



STATE OF CONCEPT
ATHENS

INFO@STATEOFCONCEPT.ORG / WWW.STATEOFCONCEPT.ORG

The Mirror has been Broken

It is hard to keep in mind that Jonas Staal is an artist, amidst a heated debate led by Leila Khaled, the Palestinian female counterpart of Arafat, when participating in one of Staal's Summits¹. The artist has been organising them since 2012, through his "political and artistic organisation", the *New World Summit* (2012-ongoing). And in effect it is quite hard to always fully grasp what Staal is aiming for, when beautifully balancing on the axis of art and politics. He questions the very thing that is defined as art, even in its meta-postmodern fluid condition.

But, it has always been so. Staal began to emerge in the wider public consciousness through *The Geert Wilders Works* (2005-2008), a series of installations that constituted mainly of staging "fan shrines" of photographs, teddy bears and candles, taped on trees in parks and other public spaces, in Rotterdam and The Hague: shrines depicting the living right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders, leader of the Freedom Party (PVV). These "monuments" created uproar and led Wilders to report the "unknown person" that was celebrating his death to the authorities several times. After more than a month of creating twenty-one of his installations in Rotterdam and the Hague, Staal made himself known to the authorities and let the artwork in essence begin unfolding through a series of trials that he announced as performative continuations of his work, thus broadening the perception of what can be considered, included and celebrated within the realm of artistic practice. And this is the primal axon of Staal's work: he meticulously observes and maps political and social conditions that define how society and the State operates, and uses his findings as tools to develop his artworks. Politics but also the political process and

¹ Leila Khaled, representative of the Popular Liberation Front of Palestine (PLFP) spoke during Staal's 6th *New World Summit* In Utrecht, January 29-31 2016

its structures, become the vowels and consonants of Staal's artistic language: a practice consistent in all of his work since 2004.

A less apparent but very interesting underlying layer of this practice is that Staal chooses to perform an almost violent mirroring of the condition of contemporary Western society and its fascination and approval with the far right and all its Baudrillardian evil: fascism, racism, discrimination, neoliberalism, corruption, hypocrisy. Staal, as a true provocateur, used Wilders (and others in years that followed) the "villain" as a muse, to unveil all that is wrong in the way politics exists in the public consciousness. Not by amplifying the obvious obscenities shooting through the right wing's mouth, but by addressing the whispers of approval behind closed doors and the silent indifference on the streets of major cities.

These silent whispers that have in recent human history allowed for many atrocities seem to be the core interest of Jonas Staal. The family man that has been silenced through consumerist hysteria, the indifference of the middle class to anything that they regard below them, the European that remains passive to the sufferings and struggles of 'far-away' countries and conflicts. The grim reality of the way local and global politics have been unfolding in the past decades are not only presented in his work through the paradigms of the far-right rising and the subsequent exclusion of non-conformist voices, but as a whole by confronting our own silent tolerance. It makes one remember Borges' myth of a people ostracized and enslaved behind a mirror, existing solely as a reflection of the emperor that has enslaved them, condemned to mimic his movements². In true Borgesian form, Staal names our enslavement, calls upon our enslaved-mirror self for emancipation, for a transgression, from our personal World of Mirrors to what Borges' described as the "World of Men."

In his major body of work ongoing since 2012, *New World Summit*, part of it presented in this exhibition, Staal has been constructing spaces in which representatives of stateless – and at times criminalised – organisations assemble. These constructed parliaments engulfed architecture, audience participation,

² Jorge Louis Borges, "Fauna of Mirrors" in *Book of Imaginary Beings* (Penguin Classics, 1957)

political theory and political structures in the form of temporary public artworks that fully engaged the audience. His last edition of the Rojava parliament in Kurdistan, Northern Syria, commissioned by the Kurdish autonomous authorities, is however a step further. What remained in part simulation becomes a never-ending practice of art and politics. The artwork becomes an architectural reminder of transgression, and is now part of daily life, and daily citizen participation: the mirror has been broken.

Trying to grasp the work and proposing to the artist to engage with the context of the Greek crisis, our dialogue brought forward common interests and views on the reasons for our European “condition”. *New Unions* (2016-ongoing), presented for After Europe in its first draft, is another kind of mirror. This time, Staal calls upon the power of art to allow for validating and fortifying what has been another kind of whisper: that of collective consciousness, that of transgressive and emancipatory movements, that have steadily – although timidly – been building up over these past eight years. He in effect, traces “proof” (through e.g. the New Unions map) of that other kind of citizen that now has passed into the World of Men. His dark flags instate a new collectivity; his scattered stars are both a reminder of our failures, but also beacons of a greater force that can allow for a different conviction: we no longer need to remain enslaved in repeating the Emperor’s movements behind a mirror. We are slowly passing to the other side, that of a New (unionised) World of Men.

And thus, the work of Jonas Staal is very difficult. Just like any realisation of a major failure, it makes one face the reflection of our shortcomings, but simultaneously operates as a Borgesian mirror providing the power to imagine the first step towards that other World, through the realm of art – that seizes finally to be a mere mirror of life. To paraphrase Derrida’s famous phrase in an interview entitled “Learn finally to live,” Staal leaves you with an almost unbearable feeling: I am at war with myself.³ This war is the war the artist aims for: it’s the war of our social and political self. But he would also make for a paradigm for Derrida’s definition of a particular political art making: to examine the self, but also to attempt

³ In Derrida’s last interview to Jean Birnbaum before his passing in 2004, published in *Apprendre a vivre enfin* (Editions Galilee/Le Monde, 2005)

to speak the language of the other, without denying one's own.⁴ Staal is indeed trying, in such a meticulous manner, that it becomes a fully successful proposition and invitation to imagine a different reflection in any mirror put before us.

iLiana Fokianaki, June 2016

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Le Dernier Mot du Rascisme* originally published in 1983 (Editions Galilée, 1987)