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ON A MUSEUM OF CARE (IN ROJAVA)

THIS IS AN ESSAY ABOUT A MUSEUM THAT DOES NOT YET EXIST

"We produce a cup only once, but we wash and dry it a thousand times."

David Graeber

The idea of the Museum of Care is to provide a space where people: artists and non-artists cooperate with each other to change, restore and repair the social fabric of society, as opposed to a traditional museum which most of the time is designed to create the space to exhibit, appreciate and archive certain sorts of objects or to document certain sorts of situations, with the purpose of presenting them as one or another form of sublime.

A large numbers of new museums are built every year around the world.

No one is quite sure where the phrase "museum industrial complex" originally came from, but it's been a favorite term of Boris Groys for many years now. He uses it to give a sense of the scale of museum expansion in recent decades, one that brings together family entertainment, touristic development, investment, and sacred space in service of the production and reproduction of what are considered society's highest values.¹

Why, then, do we need to add another project to what already seems like a neurotically long queue of infinitely expanding spaces of representation?



Nika Dubrovsky "Curtains". "Where does the Homeland begin?" with the community of elderly Germans from the ex USSR. Berlin, Germany 2020.

¹ Groys XXX; Hal Foster, "Art and Architecture" XXX



Nika Dubrovsky "Curtains". "Where does the Homeland begin?" with the community of elderly Germans from the ex USSR. Berlin, Germany 2020.

We believe that our museum represents a genuine departure: it is a museum that does not need buildings and sponsors, guards, and archives, one that does not need cashiers, accountants, and lawyers.

Our museum relies on the interest of like-minded people in radicalizing the practices of contemporary art by changing the very essence of what contemporary art could be.

The authors of this text are a collective in the process of becoming; joined only by an idea. We are artists, Kurdish activists, and contemporary art theorists who have gathered around this idea as a way to think together about what can be changed not even as much in contemporary art, but in the society around us.

And how exactly could contemporary art play a part in this? It might seem surprising to focus on Rojava or the Kurdish liberation movement in this context – and of course, we don't want to make it our exclusive focus – simply because the situation there might seem, to the

outside eye, so desperate. These are people literally battling patriarchy, faced with the possibility of outright genocide. One might imagine the role of art and society is far from their immediate concerns, even, that it would be a bit narcissistic or exploitative of even the most well-meaning Western artists to treat it as if it should be. But in fact these matters are the tops of lively and active debate in Rojava itself. There is a broad recognition that part of creating a society without bosses or subordinates, where authority exists only as long as it can immediately justify itself, not because it is imposed by people with guns, where knowledge is to be disseminated as broadly as possible, that the relation of ethics, aesthetics, and the social good must necessarily be reimagined.

We first presented and tested this concept of a Museum of Care at the CCC conference in Leipzig in 2019, in which Lena Fritsch, one of the editors of this volume, took part. In return, she invited us to contribute to this book.

We are calling it the “Museum of Care” in Rojava. Rojava means West in Kurdish and refers specifically to a largely (but by no means exclusively) Kurdish region of Northern Syria, also known to Kurds as “the West” of the larger region, also including parts of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, in which Kurdish people have historically been located. For the last eight years, Rojava’s women’s revolution has given it a place on the world stage. Despite the war and destruction that surrounds it, despite the hostility of all its neighbors and the determined attacks of the Islamic state, and now directly of the Syrian and Turkish governments, the people of Rojava have for almost a decade now been building a society founded on directly democratic assemblies, ecology, anti-capitalist cooperation, and alliances across genders, ethnicities, religion and beliefs.

For many reasons, in Rojava, the primary economic system of production is based on co-operatives. Decision-making is based on principles of democratic confederalism, which means that ultimate power is bottom-up, resting in a system of neighborhood assemblies which send delegates (not representatives) to larger municipal or regional ones. The representation of women in all committees of all levels is determined by quotas: not only must there be at least 40% women present to hold any meeting, but all official positions are held by “co-chairs”, one female, one male. This is not just for gender balance, but for the general principle that no one should make decisions alone. Most of the women involved in these assemblies as we’ve noted, are active care-givers.

ON CULTURAL GENOCIDE

Raphael Lemkin, a legal theorist of Polish Jewish descent, who first coined the term “genocide” defined it as “the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group.” In 1944 he added to this the notion of cultural genocide or cultural cleansing as a component of genocide as a whole.

More recently, Robert Bevan’s *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (2007), and Tim Slade’s 2016 documentary based on the same book, argue that war is never only about the destruction of the people and conquering territories, but it also about the destruction of memory and cultural heritage. Any attempt at genocide

against an ethnic group is invariably integrated with the destruction of cultural artifacts – which becomes a necessary part of the destruction as a whole. They have since called for an additional international treaty that would handle the prosecutions of the nations or groups who involved in a destruction of the architectural monuments.

All of this entirely true and appropriate, but the concern for cultural monuments has sometimes had the perverse effect of overshadowing the destruction of human beings. Reading media reports about the conflict in Syria, particularly from mainstream western media, one might be forgiven for being left with the impression that the most horrifyingly violent events performed by ISIS were not even their mass killing and torture of civilians, but their destruction of art and historical artifacts; objects that were considered to be, unlike the relatively unremarkable pain and suffering of the people of that region, a matter of concern for the whole of humanity.

No one in their right mind supports the blowing up of ancient Greek temples, but it’s hard to refrain from pointing here that “iconoclasm” has a literal meaning – the Protestant reformation, for example, involved the conscious destruction of many old and aesthetically valuable objects, in much the same way as did the anarchist revolution of 1936 in Spain. Not just genocide; revolutions, too, invariably involve a challenge to the sacred; and often, that sacred takes physical form. Kazimir Malevich called for the destruction of museums, and the French Revolution, above all, changed the criteria for assessing what was considered valuable cultural heritage and what was not.

In a sense, the whole idea of cultural heritage, the necessity of protection, collection, and archiving of cultural artifacts that define us as humans emerged after the French Revolution, as well as the concept of museums, as we know it – just as the iconoclastic spirit of contemporary art could be said to have been born in the Protestant reformation.

ON THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

If moments of social upheaval always involve a reevaluation of what art is, and of the role of the artist, then surely we are in such a moment now. Today we face changes that literally threaten

to destroy humanity. We are no longer just facing a financial crisis or even a crisis of capitalism, but the real prospect of ending civilization as we know it. If our definitions of art and the role of the artist are about to change in a correspondingly dramatic way, might it now finally be possible to reconsider the fundamentally gendered way that the art world is constructed, and even, to do something about it? One reason art has remained a competitive game, despite all its past revolutions, has been that it is conceived as a form of production. What if it were conceived as a form of care? What if we conceived of all forms of value in such terms – to see the transformation of art to be part of a more general process of replacing patriarchal society with a society of caregivers, in a world tilting towards total disaster? This would create art with what it deserves, not just as product and production but as a method to create and recreate life, society and culture that serves meaningful freedom.

Rojava might seem a surprising choice to some as a place to create a museum according to these principles, since most people in the west would perceive it as a very traditional Middle Eastern society in this respect. It's true that there is a very high birth rate, so most women on local councils are likely to be mothers and grandmothers, that is, women who practice care on a daily basis; since Kurdish society (like many societies in which capitalist individualism has not taken foot) is historically based on sharing, particularly day-to-day tasks with extended family and neighbors, even those without children of their own are likely to be involved in care-giving of some kind, and to see care as a value. Therefore, the women's quota in Rojava's councils ensures a change in perspective from what had become traditional and very patriarchal forms of organization to one oriented to what had been traditionally the concerns of women. Perhaps, the fact that Rojava is at war and surrounded by enemies on all sides set to annihilate them and everything they stand for, creates a certain unity. Competition of all sorts, between men, between women, between religions, and ethnic groups has been mostly set aside, and this used as an opportunity to cement and institutionalize co-operation, direct democracy and women's liberation. What is often perceived as a unique, even spontaneous uprising, is in fact the product of four decades of organising, most of which had to be carried out underground – organising based

on the assumption that people had to be educated in preparation for a moment like 2011, when the Syrian regime, facing uprisings everywhere, could be effectively forced out of the region. Since the early 1980's, the architect of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, Abdullah Ocalan made sure every house their movement was able to organize in Northern Syria was in turn treated as a revolutionary academy, with a particular emphasis on the development of women's solidarity and mutual care to create the foundations of a moral-political society. As a result Mesopotamia, the very birthplace of patriarchy, for decades became the center for a largely covert movement in which Kurdish women and their comrades struggled at the same time to understand what women's liberation would mean, and to those understandings into practice: then, after 2011, began to do the same openly, on a broader societal level, setting-out to provide an example, inspiration and hope for the world.

Rojava's societal changes come together with the radical changes of the mechanisms of cultural reproduction. Participants in the Rojava video community say that when they first visited the West, they were constantly asked questions they found completely irrelevant. The western artists would be interested to know how they financed the production and organized the distribution of their films. At first, they did not even understand these questions, thinking that they were something so rooted in specific Western conditions they could be applied to the rest of the world. "In Rojava, we [our collective] are simply doing what we think is right, and the people around us are helping in the same way as we help anyone else with their work.," Sevinaz told us. In other words, the very conceptions of what an artist is and how art is organized necessarily change under revolutionary social conditions.

ON THE CONCEPT OF CARE

Da Vinci painted his Mona Lisa once, and then for centuries, people have written about it, argued about it, researched it, made jokes about it, and jigsaw puzzles out of it, used it in their own artworks, loved it, and taken care of it.

All this involved an enormous amount of work. Without that work, Mona Lisa would never have been so important to humanity, but would



"The schools of the Future". Anthropology for kids (a4kids.org).
HKW Berlin 2017.

have shared the same fate as innumerable other works of art, many perhaps just as (potentially) enchanting, that were either lost and physically destroyed, and which we have never therefore heard of.

The Mona Lisa, as a painting, does not contain any inherent magical powers by itself; what we call "the Mona Lisa" is not simply a work by Leonardo, but a combination of efforts of innumerable people in every part of the world and many different historical epochs. There are many ways to conceptualize this labor, but it seems to us it is best seen as a form of caring labor.

Like most forms of caring labor, it is performed, disproportionately, by women.

We know that the overwhelming majority of those recognized as artists in the world today are male, but the overwhelming majority of those who take care of art: the teachers, guides, art researchers, art historians, museum workers, artist's wives, and "muses" (whatever shape or form that takes) – not to mention exhibition visitors – are women.

If art is so crucial for humanity, can we create a space for new art that would be very radically different?

So a revolutionary act would be the following: We would like to call it the "space of care."

By saying this, we don't mean just some new style of art, or art whose recognized producers have different names or identities, but an art that would itself be able to reorganize existing power structures, by prioritizing the values of care and maintenance over production, extraction and patriarchal order. Indeed, focusing on being the expressions of a moral-political society, recognizing that such society is not possible without a radical democracy and women's liberation.

To return to Rojava: outsiders are often startled by the compassionate attitude of YPG (People's Protection Units) and YPJ (Women's Protection Units) members to wives of ISIS members and their children. YPG/YPJ soldiers often gave them food and blankets, despite receiving only insults and threats in return.

Why do the soldiers spend their resources on these women? One of Rojava's famous slogans is "Women, Life, Freedom." This means more than how to treat all women, but how to treat life itself, the values that form the foundation of the treatment of the very women who assisted the very people who tried to destroy you. Freedom, liberty, is not something that you can take and keep for yourself. Freedom exists between people in human relations. You free yourself by freeing others, taking care of them, giving them life, for as long as possible as best you are able to do, and this reflects a general approach to life which is much more important than the identity or moral status of any particular object towards which that care is directed. The idea of soldiers as care-givers might seem extraordinary to begin with, but it makes perfect sense in terms of the philosophy underlying the YPG and YPJ as organizations. They are "protection" units and believe it is fundamentally wrong to undertake offensive operations. (This orientation has in fact gotten them in trouble in the past with other rebel groups who accuse them of not going on the offensive against the Syrian government). This stems from a general philosophy of "defense"; any living thing, any social arrangement, must necessarily as part of its conditions of existence have some means of self-defense in the same way as a rose has thorns. Defense, unlike aggressive warfare, is ultimately a form of self-care. It only makes sense, then, that women who have left home to join the YPJ, when asked what they'd like to do if the war ends, almost invariably speak of becoming teachers or doctors, or otherwise, part of the caring professions, as they see this as a continuation of rather than a break with what they are doing while bearing arms.

ON PRACTICALITIES

One wouldn't want to be doctrinaire; there's no one model for such a museum. But let's take a few of the principles we have in mind and explore what their ramifications might be. Can we create a Museum of Care in the war-torn Rojava?

In some ways it would be easier than creating a more traditional sort of museum, which would require a great deal of money, expertise, and security.

First of all we do not need to be moving material objects around. Most contemporary art is about producing impressions and experiences rather than existing as an object itself. Second of all, it would involve moving away from branding-since in so much contemporary art, the actual value of work is seen as lying neither in the material object or in the impressions or experience, but in the name of specific artists or collectives that created them. For many years contemporary art aims to actively shape the social life of its audience by employing video, projections, instructions, or by almost any means imaginable, and constantly trying to imagine new ones that we previously couldn't. In the process it becomes ever more immaterial. This immateriality makes it far easier to create such a museum, or hold international exhibitions, and generally reduces the cost of sharing art to something approaching zero (if the branding is also eliminated). In the Museum of Care, any objects, material or otherwise, would have significance primarily insofar as they can be used in organizing or preserving valuable life experiences that for whatever reason can influence public life now or in the future, or some sort of social codes that might rewrite it.²

Rojava's art today is as young and new as a Rojava's transformation itself. Most of it is practiced collectively: including dancing, singing, theater (followed by a session of friendly criticism after each show, which tends to lead to vivid discussions). It favors genres not just accessible to all, but easily replicable, in which anyone could find some way to participate. Rojava's visual art, such as graffiti, on the one hand, maintains a strictly recognizable iconography – it tends to employ three colors (red, yellow and green), on the other hand, acting on the principle of almost anonymity, it has taken up by autonomous artists and activists all over the world and could easily be changed by them. In support of the Rojava revolution, graffiti can be found on the streets of Bratislava, on the walls of the student

² The idea of a museum with no objects, or that does not itself exist as a physical object, is not itself entirely unprecedented. For an example of the first, see Françoise Vergès Museum of La Region, for the second, the Communist Museum of Palestine, as conceived by Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri



Visual assembly in the times of social distances.
2020 London. David Graeber and Nika Dubrovsky

campuses in Bologna, on the streets walls of Berlin, under busy bridges in London and so on.

Can we also make a cooperative museum of contemporary art, where there will be no “physical objects”, whose exhibits will consist of the ideas and care of people who interested in them, for whom they are important?

And then, of course, the main question arises: what kind of art do people need? What will happen if artists and their works are evaluated not by curators and administrators of art institutions, but by people who can or cannot use this art?

To imagine what an exhibition in a Museum of Care might look like, consider a recent action in the British museum involving almost 1500 people. The organizers were demanding the museum break its financial ties with British Petroleum (BP), an oil company responsible for countless ecological tragedies, which was effectively art-washing itself by placing their logo on the facade of what is considered one of the most prominent cathedrals of humanity, protector of just the kind of eternal treasures that would be pillaged or destroyed by a group like ISIS. The action contained many elements, from occupation of the museum to the use of elaborate props (i.e. a Trojan horse),

but we would like to point out one particular moment, when 50 occupiers made white plaster casts of parts of their own bodies: arms, feet and so on directly in the museum, and then left them in the middle of the grand foyer surrounded by barriers as if they were an officially approved installation.

Since BP was at the time sponsoring an exhibition about ancient Troy, the pieces could easily have been either ancient artifacts or the work of any number of contemporary artists. (We could name which ones, but this is precisely what we are not trying to do here).

In fact, they were actual casts of the actual bodies of human beings who objected that they may well, in a few years, be dead as a result of BP's activities. In other words it was itself simultaneously an act of art, of self-defense, and of care.

Earlier we cited the examples of Leonardo da Vinci and the Mona Lisa precisely because the Mona Lisa, to some extent, is no longer a work of art, but a kind of cultural meme, a reference, actively and repeatedly used not only within the art world but by advertising, media, and popular culture more generally.

While any mention of the names of contemporary artists or their artworks will unavoidably

bring us back to the bad infinity of reproducing hierarchies of names and objects, which in itself is a problem rather than a solution.

The "Museum", that invention of the French Revolution, arose as a representation of newborn nation-states. These first museums assigned a specific role for the artist as an individual creator, which embodies the freedom of creativity, inaccessible to workers, whose lives are supposed to be anonymous and lacking creativity.

Our Museum of Care is in this sense a self-conscious post-national and postproductionist project; another reason why Rojava seems such an appropriate place for it. This is actually something widely misunderstood about the Democratic Confederation of Northeast Syria, of which Rojava is now a part, as well as the Kurdish Freedom movement more generally (i.e., including the PKK in Turkey). The democratic confederalist project they've embraced is not separatist, they are not trying to create a new nation-state and national identity at all, but rather, see themselves as trying to overcome the logic of the nation-state, and of capitalism, simultaneously.

Nowadays, in the time of epidemics and general quarantine, experiments with new ways of connecting people through the cultural production emerging throughout the world: networks for mutual help and online activism, as well as collective literary initiatives and online learning meetings developing between countries and languages.

We are looking for forms of production and distribution of art that could meet the following criteria: first, they must be collective. By this we mean, the major task of the organizers is not

to providing a stage for some author's self-expression or personal commentary, but a collective participatory space. This is why we highlighted the action in the British museum, since they were able to involve thousands of people in a collective effort to reorganize a public space.

Secondly, a focus on "care" necessarily means overcoming the division between "creator" and "assistants", that is, between the act of creation, and the process of maintenance of the work of art. Again, this is a key quality of the BP/British Museum event, as its purpose is to break the relationship between oil companies and state museums. In other words, the action must continue in one form or another until its goal is achieved.

Thirdly, art is only a form of care if it is radically politicized and embedded in society, as can also be seen in this action.

Acts like this are easily replicable anywhere in the world.

By writing this, we realize that our text is trying to jump out of a traditional and safe space of the piece of theoretical fringe to become a road map for practical actions that we – or any reader of this text – could try to implement. It's understood that these are just initial ideas, only a direction to be considerate.

We invite everyone to participate and share their thoughts or merely start implementing something similar in their own way.

