

STEDELIJK

SZINE

MUSEUM

#2
2022

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

AMSTERDAM

INTRODUCTION

In 1971, Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault came to Eindhoven, the Netherlands to participate in a debate on human nature, which quickly became a discussion on its revolutionary potential. What is innate to the human mind and shaped by the powers embedded within social structures and institutions? John Rajchman, professor of art and philosophy at Columbia University, New York revisited this discussion in his 2006 edited collection *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate*. As a student of his class that was centered on the similar question of who—or what—creates something truly revolutionary, I recall our conclusion that only those willing to put their lives at stake are true revolutionaries.

In this *Szine*—the Stedelijk’s intermittent publication driven by research as practice and conversation around the museum’s subject position—we explore the kinds of spaces that could be created for the artistic outcomes of revolutionary practices. There is ample historical and contemporary evidence of cultural institutions in the Netherlands open to supporting (revolutionary) artists from “elsewhere” and who, in line with Dutch ideological frameworks, oppose regimes of, or within, the artists’ home countries or communities. Under the guise of artistic freedom, these means of support undoubtedly move into the realm of international politics. The primary concern for this edition of *Szine* was therefore to explore the role of cultural institutions as cultural diplomats, which accompany other forms of diplomacy in international relations and nation-state ideological frameworks.

Stedelijk curator-at-large Adam Szymczyk led the charge for this second issue that asks if cultural institutions could move away from their imbrication in politics and international diplomacy, could they serve as real cultural havens for the artistic consequences of revolutionary practices, regardless of their geographical origins? In light of the overwhelming show of solidarity for Ukraine by museums across the globe, the question of how a museum could be a more universal and sustainable cultural diplomat is now more urgent than ever, and in need of critical dialogue.

Working from a discursive research practice and prompted by the current situation in Ukraine, we appealed to Jonas Staal, renowned for his work on art, propaganda, and assemblies, to compile a group of respondents from a wide range of practices

and geographies. With contributors from the Philippines, Palestine, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, and the Netherlands, two days of online roundtables were organized: on day one the current position of cultural institutions with respect to cultural diplomacy was reflected upon; on day two we speculated about how the museum, or cultural institutions as a global network of solidarity, could become a safe haven for artistic practices.

These two roundtables culminate in *Szine 2: Cultural Diplomacy* available in English (print and .pdf) and Dutch (.pdf). Thanks to the unwavering support of our director Rein Wolfs we are able to question the institution's own subject position and consider the results of such discursive questioning as part of the museum's artistic research practice. The dedication with which our editorial team, consisting of Gwen Parry, Meredith North, and Carlos Zepeda, organized the roundtables and edited the recordings into this Szine allowed for a relatively, within the confines of museum time, swift response to current debates around the situation in Ukraine. *Szine 2* can be read as a continuation of *Szine 1*, which reflected on the Stedelijk's origins and future. Simultaneously, the question of the institution as a cultural diplomat could be understood as supportive of diaspora as driving force in curatorial and acquisition strategies, further explored in *Stedelijk Studies Journal 13* on the subject of Diaspora, forthcoming at the end of 2022.

Considering the museum's subjectivity, the question remains as to whether an institution can operate as a revolutionary agent within the confines of the state without heralding its own demise. Thanks to Merve Bedir, Vasyl Cherepanyn, Keti Chukhrov, Lisa Ito, Yazan Khalili, Jonas Staal, and Adam Szymczyk we get to catch a glimpse of new realms of possibility.

Charl Landvreugd
Editor-in-Chief, Stedelijk Studies

ROUNDTABLE I: REFLECTION

ADAM SZYMCZYK I think the museum is asking for help, advice, knowledge, and expertise from different types of institutions and personal perspectives that are about imagining things otherwise because there is an urgency to do so. The war in Ukraine is maybe the last call that makes us all feel that we have to reimagine the Western-European art museum and the proliferation of that model elsewhere reproduced in non-Western areas. How do we put an end to a certain myth that writer and curator Laura Raicovich terms the myth of neutrality—the idea that the production and presentation of art can be separated from the political, economic, and ideological conditions of production? To what extent can the museum express its stakes in egalitarian, political projects as an engaged space?

YAZAN KHALILI I want to begin my answer with telling you how things developed at Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center. It's a small cultural institution, certainly not a museum, but it's very central and important within the art scene in Palestine. The art in Palestine depends mainly on international funding, on a donors' economy to sustain its programs, activities, etc. We tried to engage with the financial crisis by challenging the meaning of funding. The institution as we know it is an ideological project a historical structure that belongs to a certain political-economical structure. We have to understand how funding differs in places where it's tax-based and channeled by government, and how the donors' economy works based on these national funding channels that then restructure society and communal organizations.

I would argue that in the last 30 years there has been re-engineering, redesigning of the cultural practices in Palestine through cultural institutions that shape culture in society. To make this financial crisis into a cultural question, we could no longer accept the institution as only an infrastructure that channels funds;

its role could no longer be to mainly apply, receive, distribute, and make projects to spend the funds and become eligible for future funds. This movement in cultural economy has to be challenged and we have to rethink what the cultural economy is. What are other resources, structures, and ways that we can produce cultural practice? In the last 30 years, culture and the donors' economy created a monoculture or *monostructure* of cultural organizations. We should instead begin to work from within and outside the cultural institution. A big challenge for us was to change the meaning of the audience by shifting from "spectators" to what we call the "producer audience". The center becomes a cultural tool, rather than arts and culture superstructure and funding body or rich refunding body for Palestine.

AS Some explanation of how funding in the bygone world streamlined output, cultural production, was given through an unwritten agreement that certain types of funding would produce a certain type of art or cultural artifacts, a static one-way kind of mechanism that should be challenged. An intervention was needed. I would like to ask Lisa to go into the question of the neutrality or not of institutions. What is it that you are concerned with?

LISA ITO The Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP) grew out of a campaign against censorship of the arts and media back in 1982, during the last years of the Marcos dictatorship, when they were clamping down on the press and art institutions. Therefore, lots of artists and media workers banded together, to work on a campaign called "free the artist, free the media", out of concern for freedom of expression, freedom of the press—which had been under threat for over a decade. From these, it grew into a larger concern for broader causes. Back then, a lot of public utility transport workers supported the artists' campaign. And when they in turn went on strike, because of the high oil and gas prices, the artists responded in kind with solidarity. The organization embraced larger causes in society such as justice for the victims of human rights violations by the then regime, and administrations since. That includes a lot of agrarian and rural workers, and indigenous people, so it became a larger cause.

It's important to address the myth of neutrality in pursuing this advocacy. The idea of neutrality, especially with regard to

institutions, has long been debunked across several disciplines and fields. But the myth is revived especially in times of crisis. When institutions are compelled to choose between the status quo or larger upheavals in society, they have to maintain a sort of balancing game for self-preservation. What is all this for? In whose interests do we stand and who with? These are the central questions when trying to think about neutrality.

In my practice, we've been working with both institutions and mass movements. There's a different degree of engagement and always negotiation. The museum as a space for making the myth of neutrality transparent rather than opaque, not normalizing or naturalizing it, is an important project and stance. And whenever we were working with institutions, we built an ecology of solidarity with co-workers, arts workers, people working inside and out. It's in speaking up, out, and within that the ecology of alliances and solidarity takes place.

That's how we continue to assert the importance of museums and other cultural institutions in the current landscape of Philippine art and society. Because even if the museum mostly started out as a colonial project, and an institution sponsored by the state or private entities, it is in working day to day, and building solidarity with arts workers within cultural institutions, that we can work together as people united.

AS Your perspective of the museum as able to become something else against its own genealogy, not bound to a traumatized state of repeating the same type of content and contradictions that make it a sort of impossible institution today, does not call for abandoning the idea of the museum altogether. Because you're not working on abstractions but on actually existing institutions that could be used toward productive ends. In order to achieve that, they need to be transformed; they need to reflect this from the inside and open up to the outside, too.

I would like to now move to Vasyi Cherepanyn and ask about where you were with regards to your practice on different levels, at the beginning of this year. Can you reconstruct that state of mind and tell us a little bit about whether you felt compelled to take a

political position not only as an individual, but also within those institutions and structures that you have been involved with? In other words, how is it possible now to challenge the constraint of neutrality?

VASYL CHEREPANYN Before I start answering this very challenging question, I just have to warn you that the air raid siren might sound. For now, it seems like everything is fine. If you asked me about the conditions, I found myself in at the beginning of this year, it's a bit like asking what I did and felt several lives back. I'm very much speaking from both a personal as well as an institutional perspective, just because they overlap so much—that's somehow unavoidable. On the one hand, we have a boom of activist culture at the moment that we support or are involved in, in particular those initiatives that are focusing on documenting Russian war crimes in Ukraine, organizing emergency art residencies, or evacuating artworks and museum collections, especially in peripheral sites. At the same time, we are under constant bombardments by the Russian military, a vanguard force of Russian cultural colonialism. So we don't have the privilege to pretend to have any kind of neutrality as the reality itself doesn't allow for it. In this situation, the institutional cultural field in the West has been very much afraid of any kind of political involvement. And if we are seriously trying to think about the possibility of rearranging the museum framework, we must look outside the cultural field in a sociological sense, to find possible tracks or routes for doing so.

One has to take into account a profound difference between the Ukrainian cultural field and that in the West. The cultural field here is not institutionalized or professionalized in the same way. We don't have any kind of institutional framework or buffer that would allow for practitioners or artists to be autonomous: you're actually working in an open social field, which has much more toxic rules, because it doesn't have any protection from intervention from the outside. It's a very ambiguous context. It has its pros and cons, because on the one hand, you cannot rely on what you have already established to be continued in a relevant manner, just because it can be easily ruined by a political enemy, including the use of physical violence. But at the same time, it somehow allows those respective cultural practitioners and artists to become directly political, unlike in the West, where there is a social



↑ Poster of "Allied – Kyiv Biennial 2021,"
© Kyiv Biennial.

← Poster of "Allied – Kyiv Biennial 2021" in a chair, 2021, photo Oleksandr Kovalenko. Courtesy of Vasyl Cherepanyn.

→→ Poster of "Strategic Plan 2020–2018," 2018, prepared by Yara Andul Hamid and illustrated by Basel Nasr. © Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center



الخطة الاستراتيجية
Strategic Plan
2020-2018



رؤيتنا
خلق ثقافة
تعددية ونقدية وحررية من
خلال البحث والمساءلة والمشاركة

INTERNAL
CHALLENGES
& TARGETED
CHANGES

زيادة قدرتنا المالية
INCREASING OUR FINANCIAL CAPACITY

LITERATURE **لُغَةُ**
PROGRAM **بَلَدِيَّة**

الاستثمار في الوجود الرقمي
INVESTING IN DIGITAL EXISTENCE

الاستثمار في الأفراد
INVESTING IN PEOPLE

INVESTING IN INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES
الاستثمار في البنية التحتية

VISUAL ARTS برنامج الفنون
PROGRAM بصرية

INREACH PROGRAM **پان ضلعان**

LAND PROGRAM

الهيئة العامة
General Assembly

مجلس الإدارة

فريق العمل
Executive Team

١٠ في رمضان للبيع

لا تي معكم \$ 100,000 بالسنة؟
Can you spare us
\$100,000 a year?

فونڊرس

الوقفية Endowment

Earned income دخل ذاتي

بیتزل!

كيف
نعمل How we work

الاستدامة
Insuring
sustainability

التفكير التعاوني والنقدي
collaborative and critical thinking

collaborative
critical thinking

المعرفة

تشيبيك و شراكات
Partnership & Networking

Miss

Mission
We're a center that strengthens the arts and culture sector in Palestine and that provides an open space for the community to produce vibrant and liberating cultural content.

مؤتمنتنا

الموارد المالية

الخطبة لآل أبي عبد الله
Prepared by Yara Abdul Hamid



consensus that you're allowed to do almost everything in art because everyone understands that it's just "art", and that it won't have real outcomes in the outside world.

But if you step outside this norm, you are easily stopped by the institution that is restrained due to its state affiliation or official obligations. To paraphrase Kant, you may say or think whatever you want, as long as you obey. So, you are somehow put in a kind of zoo cage, within which almost everything is allowed, but you're not allowed to break the cage itself. It reminds me of the Old Testament's paradise, where God allows you to do everything you want in the garden, apart from eating from that one tree. In the contemporary context of art production and consumption, this tree has always been politics, of course. If you are ready to eat from that tree, it presumes that you agree to be dirty in a way, which means that you have to be ready to face political challenges outside of your field, outside of your comfort zone.

So if we think about how to rearrange the institutional museum framework, the possible solutions might lay in these toxic outsides. And I think it's always about political will, the willingness to take a risk. Many partner institutions of ours, with whom we have been working for years, and who have always claimed that they are super-radical, politically involved, and socially engaged, just resorted to white cube radicalism when it came to realpolitik of the war. They didn't want to take a risk, to unsettle their public and the authorities that they are dependent on, to influence and affect the political decision-making processes. This neutrality is just a cover. It's become fashionable to question what art or culture can do to activate political change, but this is a trap itself, it just points at counter-revolutionary characteristics of today's cultural field. People are looking at culture or to art trying to find the answers that real politics cannot provide them with. Emancipative politics has been outsourced to culture, to soft territory, where you can practice it within the cage. But real politics in the West is being ruled and governed by neoliberal technocrats and right-wing populists, who are in charge in real political life. What we can do to make a political difference is reinstate the political agency, also of those involved in the cultural field?

AS I just wanted to drop the possibility that Adam of the Old Testament did not commit a crime, but that he was poisoned. You can interpret this story as a violent, deliberate act by a superior authority that decided to poison someone who was trying to discover the truth—something that happens quite often. You can use this figure to describe situations in which to describe this kind of silencing, or neutralizing. I don't have a problem with neutrality as such, it's a beautiful concept, and we all would like to live in a garden of some kind. The garden itself is a kind of safe space. But I think the problem is that we discover that this space is very confined. Those agents who are deciding on this confinement are usually very far from what the public sees in those so-called cultural institutions. What can we do to regain subjectivity and agency as individuals, but also as a collective alliance? And maybe the museum can still become a place where these things happen, although it will not be without cost.

VC Just to pick up your metaphor, I would suggest that we need much more political poison in order to counter the opium for the people.

AS Then I would give it over to Yazan and ask you perhaps if it would be good to go from the question of funding to the question of ownership, namely, those who occupy owning those mechanisms that then result in a culture of production that is in a certain way streamlined. It's a question about the politics of those who believe that they own cultural production and how this can be countered from the bottom level, through, for lack of a better word, pluralistic distributed cultural production that needs to find its own circumstances for articulation.

YK First of all, I want to show my support with the Ukrainians in this war, and with Vasyl; it's affecting us all in different and many levels and one has to say it. During Covid time in Palestine, when many of the businesses, coffee shops, and cafés had to close, and many of the people who work there lost their jobs because they also work on short contracts, suddenly, a city like Ramallah

economically collapsed in a way. At the same time, cultural institutions began coming together and asking for more funding to protect their collapse. They could not think beyond their existence at that moment. Instead of creating political or economical alliances with different societal economies to overcome that crisis, they went deeply inside. That for me was very contradictory because the question for cultural institutions always relates to relevance: how many people are visiting, we don't have enough, people are not coming and appreciating the art and culture we produce. Yet they could not move, preferring to stay inside the cage and to look at themselves only.

To go back to this issue of neutrality, I don't think you can at any time find a moment of neutrality. It's a totally constructed idea. It doesn't have any reality on the ground. When the moment comes to engage with any real political movements that do not necessarily belong to popular opinion, to speak against certain injustices in Palestine as an example, that's when you see neutrality falling.

I think ownership cannot happen without economical independency, meaning funding through taxes and the political constraints and limitation of how much cultural institutions can engage with unpopular opinion or meaning. Other types of funding, from companies or philanthropy, also come with limitations. Being able to own your own practice means you have to not be dependent on one kind of funding; when we are totally dependent on the donors' economy, it dominates the culture we are producing. The minute we began changing that and became less dependent on it, but dependent on different resources, our ability to engage with politics, outside of the safety of the cultural field, began to expand. When we looked at our institution in itself as a resource that exists beyond financial means with spaces, a team, connections, history, an archive, equipment, etc. that cultural producers can use in society, the culture produced is through the center, not necessarily in it. How the cultural institution in Palestine has been restructured was part of the whole political restructuring of Palestinian society.

The cultural institution is a tool that produces society that somehow suits the given structures and a product of those structures. To create affirmative critique was about challenging the institution and actively producing models from within. How do we move away from that to actually have theory and practice it?

AS I wanted to ask Lisa for some ideas concerning the way institutions, proto-institutional entities, or pre-institutional entities such as movements could work together transnationally and with museums, or whether this is even of any importance speaking from the perspective of your location. What is the use of the museum to you?

LI Firstly, solidarity is important. The Stedelijk, of course, by making this conversation possible, is making a contribution. The boundary between diplomacy and complicity is drawn when political assertion ends within the space of art and does not go beyond it. It's important that we allow institutions to be those spaces where things grow and connect. There's a lot of risk in that and a lot of uncertainty, but it's in breaching that boundary where things start to change. If this does not happen, instead of becoming a safe space or sanctuary for the oppressed, institutions become a prison. There are many ways of connecting to different sectors in society to make change possible. Whether you're talking about programs or specific engagements, many things are possible still with the little democratic space that we have left. That's why it's important to be working with more individuals, self-organization, and institutions in order to reach that level of understanding about what's really happening in the world.

CHARL LANDVREUGD Are you saying that when institutions work together with self-organizations there is a way out of this prison, whereas the institution itself might not put its own self on the line? Could working with self-organizations be a proxy for the institution's own independence or fight for independence from capital?

LI Of course, it might end up in situations where the dissolution of the institution would be the possible outcome in taking that risk. In the Philippines, we just finished with a national election, where a dictator's son is back in power 50 years after Martial Law. Under the conditions of the pandemic, political repression has increased. The little democratic spaces that communities and countries have left are shrinking. One example that I remember here was a proto museum, *Museo Lumad: Land, Culture, Life*, made by the Lumad indigenous peoples in a protest camp in Manila in 2016. During one march, indigenous peoples from across the Philippines made

this makeshift museum. They brought their stories, different precious things with them, and for the duration of their camp at the university created this temporary space where everyone could congregate and share. Today, it's not really possible to hold the same thing under these conditions of the pandemic and political repression. And the only way to hold or possibly re-enact these types of initiatives in my belief would be if institutions also reach out to help assert that space, but it will be a risk.

AS This links to one of the questions of today's panel: should the museum only be a place for the presentation of our discussion of art, or could it also be a sanctuary or a place of collective care, or even something else? We can imagine different uses of a museum because it's an existing institution that enjoys certain rights, at least in democratic or para-democratic states. It's not only about abandoning the museum and turning it into something else, but I think we need some more radical imaginary in order to think about possible ways of starting to use the museum that should belong to the people. And it should not belong to those who are in charge of it politically, or through funding, because the museum is for society at large.

LI It's important that museums and institutions never forget the narratives of all the oppressed, from the past and present. Because even if you don't turn the museum into a literal sanctuary, in re-enacting and creating platforms for these narratives to be retold, especially at a time when there is so much fake news and disinformation, there is that space for truth-telling and younger generations can become aware and empowered to act from knowing the facts. These spaces need to be protected because dictators win elections largely through disinformation—narratives believed because they are told again and again to people who have no access to real freedom of information. Institutions such as museums have a role to play, especially when protests, initiatives, and actions in the streets are increasingly threatened.

AS Hito Steyerl questions whether the museum is a battlefield.¹ The notion of the battlefield has gained quite concrete reality for many at the moment. I wonder if you, Vasyi, could speak a little to this idea?

Hito Steyerl, *Is the Museum a Battlefield?*, 2013, video, 40:09.

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VC I totally agree that our democratic spaces have been constantly shrinking and share the idea that you just mentioned about the transfer of power, and how the museum or other cultural institutions can be given to the people. But I'm also a bit cautious here: when we claim that the cultural institution can be transformed into a sanctuary or a shelter, let's not forget that a sanctuary can play a dual role—not only to protect those hiding inside from the outside dangers, but also creating a bubble or a warm bath for those inside protecting them from what they don't want to tackle outside. What we face currently on a pan-European scale, is that in many places, like Hungary or Poland, right-wingers are appointed as chiefs or directors of cultural institutions. The stakes here are higher and lay beyond the cultural field as such. When right-wingers hijack or occupy cultural sites and institutions that have been the sites of democratic discourse, which was not possible elsewhere, it's a sign that it's too late.

I'm here following Walter Benjamin's famous statement that behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution. If we take the political situation of the last ten years, after the economic crisis of 2008 and a global wave of square-occupation movements, uprisings, and revolutions, the right-wing problem in the cultural field is basically an outcome of the unfulfilled promise of this revolutionary wave. The authoritarian right-wing turn didn't just take place; it took place because something else didn't. This radical and powerful revolutionary potential remained unfulfilled and unrealized because it had been substituted with a harsh right-wing counter-revolution, also in the form of war, like in Ukraine and Syria (in both cases, from the side of the Russian Federation). That's exactly why we've also got Trump in the US, AfD in Germany, "Orbanization" of Hungary, anti-migrant consensus throughout the EU, etc. When it reaches the cultural field, it's already a sign that something has been lost in the general political field. And the reason for that is the West's unwillingness to accept the emerged revolutionary potential—it became rejected because of the institutional, political, and economical modus of Western governmentality, which is "let's move the problem to the outside, in order to keep our interior safe". We must somehow unlearn this anti-revolutionary and economy-based stance in order to make a political change. If we are trying to simply secure an institutionally protected political shelter for progressive



↑ Entrance of Museo Lumad: Land, Culture, Life which was built inside a protest camp in Manila, Philippines, 2016. Photo: Karlo Mongaya.



↑ University students and other visitors look inside Museo Lumad, a museum

that showcases the history, land, and culture of the Lumad indigenous

people from southern Philippines, 2016. Photo: Karlo Mongaya.

democratic discourse in the cultural field, it will just keep on shrinking. Because if we don't expand, then our adversary or enemy will occupy this space. If we want to counter this authoritarian turn taking place in various forms today, including warfare, we then have to become ready to incorporate a real alternative in the cultural field institutionally, which is accepting something that comes from the outside.

YK I don't think you can solve the museum separately from solving everything else. The museum is the tool and the product. I still think there is that possibility. It can only happen in moments of crisis and failure for certain economic and political structures: ideological structures that make a gap in the history of the museum that allows them to have a vision of their own structure. Museums are noticing this failure and are worried about this crisis that they are suffering from. But there is also a problem in that political structure around them. I see it as a general question about our political sphere when this failure of the museum is noticed. But engaging with the museum, engaging with these institutions, one needs to have one foot inside and one foot outside. Through the act of professionalization, there has been a separation in individuals: you are either inside it as a professional figure or you're outside as someone who is critical and looking for alternative structures. I think museums are already in failure, because of their inability to challenge politics, and the inability to bring in voices that challenge them. The museum is not the goal: the goal is politics in the general sense, and because the museum is always interested in its own crisis, it's not able to be of use for the bigger political crisis. Are we fighting for the institution itself? I don't care really. But do we fight with the institution, do we take it and use it in the fight against the right-wing shift, conservative, or even fascist movements within European context? I think yes, then it can be an important ally.

AS Yes, maybe it's true that the bounds of the reactionary forces within the cultural sphere might result from the fact that we were asleep for too long. Sometimes these changes take place in the guise of cultural management. This managerial streamlining of institutions really can void institutions into being unable to incite discussion. Everything revolves around accountability, good management, and the whole lingo that comes with it. It's very similar to what is happening with academia, where it's becoming extremely difficult for scholars, because it has to be accountable and deliver within a larger scheme of "managing" education. The failure is the only thing that escapes the checks and balances.

I think that this change could be initiated on different levels of institutional or museum hierarchy. It's very difficult to find out where the real top of the structure is: it kind of disappears into the clouds. You can start change from any level within any institution by having conversations and taking action, which doesn't have to be huge to start with. I believe that there is a potential to revolutionize institutions from within. Lisa, could you speak about this? Because I think what you brought into the conversation in your last statement is very important regarding how the museum could become a place for those who have no place.

LI I wonder, to what extent will progressive change—truly liberating history and practice—still be able to operate within the space of museums and other institutions? Especially under the patronage of very authoritarian and neoliberal regimes where either the market or today's fascism is controlling people and setting systems in place, including cultural institutions. So, we will have to find ways to unite so that we will not be defeated again. Because we know that there have been defeats, we will have to unite and build solidarity to lessen the possibility of defeat reoccurring. There are many ways of trying to imagine how to build solidarity and uphold the welfare of all the laborers in our respective industries. There are ways to expose the conditions of production and power, which can and should reach a wider and younger generation. It would be interesting also to think of institutions as fragments of a wider garden, which is not to say they are not battlegrounds, because they are. We are operating from

platforms, which are fragments of an old pot, or a very small planter within a large garden, or other things happening out there in the world. But in that modest part, it's possible to sow the seeds for another world to come. And to do that, we will need new tools.



↑ Cosmology map of the “Kitchen Workshop,” a hospitality collective of women from Turkey and Syria that want to live altogether. Illustration by Merve Bedir.

ROUNDTABLE II: SPECULATION

State(lessness)

CHARL LANDVREUGD / GWEN PARRY

We have invited you to speculate with us about how the museum can approach its potential as a force of cultural diplomacy while avoiding becoming an extension of state ideology. Under which social and economic powers can a museum or a cultural institution operate with political agency, if it is not the state? What could we consider a new model for museums to effectively engage with people struggling for their right to self-determination? Could the museum not only be a space of presentation and representation, but also a sanctuary?

MERVE BEDIR These are broad questions that I would like to provoke unpacking through the notion of hospitality. My research on hospitality is contextualized in migration in relation to imperialism, war, nation-states, and displacement—asking how different nation-states define hospitality in their governmental language, and national and international laws. Who defines the responsibilities of the state and its institutions against the citizens vs migrants? Today, especially when the nation-state is crumbling and the international networks and agreements are in jeopardy, the question of hospitality for a museum makes me think of the possibility of statelessness, or rather the capacity of a museum to act stateless.

JONAS STAAL Statelessness is always relative. Infrastructurally speaking, the Stedelijk exists within the nation-state of the Netherlands and its constitutional framework and receives public funding. It must follow guidelines from an entity that considers



↑ The *New World Embassy – Rojava* was a temporary embassy built in the Oslo City Hall that represented the principles of “stateless democracy” practiced in northern Syria by Democratic

Self-Administration of Rojava. The embassy is a collaborative project between the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal. It was commissioned *Oslo*

Architecture Triennale: After Belonging by for its sixth edition and co-produced by *KORO Public Art Norway/URO* in 2016. Photo: Istvan Virag.

↓ Umbrellas left behind after tear gas firing during protests in Hong Kong, China, September 29, 2019. Photo by Eric Tsang, “White” Terror” Series.



itself the state. Cultural institutions that engage with stateless or refugee cultural workers might not be able to transfer funds to them because only the stated are allowed to receive money from the state. For the museum and the wider sphere of cultural production there is of course a possibility of “complicit resistance”: one can operate within the infrastructures of a state, and still challenge state mentality. The Stedelijk does exist within a governed territory, but there is a relative space in which programming and acquisitions can challenge the cultural construct of the state and its performativity. I would say this is where a form of “radical cultural diplomacy” can be practiced.

GP If the Stedelijk were to take that space offered by complicit resistance, where would it get its mandate from to take a stand on or become involved in political issues—to what stateless framework would it then answer?

JS It is important to define statelessness because there is a risk of romanticizing the term, in the sense that being stateless in a material sense means not being able to open bank accounts, travel, access social security, or housing. Which is of course not to say that stated citizens are necessarily protected by the state. But I totally agree with Merve that statelessness holds a potential emancipatory potential, but we must be specific what practice of statelessness this relates to. We can look at the autonomous territories of Northern and Western Kurdistan, for example, that established a form of stateless democracy centered on self-governing communes, gender equality, and communal forms of economy. Their objective is to liberate democracy from the patriarchal, nationalist, and capitalist form of the nation-state. But even this emancipatory practice comes at a great cost of sanctions and military interventions imposed by stated territories on liberated stateless regions, like those in Kurdistan.

KETI CHUKHROV I would add that statelessness makes sense when this is the condition for all. For example, one cannot demand from Ukraine, or any other country, to be less persistent in affirming their sovereignty and statehood—as certain critics of American democracy do—when all other states increase their sovereignty. We cannot get rid of

statehood while there are hegemonies and supremacies. As for stateless conditions as the most productive realization of agencies, I never thought about museums as cultural diplomacy agents. I thought of an art institution more as a public space that is in communication with the sociality around and beyond it. In the post-socialist condition, public space was completely superseded by audiences, and the same danger exists for democratic countries that practice state diplomacy through it. The public space can be a small community of progressive thinkers around a museum, but it can as well be the place where certain conflicts are revealed and debated, or even the site where the public itself is being insulted by the artist or curator in their quest.

MB Is it possible to think of the museum or another cultural institution actually being owned by its community of producers? For instance, I'm thinking of the urban gardens in Bulgaria, where the land was owned by the public/state, and some were taken over by their communities after the collapse of the Communist regime. I ask how can we rethink the Stedelijk in relation to its community and commons. How far can that space be used for the museum's freedom of representation and action?

GP We just discussed how complicit an institution such as the Stedelijk is in a political and economic sense, and that its cultural diplomatic potential may lie in a certain complicit resistance. Do you think it's possible for an institution like the Stedelijk to also function as a sanctuary in political crises, or is it simply both too complicit and implicit in the overarching structures that perpetuate the crises it sets out to counteract?

JS It depends on how beneficial it is for a given government to appear progressive or tolerant toward what a state-owned or state-regulated museum or art institution wants to do. This is, I would say, what defines the relative space of negotiation in which a practice of radical cultural diplomacy is possible. A liberal government might not support radical politics but would also be hesitant to intervene in the programming of a cultural institution out of fear of being perceived as censoring or conservative. In

such a case, the tie of the state to the institution is of strategic benefit: the politics of the museum can be more radical than that of the state, while the state is forced to provide legitimacy, nonetheless. But of course, this identification of the state with the museum can also be the museum's demise when authoritarian politics take power. Then the space of negotiation is gone: diplomacy becomes complicity. In other words, the more progressive a government, the more space emerges for radical cultural diplomacy; there is an inherent link between dominant regimes of political and financial power and cultural infrastructure and expression.

CL If the museum functions properly for the state through the lens of international politics, doesn't it then gain some kind of autonomous agency to operate how it would like to?

JS State identification with its cultural institutions can be used strategically, for example, in the case of liberal governments I referenced earlier. In those cases, the Stedelijk Museum services the state to an extent, by providing the governing powers in question with a progressive and "enlightened" self-image. Even when the museum is critical of the state, a government can claim this as a proof of democratic values: "look how progressive and tolerant we are, we fund the museum to *critique* us!" This is the paradox of the role of art and culture in democratic propaganda: it is mandated to be free and critical, in order to prove that democracy actually exists. This is contrary to the situation in Hungary and Poland, for example, where a whole series of curators and museum directors have been removed and replaced by extreme right nationalist actors that are turning cultural institutions into nationalist myth-making machines.

KC This idea of sanctuary brings back the question about the extent of autonomy that is available for the community of museum workers. For instance, the GES-2 in Moscow was financed by the oligarch Leonid Mikhelson, and it is one of the most contemporary architectural premises. It has been functioning well in terms of emancipation: working with the communities, including unprivileged layers of society, or

exploring the indigenous practices. This space was meant to be a sort of urban escape for citizens into the cultural realm and education—and not simply an art representation. In this sense GES-2 was a kind of a sanctuary, which was not subservient to the state. Yet, at the same time, its program has been too diplomatic and neutral and hence inarticulate in its political and artistic agenda. Translation of this cultural diplomacy into different agencies is possible, but there comes the moment when the governments might demand loyalty from an art institution.

CL I was wondering if there are any alternative funding mechanisms. Can the commons provide the means for this operation to be continued? Because if you have a different funding stream, this means you get other liberties?

KC The alternative funding mechanisms through the commons depend on the loyalty, the foundation, or people who fund it demand from its agents. Probably at the Stedelijk, this agency is expanded and diverse, whereas somewhere else, it is more focused. Since one has to be loyal in this or another way, critical lexicons of contemporary art production often become a formality, without the opportunity to make radical historically grounded statements.

Transterritorialism

GP Museums have varying degrees of free space, or negotiated autonomy, to make radical statements because of the political and state infrastructures they operate within. Is there potential for a global museum network that works through transnational collaborations, wherein the space offered to one museum could be utilized by another that may have less affordances? What could a global museum solidarity look like, and from what ideological framework could it operate?

KC The idea of new institutionalism actively discussed ten or fifteen years ago saw an alignment of museums initiated by Zdenka Badovinac's Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, followed by Charles Esche's Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Maria Lind's Tensta konsthall, and MACBA in Barcelona then headed by Bartomeu Mari. The idea was that critical art institutions, which are not big blockbuster museums, could somehow gather in solidarity, to launch a nonaligned parallel cultural history. Interestingly, in Russia, such an alignment appeared a year ago, but it implied on the contrary the unification of the most powerful, funded state institutions.

MB My recent research is investigating the notion of nonalignment and nonaligned work. There may be a possibility of thinking in terms of a nonaligned museum or cultural networks. I'm thinking of them as organizations under public patronage that refrain from neutrality, but take a position. They employ particular meanings within concepts that otherwise become empty signifiers such as representation, participation, community, and cultural production, through embodying nonaligned practice as alternative framework. People who work in these organizations are networks of artists and/or workers in international solidarity, and who try to work within the cracks of their own broken systems. The internationalist ideology needs redefinition, instead of organizations trying to facilitate different practices in ways that are maybe not even visible on paper. The other thing is related to the authoritarian states that seemingly act as monolithic structures, which also force for a singular alignment within and beyond their national territories. For a new internationalist solidarity, I wonder: is nonalignment possible?

CL The appearance of the monolith or of us as one big structure could function while working on the ground in the neural network. I picture a monolith with all these roots sprouting underneath, growing into different areas, and supporting in whatever way possible. Is that what you mean?

MB Whether it is visible or invisible, you make things happen through the cracks, roots, branches, at the edges. I'm also thinking of the cultural institution as a tree with roots in its community and/

or commons, and its branches reaching out to the cosmos. The roots, branches, and edges are what seem to be the only operative space for nonalignment, but how to transform the inside remains the challenge.

GP Do you see potential in transinstitutional museum collaborations as a means to make such non-alignment possible? How could it resist an internationalist ideology and challenge museum collaborations that may have different goals or form certain power blocks in their own right, such as the unification of powerful state-funded museum institutions, mentioned by Ketí?

JS In the European context, the L'Internationale museum confederation is probably amongst the most concrete examples of museums that have been sharing resources and programs, in close proximity with networks of activists and social workers. Of course, such international and transnational coalitions also have their limits vis-à-vis national governments, for example, when Zdenka Badovinac, the director of Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, was removed from her post by the authoritarian-minded former government of Janez Janša. She now heads the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, which joined L'Internationale instead. This shows a cultural struggle between nationalist-minded governments and internationalist attempts at building solidarity across art institutions.

Could we think of expanding on the L'Internationale model, as one of transnational unionization, so that if museum directors or curators are fired, or when artists are prosecuted, their legal costs can be supported or refuge guaranteed? Could such transnational cultural unions also organize cultural strike funds and finance parallel cultural infrastructures—counter museums—to those taken over by authoritarian regimes? Such strategies are risky of course, they can be undermined through sanctions that block us from sharing resources, or for individuals or organizations to receive funding from abroad can also add to their criminalization and prosecution in their respective countries. But we cannot resist without deepening these “neural networks”, to paraphrase Merve: we need to conspire with progressive cultural actors across and beyond institutions to make new forms of internationalism imaginable and actionable that the state refuses to provide for.

KC I completely agree with what Jonas mentioned about the limits of institutional solidarity and funding. At the same time, I agree with Merve too, in that international solidarity was rather an alliance that insisted on nonalignment. Such nonaligned alliances could have developed certain types of curating, quality of works, the types of publications that could be drastically different from state art production, or hegemonic forms of culture. This implies the capacity to develop intellectual or creative potentialities transterritorially. The production of this new platform then could have the goal to become more important, powerful, and fashionable than what is produced by nation-state council productions, for instance, in Russia. Transterritoriality has a huge potential as it would bring independence from belonging to a country or nation. It would allow some cosmopolitan expansion and freedom from one language, one culture, enabling us to become transformative cultural workers.

CL I have also been looking at precisely this notion of movement. I'm talking about movement, not migration, and how it is such a defining circumstance for the production of European subjects or subjects in general.

KC Culture nowadays is a term that is constantly attacked and criticized because it is also a form of hegemony. But if we look at how it was formed, starting with modernity, it stems more from the interest in the other, even in a way of becoming the other. So, this is the paradox, the greatest paradox, which created modernity. And when I think about the forms of nonaligned alliance, for me, this could be a virtual "non place" where I can contribute, when contribution to the national or local context becomes impossible.

MB The question of movement is also related to the border spaces of and within the institution: inhabiting those borders, moving through and expanding the cracks of the institution. Maybe that's a way to, at least for me, project my own position onto the institutional framework.

JS I think it's brilliant what Ketí and Merve are saying, and it brings me back to Merve's earlier proposition of

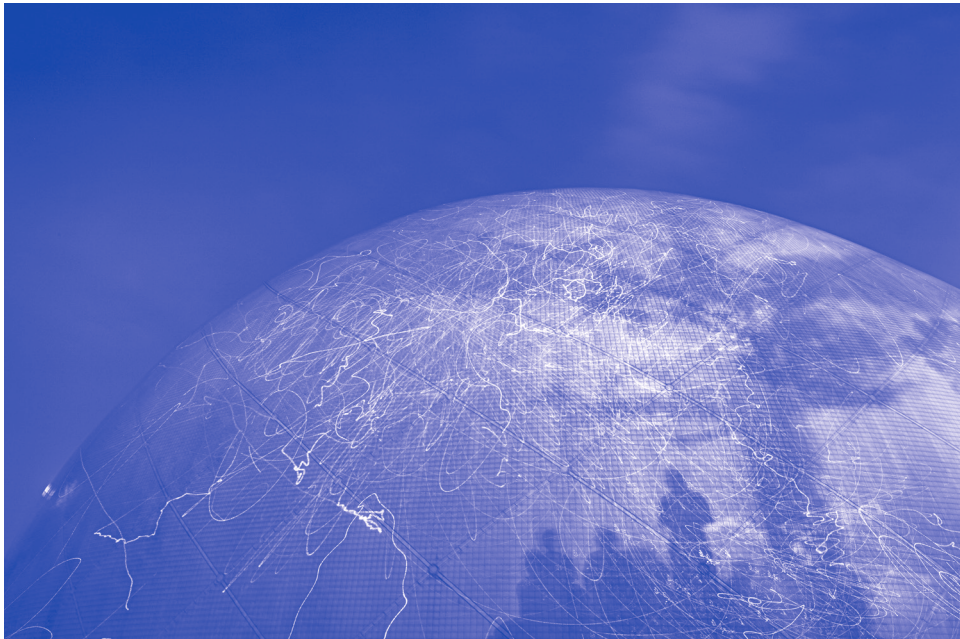


↑ *Collectivize Facebook* is a collective action lawsuit project by Jonas Staal and Jan Fermon to legally recognise Facebook as a public domain platform with self-determination,

ownership, and control by its users. It was produced by *HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin*, 2020. Photo: Ruben Hamelink.

↓ Protestors gather at the Hong Kong Space Museum to carry out a protest using laser pointers. It follows the arrest of a student for possessing what police called an "offensive

weapon" after he is found with several of the devices in Hong Kong, China, August 7, 2019. Picture taken with a long exposure. Photo by Eric Tsang, "Language of the Unheard" Series.



the Stedelijk reshaping itself toward the “stateless museum”, which Ketj now rephrased as the “transterritorial museum”. We cannot deny and shouldn’t deny that we live under specific regimes that manage and survey access to funds, resources, and infrastructures. But simultaneously, there are spaces and methods to live beyond, parallel, or against these inherited structures and systems. There are so many aspects of our lives that exist separate from our statedness, and which relate to an entirely different set of sensibilities, solidarities, and convictions. Speaking about statelessness though, I would like us not to forget about that other form of stateless entity, the transnational corporation, which is just as, or even more powerful, than the state.

KC This is the vicious otherness of transterritoriality, because one can always say that global capital is the embodiment of transterritoriality. Antonio Negri wrote about this alternative dimension of empire. In that sense, internationalism is an emancipatory alternative to empire. Capitalism remains global and transterritorial indeed, with its capacities of circulation. Yet, lately, we are more and more witness the rise of crypto-currency-oriented capital that restricts circulation as it is much more dependent on storage and encryption. So, the circulation element is gradually diminishing in global capital and capitalism recedes to quasi-feudal storages and monopolized tokens.

JS Very much agreed. I think it’s just what people like Jodi Dean and Yanis Varoufakis have been describing as “neo-feudalism” in relation to the contemporary trillion-dollar company, whether it’s Apple, Amazon, or Facebook. Unfortunately, such entities are increasingly becoming the shareholders of museums, and the idea of the museum as well. The wild growth of crypto museums is one such disturbing example. This is the dangerous mirror image of an emancipatory practice of statelessness, as we were discussing earlier: it does not aim to dismantle the state, but to usurp its powers to establish new planetary monopolies instead..

Parallel government, new types of production

CL If the museum could become transterritorial and independent from the state, and if capital and culture are not produced within it, what is then produced? Is it only solidarity?

GP Indeed, when we peel off all these layers of state, possibly also of corporation, what is the foundation through which we are connected; what or who are we then answering to? Would there be a legal infrastructure, a parallel government? What would be the ideological fiber at the basis of this solidarity?

KC I think a parallel government is the horizon of such activities. When we say transterritorial we are aware that it's not simply a virtual realm, but these are concrete material acts of cultural politics as well. Such a parallel strategy might be somehow digitized, but it means that the trajectories and vectors connect people in certain organizational forms in which they define culture, and their power is applied. These acts are not to be coordinated by the ministries of culture or other state infrastructures, even if there is a certain part of state funding in them.

MB In Turkey, parallel government is literally the term projected upon those who desire to produce culture differently. In Hong Kong, during the recent movement, the parliament, police, and museum were referred to as decommissioned fortresses.

Thinking through the state or through government diminishes and even eradicates the space to think and act. I try to think outside of them as much as possible, that's why I started with the premise of statelessness. Since 2013 I've been practicing ways of instituting, some official, some not, to produce content and meaning differently based on care and participation to have control over our own decisions. In the scale and network I work in, the space of sanctuary and collective care also needs to be a non aligned, internationalist space—a neural network. Following movements since 2011 in different countries I see the collective care idea leading to further self-isolation of artist collectives and cultural institutions that should actually be doing the opposite

and connecting internationally in solidarity. The cultural institutions who want to be in solidarity from the “global north” need to have a clear agenda of a nonaligned alliance beyond the constantly changing national, international, or global governmental agendas. They need to be in solidarity without assuming that the operational territory/space of the cultural institutions of the “south” is the same as the monolithic structures of their states. They need to act without victimizing the artists and cultural workers in these institutions, follow them more closely to see continuous ways of mobilizing, and acknowledge their agency at home and through their diaspora.

JS The notion of a parallel government is very helpful to recognize that, in a way, we already exist within a condition of dual power. The power of corporations and states undeniably shape our everyday life, but the way we live and organize our life can be more than the sum of the systems we have inherited. For me this notion of parallel government or dual power, effectively describes our being “between worlds”: between the world as it is, as we have inherited it, and as we aim to construct it differently and collectively. From an institutional perspective, radical cultural diplomacy is a way to contribute to the transition from one mode of governance to another. This again formulates the position of “complicit resistance” that I referenced earlier: “complicit” because we did not have a choice in the systems we are born into, and “resistance” because we reject full identification with these systems—these state mentalities. Of course, to truly transform our realities we have to go beyond the museum and speak of popular unity and the establishing of emancipatory political hegemony. But as cultural workers we can prefigure and practice the world not as it is, but as we collectively desire it to be. To change the world, we need to imagine that change first—so art, cultural work, and the radical cultural diplomacy of institutions have a crucial role to play.

KC I would like to end with sharing two dilemmas that I cannot resolve in my mind. They both relate to the opportunities of transterritorialism. In a certain sense, an enlightened and emancipatory cultural production—seen as a progressive force—might function as a parallel government. Yet the oppressed

that these progressive agencies claim to protect might persevere in conservative populisms when those agencies have no opportunity to influence them despite emancipatory aspirations. This confirms art's inability to form continuity with local contexts or the unprivileged. In other words, the discourse about equality shifted into the right and this failure exists parallel to the emancipatory agencies without their opportunity of proper impact. Another paradox is the following: art insists on social engagement as its crucial agenda. Yet when it comes to recognition and validation, the socially engaged art is evaluated not according to social merit but according to certain conceptual merits—not needing any audience to legitimize an artistic event. Art is socially engaged rather in its form; and it is speculative, theoretical, and at times even nihilist in its contents. This duality is the fate of art and the genesis of its negativity. While I think that it's important to keep this Adornian negativity, one has to be aware of the hypocrisy of such duality.

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