

## **LET'S TALK ABOUT NATIONALISM! Between Ideology and Identity**

*From February 4th throughout April 25, 2010, in Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia*

An international exhibition of contemporary art, which aims to ask critical questions about nationalism, here and now, in 21st century Europe. The exhibition project explores the complex cultural-political process, in the course of which nationalist ideology transforms into national identity, as well as the mutual relationship and drawbacks of the two.

website : <http://www.publicpreparation.org/2010/lets-talk-about-nationalism/>

exhibition catalogue, 1.7 Mb : [http://www.publicpreparation.org/failid/hp/Kumu\\_A4\\_lores.pdf](http://www.publicpreparation.org/failid/hp/Kumu_A4_lores.pdf)

## **Let's Talk About Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity**

### **The curator's foreword to the exhibition**

#### **Who has the right to live in the nation-state?**

*Let's Talk About Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity* is an exhibition of international contemporary art, and its goal is to pose critical questions about contemporary nationalism, to acknowledge the problematic nature of the currently prevalent national discourse, and to create a counterweight in the public sphere. This art project reviews and analyses the complex cultural and political process through which a nationalist ideology becomes a national identity. It also looks at mutual relationships and negative aspects.

We have asked a number of internationally active artists working primarily from a critical approach to participate in this exhibition and to display both earlier works and pieces that have been adapted to the Estonian cultural context or made specifically for the Kumu Art Museum exhibition. This exhibition will cast doubt on the dominant national agenda's truths, which are spared (self-)criticism, and will approach the topic of contemporary nationalism from many different sides. Considering the specifics of an art museum geared to a wider audience, we have avoided focusing on a narrow aspect of the issue and have instead decided to create a more panoramic picture.

The works displayed in the project are conditionally divided into three groups: ideological habits, reproduction of a nation and conflicts. There are no complete answers or standard solutions at this exhibition – just questions. The choice of works might be characterized as a selection that is as open as possible and maps the area to the widest possible extent. Each work here is a potential premise for wider discussion.

It is difficult to overrate the topical nature of national issues. In the local Estonian cultural space, some of the events that have caused the greatest confrontations, anger and violence in recent years have been conflicts over monuments that perpetuate different treatments of history. From Europe and the world come constant stories of illegal immigrants and the Schengen visa space, as well as news of right-wing extremists and racially-motivated crimes committed by neo-Nazis. Who can live in Estonia and Europe and under what conditions? Who has the right to have a say in local matters? Who can demand political rights and who must simply be content with the opportunity to earn and to consume?

Living in our little sovereign state, with its decreasing population, in our microscopic national cultural space, we might be tempted to ask: why even question Estonian nationalism? Why organize an exhibition on this issue? The answer is logical, but also uncomfortable and unpleasant: Estonian nationalism, at first glance so natural and justified, also leads to segregation, discrimination, suffering and violence. Nationalism affects every country, even though the violence might not occur directly on the streets, but rather be hidden or institutionalized. The nationalist way of thinking has been welded into the collective mentality to such an extent that casting any doubts on it is seen as inappropriate. The exhibition *Let's Talk About Nationalism! Between Identity and Ideology* dares to raise doubts and

invites us to once again review the mechanisms of collective self-awareness in the context of the contemporary world.

## Premises

How does the nationalist agenda, which prevails without criticism in the Estonian public sphere, relate to contemporary art, the Kumu Art Museum and the international artistic community?

The basis for this project is the idea of contemporary art as an integral part of the public sphere, and of art practice as the language and method for holding discussions. In this case, the art hall can be considered to be a forum for holding public discussions. The artist is primarily a citizen with a personal opinion and an intellectual participating in public life. The artist has an opportunity to comment, criticize and uniquely view the social realism around the artist through publicly displayed activity. Simon Sheikh sees the artist not only as a participant, but also as a producer of the public sphere who is often in opposition to the dominant cultural and political hegemony in society.<sup>1</sup> The artists at this exhibition are precisely in that position.

Every exhibition is a temporary world with its own message, position in time and space, and visual reality. Below this exhibition are two floors of permanent displays of Estonian art classics. It is impossible to ignore the semantic charge of this place when I curate an exhibition over the national gallery – the rooms where the Estonian people are told the tale of how Estonian art has arrived at the present, using iconic images that embody the terms of a nation and the visual anchors of the mechanisms that construct national memory. This is especially true when we consider that the exhibition takes place immediately after the 90th anniversary of the Art Museum of Estonia. This is the same time span that also includes the birth of the Republic of Estonia and many other nation-states in the former Eastern Bloc.

The exhibition also has a direct link to the national gallery: Raul Keller's installation *Peep-Show* allows us to look into the eyes of the young Helle Pihlak (later Meri) in Tõnu Virve's iconic painting *Estonian Woman* (also known as *Girl In Folk Costume*), which embodies all the clichés of the things that are characteristic, significant and – in a way – traditional for the Estonian people. The other installation component that accompanies the painting and appears as traditional and tempting is the fragment of a socialite magazine that covers the most intriguing part of the Republic's anniversary: the ceremony in which the President shakes hands and gives every Estonian a chance to join the national elite during the country's birthday. The character is the same in both ritual tales, at both the President's reception and in the history of Estonian art.

The project *Let's Talk About Nationalism! Between Identity and Ideology* was prepared by a series of events called Public Preparation, which turned into a multifunctional tool. On the one hand, the format of collective work was made to map and understand contemporary nationalism and the issues of critical art practices and, on the other hand, it was a curatorial strategy to gather and systematize positions and concepts.

The first edition of the nationalism series *Public Preparation* was called *Translocal Express. Jubilee Edition* and took place in February 2008 in Tallinn, in cooperation with the Van Abbemuseum project *Be[com]ing Dutch* and focusing on issues of the nation-state and its mechanisms and alternatives, in the context of the jubilee year of the Republic of Estonia. During that gathering, Joanna Rajkowska presented the concept of her work *Airways*. Now we can see the finished product. The second *Public Preparation* event, entitled *Symptoms of Nationalism and Critique of Nationalism in the Practice of Contemporary Art*, took place in a summer camp format in July 2008 in Pärnu and the issues

discussed were the different forms of nationalism in Europe and the world. Johannes Paul Raether, whose photo series *Fanmeile*, which dissects the construction of a new German identity, is also displayed at this exhibition, talked about the situation in Germany and his personal relationship with German nationalism. The logical next step for the previous events, the *Translocal Express. Golden Age* in March 2009 in Tallinn was organized in cooperation with the Kumu Art Museum and focused on the role of history-writing and collective memory in contemporary nationalism. The seminar, built around the term “Golden Age,” analysed how today’s artist works with the controversial problems of historical narratives and collective memory (but also amnesia). In November 2009, the seminar-workshop *Crisis Special* in Łódź, organized in cooperation with the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, focused on the mutual relationships between contemporary nationalism and capitalism in the circumstances of worldwide recession. Capitalist principles have formed the foundations of modern economies and, since they have developed hand-in-hand with the machines of the modern nation-state, the mutual dependence of these power structures is obvious.

All the meetings of *Public Preparation*, during which this exhibition was prepared and its conceptual framework produced, studied the links between contemporary art and the daily social reality that has been shaped by nationalist ideology.

### **Unnoticed nationalism**

The subject of interest for the project *Let’s Talk About Nationalism! Between Identity and Ideology* is contemporary nationalism. The term “contemporary nationalism” is proposed by Boris Buden in his essay *Why not: Art and contemporary nationalism?*. He says that nationalism, like art, is a phenomenon that develops over time and takes new shapes,<sup>2</sup> and thus it is not possible to talk about one homogeneous and universal nationalism. There are as many forms of nationalism as there are nations and each has its history and output. The main generators of contemporary nationalism are two forces: firstly, the ever increasing mobility of large human groups and mass migration and, secondly, globalization and the increase in power wielded by supranational societies. While immigrants are primarily seen as an economic threat and nationalism is expressed through xenophobic and racist attitudes and behaviour, globalization and international power structures are considered to be a threat to national identity. In Estonia and the former Eastern Bloc, the foundations of national identity are undoubtedly language and culture.

Even though most of the works displayed at this exhibition stem from the post-socialist and ethnocentric nationalism of the former Eastern Bloc, nationalism is certainly not a problem unique to the former Eastern Bloc. On the contrary, nationalist sentiments are deepening also in Western Europe; only its premises and forms of expression are different. In the former Eastern Bloc, most social phenomena appear in a more “raw,” “less developed” or less hidden form (neo-liberal capitalism, political culture, civic society, the basis for public space organization and corruption). The same applies to nationalism. Even though nationalist values direct our everyday life very persistently and systematically, their critical analysis has been shoved into a very marginal position in the public sphere.

The interests of the curator of the exhibition *Let’s Talk About Nationalism! Between Identity and Ideology* do not limit the definition of nationalism as a historical phenomenon that dates back to the 19th century or the time before World War II or as something peripheral and extreme that is a byword for violent, radical and separatist movements that drift into terrorism. Rather, the exhibition views nationalism as a widespread mentality and ideological machinery that organizes our everyday life, surrounds us all and has thus become one of the relatively dominant background elements of contemporary social reality. The presence of the nation-state around us is visualized by Jens Haaning

in his work *Estonia, Thursday, November 12, 2009*, as he collects all the words that derive from the word “Estonia” and were found on that day in all the Estonian newspapers.

In his book *Banal Nationalism*, the British theoretician Michael Billig gives a very vivid and metaphorical picture of contemporary nationalism, which has seeped into all fields of social life: “... it is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is a flag hanging unnoticed on a public building.”<sup>3</sup> The term “banal nationalism” itself stands for the representation of nationalism in everyday life through the use of images and the practice of actions that carry a symbolic value to the nation. Every day, citizens are quietly reminded of their nation’s place among the world of nations. This process of reminding is so familiar, so repetitive that it is scarcely noticed. The reminders in the form of modest, almost unnoticeable gestures have the main goal of creating a national solidarity background and a sense of belonging that can be quickly mobilized in crises. One might say that the main foundations of the collective national identity are shaped and repeated constantly, precisely through these minimal, everyday details.

### **Ideological habits and identity**

It seems that Estonia is growing into an ever more xenophobic small country that for many people is unpleasant to live in. Such a situation makes it very important, if not acutely necessary, to acknowledge the potential content of nationalism in a (self-)critical manner and to talk about nationalism’s role in today’s Estonia and Europe. One potential way to approach these issues is to study the mutual links between the terms “ideology” and “identity.” In the context of the exhibition *Let’s Talk About Nationalism! Between Identity and Ideology*, national identity is not something born into, inherited or created on its own. National identity can only be construed as a product of nationalist ideology. Each nation-state is the victory of a specific form of nationalism in a specific territory, and it is vitally important for a nation-state to reproduce the nationalist ideology and identity.

However, in the context of this exhibition, we should differentiate between nationalism as an ideology, as a national movement, as a cultural category and as an everyday mentality. The mutual links between these positions might generally be seen as a sequence where the ideology (the collection of ideas and ideals about social order) creates a national movement that adheres to and accepts certain ideological truths that, in the end, turn into identity and mentality. In a way, this is a closed loop where it is extremely difficult to identify specific cause-effect relations.

Identity – whether collective or individual – is always relational, playful and performative: it is expressed, reproduced or affirmed to oneself, to the other members of the community and to outsiders through certain rituals. Rituals are habitual activities that adhere to specific procedures and, through their frequent repetition, turn into habits, but at the same time lose their content – their deeper meaning is forgotten. Though ritual is a term with religious undertones, its usage in the context of nationalism might be appropriate, as several theoreticians have proposed the idea of nationalism as a religion for modern society. One such ritual that generates collective identity on the basis of nationalism is the subject of Katarina Zdjelar’s video and sound installation *Don’t Do It Wrong!*. This video shows how the Independence March is recited every day in every primary school all over Turkey.

However, the main issue of the exhibition *Let’s Talk About Nationalism! Between Identity and Ideology* might be better characterized by the key phrase “ideological habit” (from Michael Billig), which has a profane shade of meaning. The phrase denotes activities or behavioural patterns that have grown into everyday habits, and the cause – and also the effect – of which is the affirmation and amplification of a nationalist world-view and mentality. Participation in the practice of ideological habits re-enforces the

collective world-view and the sense of belonging to a nation as an imaginary community.

Of course, in order to practice ideological habits, one requires various tools (or an “arsenal” as Michael Billig calls it). Some parts of the “arsenal” are official and have been confirmed on the state level (e.g. in the national colours); others come into effect on their own and are instruments that have come into use during certain historical moments (e.g. in the ribbons of the Order of St. George). In one way or another, many works displayed at the exhibition deal with the mechanisms through which certain ideological convictions are projected onto images (colour combinations, graphic symbols, sculptures and clothing) and these images and shapes then become the “arsenal.” This process can be observed very vividly in Arturijewski’s video *Them*.

All sorts of “ideological arsenals,” from facial paintings to underwear, are especially visible in Johannes Paul Raether’s slide series *Fanmeile*, which shows visitors the organizer’s side of nationalist sentiment expression in Germany during the Football World Cup – an extremely commercialized entertainment event – which took place in Berlin. After many decades, the German nation once again dared to express its feelings and to perform for itself, living through the national team’s wins and losses with emotional abandon.

The same kind of expression of political views through appearance forms the basis for Shlomi Yaffe’s performance *How I Changed My Ideology In the Prague Market*, in which the artist visits one Prague outdoor market and shops for typical right-wing extremist clothing, leaving the market as an honest-to-God neo-Nazi.

There is no reason to treat national rituals, symbols and traditions as something natural and self-evident. Thus, Nanna Debois Buhl searches for the traces of specific culinary traditions in her *Danish Pastry* and finds them far from Denmark. Some habits are so old and familiar that nobody can, or even wants to, remember how they came into being. Audrius Novickas casts doubt on the symbolic value of such recognized symbols as national flags in his installation *Tricolour Sets*. What are the characteristic traits in the national consciousness that correspond to and are mirrored by the national flag colours? Maybe it is a made-up thing that once accidentally went into use.

## **April Shock**

Another factor that defined the content for the project *Let’s Talk About Nationalism! Between Identity and Ideology*, and that cannot be ignored, is the rioting in April 2007 in Tallinn. Such massive and vocal nationality-based confrontation in the urban space and media proved that the national issue can be an extremely explosive subject. The conflict situations that arose on ideological grounds and escalated in the urban space have not gone unnoticed by the artists, a result of their brutal spectacle. Thus John Phillip Mäkinen’s work *Children of the Revolution* was born as an immediate reaction to the April 2007 riots. Mäkinen proposed for both parties a simultaneously suitable and classic bomber jacket, where the lining is in the colours of the Russian Federation and the outer layer in the colours of the Republic of Estonia (or vice versa). Which side should one take and whose position should one support? This is an important question and one cannot avoid making a choice if one needs to wear the jacket. The posters by Twożywo and R.E.P. group, on display both in the Kumu Art Museum and in the urban space, also deal with anger that has arisen from nationalism.

A quite unmistakable reference to the monument-related debate and the dramas that have taken place in Estonian society for some years now is Tanja Muravskaja’s *Monuments* – an installation with a minimalist appearance. It consists of two piles poured directly on the exhibition hall floor: one is a pile of broken glass, the other a mound of coarse limestone gravel. The pile of crushed limestone

symbolizes the national self-awareness of the Russian-speaking community, which was damaged by the Bronze Soldier's removal, and the pile of glass shards stands for the gap in the Estonian-speaking community that has been created due to the giant glass cross (the ever-failing Triumphal Column of the War of Independence). One must not forget that limestone is also Estonia's national stone and that glass shards also refer to the windows broken during the Bronze Night in downtown Tallinn in April 2007.

Conflict situations and overblown national sentiments that are triggered on a national basis in the public sphere are not unique to Estonia's recent past. Danilo Prnjat uses the sentiments created by Kosovo's independence from Serbia in his work *Tempo Project*. His performance involves bomb threats to a supermarket chain with Serbian owners, a result of the effort to short-circuit national capital circulation.

A wholly different form of anger linked to ethnic and cultural causes has taken place in Hungary: in recent years, violent acts against the Roma have increased and it is said that right-wing extremists with military training are to blame for the murders. The crime scenes are depicted by Csaba Nemes' series of paintings, which are primarily based on photos and news stories. The artist has also written the script for the short film *Softies* on the basis of these materials. Right-wing issues are also the subject of Joanna Rajkowska's *Airways*, which was filmed in Budapest. The video installation runs on two screens, one of which shows footage, without commentary, of the ceremonial manoeuvres of a right-wing paramilitary group, the Hungarian National Guard (*Magyar Gárda* in Hungarian), which took place in the city's central square. The other screen follows a performance organized by the artist. Rajkowska rented an aeroplane and organized a flight in which she invited leaders of the same right-wing organization, along with some homosexuals, a number of immigrants from the Middle East, Asia and Russia, and some Roma and Jews. The artist invited this group of people with varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds onto a plane called *Hungary*. The flight over Budapest, with right-wing extremists and immigrants sitting side-by-side, became a truly physical experience.

Even though a nation is "an imaginary community" and an ideological construction, this collective imagination is shared and carried by real, physical bodies. Nationalism is not just an ideology that constructs identity and aspires towards political power or executes it. Nationalism also attempts to control the various aspects of physical existence experienced by the members of the community, and to shape traits related to race, gender and sexuality. In the national ideology, a historically significant place has been reserved for purity of blood, as if a nation were indeed related to the ethnic heritage and genetic consistency of a body.

It is true that, after the experiences offered by National Socialism and the Holocaust, these ideas are not manifested in the public discourse of the contemporary liberal democracy and globalization context, but they are still encountered in "banal forms" and in extremist communities. The ideas of land and blood<sup>4</sup> have not gone away, but simply hide themselves behind different rhetoric and there are other mechanisms to control them. Eva Labotkin refers to these in her videos and installations: her performances become a symbolic meeting point for land and blood and can be considered to be a direct commentary on the *Blut und Boden* ideology that was popular with National Socialism. Through her performance, the artist expresses her criticism of the viewpoint that has taken hold of the public discourse and that considers the female body as a reproductive mechanism for the nation and the state.

The issue of ethnic purity is also dealt with in the photo series *Estonian Race* by Tanja Muravskaja, who refers to ethnic heritage as the main argument that forms the basis for the "us/ foreigners" distinction on the streets and in job interviews.

## Let's talk about nationalism!

So let's talk about nationalism, let's talk about national identity and the prevalent nationality-focused mentality as a cultural and political construction! National values, the policies that support them on the state and everyday level, national symbols and rhetoric – these are not phenomena that create themselves, but are the results of the dominant nationalist ideology. Nations are not natural phenomena and ethnic heritage need not be related to the collective identity. Modern nation-states, their functioning principles and the attributes for demonstrating national sentiment, from flags to state ceremonies, were established so long ago that we consider them to be self-evident. The main goal of this exhibition is to cast doubt on this self-evident quality and to thereby offer critical analysis of national consciousness and sentiments.

Let's talk about nationalism – the methods and positions have changed over time. After starting out as semi-undercover and illegal resistance movements, the nationally-minded forces finally asserted themselves in societies and helped to dissolve the Soviet Union as a totalitarian superpower and one-party dictatorship, and to restore democratic systems of government. After this successful self-assertion and the restoration of nation-state sovereignty in the former Eastern Bloc, nationalist ideology has become dominant and its consistent implementation has become prevalent in the public discourse as well.

Let's talk about nationalism, because political and civil rights, as well as collective self-consciousness, are still linked to national belonging in this world that is divided into nation-states. The national issue is a passionate topic and concerns everyone. This is why such a discussion usually engenders strong feelings instead of sober argumentation. What if we were to view this issue calmly and analytically and to remind ourselves that it is all taking place in the context of 21st century Europe?

Welcome!

Rael Artel

RAEL ARTEL (b 1980) is an independent curator based in the forests of Estonia. She graduated from the Institute of Art History at the Estonian Academy of Arts in 2003, and participated in the Curatorial Training Programme in De Appel, Amsterdam (2004–05). Since 2000, she has contributed to a number of magazines in Estonia and elsewhere, and curated shows in Estonia, as well as in Lisbon, New York, Amsterdam and Warsaw. In 2004–2008 she ran and moderated her experimental project space Rael Artel Gallery: Non-Profit Project Space, and in 2007 she initiated Public Preparation, a platform for knowledgeproduction and network-based communication, which since the beginning of 2008 has focused on issues of nationalism and contemporary art in Europe in the format of international meetings.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sheikh, Simon. Representation, Contestation and Power: The Artist as Public Intellectual. [http://www.republicart.net/disc/aap/sheikh02\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/aap/sheikh02_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Buden, Boris 2007. Why not: Art and contemporary nationalism? – *Contemporary Art and Nationalism. Critical Reader*. Eds. Minna Henriksson, Sezgin Boynik. Prishtine: Prishtine Institute for Contemporary Art "Exit", pp 12–17.

<sup>3</sup> Billig, Michael 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications, p 8.

<sup>4</sup> The *Blut und Boden* ideology is an idea based on Romantic Nationalism at the end of the 19th century, according to which ethnicity is based on the family tree (blood) and the motherland (soil). This idea found expression in the 1930s in Nazi Germany.