

Aesthetic States: Architecture, Territory, Nationalism

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Nationalism

Most of us have never been this saturated with signs of nationalism. Most of us have never been this aware of its infrastructures, architectures, and spatial inscriptions. Through the exhibition of designs for new walls at the border with Mexico, images of rallies in Charlottesville, and the rising trend that political theorist Wendy Brown calls “apocalyptic populism,” nationalism has entered the daily news cycle, political discourse, and the American social imaginary with alarming ferocity in the last year.

Yet, despite these spaces, demarcations, and moments of eruption that appear directly or indirectly linked to nationalism, and despite its seeming ubiquity and currency, nationalism is disarmingly elusive. Almost every theorist or writer of nationalism contends with its multiple and contradictory personalities. Although it is identified with repressive, racist, xenophobic, and even fascist states and movements—both historical and contemporary—nationalism was once also identified with post-colonial state formations and liberation struggles.

Moreover, in its most recent iterations, nationalism acquires multiplicity through its globalism. Nationalism is global because almost every country—from Greece and Turkey to China and the UK—has been impacted by its own particular form. It is also global in that its current resurgence as a populist movement is the byproduct of globalized economies and global neoliberalism. David Harvey describes our current nationalism as a political tool that offers compensation for the erosion of whatever privilege or benefits, real or illusory, was attached to nationhood. The elusiveness of nationalism results from its internal contradictions, complex history, and divergent associations. Yet nationalism is primarily elusive because the nation, faced with erosions, is itself ever harder to delineate, describe, or define with concrete certainty.

Architecture

Against the backdrop of the simultaneous resurgence of nationalism and the erosion Wendy Brown names “waning sovereignty,” the studio will analyze and manipulate the architecture of nationalism. For Brown, waning sovereignty is most clearly discerned in border walls and other forms of national fortification. These structures have both expressive and functional dimensions. They guard against incursion and entry, while also announcing the enclosure, protection, and insularity of the state. Further, as Brown recognizes, the walls’ expressive dimension reveals a primary anxiety, a “tremulousness” of state security, that underlies these defense systems. The walls are not only spatial inscriptions of nation and statehood, but also talismanic objects—they call up the force of the state and the coherence of the nation at the moment of its greatest vulnerability.

Similarly, this studio will focus on the architecture of nationalism to glimpse the complexes of global finance, climate, refugee populations, communications, law, and the myriad other systems and relationships against which the nation and nationalism are positioned. The studio will identify, locate, and operate on the forms of architecture, infrastructure, and media, that—like the walls President Trump wants to build and that Wendy Brown has tracked around the planet—reveal the conditions and frictions between the nation and the forms of internationalism that erase, efface, and dissolve it. For better or worse.

Banal and Spectacular Nationalism

Nationalism is often portrayed as an action—the formation, consolidation, or demarcation, of state or ethnic territory—and a set of credos and sentiments. It is political philosophy, territorial instrument, and an atmosphere of beliefs and ideologies. This soft atmosphere of nationalism is distinct from the hardness of its monuments. We can use the term spectacular nationalism to describe these monuments as well as border walls, national museums, and military operations. In contrast, banal nationalism describes those objects at the edge of perception and perceptibility: bureaucracies, anonymous federal buildings, postal uniforms, and license plates. In both spectacular and banal cases, nationalism is conjured by beliefs, concrete signifiers of national identity and history, and their systems of transmission and reproduction. Nationalism is architecture, media, and territory folded together to form an aesthetic political technology.

Studio Structure

Trumps' wall and the walls Wendy Brown discusses will be among the references for the studio. However, the range of objects, spaces, and systems of nationalism in the studio will vary widely. Each student will analyze and represent spectacular and banal forms of nationalism. Borders, immigration systems, national monuments, museums, as well as trade exchanges, black markets, communication networks and other systems of state formation and dissolution may be selected. Students will examine their objects and examples spatially, operationally, and technically. Their descriptions and systems of representation will become the basis for design procedures and interventions that expand, limit, or challenge the architectures of nationalism.

Students may work alone or in pairs, if their topic warrants collaboration. Wasiuta and Hackl will be in studio every day.

Site

Greece and Turkey and their architectures of nationalism will be the sites for the studio. Students will work in one location or the other and the studio will travel to Athens and Istanbul for the Kinne trip. Details of the sites will be presented at the lottery and in the first meetings of the studio.