

Drama School



Left: Curators Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza. (Photo: Agnieszka Gratzka) Right: Artist Jonas Staal. (Photo: Lidia Rossner)

“WE CAN LEARN A LOT FROM PIRATES,” artist Jonas Staal assured us. We had just finished the “Violence & Non-Violence” panel that closed day two of Artist Organisations International (AOI), a congress initiated by Staal with the Berlin-based curators Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza and held at the Hebbel am Ufer complex in Kreuzberg. According to Staal, “pirate ships run on a model of direct democracy.” The metaphor wasn’t totally off; we may have been on dry land, inside a theater rather than a boat, but the three-day event at times felt as rudderless as a Ship of Fools.

The AOI gathered representatives of twenty-some socially and politically engaged artist organizations flown in from as far as the Philippines and the unrecognized sub-Saharan state of Azawad in northern Mali. The “forums,” “büros,” “associations,” “laboratories,” and “institutes,” listed alphabetically in the AOI event leaflet—from the Artists of Rojava to the Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Center for Political Beauty)—made up a “bestiary of artist organizations,” as Forensic Architecture’s Lorenzo Pezzani put it. But what sort of beast were we dealing with overall?

Things got off to a rocky start. An anonymous letter voicing “discomfort” with the whole proposition for an “Artist Organization International”—and specifically the “genre-fication of political art” that it entailed—circulated in the foyer on the opening night. Dedicated to “Propaganda & Counter-Propaganda,” the first session was running behind schedule as a group of students who refused to pay the hefty admission fee—thirty-three euros, albeit with a substantial reduction for art workers—unsuccessfully tried to storm the place.



Left: Writer Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei and HAU artistic director Annemie Vanackere. Right: Writer and comedian Moussa Ag Assarid. (Photos: [Agnieszka Gracza](#))

Our agenda for the coming days was visually expressed in Staal, [Remco van Bladel](#), and [Paul Kuiper](#)'s erratic architectural design, inspired by El Lissitzky's 1929 *Model for Sergei Tretyakov's I Want a Child for Meyerhold's Unrealized Production*. Tuareg spokesman [Mazou Ibrahim Touré](#) argued that slogans are a "poetry of manifestations," and these texts had pride of place during the proceedings. Written out on banners overlooking the theater space and spread over the different lecterns used by the speakers, they at once explored the common ground among artist organizations and gestured toward the umbrella artist organization to come.

The inaugural panel began with presentations by delegates of the Zentrum für Politische Schönheit, who chose to foreground a Federal Emergency Program modeled on the British Kindertransport scheme, which helped bring 55,000 Syrian children over to Germany; they were followed by the Concerned Artists of the Philippines, a group blacklisted in its own country. These gave way to a rousing reading by [Susanne Sachsse](#), representing [Yael Bartana](#)'s Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland, who ended with the injunction: "Join us and Europe will be stunned."

Trouble began after the break, when the panel's chair, [Matteo Lucchetti](#), announced that [Tania Bruguera](#), who was going to speak on the panel but was unable to leave Cuba pending a decision regarding her trial, had agreed to talk to us about the Immigrant Movement International and the circumstances surrounding her arrests in late December. The barely audible phone interview, which Lucchetti conducted, was interrupted shortly after it got going by the arrival of a state security agent summoning Bruguera to her daily interrogation. The artist used the occasion to instruct the agent in her ideas about *arte útil* (useful art); then, just as Bruguera had broached a sensitive topic, the connection went dead.



Left: Susanne Sachsse. Right: Matteo Lucchetti. (Photos: Lida Rossner)

Bruguera explained what had happened, apologizing “for the stupid and unnecessary drama” this created, in an email that Warsza read to us the next morning. But the fact that Lucchetti carried on interviewing Bruguera in the face of her growing agitation, prompted the ZPS to accuse him of insensitivity. ZPS went further, voicing their issues with the AOI and asking themselves why they were there. “I’ve got real issues with your use of aesthetics in the Syrian project,” artist Blake Shaw blurted out at that point, gradually working himself into an oratorical frenzy. The heated debate that ensued threatened to degenerate, with Staal denouncing the ZPS members for attempting to derail the discussion.

Such mutiny did not bode well for the remainder of the summit, but the AOI organizers succeeded in putting things back on track without dismissing the incident. After all, as Malzacher reminded us, theaters are “agonistic spaces” where crises of representation are permanently addressed. Nowhere more so perhaps than at the Hebbel Theatre, where director Erwin Piscator was active in the 1920s and which was used by the American occupational authorities to “re-educate” the German public at the end of World War II. This is also where the messy experiment of “Selbstbestimmungs Theatre” took place in the early 1970s. Not unlike pirate ships, the self-governing theater gave all its employees the right to vote on matters of artistic policy.

Berlin itself has a strong ethos of self-organizing and a penchant for lively debate which can rapidly turn to rhetorical violence—as the AOI event illustrated. The genius loci was reflected in the panel titles that read as so many propositions and counter-propositions, seemingly at strife: (i) “Propaganda & Counter-Propaganda,” (ii.) “Learning & Unlearning,” (iii.) “State & Statelessness,” (iv.) “Violence & Non-Violence,” and (v.) “Solidarity & Unionising.”



Left: Curators David Riff and Ekaterina Degot. Right: Van Abbemuseum director Charles Esche. (Photos: Agnieszka Gratzka)

Commenting on the energetic design riffing on Russian constructivism, curator Ekaterina Degot said that we seemed to be characters in a play for which no one was ready. The five acts of the AOI drama unfolded against this backdrop until the final debate, for which the lecterns were removed and the banners came down to reveal, beneath all the visual clutter, the curved mahogany lines of the Jugendstil theater. The seating was rearranged to break down the divide between audience and invited speakers in order to, as Staal put it, “collectively explore what remained to be discussed.”

Tasked with chairing the final debate, Van Abbemuseum director Charles Esche spoke for many when he voiced his fear that the summit may have been a missed opportunity. Yet he also argued that this was one of the more interesting conferences he had attended precisely because it gave rise to vocal disagreements. Some were quick to dismiss it as a “trendy and fashionable event.” Others scoffed at the pragmatic proposal to use the meeting as a platform for future exchanges, starting with a mailing list, which was deemed an “unglamorous ending” to a congress that set itself up as a proposal for an Artist Organisations International. “I don’t want to be part of that mailing list,” someone added.

It fell to Moussa Ag Assarid, the Tuareg storyteller, to lift our battered spirits with an edifying tale about the founding of his nomadic School of the Sands, named after Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, whose *Little Prince* was the first book that fell between his hands. The story ended with a plea: “What can artists propose to give us hope? Let us have faith in artists. Mazou and I can then go back to the desert.”

— **Agnieszka Gratza**