

State Traps // A Duo-Exhibition by Yazan Khalili and Jonas Staal

For their first collaborative exhibition, Yazan Khalili and Jonas Staal coined the term 'state-traps.' This term addresses more than a decade of artistic and political tactical and strategic engagements through which both artists confront the power of the nation-state, and its ideological and repressive apparatuses. Positioning censorship as intrinsic to the freedom of speech, Yazan and Staal expose in the works exhibited here the limits and falsity of a human right often perceived as the pillar of Western democracy.

As freedom of speech is recognized by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it is oftentimes regarded as a basic human right needed to be protected by all political systems at all times. Yet, on the backdrop of the seemingly expansion in the scope of the freedom of speech, authoritarian regimes just as some legal scholars, have expressed doubts to whether freedom of speech is altogether a right in support of democratic goals. Some are also continuously challenging whether the freedom of speech should be considered a unique human phenomena distinguished from other activities.

While a vast number of American and European legal scholars identify freedom of speech as a special right, Staal and Khalili demand us to re-think and reconstruct our notion of freedom of speech as it has been articulated and appropriated by imperialist and neoliberal formations of power. The juxtaposing of works by these two artists as suggested in the exhibition, calls for a critical reflection on the essence of freedom of speech, its distinctiveness and robustness, when it itself is used as a form of silencing. Pondering into the tension between freedom of speech and censorship, the artists urge us to contemplate on how the two are congenital to each other? What is

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speech in our time? Who, if at all, can speak and where? And, what forms of speech are recognized as a fundamental human right?

Both artists bring into confrontation the relation between law, justice and democracy as they challenge local and international law and legal constructions. By asking whether an art work can hold in itself the power to boycott (I, The Artwork, 2016); by creating fictive memorial installations of a living politician (The Geert Wilders Works, 2005-2008); by establishing temporary parliaments for stateless and blacklisted organizations in cities such as Kochi and Utrecht (2013, 2016); or, by envisioning the geopolitical condition of Palestine from the eyes of thieves (Robbery in Area A (2013 – 2016)), Khalili and Staal demonstrate the power of art to create new regimes of visiblization, while it traps the state to over react, to over respond.

The artistic-legal-political positions and actions advocated by Khalili and Staal can be understood as a form of a guerilla warfare. When the law of the nation-state opposes social justice, state-traps are creative, non-lethal assaults, which are intended to provoke the nation-state to over-act. Through minimal means, artistic capabilities are able to trigger and provoke the nation-state to overreact as it is caught off-guard. They make visible the unjust over-powering of the nation-state, and thus, subversively are activating and challenging its institutions and legal systems.

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