FEATURE - 22 APR 2017

Imagined Communities

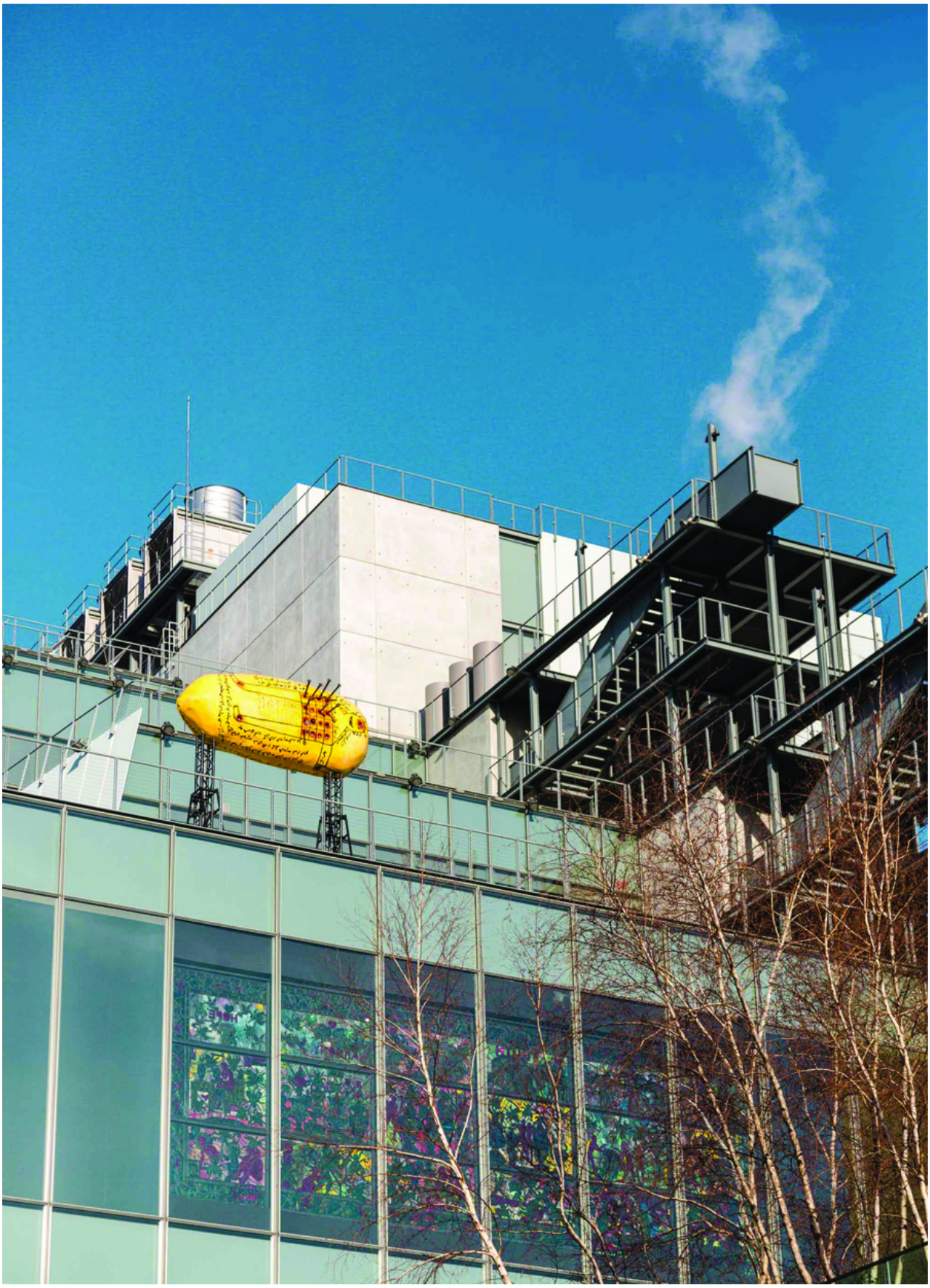
How the artists GCC, Lawrence Lek, The Propeller Group, Larissa Sansour and Christopher Kulendran Thomas are visualizing a world in which borders no longer define who we are

BY ELLEN MARA DE WACHTER

In his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, the historian and political theorist Benedict Anderson wrote that 'nationality [...] nation-ness [and] nationalism are cultural artefacts'. According to Anderson – who was born in China, died in Indonesia in 2015, and held US, British and Irish passports – modern states are correlates of our 'imagined communities': by-products of the industrial revolution that require complex hierarchies and bureaucracies to manage new social and economic needs. Nations are not the only imagined communities: consider other transnational systems we collectively believe in, such as global currency markets, the international value of art or the ubiquitous reach of corporations whose products are available in the most isolated places. These operate across various media, markets and ideologies, promising security, convenience and wealth. As the world achieves peak globalization, these new systems increasingly expose the contingency of countries and borders. At the same time, extreme forms of nationhood are emerging across the world, with the US President proclaiming 'America First', far-right parties enjoying an increasing share of the vote in France, Germany and the Netherlands, and the popularization of isolationist policies and demands for absolute sovereignty becoming widespread. How are artists reflecting on this modern-day tussle between national and global systems? And how are they imagining a world beyond borders, which will require new forms of citizenship?

For over two decades, Larissa Sansour – who was born in Palestine and lives in London – has addressed these questions in her videos and photographs. For *Space Exodus* (2009), for instance, she re-created a moon landing with the Palestinian flag, while in *Nation Estate* (2012), she imagines a solution to the issue of Palestinian statehood in a gigantic skyscraper: a vertical city with floors devoted to Jerusalem, Bethlehem's Manger Square and the Mediterranean coast. Sansour's latest work, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), is a 28-minute science-fiction video telling the story of a 'narrative resistance leader' whose outlawed group buries porcelain dishes in disputed land for future archaeologists to unearth. Here, warfare is archaeological: by planting 'facts in the ground', a future

is orchestrated in which crockery will disrupt dominant historical narratives and constitute physical evidence of a right to the land. Archaeology becomes, in the resistance leader's words 'an epistemology, a tool for shaping national imagination'.



GCC, *Local Police Find Fruit with Spells*, 2017, installation view and detail at the Whitney Biennial. Courtesy: Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and Project Native Informant, London; photograph: Daniel Turna

For a related performance, *Archaeology in Absentia* (2016), Sansour worked with art institutions across Israel and Palestine to bury 15 batches of porcelain plates and bowls, hand-painted with the Palestinian *keffiyeh* pattern and made by the mother of her partner and collaborator, Søren Lind. The co-ordinates of these burials are engraved onto metal discs contained in replicas of small Soviet atomic bombs from the Cold War era, which she exhibits as sculptures. Porcelain doesn't have a particular significance in Palestine, which is one of the reasons the rebel leader in Sansour's video chooses it as the 'trademark' of her people. As Lind explained to me: 'Her logic is that, in order for archaeologists and historians to be prompted to revise their current understanding of the region (and for such a revision to eventually cause political change), the material introduced needs to conflict with expectations and traditions. Only if the plates constitute a foreign element ill there be grounds for a revision.'

The idea that nations, like branded products, could have trademarks is central to *Viet Nam The World Tour* (2010–ongoing), by The Propeller Group, a Vietnamese collective established in 2006 by Matt Lucero, Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Phunam. The project uses marketing and advertising strategies to generate videos, murals, workshops and performances in several countries. Part of the tour is *Birds of No Nation* (2012), a portable painted mural about conflict-related migration, which has so far been shown in Brisbane, Kabul, Los Angeles and Saigon. Painted by the graffiti

artists El Mac (from Los Angeles) and Shamsia Hassani (from Kabul), it asks how people who no longer have a nation might be branded. For The Propeller Group, the issue of nationality and the question of whether there is even such a thing as 'Vietnameseness' are academic. The sentiment is neatly expressed in the project's mission statement: 'We are not Vietnamese [...] nor are we American, nor French, nor Brazilian, nor Iranian, nor Australian. We don't subscribe to those traditional and problematic notions of nation. Nations give way to conflict.'

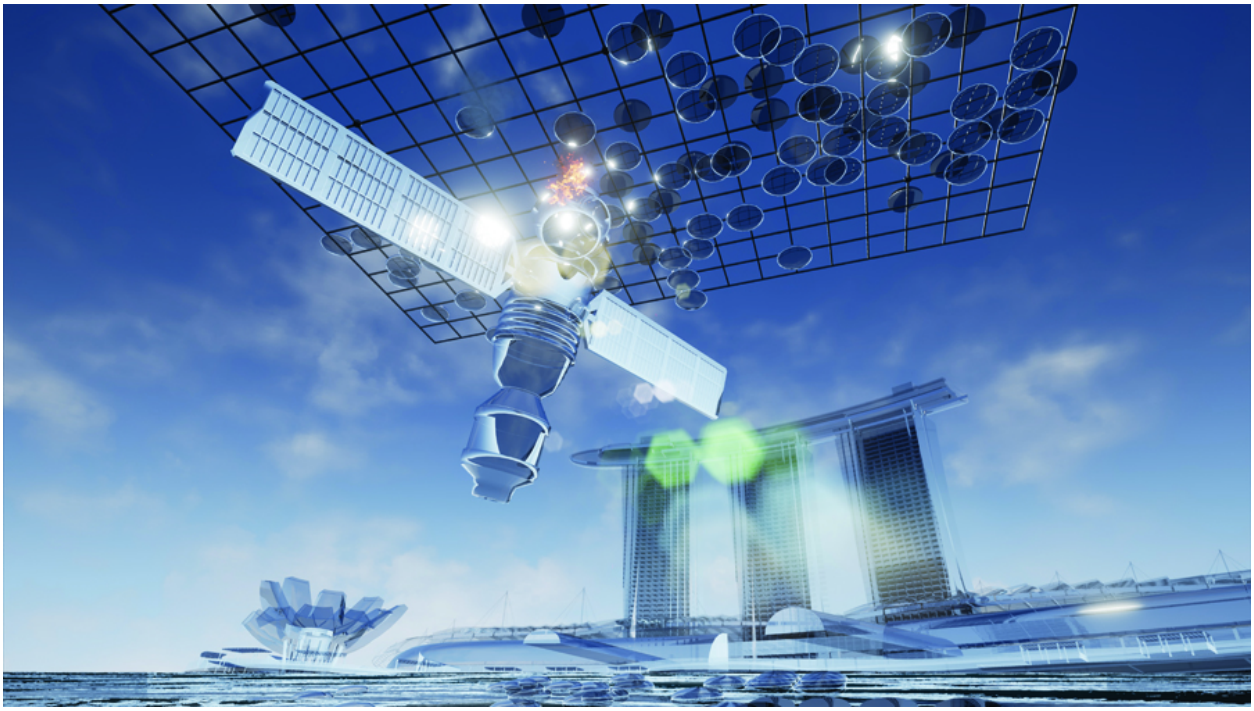
The Propeller Group, *Birds of No Nation*, 2010–ongoing, transportable mural. Courtesy: the artists and James Cohan,
New York

Since it was established in 2013, the art collective GCC – whose name echoes the acronym of the Gulf Cooperation Council, an intergovernmental political and economic union of Arab Gulf states – has explored the branding practices used during the region's 30-year history of developing new national and regional identities. In that time, the region has undergone a rapid transformation from a traditional culture to a post-oil economy, with staggering developments in the production of, and markets for, architecture, art and culture, as well as the propagation by the GCC of the notion of a unified Arabian Gulf people. Although

the art collective is associated with the region, its eight members are distributed across the globe in Amsterdam, Berlin, Dakar, Kuwait City, London and New York. GCC's latest sculpture, *Local Police Find Fruit with Spells* (2017), made for this year's Whitney Biennial, explores magical traditions suppressed by the official cultural narrative, through the story of a purportedly cursed fruit found floating in the sea by local police. GCC's tribute to the incident includes a large melon inscribed with talismanic writing and a human effigy, which is placed on top of scaffolding erected in the middle of a structure reminiscent of a roundabout: a device introduced to the area during the colonial era, but which has been used by the military over the past few years to suppress and control protests. This esoteric take on Gulf culture is a departure from GCC's earlier work, which appropriated the gestures, artefacts and rituals of official state diplomacy. But the group hasn't abandoned its interest in the grandstanding performances of leaders: they recently refashioned *My Vision* (2015), a series of oil paintings depicting the members of GCC in Sheikh drag, as a video for the 'Oculus' screen in Brooklyn's Barclays Center, a 900 m2, 360-degree LED marquee. The prosperity of the Gulf, largely due to an oil market bolstered by Western powers, has been a key factor in the region's fervent nation-building over the past three decades. As the environmental crisis and global developments in technology compel us to move beyond fossil fuels, however, the ongoing contest between international and local needs will reach a new stage. What is next for nations whose value systems are inextricably linked to assets that are responsible for environmental disasters and are likely to run out?

The onset of global warming and the hastening of extinction put the play of nationalisms into perspective. But are these threats enough to wipe out nation-centred thinking altogether? London-based artist Lawrence Lek's new video, *Geomancer* (2017), is set in the sky above Singapore in the year 2065, when oceans have flooded continents and Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems are ultra-sophisticated. The Geomancer of the title is a retired satellite system that was capable of global geomancy or reading 'feng shui on Earth' – in other words, of divining the physical and energetic relationships that enmesh borders and

transnational systems. The video discusses the speculative doctrine of 'Sinofuturism', which Lek introduced in his 2016 video *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, as an anti-art movement started by Chinese AIs gone viral. The movement espouses the values and practices of present-day Chinese industry, which privileges copying over originality and quantity over quality, and operates with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of labour as well as a belief in the possibility of progress independent of human endeavour. Yet, although *Geomancer* is set in a future in which borders are submerged under the ocean and the crisis of human obsolescence is a thing of the past, the hermeneutics of culture, production and power are still wedded to concepts of nationality – in this case, a particular understanding of 'Chineseness'.

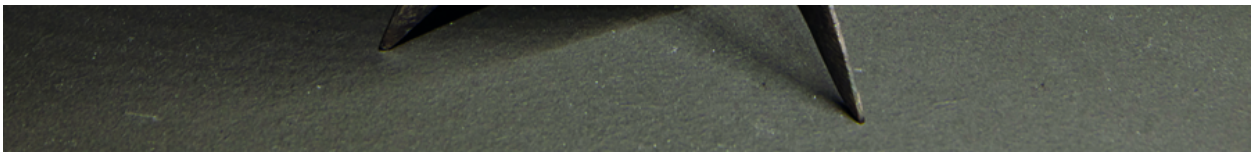


Lawrence Lek, *Geomancer*, 2017, CGI video still, commissioned by Jerwood/FVU Awards, London. Courtesy:
the artist

The notion of 'liquid modernity' developed by the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who died in January this year, may help us imagine a future beyond fixed nation states. Bauman posited that in late modernity – in a world already transformed by the digital revolution and governed by the global movement of capital – identity comes to be defined by the way we flow through places, states and categories. This liquid condition is characterized by nomadism across living conditions and professions, as well as political, sexual and ideological identifications. Taking up Bauman's idea of liquidity, the artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas has, for the past few years, been working on a project that brings together the story of Eelam, the homeland of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, with the business practices of Amazon, in order to imagine a future society in which a liquid form of citizenship could be connected to real estate.

Thomas – whose parents fled the civil war in Sri Lanka in the 1980s – begins his

video, *New Eelam* (2016), with the story of the Tamil Tigers: a militant group that, in 1976, formed a secessionist state in northern Sri Lanka, which led to three decades of civil war, culminating in the massacre of the Tamil Tigers in 2009. The video then segues into the story of Amazon, a global company that is generally viewed as an exemplar of efficiency. In a voice-over, Thomas explains how, instead of paying dividends to its shareholders, the company re-invests profits into its infrastructure, offering investors the long-term value of 'a non-profit-making global service'. Amazon is also at the forefront of automation: the replacement of human labour with machines. Together with the advent of streaming technology, which makes products and services instantly available to subscribers, Amazon represents what Thomas calls 'an accelerated mutation in the nature of capitalism', which, by offering both corporate security and consumer flexibility, reconciles the opposing camps of capitalism and communism. The video concludes with a bona fide sales pitch, in which beautiful multi-ethnic people hang out in an apartment flooded with light, drinking fresh juice and passing around computers showing New Eelam: an online global service for collectively owned homes.



Larissa Sansour, *Archaeology in Absentia*, 2016, bronze, steel, porcelain (absent), 21 × 18 × 16 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Sabrina Amrani Gallery, Madrid, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, and Montoro12 Contemporary Art, Rome

Thomas's project is compelling as a way to imagine a future in which nations relax their hold on identity and movement. However, I find his laudatory version of Amazon problematic. The company may offer an interesting model for an idealized society sometime in the future, but right now it has a terrible reputation: it avoids paying tax on a grand scale and treats its workers like machines. It is a global distribution system designed to incite consumerist desire and generate revenue, not an altruistic organization. The idea for the New Eelam service came to Thomas during a time spent living and working between cities in Asia and Europe, when he began to notice a growing tendency for people to work at home, supplanting the office as the primary site of production. Thomas explained to me that he wanted to find a way for 'globally dispersed citizens [to] take collective ownership of this means of production'. Once New Eelam is up and running, subscribers will pay a flat rate to live in one of the company's properties, as well as becoming co-owners of a growing portfolio of properties. Over time, if successful, Thomas imagines that the service could grow into a 'cloud nation' with its own form of citizenship – a subject he is set to explore in a forthcoming video, *New Eelam 2*.

Across the globe, people are increasingly participating in fluid transnational networks to do business and to communicate. One might expect the political and governmental structures that represent them to reflect that paradigm shift. Yet, in many countries, just the opposite is happening: right-wing governments promise to restore past greatness, intent on securing their stay in power. They build walls, break trade partnerships and block free movement, preferring to satisfy majority opinion holders who don't share progressive ideas around a more fluid conception of global

systems. Consequently, these governments are promoting a narrow ideal of sovereignty that grew out of the conditions of the industrial revolution more than 200 years ago. As artists grapple with this topic, the next step isn't yet clear. We can only hope that, in time, outdated forms of nationhood will disappear and a new kind of community will emerge – one that transcends the existing conventions of borders in order to meet the current and future needs of people and the planet.

GCC has work included in the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA, which runs until 11 June.

Lawrence Lek lives in London, UK. His work is included in 'Jerwood/FVU Awards 2017: Neither One Thing or Another' at Jerwood Space, London, until 14 May. His work is also part of the group show 'The New Normal' at Ullens Center, Beijing, China, until 9 July.

The Propeller Group are based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Los Angeles, USA. Their touring solo show opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA, in 2016 and will be on view at Phoenix Art Museum, USA, until 14 May, then the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, USA, from 3 June to 1 October.

Larissa Sansour lives in London, UK. Her solo show at Bluecoat, Liverpool, UK, runs from 6 May to 24 June.

Christopher Kulendran Thomas lives in London, UK. His work has recently been included in the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016), the 9th Berlin Biennale (2016) and can currently be seen at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany, until 17 September. In October, he will have a solo show at Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden.

Main image: Christopher Kulendran Thomas in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann, New Eelam*, 2017, exhibition view at Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin. Courtesy: the artist and © Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, SMB, Berlin; photograph: Jan Windszus*

ELLEN MARA DE WACHTER

Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer and curator based in London. Her book *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration* is published by Phaidon.