

News Middle East

Dutch artist helps Kurds' grassroots democracy grow

"People's parliament" built for revolutionaries fighting Isil in northern Syria

WAR

Derik. An international team led by the Dutch artist and activist Jonas Staal is building a "people's parliament" in the city of Derik in the northern region of Syria known as Rojava, where the mainly Kurdish population declared autonomy in 2013.

The new building is intended to provide a focal point for Kurds and other communities who launched the Rojava Revolution during the ongoing civil war in Syria and the fight against Isil fundamentalists. The parliament and surrounding park will provide the city with its first open-air space for cultural events and political meetings, which were banned by the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad.

Speaking from the region, Staal says that he hopes the structure will become a destination for "many public demonstrations" in the self-administered city. The project is being funded by the Dutch organisation Mondriaan Fonds, which supports Dutch visual arts with public money.

In Rojava, the Kurds and minority communities are creating a multi-faith,

non-sectarian, "stateless" democracy; one of its founding principles is equal rights for women. But they face many challenges, and most of their efforts are focused on fighting Isil. "There is a huge offensive going on to take back Isil-controlled villages," Staal says. "The booby-traps and mines that [Isil] leave behind result in many deaths."

There are also huge shortages in the region, which are aggravated because the border with Turkey is sealed. This is because the Turkish government considers the Kurdish militias to be terrorists, thanks to their affiliation with the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Despite these challenges, Staal says that there has been a "cultural revolution" in the region. After years of oppression, cultural centres and art schools have been created "all over". The nearby archaeological site of Urkesh, which was excavated by a team from the University of California, Los Angeles, before the civil war, is guarded by the community to prevent looting. This summer, film-makers and artists established a film "commune", organising a Charlie Chaplin season for children. "Everyone is committed to creating something new in the face of the devastation," Staal

says. "The struggle of the Kurdish people has everything to do with the defence of culture, long forbidden by the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria."

New World Summit

Staal is the co-founder of the New World Summit, a collective that has organised alternative parliaments during the Berlin Biennale and elsewhere in Europe, using art to provide a platform for opposition political groups, including the Kurdish Women's Movement and separatists from the Basque Country, the Philippines and Mali. In October, the artist co-organised the first of three planned conferences in Derik under the New World Summit banner. Invited delegates included around 30 from abroad, among them Robert Kluijver, a curator and lecturer in international relations and contemporary art at Sciences Po in Paris. Kluijver says that the summit enabled delegates to gain a thorough understanding of the revolution, adding that, in Rojava, the young Dutch artist has found the "perfect partner".

"The Rojava revolution is extremely pragmatic. It may be inspired by ideals, such as abolishing the state and full



The New World Summit's "parliament" takes shape in a Syrian war zone

gender equality, but those ideals are being realised, not just talked about," Kluijver says. "For three years now, the entire population – including, as I could see, minority groups – has been mobilised to create a new society."

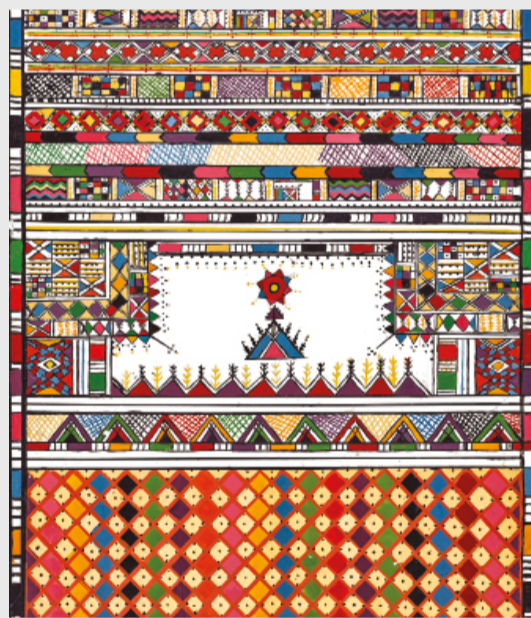
Staal and the New World Summit team are "contributing to the difficult task of establishing a new form of governance in the world", says Charles Esche, the director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, adding that the

Dutch institution plans to support the project by acquiring art produced by Staal and his team.

Staal is hopeful that his open-sided, circular parliament will be ready by next spring, despite limited access to machinery; the priority for excavators is digging fighters' graves. "The first arches are standing" and concrete for the circular seating below has been poured, he says.

Javier Pes

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At home with female Arab muralists

The leading Saudi Arabian artist Ahmed Mater is working with his mother, his sister and a host of other artists and cultural historians to draw attention to a centuries-old Saudi tradition of house painting by women that is at risk of dying out. In November, a group of female Asiri artisans from the village of Rijal Alma, where Mater was raised, painted two large-scale murals for an exhibition at the United Nations' headquarters in New York. The project, entitled Our Mother's House, is being organised by the arts groups Edge of Arabia and Art Jameel, in collaboration with the Saudi government, which is lobbying Unesco to add Rijal Alma to its list of World Heritage sites. Mater, who helped his mother to decorate the interior of their house as a child, says: "This tradition means a lot to me because it was my first exposure to art." The UK artist Steven Stapleton, who co-founded Edge of Arabia with Mater and the Saudi artist Abdunnasser Gharem, says that the non-profit group is planning to organise a Middle Eastern tour of the exhibition about the tradition, which involves painting colourful patterns directly onto the wall or onto wood panels and is generally passed down from mother to daughter. As we went to press, the Asiri painter Fatimah Jaber and the cultural historian Ali Moghawi were due to speak in New York at a conference on Asiri house-painting, organised by the Middle East Institute. E.S.

A mural painted by Fatema Hassan, Ahmed Mater's mother

Francis Alÿs to work with refugees in Iraq and meet Isil's victims

Baghdad. The artist Francis Alÿs intends to visit refugee camps in Iraq and work with people forced to flee their homes by Isil. The Ruya Foundation, a non-governmental organisation based in Baghdad, has invited the Belgian-born, Mexico City-based artist to visit; its co-founder and chairwoman, Tamara Chalabi, says that he may travel there before the end of the year.

The foundation is working to help some of the thousands of Iraqi refugees, including the Kurdish-speaking Yazidis, who are now living in places such as Camp Shariya in the north of the country, where they wait endlessly for relief – like "waiting for Godot", Chalabi says.

Support from Ai Weiwei

The foundation is already working with artists such as Baghdad-based Salam

Atta Sabri, as well as Ai Weiwei. Earlier this year, the Chinese artist chose drawings made by refugees with materials provided by the foundation, which hopes to open a space for art therapy in a camp.

The works selected by Ai were on display in the Iraqi pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and they also feature in the book *Traces of Survival*. "[Ai] wanted to visit but did not have his passport [at the time]," Chalabi says. Instead, two members of the artist's studio travelled to Iraq to meet refugees and to record their testimonies.

Ai continues to support the foundation's charitable work; the artist recently donated *Hanging Man in Porcelain* (2009, edition 87 of 100), formed by a piece of wire bent in the profile of Marcel Duchamp, to help raise funds. J.P.

Peter Finer

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