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
“Are global warming and the hastening of extinction enough of a threat to wipe out nation-centred thinking altogether?”

and Phanam. The project uses marketing and advertising strategies to generate videos, murals, workshops and performances in several countries. Part of the tour in *Birds of a Feather* (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 ‘Vietnamese’ 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.’ Since it was established in 2009, 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 50-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 Spills* (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* (2007), a series of oil paintings depicting the members of GCC in Sheikh drag, as a video for the ‘Oculus’ screens 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 intrinsically 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, *Geoman* (2017), is set in the sky above Singapore in the year 2055, when oceans have flooded continents and Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems are ultra-sophisticated. The Geoman of the title is a retired satellite system that was capable of global
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, supplementing 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. Overtime, 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 communicate. One might expect the political and governmental structures that represent them to reflect this 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, outmoded forms of nationalism will disappear and a new kind of community will emerge. Thomas’s work aims to dissolve the existing conventions of borders in order to meet the current and future needs of people and the planet.


Lawrence Lek lives in London, UK. His work is included in ‘Jestern/FVU Awards 2017: Neither One Thing nor Another’ at Jerwood Space, London, until 24 June. His work is also part of the group show ‘The New Normal’ at Ellesse Center, Beijing, China, until 9 July.

The proposer group is based in Los Angeles, CA, Los Angeles, USA. They have recently exhibited 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.

Larsen Nielsen lives in London, UK. Her solo show at Blauenet, Liverpool, UK, runs from 6 May to 28 June.

Christopher Kulendran Thomas lives in London, UK. His work has recently been included in the 11th Guangzhou Biennale (2016), the 9th Berlin Biennale (2016) and was previously seen at the Biennial of Biennials, Berlin, Germany, until 17 September. In October, he will have a solo show at Studio Krimball, Stockholm, Sweden.