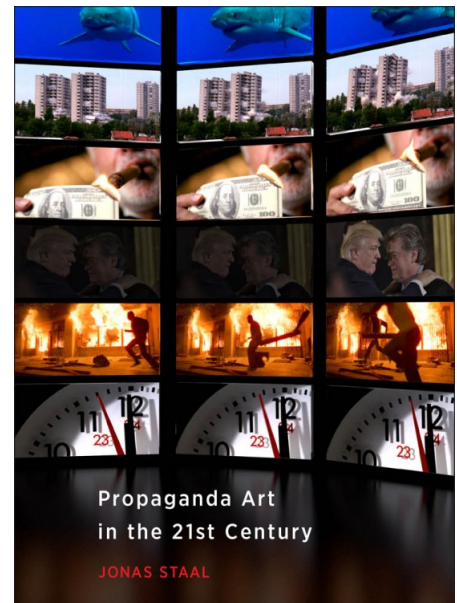

Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*

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reviewed by Christoph Chwatal



Dutch-Swiss artist Jonas Staal's *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* is a condensed and revised version of his 2018 PhD-in-practice thesis.¹ The book resembles a manifesto when juxtaposed with the arduous academic exercise of his substantial thesis, with the latter including an extensive apparatus of references. Providing the academic backdrop to Staal's artistic practice, the key undertaking of the publication is an attempt to redefine the concept of propaganda. Prior to providing a clearer outline of his understanding of the term, the author begins with a somewhat provocative statement: 'My name is Jonas Staal and I am a propaganda artist' (p 1). Conceptualising propaganda as the 'performance of power' (p 1), Staal shifts away from canonical studies on propaganda in totalitarian regimes, post-war capitalism and the present-day rise of right-wing nationalism to instead provide a framework within which to discuss how popular mass movements enact and perform power from below. Here, it becomes clear that the author opposes the pejorative use of the term as deception – or worse, its association with the horrors of both the Third Reich and Stalinism. Thus, Staal aims to 'demythologize propaganda' (p 22) while simultaneously challenging the narrative that democracy is the ostensible opposite of propaganda. To mark a semantic difference, the author moves on to speak of propagandas in the plural to include the various struggles of social movements. In keeping with this, the book provides case studies of artistic practices ranging from Russian Productivism and Constructivism to the Artist Association of Azawad in Mali and artistic and aesthetic practitioners from the autonomous region of Rojava in northern Syria. The book's contribution is thus not exclusively scholarly; it also offers original insights into the role of artistic practice in liberation struggles and the potential of social movements to shape reality, or participate in 'world-making' (p 114). According to Staal, popular mass movements have either been absent throughout scholarly debate or understood as mere

¹ Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art: From the 20th to the 21st Century*, PhD dissertation, Universiteit Leiden, 2018. Also known as 'PhDArts', Staal completed a joint programme of Leiden University and the Royal Academy of Art in the Hague, the Netherlands. The thesis was advised by historian Henk te Velde and art historian Sven Lütticken. The reading committee included acclaimed scholars such as curator and author Nato Thompson.

‘counter-propaganda’ (p 3). Extending the definition, Staal aims to offer a pathway into future studies of propaganda. In turn, his model also aims to broaden the understanding of aesthetic and artistic production to include that which was ‘previously not understood as art at all’ (p 6). Hence, he proposes a redefinition of both propaganda and art.

Staal opts for an understanding of propaganda that grasps the manifold social and political movements (both historical and present-day) that imagine, forge and devise new societal and political models. Perhaps comparable to political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s refashioning of populism in her call for an ‘anti-essentialist’ left-wing populism,² Staal’s aim is to make the term ‘propaganda’ fruitful again as an emancipatory project. Much of the author’s thought seems to resonate with Mouffe’s radical democratic theories, yet there is no mention of her throughout the book. Rather, he cites Judith Butler, most notably her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), where she proposes the idea of ‘performative assembly’ in the wake of the 2011 Occupy movements.³

Staal’s first chapter, ‘Propaganda and Democracy’, unravels the relation of democracy and propaganda. The author introduces Edward S Herman and Naom Chomsky’s propaganda model as put forward in their *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988). In contrast to earlier accounts that were concerned with totalitarianism (eg Theodor W Adorno and Jacques Ellul), Herman and Chomsky focus on the relation of propaganda and the mass media under capitalist conditions, introducing a set of ‘filters’ employed by mass media to ‘manufacture consent’, ie to steer public opinion making.⁴ As a form of organised propaganda or ideology, they sense that the mass media and its filters (which regulate opinion making) serve an elite instead of the public interest. The authors further contend that,

... the U.S. media do not function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather, they permit – indeed, encourage – spirited debate, criticism, and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus, a system so powerful as to be internalized largely without awareness.⁵

Staal’s reworked model of Herman and Chomsky (which he calls ‘inverted model’ [p 46]) is used throughout the book to understand how artistic practitioners and the aesthetic production of popular mass movements can be understood as ‘performing power’, and thus engaging in propaganda from below. For Staal, popular mass movements do not operate by imposing ‘filters’ but, rather, put forward sets of demands (such as collectivity, democratisation, transparency, grassroots mobilisation and public knowledge). The second chapter, ‘Propaganda Art, From Past to Present’, moves on to the twentieth-century history of propaganda art, from totalitarian regimes

² See Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London/New York, 2018, p 10

³ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2015

⁴ Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon, New York, 1988, p 2. Following Herman and Chomsky, these filters are: ‘monopolization’ of mass media, ‘corporate advertising’, ‘flak’ and ‘anti-communism’.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 302

(notably the activities of the Third Reich and Stalinist socialist realism) to the Cold War. In keeping with Herman and Chomsky, Staal stresses that propaganda is ‘not limited to what we can see, it is also what we come to embody and perform without necessarily being aware of our own implication in process’ (p 50). The former (the visible) is defined by Staal as the ‘macro-performative’ level and the latter the ‘micro-performative’ level of the everyday. ‘Imagining Terror’, the third chapter of the book, departs from the present-day culture wars. It introduces the cinematic work of the former chief strategist of the Trump administration and former vice president of Cambridge Analytica: Steve Bannon. Bannon is also the author of a series of documentary films, which he termed ‘kinetic cinema’, or, in its entirety, ‘kinetic campaigning’ (p 102). Bannon’s alt-right cinema seems to serve as a counter-part to what is discussed in the following chapter, ‘Popular Realism’. This chapter traces the activities of global popular mass movements that are put under severe scrutiny and discusses the alignment of artistic practitioners with those movements. In contrast to state propaganda, the propagandas of popular mass movements are, according to Staal, ‘authored no longer by a particular elite but by a popular mass’ (p 114).

In this chapter, Staal also hints at what may be the most trenchant question posed in the book: what is the relation of artistic practitioners to popular mass movements and what can they contribute? Throughout this book, and elsewhere,⁶ Staal maintains that one of these functions is artists’ capacity to analyse ‘form’, modify it and make it useful for the purposes of social movements and, more generally, liberation struggles. He calls this putting to work of form ‘morphology’. Expanding upon this, Staal views art as an imaginative and morphological practice that is both analytical and practical, thereby, of course, inserting his theoretical and artistic work in the legacies of the avant-gardes. Apart from more recent artistic practices, the role of artist Emory Douglas in the Black Panther Party serves as a key example. Staal recounts how Douglas invented a ‘new art-historical and aesthetic canon through which he developed a cultural body specific to the party’s aim to unify, politicize, and strengthen a revolutionary people’ (p 115).

The last chapter, ‘Theater of the Stateless’, introduces the key term ‘the stateless’, as voluntary or involuntary ‘refugees of a particular state idea’ (p 150). Staal urges that one can ‘learn from the specific knowledge generated by the experience of statelessness’ (p 150). He argues that one should not assume the stateless’s need for support, rather that they ‘assemble and articulate collective political demands themselves’. Responding to the famous question of Gayatri Spivak, Staal opposes: ‘The subaltern speaks’ (p 151). This chapter also details case studies ranging from the Artist Association of Azawad in Mali (eg the work of artist Abdullah Abdul) to the Rojava Film Commune of the de facto autonomous region of Rojava. The social and political movements of

⁶ See Jonas Staal, ‘New Art for the New University’, *OnlineOpen.org*, 15 June 2015 <https://onlineopen.org/new-art-for-the-new-university>. The function of artistic practice, as Staal claims in this text on the occupation and formation of the New University in Amsterdam, can be described as contributing ‘visual literacy to the social movement’. He further notes: ‘Art is what connects the space of the impossible to the present; it occupies the space of our political desires and imaginaries, and creates the means for them to manifest themselves in a collective and shared presence. Morphology thus also connects the concepts of past, present and future, allowing different “spheres” of time to become interconnected. In this process, solidarities are created through the overlapping of time – how the students from 2015 engage in a dialogue with the students from 1969. The years of ideological erosion are ultimately discarded, and 1969 re-emerges in the present day.’

Rojava have been subjects (or, rather, ‘collaborators’) of Staal’s artistic practice over the last years. His long-term project, the ongoing *New World Summit* (which started in 2012), is a trans-democratic and trans-national support structure that maps Western liberal democracies’ (ie nation states) inclusions and exclusions. It provides both spatial and discursive assemblies for those who lack visibility in democratic debate, featuring and providing a space for discussion for groups who have been labelled as terrorist organisations and alike. Seminally, this includes movements such as the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Rojava, a subchapter of the Marxist-Leninist PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) that has been designated a terrorist organisation by most members of the European Union, the United States and beyond. Rojava’s constitution (the ‘Social Contract’) with its call for gender equality and its grassroots form of democratic self-governance in small communes (which have more power than the trans-cantonal organizations) seem to be prime examples of what Staal considers ‘alternative or competing state ideas’ (p 45).

Mirroring what Judith Butler terms ‘performative assemblies’,⁷ Staal’s summits both give form to and pre-enact future forms of social and political organisation. Centrally, Staal’s project has forged links and made allies across social fields on an international level. In the context of the arts, the *New World Summit* surfaces as a series of imaginary, temporary ‘parliaments’ shown in European theatre and performing arts spaces from 2012 to the present. This commenced with a staging at Sophiensaele, Berlin as part of the hotly debated seventh Berlin Biennial in 2012. While Rimini Protokoll or Milo Rau’s theatre productions share some conceptual similarities with Staal’s work, in parallel to the arts’ context, Staal inserts himself strongly into the public sphere with on-site collaborative work (for example, in Rojava) and a high degree of participation in the struggles of those who are not officially recognised or marginalised. This strong emphasis on fieldwork (p 12) and cooperation with social movements is a key aspect of Staal’s artistic work and its academic backdrop as embodied by this book. Rojava, which is currently, in 2019, once more under attack from Turkey, gained de facto independence in 2016 and has been thus regarded in the West as exemplary for translating radical democratic theory into practice. Staal, following years of collaboration with activists, artists and politicians from the region, was commissioned to conceive Rojava’s people’s parliament for assemblies in 2015.

The assembly, as both a contemporary form of subject formation and as an analytical term for present-day contestations of post-politics, has been subject to political and philosophical consideration following the global waves of upheaval after 2011. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri go so far as to declare the assembly as a ‘*constitutive right*’ and as capable of ‘composing a social alternative, for taking power differently, through cooperation in social production’.⁸ According to Hardt and Negri, the assembly signifies less a form of counter-power than a contemporary model of collectivity and subjectivity, permeating social and political relations. However, Butler (whose theories appear central to Staal’s book) seems to foreground the assembly’s power differently. Her thesis is that its capacities lie in both making visible as well as

⁷ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, op cit

⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017, p 295

counter-acting the divisions and sets of inclusions and exclusions that stand at the basis of democracies: the very definition of ‘the people’. Similar to Chantal Mouffe, Butler departs from an agonistic understanding of the public sphere by assuming heterogeneity rather than unity. Describing the role of (his) artistic practice and referencing Butler, Staal coins the term ‘assemblism’ as the ‘artistic components of performative assembly’ (p 124). In an expanded version of the book’s subchapter on ‘Assemblism’, Staal writes:

As artists, we are not *in power*, but through morphology we *give power*: we give form to power. The practice of assemblism that we can derive from Butler’s work opens up the possibility of a new collectivity arising from the precariat – a new Us with the potential to shatter the Us/Them divide that has brought the new authoritarian world order into being. Embedding our artistic practice within social movements, we can help formulate the new campaigns, the new symbols, and the popular poetry needed to bolster the emergence of a radical collective imaginary. In that process, we can also begin to devise the new infrastructures – the parallel parliaments, the stateless embassies, the transdemocratic unions – needed to establish the institutions that will make a new emancipatory governance a reality. Our time as assemblists is now. As the tsunami of authoritarian decrees from Trump to Erdoğan suggests, our time might never come again.⁹

Throughout the book Staal also seems to act as an art historian who engages in rethinking and rewriting the canon of art history and aesthetic theory with the aim of ‘collectivizing propaganda literacy’ (p 188). There has indeed been a lack of analysis of historical and contemporary art practices in terms of their capacities to ‘enact power’. Case studies in the book range from historical examples (for example, the art of Black Panther Party ‘minister’ Emory Douglas) to the contemporary practices of Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, Turkish-Kurdish artist Ahmet Öğüt, Hito Steyerl, Trevor Paglen and the Russian collective Chto Delat?. Staal seems to favour what he terms ‘organisational art’, artistic practices that devise quasi-organisations or ‘para-institutions’ (p 135).¹⁰ He places these practices over what he calls ‘embedded art’ (p 129). Hence for Staal, facing the intensification of what has been variously described as post-democracy and new forms of neoliberal governmentality, present day artistic practitioners need to form inter-sectoral and international allies. In part, this call both echoes and pushes further Chantal Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy and her assumption that linking artistic practices ‘with traditional forms of political intervention like parties and trade-unions’¹¹ is necessary to move beyond the currently politically insupportable idea of radical critique from an ‘outside’ – notably in the form of an avant-garde. While Staal cherishes the (pre-Socialist Realism) Russian avant-garde, which he contends ‘has left us with an alternative infrastructural map of a world on the verge of becoming reality’ (p 62), he, in turn, also seems to take the idea of a present-day neo-neo-avant-garde (p 190)

⁹ Jonas Staal, ‘Assemblism’, *e-flux journal* 80, March 2017 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/>

¹⁰ Sven Lütticken, ‘Social Media: Practices of (In)Visibility in Contemporary Art’, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 40, Autumn/Winter 2015, pp 4–19

¹¹ Chantal Mouffe, ‘Artistic Activism and Antagonistic Spaces’, *Art & Research*, vol 1, no 2, Summer 2007, p 5

with a grain of salt. Instead, the book sets out to offer fruitful and original conceptualisations of the contemporary role of the artist as ‘organizer’¹² and collaborator. Departing from the writings of Augusto Boal (particularly the Brazilian theatre maker and activist’s notion of the ‘spect-actor’) at various occasions, Staal seems to understand the space of theatre as a space for ‘rehearsal for the revolution’.¹³ Yet, especially the presentations of his *New World Summit* in the arts context appear rather as performative pre-enactments or prefigurations than as hands-on rehearsals.

Notably, the institutional circumstances of what Staal terms ‘assemblist art’ remain to some extent opaque. Staal has continuously worked with *BAK*, *basis voor actuele kunst*, an Utrecht-based art institution which has provided a fertile *basis* for his practice. In a Western European institutional context, practices that operate toward establishing long-term forms of transversal and transnational engagement (and we might expand this to many of the artists mentioned in the book) rely on government funding. This often entangles the neoliberal notions of usefulness and social ‘impact’ (in the Dutch context, for instance, the Dutch Ministry of Culture’s art and culture programme for 2015–2016, with the name ‘The Art of Impact’)¹⁴ and the curatorial priorities of individual, progressive art institutions navigating within the environments created by such policies.

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¹² See Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, Verso, London and New York, 2016. McKee argues that artists were not simply corollary to the Occupy movements but, on the contrary, served as actively involved ‘initiators and organizers’.

¹³ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Charles A McBride, Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer, trans, Pluto Press, London, 2008 [1974], p 98

¹⁴ See *Kunstlicht* journal’s issue on ‘Cultural Policies: Agendas of Impact’, vol 37, no 1, 2016 <https://tijdschriftkunstlicht.nl/vol-37-2016-no-1-cultural-policies-agendas-of-impact/>. The journal is edited by graduate students of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. I would like to thank Angela M Bartholomew (former member of the editorial board) and Steyn Berghs (former co-editor-in-chief) for pointing this out to me.