration in their propaganda model. The “reversed propaganda model” that I propose is not focused on filters, but on collective demands articulated by popular mass movements and stateless peoples. Rather than operating as a form of elite control, I will argue that the inverted propaganda model opens the possibility of egalitarian or collective propagandization for the collective interest. In the case of *War on Terror Propaganda*, I will try to show through the work of Joseph Masco how the accelerated and interconnected domains of politics, economy, science, and the military–industrial complex have become implicated in an “expanded state,” a state that operates largely outside of democratic control and engages in a war against forms of threat production – forms of terror – that are in part a product of its own making. In the case of *Popular Propaganda*, I will trace through the work of Judith Butler the process in which popular mass movements develop alternative and collective formations of power having the popular assembly as their point of departure. In the case of *Stateless Propaganda*, I will trace – as far as my own blind spots allow – alternative forms of assembly through the work of Mohamedou Ould Slahi, which departs from the recognition of statelessness as a political condition. In the process of discussing the proximities and oppositions between these three forms of contemporary propaganda, I will not only emphasize their different performativities and claims to different understandings of power, but also their *creative* capacities, their aim to perform power and imaginative competences to create vastly different realities as a result. This brings me to conclude that *contemporary propaganda is the performance of power in contemporary society*.

In the fourth and final chapter, *Contemporary Propaganda Art*, I will apply this definition of contemporary propaganda to the domain of art. I will emphasize in the process how the changing character of propaganda from the modern to the contemporary also changed the definition of art as such, increasingly expanding its reach into the domain of contemporary mass media and technology. I will clarify these different formations of propaganda art through the three main agents of the contemporary defined in the third chapter: the War on Terror, popular mass movements and stateless peoples. With each of these actors, I will try to show how different power structures in the contemporary – whether in the form of established or emerging forms of power – are performed as art. In the case of War on Terror Propaganda Art, I will show through the work of Steve Bannon, Trevor Paglen, Stephen Eisenman, and Coco Fusco, among others, how a variety of media, reaching from

spectacular forms of theater, cinema, visual art, video games, and even alternative forms of abstraction, has been employed to manufacture ever increasing forms of terror that legitimize the War on Terror and protect the interests of its stakeholders. In the case of Popular Propaganda Art, I will introduce through the work of Upton Sinclair, Alice Guillermo, and Claire Bishop artists who have contributed to its performative practices of assembly, and who have tried to contribute to their demands of an alternative egalitarian society that opposes the divisions promulgated by the War on Terror. Examples range from artists and art groups active within popular mass movements, such as Not An Alternative, Matthijs de Bruijne, and Decolonizing Art Architecture Residency, to artists who have created their own alternative models of political organizations, such as Ahmet Ögüt and Tania Bruguera. In the case of Stateless Propaganda Art, I will discuss how different formations of statelessness – from the demand to be recognized by the state to the desire to create a state of one’s own or even reject the notion of the state altogether – have resulted in artistic practices that aim to recognize statelessness as a power in and of itself. From refugee collective We Are Here and the work of Mazou Ibrahim Touré’s Artist Association of Azawad to the work of Abdullah Abdul and the Rojava Film Commune, we will see how these artists and art groups contribute to the construction of reality departing from various conditions of statelessness. This process of tracing specific power structures in their performance as art allows us to distinguish different propagandas and different models of propaganda art, which brings me to conclude that *contemporary propaganda art is the performance of power as art in contemporary society*.

#### “WE”

On a final note, the reader will notice that starting from chapter one, this thesis is written from the perspective of a “we.” That is not a royal “we,” and it doesn’t lay claim to a constant agreement between writer and reader. Rather, this “we” is a we-in-the-making.<sup>32</sup>

This thesis proposes a discursive space of assembly around the notion of propaganda art, which might make a modest contribution to redefining the meaning of both propaganda and art in the 21st century, and, more importantly, put such a new definition of contemporary

32 The fear of positioning a “we,” a claim to a collectivity or the need for one, and the neoliberal propaganda that fuels this fear, is well summarized by Jodi Dean: “Collectivity is undesirable because it is suspected of excluding possibilities, effacing difference, and enforcing difference, and enforcing discipline. ‘What do you mean ‘we’?’ is one slogan of this suspicion, typically lobbed into contexts and discussions deemed insufficiently attentive to the specificities to each person’s experience.” Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London/New York: Verso, 2016), pp. 67–68.



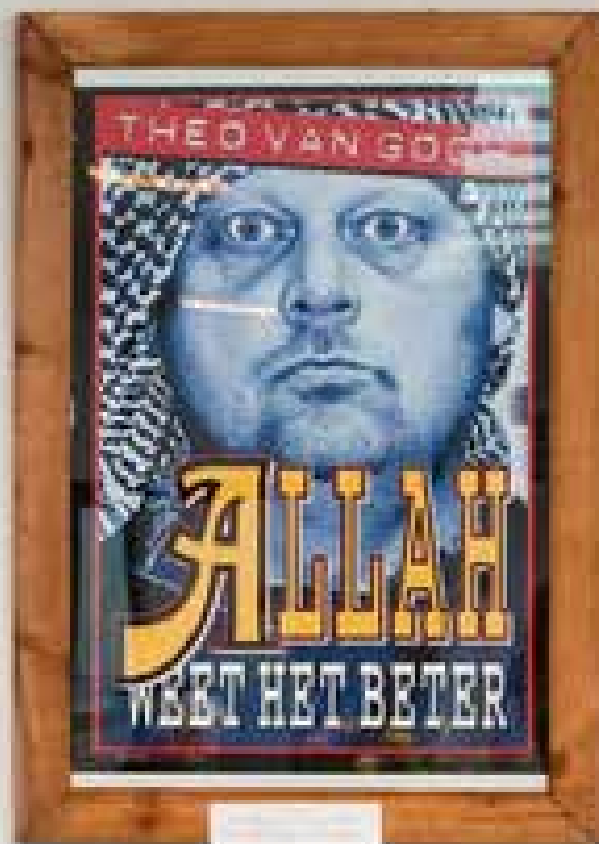
propaganda art to use. With this thesis, I thus hope to strengthen a collectivity that recognizes the importance of propaganda art for the construction of our shared reality, and the question of what kind of reality we desire to create.

Naturally, this thesis, written by a propaganda artist on propaganda art, is itself a work of propaganda art. It is a work of propaganda art that, in the tradition of conceptual art and institutional critique, appropriates the form of academic writing, including its entire scholarly apparatus, as artistic material. Te Velde has described this as a particular ambiguity regarding the role of art in propaganda art. Propaganda art, in his view, does exactly what the artist states that he or she will do – in my case, writing a thesis on propaganda art, or develop a parliament commissioned by a stateless nation – while at the same time doing *more*.<sup>33</sup> This “more” is defined not just by what we perceive visually as the art work, but by what such an artwork aims to bring into existence: the construction of a different reality. Just like the many propaganda artists that the reader will encounter in the following chapters, this propaganda artist aims to construct reality anew, or at least start a discussion on how we might assemble in order to do so.

Not to speak as a we-in-the-making would be a betrayal of this objective, and of my claim at the very beginning of this introduction: my name is Jonas Staal, and that I am a propaganda artist.

<sup>33</sup> Noted from a personal conversation with Henk te Velde and Sven Lütticken, Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, Jun. 2, 2017.



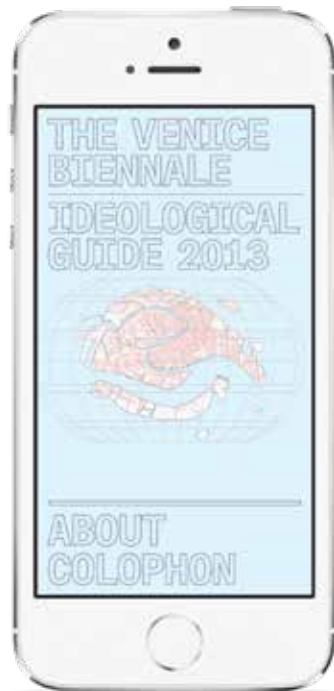




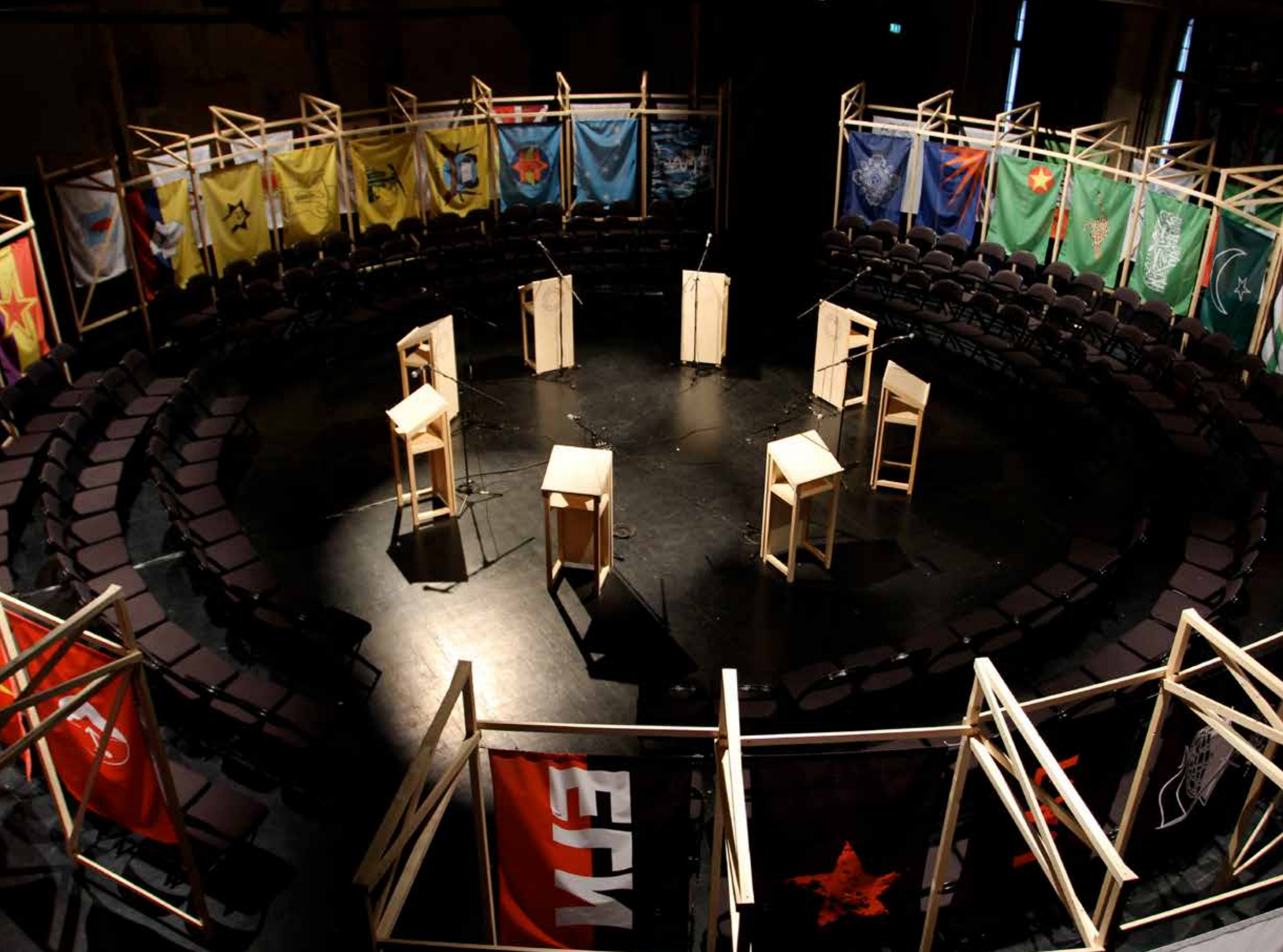
















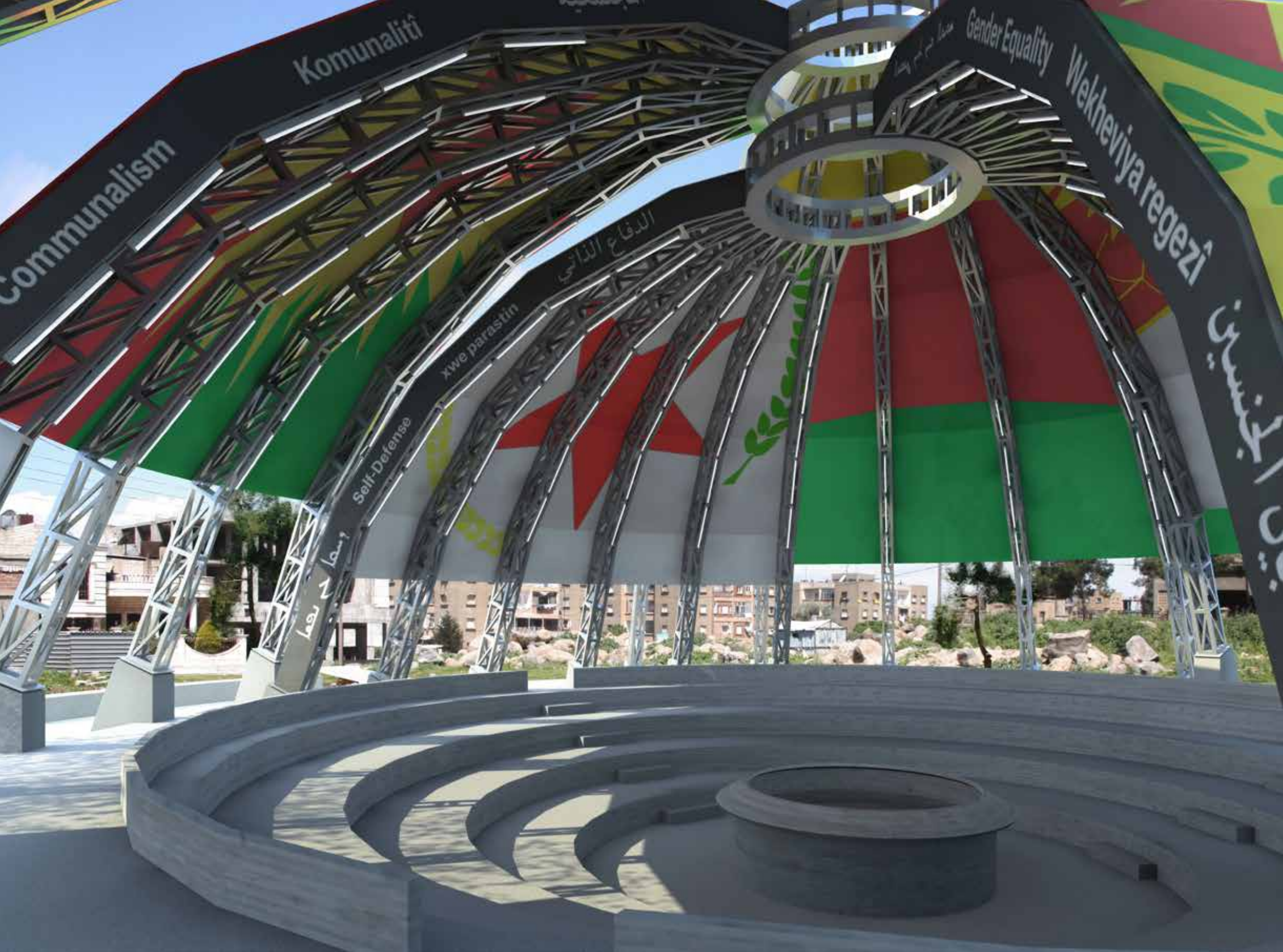


















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*New World Summit – Rojava* (2015-17), in collaboration with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, Digital drawing

p. 40-41

*Freethinkers' Space* (2010), based on a concept of VVD and PVV  
Installation view in Dutch parliament, The Hague

p. 42-43

*Freethinkers' Space* (2010), based on a concept of VVD and PVV  
Installation view in Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

p. 44-45

*Closed Architecture* (2011), based on a concept of Fleur Agema, Digital drawing

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*Closed Architecture* (2011), based on a concept of Fleur Agema, Digital drawing

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*Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennial* (2013)

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*New World Summit – Berlin* (2012)  
Installation view in Sophiensaele Theater, Berlin

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*New World Summit – Brussels* (2014),  
Royal Flemish Theater (KVS), Brussels

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*New World Embassy: Rojava* (2016),  
in collaboration with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, Installation view, Oslo City Hall

p. 56-57

*New World Embassy: Rojava* (2016),  
in collaboration with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, Oslo City Hall

p. 58-59

*New World Summit – Rojava* (2015-17), in collaboration with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, Digital drawing

p. 60-61

*New World Summit – Rojava* (2015-17), in collaboration with the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, Construction view, Derik, Cezire canton