

Art & National Identity: A Critics' Symposium

Peter Schjeldahl

Nationality is one of the most significant and interesting things about anyone, and therefore about any art. It affects the content and character of art at least as much as, say, gender does, even or perhaps especially when an artist tries deliberately to transcend it. The modern figure of the expatriate—Picasso, Nabokov, Beckett—is often a case of nationality enhanced by distance. And yet nationality is regularly scanted by many intellectuals, maybe because it humiliates assumptions of universal reason that give intellectuals prestigious employment. Like sex, nationality is a great big primitive all-underlying fact of life that permits no point of view outside itself. It spurns "discourse," demanding the services of poetry.

Downplaying nationality is no longer possible. From breakaway Soviet republics to micro-nationalistic U.S. multiculturalists, it is the most compelling idea that promises value and meaning to human lives today. Capitalism and democracy cannot promise value and meaning. The global triumph of these pragmatic systems leaves a vacuum, once filled by dreams of alternative economics and politics, that emotional claims of nationality rush to occupy. To be sane about this development, seeing the hope in it while marking the threat, we can start with distinctions.

National feeling is not automatically nationalism, a sometime political epiphenomenon of nationality. "Nationalism," with tacit emphasis on its direct historical associations, is a scare word that is used to forestall any acknowledgment of nationality's importance.

Nations are not states. The world is full of nations without states—Palestinians, Kurds, Sikhs—and much of the violence in the world emanates from those stateless nations. The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Lebanon, on the other hand, are states without national coherence, and are likewise volatile.

In culture, the alternative to the national is not the universal. It is the cosmopolitan, a sophisticated mingling and cross-pollination of national qualities. It has always been thus, even in heydays of internationalism.

Malevich, Mondrian and Pollock were, respectively, as Russian, Dutch and North American as vodka, windmills and quarter horses.

The 1980s, which in the New York art world began with Italian, German and French "invasions," was an era of cosmopolitanizing national art. The main prophet was Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer's imagination reunited Europe before the fact, before East Germans, encouraged by Gorbachev, pulled the linchpin of the Berlin Wall, bringing the old frozen disorder of the cold war crashing down everywhere. Kiefer made Germanness available again to the imagination. He took the taboo off it. Kiefer's work embodied a consciousness true to the best and chastened by the worst of the German past and therefore fit for an integral future. Kiefer may not have changed the world, but he gave anyone who was attentive an inkling of why and how—and where—the world would change.

Prophetic artists in the U.S. included Eric Fischl at the onset of the decade and Mike Kelley toward the end of it. Both heralded national decline—as seen in a maimed upper-middle-class gestalt in Fischl's case and a dolorous lower-middle in Kelley's—but with rangy American-type metafiction. Their imaginings were in tune with a hopelessly heterogeneous nation held together by some 18th-century pieces of paper and by Hollywood. And Jeff Koons played out an endgame of U.S.-identified "multinational" corporate culture.

These are sample reflections. I won't do a roll call of national characteristics in recent art. Do one yourself. The characteristics are not obscure, only ignored.

Symbolization of national themes and qualities does not make artists major, but major artists figure forth the deeper truths of themselves and their world, which at present most urgently include truths of nationality. What can now oppose nationality as the primary element bonding and distinguishing human groups? God is dead, again. Lenin awaits burial. Eden and Utopia are ghost towns. Only a spiritual principle that answers people's need to identify can repair the injuries caused by dehumanized global economics and politics. "Mystic chords of memory," in Abraham Lincoln's metaphor for nationality, can avail. If not

connoisseurs and critics of that equivocal music, we will make no useful sense of the world being born and the art that expresses it.

Peter Schjeldahl is a New York poet and critic whose most recent collection of essays will be published this fall by the University of California Press.

Edward Said

At some stage in the development of every national group there is a need for nationalism. The establishment of nationalism includes the refurbishing of one's past, the invention of traditions and the recapturing of cultural, geographical or political territory that was taken by others. Nationalism also involves, in this phase, setting up institutions that approximate or will become the institutions of state. Creation and reinforcement of identity in the political sense are fundamental in this phase as well. The problem is that nationalism can quite easily become a frozen thing.

In the case of today's postcolonial countries, many of them in the Third World, nationalism can become the excuse for many things: the abrogation of personal freedoms, the one-party state, the dictatorship of the army, the cult of the leader and various forms of extreme xenophobia. Frantz Fanon said that the important thing about the nationalism of an oppressed people is that once it realizes its goals, it should develop a social consciousness that is very different from a national consciousness. This conversion is very difficult; there are not many actual examples of it.

In the case of the Palestinians, it is difficult to avoid the kind of apology that many of us feel we have to make for our nationalism. Because it is probably the last and most intractable unrealized nationalism of the 20th century. It is the kind of thing Palestinians cannot give up. Nevertheless, I think it is important, given this very difficult context, to try to be critical and not to forget that critical consciousness is, at times, more important than solidarity.

Except in cases of people like the Palestinians, South African blacks, Puerto Ricans or Kurds, nationalism is on the whole a

negative force because it breeds the politics of war and xenophobia. Nationalism gives the question of identity greater eminence than I believe is required. And if you are promoting a politics of identity, you have no way of dealing with identities other than your own except by competing with them. That whole politics has been the pattern since the days of modern European imperialism. What we need is a new pattern.

Many Western writers on nationalism—I'm thinking of people like Elie Kedourie, Hugh Seton-Watson, Eric Hobsbawm and others—whether they are of the right or of the left, have tended to exaggerate the extent to which there is a difference between nationalism of the sort that you find in countries like Germany and France, on the one hand, and Egypt and India, on the other. They argue that in postcolonial countries, ideas of the nation are, in effect, largely borrowed from the West.

The essence of the treatise of Ibn-Khaldūn, a 14th-century Arab sociologist who many consider to be the father of sociology, is a study of what we would call "nationalism." He called it *asabiyyah*, which means group solidarity. He discusses how dynasties get started, how they build institutions, how people come in from the rural parts of a society to the city, how they set up institutions of power and how gradually these institutions and dynasties wither and are replaced by new dynasties. It's very hard to distinguish between Khaldūn's theory of *asabiyyah* and modern Western conceptions of nationhood.

The whole concept of national identity and the institutions of power—that is to say, authority, demography, geography—are pretty universal. They are to be found everywhere, in the precolonial, colonial and

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Guy Brett

Everything in my own experience has prompted me to reject nationalism—especially a "national art." I have seen, over a period of two decades or more, the falsity of the image of artistic activity in Britain, an image which has been constructed according to the dictates of such national institutions as the Tate Gallery or the British Council. The personnel may change (both the bureaucrats and artists), but the process of "nationalization," strangely, goes on, however subtly it may be conducted and whatever justifications those involved might produce for their selectivity.

This resulting image has many false aspects, in which the "national" is intricately mixed up with the "institutional." Here I would like to mention only two examples. First, the ongoing denial of the fact that artistic creativity in Britain (in London especially) has been a process of reciprocity and encounters between artists of many nationalities. While promoting itself as a metropolitan art center, London has failed

to live up to its own actual cosmopolitanism and contemporaneity (in this, art institutions have been no different from educational systems generally, which are still structured along national lines and, as Edward Said says, "have not yet dreamed" of the ways in which we are mixed together today).

The second aspect that concerns me is the denial, or watering down, of the audacious experimentation that has taken place in London, especially those innovations at the boundaries of art forms and genres. This denial betrays a desire to maintain, often by means as persistent as they are low-key, the Beaux-Arts categories of painting and sculpture, and a conservative hierarchy of art forms in general.

National institutions have a peculiar, often unwritten, *modus operandi* in Britain. Selectivity is heavily influenced by the phenomenon of clubbiness, the reign of the "old school tie," which is extraordinarily tenacious and powerful in the construction of an image of British art for export. And always particularly persistent in Britain is the division between the "haves" and "have-nots." The Establishment maintains its dominance by letting a few formerly marginalized people into the club, but it has never practiced an "open polity."

As nationalism implies chauvinism, it also implies homogeneity. This would seem to be something antithetical to the practice of art, almost by definition. If art is a paradigm of vitality, it thrives on movement, mixing, critical difference, argument, elasticity, cross-fertilization. Not that the nation is a static entity. It can in fact be seen as a process taking place in time, by which what was once dissent becomes official policy, liberating ideas get turned into new forms of conformism and unruly elements become homogenized. In more senses than one, a country can honor as "national figures" artists who were once considered "undesirable aliens"—people who have used their wits even to establish their residence.

Of course the European-American art centers never need to describe their actions crudely in terms of national chauvinism. They are in a position to explain their selectivity in terms of "universal" standards of quality, or a modernist or postmodernist mainstream, or whatever. Nothing is met with more disdain than the "official," "governmental" participation of peripheral countries in events like Biennales, perhaps for the very reason that powerful countries realize they are on such occasions confronting their mirror images. The paradox here—or the double bind—is that while the powerful claim as *universal* what is really their national interest, countries that have been humiliated by colonialism must defend their *national* history in order to have a place in universal culture. "Universal" is rarely construed to mean "plural." Our art-historical world maps are still largely a one-way projection from a fixed Western point of reference. We might speak, for example, of "modernity in Latin America," whereas we should be speaking, or learning, as the Chi-

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Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

There is a sort of slippage in what we mean by "nation," "state" and "culture." In order for a state to have any kind of stake in the world, it has had to constitute, at least historically, what we call a "nation." For the nation to have any kind of palpable presence on the international scene, it must construct its own definitive culture. The reclassification of ethnographic material as art has been instrumental in this process. One of the very first things that one can observe in new states is the imperative to create museums of ethnography and national heritage and to form national folkloric ensembles, ballets, symphonies and theater companies. In a sense, these institutions dramatically enact the nation through performing its "culture." The strategy becomes even more powerful when all of this is called "art," because the term confers upon the material the highest accolade. Rhetorically speaking, a nation without art is not a nation.

There are two main ways this national image can be constituted. The "high road" approach argues in terms of civilization and broad universal values. France offers a prominent example of this sensibility. The French Revolution represented an important transformation for the concept of the French nation. While an emphasis emerged on building a unitary French high culture, great difficulty arose in dealing with more local French cultures. There was a great investment in the idea that France represented the pinnacle of European culture. Such reasoning produces a form of cultural nationalism—a celebration not of what makes us different but a competition for the honor of being the greatest civilization.

The "low road" approach, on the other hand, looks toward the local or indigenous. The national ethnographic museums of many European nations take this approach. The governing idea here is that a nation's distinctiveness is based on its local culture. The place to find these culturally distinctive materials is in the peasant populations of the rural countryside or in other isolated areas. These places, as the nationalistic narrative would have it, remain relatively uncontaminated by outside or cosmopolitan influences. So in these folkloric or ethnographic collections, you get re-creations of peasant interiors or collections of peasant costumes—a celebration of the minute particularities of culture within the boundaries of a nation.

Of course, ethnographic "exhibitions" by their very nature involve classification and positioning. To detach an object from its national locale requires that it be reclassified and that it be positioned. The moment this is done, you cannot avoid either defining or blurring ethnic and national differences. To understand how differences are

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postcolonial world. So we cannot make a distinction between Western and non-Western or between colonial and postcolonial nations. There is, however, a tendency in the postcolonial world—largely because many of the pressures of the colonial or imperial period are still present—to exaggerate nationalism. This is not only true in the postcolonial state but was true also in Nazi Germany and is true today in a Central European country like Romania.

Since the 1960s, we have seen the failure of the melting pot ideology. This ideology suggested that different historical, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds could be subordinated to a larger ideology or social amalgam which is "America." This concept obviously did not work, because paradoxically America encourages a politics of contestation. We saw this during the civil rights struggles, where the prevailing notion of the state was contested by a group that had been oppressed, marginalized and largely forgotten. What you had was an attack on the concept that black history could be forgiven and forgotten. The melting pot suggested that blacks could put their history behind them and become part of the larger society. Of course, that didn't happen. Blacks had to fight to change laws, social practices, patterns of perception and ideological structures. Their struggle gave rise to other marginalized voices—women; ethnic, minority and subaltern groups; and gay men and lesbians—who are now fighting for their rights.

The Reagan and Bush administrations look upon all of this activity as a mistake that was in part due to the liberal Warren and Burger courts. Too many claims, this reasoning goes, have been honored for individual rights. The past decade has seen considerable regression as right-wing forces attempt to take back these earned social and political victories. You now have an attack on multiculturalism. While multiculturalism is not a panacea for all of our problems, I see it as an important step. It should not become a term of caricature or the brunt of attacks on "political correctness."

I think you can see the positive effect multiculturalism has had in changing our concept of society in recent developments in the Western European states. For a long time these states were homogeneous. But there are now large immigrant populations in France, Britain and Italy. You can no longer assume that France equals all the French people. Nations and states are now aggregates of different kinds of populations. More and more, these European countries are resembling the United States in the earlier part of the 20th century. The fundamental fact of political and social life today is that all states are impure hybrids. It is this tension between the idea of the hybrid and the homogeneous state that is the great social and political problem to be resolved.

Given the opposing claims of multiculturalism and its enemies, we must now clarify the role of the intellectual. During the Gulf crisis there was no organized intellectual discussion about the war. In the post-Cold War era, consideration of the role of the United States in world politics rarely involves intellectuals. But these are issues that must be dealt with by intellectuals and not only by bureaucrats working for the Rand Corporation.

—interviewed by Maurice Berger

Edward Said holds the position of Old Dominion Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. He is the author of numerous books, including Orientalism (1978), The Question of Palestine (1979), After the Last Sky (1986) and Musical Elaborations (1991).

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lean artist Eugenio Dittborn has put it, of "Latin America in modernity."

The catalogue of an exhibition (held in Oxford recently) featuring the Indian writer and painter Rabindranath Tagore republished some extracts from Tagore's essays on nationalism. Many of his remarks, though written as long ago as 1901-16, still seem remarkably pertinent today. Tagore was preoccupied with the "abstract" nature of the nation. In its experience of British colonialism, India had been conquered not by a people but by a nation, a remote abstract entity. Tagore made a distinction between "People" and "Nation" and compared it to a distinction between the natural (or social) person—the parent, the lover, the friend—and the professional person: doctor, soldier, businessman. The ideal of the person in his or her professional person was "selfishness." If applied to nations, this differentiation meant that nations could only fear other nations, and the "one wish" of the powerful nation "is to trade on the feebleness of the rest of the world"—a phrase having a curious resonance in these days of the so-called New World Order.

It is striking that Tagore's analysis of the impersonal, "abstract" nature of colonial power not only echoes the recorded experience of other colonized peoples but also points forward to what has become more and more the general experience of all of us in modern nation-states. We live now, according to Guy Debord in his recent book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, in a climate of "generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies." This climate surrounds us to such an extent that we are not sure who is really running the state. The domain of secrecy grows with the increase of confidential files, of fenced-off, inaccessible places, of surveillance and remote-control weaponry, of euphemism, of decision-making by specialists and managerial professionals and so on. Debord's provocative image for the present state of affairs is that of the Mafia, which, from being (or while being) considered the antithesis of public morality and social good, "now

stands as the *model* of all advanced commercial enterprises."

One can hardly say that the visual arts world is immune from this climate, either externally, in the implication of some of its associations with business and national interests, or internally, as a microcosm of the same conflict of values.

Guy Brett is a writer based in London. He is the author of Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History (1987) and Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists (1990).

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visions of a unitary postmodern global village—ruled by the "digitalized world of the computer," "the hyperreality of the simulacrum," "the superobjectivization of the subject" and the "telepresence of a world without spatial depth"—may capture the experience of the disembodied present, they do not apply to our experience and our development.

Even if our art does eventually enter the international mainstream, it will certainly be colored for some time to come by a far stronger emotional relationship to our own specific location, our past and our future. We live in a culture where memory, narration, the romantic story and hope for change still function, and where an existential link to a specific place has not lost its meaning. This may be a positive thing for our art, because these emotions involve a spontaneous response to the natural world, bringing up feelings not yet erased by the world of the TV screen and consumerism.

Jiří Ševčík is chief curator of the City Gallery of Prague; Jana Ševčíková is an art historian at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

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foregrounded, one might look at the Hall of Asian Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History. Here, cabinet after cabinet of the cultural artifacts of different nations or ethnic groups are lined up to project national differences. To blur such differences, one might construct an exhibition like the Smithsonian Institution's "Generations," which was organized around large, so-called universal themes—"childhood," "marriage," "death." For any given category or scene, the curator displayed a wide variety of objects: shoes from Tibet, a cradle from China, swaddling clothes from Russia. The idea was that all cultures and all peoples go through childhood, marriage and death. In this kind of show, classification is designed to blur cultural, national and ethnic differences while giving priority to universal themes and processes.

A different kind of populist signifier, to take an example from closer to home, is the Ellis Island Museum and Historical Site, which tries to rewrite the master narrative

for America. Instead of beginning with the arrival of the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower*, for example, immigration, very broadly conceived, becomes the master paradigm—a paradigm that can include virtually everybody. While the organizers had a difficult time including predominantly nonimmigrant constituencies such as African-Americans and Native Americans, these groups eventually did find a place. Other distortions were made as well. The tortured and restrictive immigration legislation passed by Congress from 1921 to 1924 and again in the Cold War period, for example, is ignored by the island's exhibitions. The museum can never be a neutral space, and in the case of Ellis Island, memory and the historical record become skewed by the institutional hierarchies of the site. Ellis Island contains a historic building through which immigrants did indeed pass, but few of them spent more than a few hours being processed there. To make this building such a sacred focal point for memory is to offer a very distortive view of the "immigrant experience." We are given a mythologized view of the federal government—and this, after all, is what Ellis Island represents—as a welcoming agency that has provided a home for everyone who has flocked to its shores. We are all, the argument goes, the beneficiaries of this gracious and enlightened policy. This mythology, of course, obscures very serious problems not only in American immigration his-

tory, but in our general attitudes about national, racial, ethnic and cultural differences.

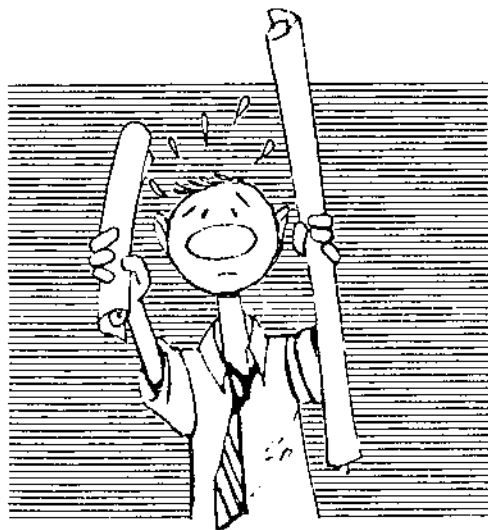
I believe, at the same time, that there is an avant-gardist annihilation of national and ethnic differences, and that the recent Los Angeles Festival of the Arts offered significant insight into how this annihilation might usefully function. The festival was as much a celebration of the city of Los Angeles as it was a celebration of arts of the Pacific. Over a two-week period there were virtually hundreds of performances, exhibitions, films, lectures and programs in many types of venues, from the most conventional theaters and concert halls to parks, churches and local community centers. The notion of the Pacific Rim was used as a unifying theme for this menu of performance forms. Conventional distinctions between high and low cultural categories were ignored, and the range of performance media was broad: a Maori cultural group, shamans from Korea, an aboriginal performance group, performers from Japan and Samoa, the Peking Opera from China, Indian shadow puppets, Balinese dancers, the Bread and Puppet Theater and the Wooster Group from the U.S. The degree to which the festival was informed by an avant-gardist sensibility had less to do with the actual performances and more with organizer Peter Sellars's statement of purpose. Sellars declared, "I want to remove anthropological and ethnographic labels. With their implied

superiority of Western culture, those labels are out of date." One could argue that the Los Angeles Festival began precisely at the point where the ethnographic and the avant-garde converged, and that it forged its own path by undoing the ethnographic. For example, the festival organizers systematically removed ethnographic labels, withheld explanation, asserted the primacy of experience over hermeneutics, demanded attention to form as content, while affirming the power of art to transcend differences by constituting difference as "just different" and by asking the audience to respond as just "humans."

The idea that the audience must confront what it cannot understand seems to me to be a distinctly avant-gardist value—a concept quite counter to an ethnographic approach. Indeed, the confusion of the audience was a highly valued experience at the festival; the most responsible ethnographic approach to these differences was to refuse to bridge these cultural gaps artificially. Instead, the avant-gardist shock of the new and unknown became one of the festival's most important goals.

—interviewed by Maurice Berger

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett chairs the department of performance studies at the Tisch School at New York University. She is completing a book about performing culture and was recently named as a Participating Scholar by the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1991-92.



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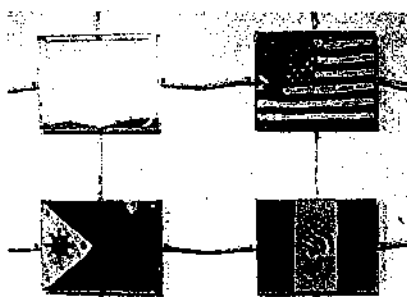
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The Museum of Hyphenated Americans
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Cover: Eating their way through Yukinori Yanagi's flag installation, the ants in this piece turn patriotic emblems into a borderless mixture that mimics the world's current ferment of nationalisms. Seen here, a detail from Yanagi's *World Flag Ant Farm 1990* (ants, colored sand, plastic boxes and tubes; installed Jan. 1991 at L.A.C.E., Los Angeles). Courtesy Hillside Gallery, Tokyo.

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