

**As individuals,**

we are each aware that we are part of a bigger whole. However, we are also instinctively inclined to put our own group ahead of others. We humans have the propensity to declare our own faith or belief superior to all others, while our fear of strangers is often stronger than our sense of solidarity with those who are deprived, disenfranchised or disadvantaged. This human weakness, gnaws at the roots of humanism – understood here as respect for human beings, human life and mutual tolerance – and makes us doubt its possibility, and threatens its realisation. However, humanism never is a done deal, simply because it goes against human nature itself (or at least the part that is governed by our ‘alligator’ brain). It constantly must be fought for and defended. The same applies for human rights.

**In recent years,**

fuelled by the mass migration of people fleeing war zones, authoritarian regimes, and areas of political or environmental crisis, the narrow-minded and dangerous spectre of nationalism has returned to Europe. It is even endangering European cohesion and testing relations between European countries. The cultural melting pot that is Europe is under threat. Nationalist parties are making gains in elections and reactionary sentiments (such as racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia) are on the rise, fuelled by disappointing economic growth, high levels of immigration and disenfranchisement of those who have fallen through the cracks of globalisation and its neoliberal agenda. Supranational organisations like the EU, which were founded in order to avoid the catastrophe of World War Two (‘never again’) and to facilitate cross-border and multilateral co-operation on economic, development and environmental issues are under attack. Europe has been reduced to a largely technocratic, managerial bureaucracy, devoid of vision. The ideal of cosmopolitan internationalism, which posited that all people of the world are equal but also fundamentally different, has been replaced by globalisation and the idea of the citizen as consumer of international products and services. The European liberal-democratic project of tolerance, social welfare for all and embracing of ethnic diversity and forms of otherness is faltering, and amnesia of European

history is taking hold. Xenophobia, racism and prejudice are on the rise, fuelled by nationalist rhetoric. Cultural and ethnic homogenisation are proposed as part of the 'us' solution. Euroscepticism is dividing nations and even families, as the recent referenda in Greece, Britain and Italy have shown.

### **The very issue of nationalism**

is more-often-than-not discussed in a polarised light, as 'us versus them'. But nationalism is a very complex issue, which is rarely critically dissected in the media, especially now in the age of Twitter polemics and the Facebook pseudo-debate. You are either for or against. As with all such subjects, the issue is more intricate. Nevertheless, defining what nation and nationalism are has always been a tricky business; as the late, great historian Eric Hobsbawm has stated in his book *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, it is impossible to reduce 'nationality' to a single dimension, and neither subjective nor objective definitions are satisfactory, as the nation and nationhood are constantly in flux, governed by ambiguity and subject to 'the element of artefact, invention, and social engineering'. Particularly in Europe and its wider geopolitical region, the focus of this exhibition, it is impossible to define the nation in the homogeneous terms that some nationalists advocate. This is because Europe has been historically a tapestry of mixed-up identities (one only needs to think of the territories and peoples of the Ottoman Empire, in this respect or the mixed identities that existed in the region of North-East Europe, or even in countries like Belgium, currently).

### **Throughout history,**

human beings have sought to constitute themselves in groups with similar characteristics, in territorially distinct societies bound by a certain sense of kinship. The formation of the nation-state can be considered to be the evolution of this tendency of humans to progress from the smaller to the larger group. In this sense the nation can be seen as a social (and even more so, cultural) relation grounded in a sense of collective self-consciousness and belonging, glued together by language, culture, religion, and a sense of continuity (the latter two

being the most problematic constructs buttressing the concept of the nation-state). In itself, it is not inherently bad to identify oneself with people who speak the same language or share the same history, or – even better – identifying oneself with people who share the same altruistic ideals and goals.

### **The nation**

is also a modern tool in the organisation of life. At this point it is important to make a distinction, here, between the terms ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’, the former being a structural, constructed entity, the latter referring to a set of beliefs about the nation which is ideologically charged. Similarly, it is important to distinguish between civic and ethnic understandings of nationalism. The former can be understood as a non-xenophobic form of nationalism in which people of different backgrounds can exist, and which is compatible with values of freedom, tolerance, equality and individual rights. The latter can be understood in terms of a common ethnic ancestry and, usually, faith. This is the most dangerous form of nationalism, as it is based on binary classificatory distinctions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, and a blind faith in the nation. This type of nationalism fosters cultural homogeneity, isolationism, suspicion of the ‘other’, exclusion and hate. It ignores the needs of people not belonging to its ethnic sphere and advocates superiority of one value system over another. Invariably, it propagates shared ancestral myths and histories that advantage one group over another side-lining the complexities that are inherent to any society.

### **Despite the negative undertones**

that govern any utterance of the word ‘nationalism’, we have to admit that belonging to a nation, for many people, also engenders a hard-to-define sense of togetherness or community. Can the commonality, social cohesion and sense of shared identity that civic nationalism fosters between humans be found beyond the nationalist ideal that promotes them? Nationalism is by definition exclusive. But how can we or should we further the idea of an inclusive nationalism? In the age of global migrations, if our societies cannot move towards this, then nationalism is probably doomed to be a negative term altogether.

Can national sovereignty be reconciled with pluralism, an open society and today's networked, integrated globalised societies? Is nationalism always bad, as most progressive viewpoints assert? Or is there such a thing as 'good' or benign nationalism?

### **At what point**

does this kind of nationalism morph into something toxic? And what about the relationship between ultra-nationalism and the so-called 'deep state', structures and practices that fall outside the democratic control of the populace such as shadow groups of people that secretly control the government. In his essay *To Make A World:*

*Ultranationalism and the Art of the Stateless State* artist Jonas Staal talks about how ultra-nationalism justifies governments' deployment of undemocratic practices under the pretext of safety and security. One example he cites is the EU's large investment of taxpayers' money to fund corporate 'research' into the development of drones. As he writes, 'This is an example of the unaccountable structures of the EU merging perfectly with the interests of private lobbies – in this case, to produce equipment for the corporate-mercenary armies of the EU [...]'. He goes on to argue, 'For citizens to outsource their agency to the structures of the Deep State, they need to have the will to do so; the fears stoked by ultra-nationalism create this will. These fears fuel the global extra-legal structures that we are confronted with nowadays, and which undermine the celebrated sovereignty of the very states that ultra-nationalism swears to protect.' This results in covert military operations and sweeping surveillance tactics that bypass democratic principles altogether.

### **The exhibition**

*The State is not a Work of Art* aims to probe the problematics and complexities of nation and nationalism, examine their current volatility, and offer a more nuanced view into the subject, beyond stereotypical understandings of the concept. It seems an opportune moment, on the hundredth anniversary of the independence of Estonia (which was the culmination of Estonian's 'national awakening' in the nineteenth century), to discuss this issue (which is of critical importance for the future direction of the countries of Europe and the

cohesion of the continent) in a considered, critical way from diverse viewpoints. In today's multicultural Europe, it is very difficult to formulate objective criteria for nationhood – as identity, language and ethnicity are increasingly shifting and fluid concepts. In this context, what of the nation-state, this relatively modern artificial construct? Has its demise in the era of globalisation been wrongly predicted? Is the nation an imagined political community, a cultural formation produced through the continued circulation of discourse, as Benedict Anderson has suggested in his seminal book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and spread of Nationalism*? How exactly do we understand nationalism? How can we re-think the modern nation-state in the era of globalisation and the often post-national understanding and operation of society today? Can we imagine other models of social organisation and statehood that don't require identification with a particular flag or passport? What other forms of belonging and community outside the nation-state might come into fruition? The State is not a Work of Art will bring together a diverse group of artists who critically probe these issues and questions from a wide perspective. Their work will unveil the hidden complexities of the contested issues of nation and nationalism, compelling us to look at them from unexpected angles.

### **The State is not a Work of Art**

coincides with the 100th anniversary of Estonian independence and will be part of the official program of the celebration of Estonia 100. The exhibition is organised by Tallinn Art Hall and will take place in Tallinn Art Hall and its additional venues – Art Hall Gallery and Tallinn City Gallery.

### **The exhibition**

will be accompanied by an extensive catalogue published by Lagemik in cooperation with Tallinn Art Hall. It will feature texts expanding the ideas behind the show, as well as all the works by the participating artists.