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 scarred by many intellectuals, maybe because it humiliates assumptions of universal reason that give intellectuals prestigious employment. Like sex, nationality is a big bright primal all-underlying fact of life that permits no point of view outside itself. It spurs "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 sure 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 foreclose any acknowledgment of nationality's importance.

Nations are not states. The world is full of nations without states—Palestinians, Kurds, Skikis—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 cultures. It has always been thus, even in heydays of internationalism.

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

The 1960s, which in the New York art world began with Italian, German and French "propositions," was an era of cosmopolitization of national art. The main prophet was Arseni Fleher, Keller's imagination reunited Europe before the fact, before East Germans, encouraged by Gorbachev, pulled the inchopt of the Berlin Wall, bringing the old frozen disorder of the cold war crashing down everywhere. Keller made Germanness available again to the imagination. He took the tabloids off it. Keller'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 Keller 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 maligned upper-middle-class gestalt in Fischl's case and a dolorous lower-middle in Kelley's—but with many American-type metallocenes. Their imaginations 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. Go 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's ashes burn. 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 equilvalve 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. His 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 recapitulating of cultural, geographical or political territory that was taken by others. Nationalism also involves, in this phase, setting up institutions that approximate or 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 Bronx zoo.

In the case of today's postcolonial countries, many of them in the Third World, nationalism can become the excuse for many things: the abbreviation of personal freedom, one party state, the dictatorship of the army, the cult of the leader and various forms of xenophobia. Franz Fanon said that the important thing about 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 that ought to stand up. However, 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...
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 whether justifications those involved might produce for their selective policies. This resulting image has many false aspects: in 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 (strangely, goes on) and the meaning of art within the system of art. Second, the denial of the fact that artistic creativity, within the system of art, is 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 copal, or watering down, of the audaciously experimental 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 exclusiveness, the reign of the "in," who determine 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 policy." 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, separating ideas get turned into new forms of conformism and unity elements become homogenized in more sins than one, a country can honor as "national figures" artists who were once considered "undeirable aliens"—people who have used their wills even to establish their residence.

Of course, 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 aesthetic. Nothing is met with more disdain than the "official," "governmental" participation of peripheral countries in events like Biennale, perhaps very often the very reason that powerful countries realize they are on such occasions confronted with their national 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 refer- ence. We might speak, for example, of modernity in Latin America, whereas we should be speaking, or learning, as the case may be. Continued on page 142.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

There is a sort of slippage in what we mean by "nation." "Art" and "cultural" 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 distinctive cultural image. The reclassification of ethnic 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 ensembles, bulletins, symposiums and the like. Companies in a sense, these institutions dramatically enact the nation by performing its "culture." The strategy becomes even more powerful when all of this is called "art," because the term confers upon the nation 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 act of "enrichment" on building a unitary French high culture, great difficulty arose in dealing with more than 100 cultures. The whole project of national culture is invested in the idea that France represented the pinnacle of European culture. The French revolutionaries produced an essentially nationalistic— a celebration not of what makes us different but a competition for the honor of being the greatest. The "low road" approach, on the other hand, looks toward the local or indigenous. The national ethnographic — the nationalistic—that is practiced by 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 populist productions of the rural countryside or in other isolated areas. These places, as the nationalistic narrative would have it, remain replete with uncorrupted 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 locales requires that it be reclassified and that it be positioned. The moment this is done, you cannot avoid either the defining or blurring ethnic and national differences. To understand how differences are continued on page 142.
Said
continued from page 81
postcolonial world. So we cannot make a distinction between Western and non-West
ern 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 impe
rial past 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 Eu
ropean country like Romania.
Since the 1960s, we have seen the failure
of the meting pot ideology. This ideology
suggested that different historical, cul
tural, and religious or ethnic backgrounds could be subordinated to a larger ideology or
cultural 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 at
tack on the concept that black history could be forgotten and forgotten. The meting
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 percep
tion and ideological structures. Their strug
gle gave rise to other marginalized voices—women, ethnic minorities and sub
class groups, and gay men and lesbians—who are now fighting for their rights.
The Reagan and Bush administrations took
upon all of this 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 in
dividual rights. The past decade has seen considerable regression as right-wing forces
have taken back these early gains in social and political victories. You now have an
attack on multiculturalism. While multi
cultualism 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 target of attacks on “political correct
ness.”
I think you can see the positive effect of multiculturalism has had in changing our
concepts 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 say that France equals all the French people. Nations and states are now
aggregates of different kinds of popula
tions. In the United States and elsewhere, 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 multicultur
alism and its enemies, we must now clarify the role of the intellectual. During the Gulf
war 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 in
volves intellectuals. But these are issues
that must be dealt with by intellectuals and
not only by bureaucrats working for the
Rand Corporation.

Edward Said has taken the position of Ort Dornan Professor in the Humanities at Columbia Univer
sity. He is the author of numerous books, includ
ing Orientalism (1978), The Question of Palestine (1975), After the Last Sky (1980) and Musical El

Brett
continued from page 81
ian artist Eugenio Urrutbi 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 repub
lished some extracts from Tagore’s essays on nationalism. Many of his remarks,
though written as long ago as 1901-18, still seem remarkably pertinent today. Tagore was preoccupied with the “abstract
nature of the nation. In its experience of Brit
ish colonialism, India had been conquered
not by a people but by a nation, an all
inclusive abstract entity. Tagore made a distinction between “People” and “Nation” and com
pared it to a distinction between the natural (or social) person—the parent, the lover,
the friend—and the professional person
docent, soldier, businessman. The strength
of the person in his or her professional person was “selfishness.” It applied to nations,
and differentiation meant that nations could only fear other nations, and the “one wish”
of the powerful nation “is to trade on the weakness of the rest of the world”—a
phrase having a curious resonance in these
cdays of the so-called New World Order.

It is striking that Tagore’s analysis of the
imperialist, “abstract” nature of colonial
power not only echoes the recorded experi
ence 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 Gary Debold in his recent
book Comments on the Society of the Spectacle, in a climate of “generalized se
curity, unanswerable lies.” This climate sur
rounds us to such an extent that we are not
sure who is really running the state.
The domain of security grows with the in
crease of confidential files, of fenced-off
inaccessible places, of surveillance and re
 mote-control weaponry, of eucenomics, of
decision-making by specialists and mana
ger professionals and so on. Debold’s
provocative image for the present state of
effairs is that of the Mafia, which, from be
= (or while being) considered the antithes
tis of public morality and social good, “now
stands as the model of all advanced com
mercial enterprises.”

One can hardly say that the visual arts
world is immune from this climate, either
evenly, in the implication of some of its
associations with business and national in
terests, 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

Sěvčík & Ševčíková
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visions of a unitary postmodern global vil
lage—ruled by the “digitalized world of the
computer,” “the hyperreality of the simulca
rum,” “the superobjectivization of the sub
ject 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, narra
tion, the romantic story and hope for
change still function, and where an existen
tial 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 long-lost not yet erased by
the world of the TV screen and consumerism.

Jill Slevkov 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 na
tional 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,
marrige, “death.” For any given category or
scene, the curator displayed a world
variety of objects: shoes from Tibet, a cri
atle from China, swaddling clothes from
Russia. The idea was that all cultures and
all peoples go through childhood, marry,
and die. In this kind of show, all distinc
tion 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
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 avant-garde confluence, and that it forged its own path by undoing the ethnographic.

For example, the festival organizers systematically removed ethnographic labels, with the aim of reconstructing the festival's history. The idea that the audience must confront what it cannot understand seems to me to be a distinct avant-garde value—a concept quite counter to an ethnographic approach. Indeed, the confusion of the audience was 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-garde shock of the new and unknown became one of the festival's most important goals.

—Interviewed by Mauricio 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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Cover: Eating their way through Yoko's 1968 flag installation, the arts in the post curfew period exist in a heteregeneous mixture that abides the world's current fervor towards nationalism seen here, a detail from Yoko's World Flag As Art Form (1980) (c) (right), mixed planting boxes and Hungarian Apr. 1848 (L.A.C.E., Los Angeles) (courtesy Yoko Ono, Tokyo, Tokyo).

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