

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Art and Nationalism – Critical Reader
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Nationalism certainly is a cultural phenomenon. This is conclusion and a *priori* standpoint of at least two most important writers on nationalism: Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm. Anderson's book '*Imagined Communities*' and Hobsbawm's '*Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*' were crucial texts preparing this book and in dealing with the disease of nationalism in our own everyday lives. The most simple and the strongest point that we got from these texts is that nationalism is not an archaic, natural or ahistorical Thing, but that it is dialectical and cultural construction defined, for instance, by economy, politics, mass-media, or in this case contemporary art.

Anderson and Hobsbawm teach us that nationalism comes before nations, and not vice versa. For us this means that nationalism is a historical and invented phenomenon, which can find ground in many cultural spheres of imagined community called Nation. The most practical conclusion of this idea is that nationalism, and the idea of a nation, can have a function of bringing together many different structures of society. Following this we can draw a very useful conclusion, that nationalism is actually a cover-up story for many differences in society, including linguistic dialects, class-consciousness, gender issues, or ideological-political differences. It is like super-glue that keeps society from dispersing.

Because of this strong effect that nationalism has in modern societies, its manifestations and spaces of materialisation can vary from ultra-disciplined structures such as the army, police, church, and school to private spaces of family, intellectual and aesthetic production of academia, or popular culture of mass-media. In this book we aim to show that contemporary art can be a cultural space where nationalism is produced and manifested.

Drawing a connection from contemporary art to nationalism is in many ways complicated and problematic. One of the main reasons lies in understandings of contemporary art as a practice that is subversive and critical, which questions mainstream ideas and conservative thoughts. In its fundamental definition, contemporary art of the 20th century (ranging from the avant-garde to conceptual art and up to the present) is assumed as an obvious negation of pre-described and fixed ideological formulations, of which nationalism becomes among the most visible examples. The practice of contemporary art, which in its character is international and cosmopolitan, supports this idea of anti-

nationalist contemporary art mythology. Because of this, the union of contemporary art and nationalism remains as an oxymoron within critical discourse. Yet, observing very obvious tendencies in contemporary art - of the support for contemporary art by national foundations and institutions, representation of contemporary artists in national pavilions in biennials, the existence of contemporary art manifestations labelled as 'Balkan,' 'Young British Artists,' 'Nordic Miracle,' 'Kurdish Video Art,' 'Moscow Conceptualism,' and so forth - made us think that connecting contemporary art and nationalism is not an exaggeration of a social problem of a minor scale, but in the contrary it is an acute and important topic of discussion.

One could offer the criticism that trying to connect nationalism with contemporary art is a very elitist, self-referential, hermetic project, and problematic in a number of other ways, in a world where each day nationalism takes more bare, banal, vulgar, and violent forms. Nonetheless, our thesis maintains that because nationalism is a cultural phenomenon, its most processed and intelligent forms are at the same time the most dangerous. So, nationalism of a non-conformist, multicultural, cosmopolitan, progressive, refined, and contemporary white-cube galleries' kind, is differentiated from the disciplined and populist nationalism only in degrees of sophistication.

Even if the connection between contemporary art and nationalism is a very important one, in part for some of the reasons stated above, there are very few publications available that address the issue. There are at least two reasons for this. The first pertains to the *temporal* definition of contemporary art, which means that contemporary art is contemporary, and thus it is ad hoc, ephemeral, up-to-date, reflexive, and it cannot have any connection to something that is mainly associated to the nation as an archaic structure. Contemporary art is dialectical and the ideology of contemporary art is based on the concept of Time. But the truth, which we are forgetting here, is that the real ad hoc, dialectical, ever-changing phenomenon, is the nation itself. Because of this, the nation and nationalism have the same logic, as cultural structures, as contemporary art. This is also the reason why there are many good publications on the connection between modern art and nationalism; based on the idea that modern art is a museum artifact, like nationalism. But we want to stress out that this logic serves more to hide the actual problem. What we are proposing is the opposite; instead of seeing nationalism as a fossilized, slow, rude, unintelligent, and in non-dialectical solid ground, it is more useful to deal with nationalism as very contemporary movement, which can manifest itself even in the most progressive structures. In one

way, this is then taking a step further from the theories of Anderson and Hobsbawm who refer to nationalism as a modern movement.

Another reason for the lack of publications on the connection of contemporary art and nationalism is practical and one that we faced during our preparation for this book. We realized that collecting articles on this topic had two difficulties. One of the problems is that contemporary art critics and curators are mainly operating within the frame of the national institutions. Many, who clearly are aware of this connection and are facing it directly in their practice, cannot speak aloud and publicly about it. This contradiction is actually a bigger issue of the contemporary art apparatus; reflected not only in national representation, but it is also connected to political-economy. Shortly put, this is one of the manifestations of the repressive and disciplined ideological apparatus of contemporary art and it deserves a broader analysis.

The second difficulty that we encountered was that many authors, who are aware of the progressive and tricky intelligence of nationalism, are not seriously considering contemporary art as a field of their research. Here we are referring to the social-science researchers who are focusing on the manifestations of nationalism in pop-culture, literature or cinema, but undermining the influence of contemporary art in the process of the interpellation of people into official and national ideology. Again we have the same assumption that contemporary art is above repressive and bio-political spheres, which in fact is not the case. This is the reason why we decided to make this book and tried to offer some thematics to a topic that is almost taboo.

Although we had difficulties in finding the articles, with the help of our friends and our patience in searching for texts in academic journals, we did succeed in finding writers who could critically respond to our call for submissions. In the first chapter, which focuses on the theoretical and fundamental connections of nationalism, contemporary visual art, and contemporary culture, we kept in mind and followed the brave experiments provided by those such as: the anthological book of Serge Guibault on the connection of nationalism, anti-communism and abstractions of Jackson Pollock; Cornelius Cardew's book on John Cage and Stockhausen as servants of imperialism; or the theoretician who guided us in this whole project, Benedict Anderson, on parallels between anarchism and anti-colonial nationalism. In this first section we could have include more texts that could have acted as the key-texts for the framing of our ideas, nonetheless we limited the focus of the book to contemporary art. The first article, written by Boris Buden, questions the title and thus the whole topic of this book as he turns the question around. Instead of asking what nationalism is to

contemporary art, he asks what is contemporary nationalism at the end of nation and at the end of revolutionary international nationalism. The second ironical article of Sarat Maharaj, which was a key-note speech given at the 50th anniversary of Documenta, draws a line between real cosmopolitanism and internationality against the plan of re-Germanization of the Documenta-exhibition. Misko Suvakovic, as well as Rastko Mocnik, focus their complex analysis on post-socialist nation states, identity politics, and cultural policies.

The second section of the book is focused on national representations of contemporary art by governmental institutions and foundations. This is an apt and important issue deserving discussion. We are certain that this section would have been more informative and critical if the stories and rumors we have heard from representatives of institutions and our friends at numerous dinner-tables, private chats or jokes, had also been written down. The new Cultural Canon Program, which started in Denmark and is spreading to other Nordic countries, became the main topic for the articles in this section. Contributions by Simon Sheikh, Mika Hannula and Marita Muukkonen describe some alarming directions taken by cultural policies in Denmark as well as in Finland (aims at preserving 'traditional national culture' from 'other cultures,' especially those of immigrants). These articles indicate that nationalism, which is usually connected to newly born states or states still waiting to gain independency, is also very visible and part of the practices of contemporary visual-culture of the very modern, democratic welfare states, particularly the Nordic countries usually not thought to have such concerns. Although not a deep analysis of the situation, we decided to also publish Margaret Tali's article as it provides a blueprint of a very important issue in regard to the exclusion and misrepresentation of minorities in newborn states. Marina Grzinic, instead of identity politics, calls for analyses of how we are attached to structures of economic power.

The third section of the book provides case studies on the connection of nationalism and contemporary art in various locations and the work of various artists. Some of the articles deal with the topic in a very subjective way by deconstructing the vision and the imagination of contemporary art from inside. The articles by Nebojsa Jovanovic, Sezgin Boynik and Kobena Mercer, in particular, are written on the basis of first hand experience and disappointment with (the illusion of) contemporary art as the most progressive field in culture. We had the great chance to receive some very interesting texts, including Ivor Stodolsky's brilliant analysis of the nationalization of dissident art in the post-perestroika period in Russia and the work of one particular artist Timur Novakov, and Erden Kosova's sophisticated

theoretical insights on Balkan contemporary art and its connection to nationalism through the use of the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler and Jose Esteban Munoz. Paul Wilson carefully dismantles the work of three Finnish photographers who each use banality as a strategy in an attempt to subvert images of Finnish national landscape, but through interpellation however remain in the sphere of nationalism. Suzana Milevska draws connections between the works of Zaneta Vangeli and deconstructive theological theories. Branislav Dimitrijevic felt that the topic, especially in the Serbian context, was too close to his personal experience for a theoretical analysis and suggested that we use the less formal method of an interview. Due to an unfortunate lack of time we were only able to conduct a small interview over e-mail.

Similarly to Roger Conover, who in his article '*Against dictionaries*' defined an editor as "One who makes it possible for writers not to apologize for the impropriety of writing," we felt many times the huge responsibility for the texts selected for this book. Nevertheless, we decided to also publish some of texts because they represent a kind of logic of thinking that has roots in certain sophisticated discourses of contemporary arts. Unfortunately this sophistication is often based on euphemisms.

We are aware that this book represents only a small part of the whole global problem of issues surrounding nationalism and contemporary art. Although it would have been very productive to include stories and analyses from other continents, we choose to keep to (our) surroundings where we are most familiar with the context. We are also aware that there are many examples of contemporary artists who are dealing very critically with issues of nationalism, but we thought necessary to focus more on the exploration of the problematic side of the connection between contemporary art and nationalism.