

Katalin Erdődi, April 16, 2016

Appealing to the State to Become Stateless

An interview with visual artist Núria Güell about the right to self-determination, the failure of the nation-state and how art can be used to challenge the possible

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Nationality is the quality that infuses to a person the fact of belonging to a national community that is organized as a state. The project emerges from my dis-identification with the structure of the nation-state, as well as from my refusal of the construction of the self in relation to national identity, since I consider it fictional and imposed.

I applied for rejecting my nationality and acquiring the status of stateless to several state authorities, with no success. Given that, I asked for a lawyer to conduct a study of both Spanish and European laws regarding nationality. We concluded that the law only contemplates the loss of nationality as a punishment—hence an individual cannot decide to reject “its” nationality. After sending a formal request twice, I was informed by a government sub-delegation that my request was transferred to the Ministry of Justice. After several phone calls from my lawyer, who is in charge of this case, we are currently still waiting for an answer.

*Núria Güell on *Stateless by Choice. On the Prison of the Possible*. Spain, 2015–2016*

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Núria Güell requests the rejection of her nationality at the Embassy of Spain in Dublin. © Núria Güell: *Stateless by Choice. On the Prison of the Possible*, 2015–2016

Katalin Erdődi: *Núria, your work is often invested in challenging the limits of legality, exposing and confronting us with the unequal access to rights and privileges. Mezosfera’s thematic issue, A Weird Geography, explores societal debates and political struggles around migration and migration politics. I would be curious to know how you see your project *Stateless by Choice* in this context, in view of the increasingly restrictive European asylum policies and the critical situation of people on the move whose freedom of movement is limited in function of their nationalities/citizenships?*

Núria Güell: In the [resignation letter](#) that I sent to the government of Spain, I explain the reasons for renouncing my Spanish nationality, and I warn them about the problems that arise from continuing to segregate and hierarchically organize society based on nationality as a vector of identity. It is exactly this filter that the European Union is applying at the moment: it builds walls on its borders based on a racist and ethnocentric

ideology. An ideology that is inherent to the nation-state, and by way of institutionalization, it also creates mental borders that define social relations and make the dehumanization of racialized people seem natural. It is precisely the way in which the nation-state and its (physical, legal, symbolical, cultural) borders are organized that permits this. For example, the famous “one-for-one deal” of the EU-Turkey agreement is clearly a measure to discipline and punish those who cross and thus challenge the European borders, born from the desire of certain politicians to set examples. “Europe agrees to grant asylum to the same number of Syrian refugees as those deported from Greece to Turkey, BUT will control and make sure that the people who receive this right to asylum or visa, are not the ones who have been deported.” I consider such politicians to be the true terrorists of Europe: their rhetoric thrives on the creation of terror, while they seal off Fortress Europe with the help of new legislation, causing death and suffering on too many occasions, and affecting thousands of people who are actually fleeing death in their countries of origin.

KE: *How do you see the artist’s role and the potential of artistic intervention in addressing the question of rights and privileges?*

NG: Our perception of the world is conditioned and informed by our experiences, and thus inseparable from our position in society, as defined by race, gender, and social class. This is why we often enjoy our privileges in an unreflected, unconscious way: we consider them to be natural. I believe that in order to understand our position and situate ourselves on a cartography of identities imposed by the coloniality of power, it is necessary to recognize our privileges, and either renounce them or use them consciously, to decolonize, deconstruct, and dis-identify ourselves. In many of my art projects, I make use of the privileges that I have as a white, Spanish, European woman, because I believe that the public voice inherent to artistic practice, as well as its critical distance, provides a relevant strategy to make visible all that is concealed and invisibilized by normalization. Furthermore, I would find it dishonest not to use this as a semantic element in my work, because even if I don’t make them visible, these privileges are inevitably informing my works, as they are social attributes of my person. I use my privileges, but I also assume risks in the process because I manifest them, I challenge their limits, and when you do such things, you also become vulnerable, as your use of these privileges can backfire. After some consideration, I decided to start demanding the same engagement from the art institutions that I collaborate with, as they enjoy much more privileges than I can ever hope to. It often happens that institutions want to exhibit works that are political, but in the meantime, they do not want to implicate themselves politically, justifying this with a supposed need to stay neutral. I do not agree with this premise: if we expect someone else to take risks, then so should we, especially when it comes to institutions responsible for producing, managing, and diffusing culture. Opting not to take a position seems to me rather unethical.



Video still of the artist submitting the application to reject her citizenship in Dublin. The authorities opened the envelope, read it and ordered her to go upstairs to the office of the consul. Afterwards they refused to send the letter to the Spanish Government, so she sent it directly by registered mail. © Núria Güell: *Stateless by Choice. On the Prison of the Possible*, 2015–2016

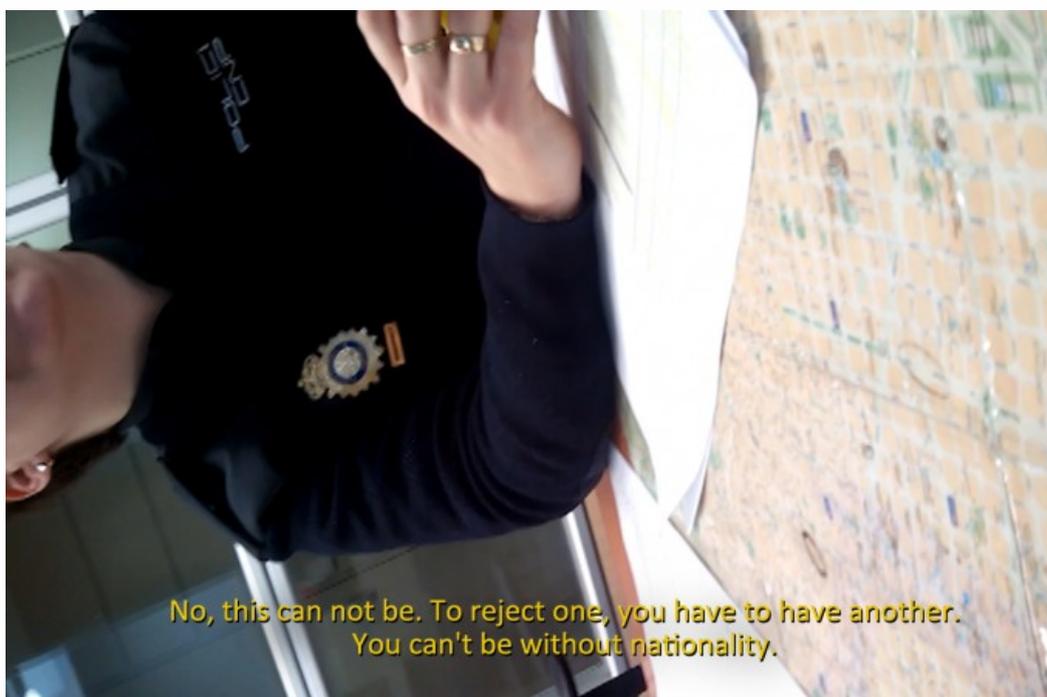
KE: *Becoming stateless is a radical gesture of renouncing certain privileges, while it can also be seen as an ultimate act of self-empowerment. This makes your endeavor extremely ambiguous, as emancipation and empowerment can only be achieved by self-exclusion. Your initiative raises questions around post-identity politics and new forms of community that many political thinkers also discuss, and it brings to mind notions such as “bare life,” conceptualized by Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben. Could you tell me how you relate your artistic work to current dilemmas around forms and strategies of political organization?*

NG: In the current times of triumphant globalization and neoliberalism, the nation-state has lost its legitimacy: it no longer represents the sovereign people, as sovereignty is actually wielded by banks, corporations, and the International Monetary Fund. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, earlier institutions of power were accepted and affirmed, because they provided social security to their citizens. However, currently the nation-state is no longer able to guarantee social rights, it only caters to the necessities, desires, and whims of cross-border global capitalism.

The nation-state is no longer able to enforce labor laws and workers' rights that benefit the majority, it is not able to collect taxes from neither the rich, nor the corporations, it cannot guarantee a public health care system, it is not able to stop banks from blocking their clients' saving accounts, and it is definitely not able to sustain its role in guaranteeing *social security*. Therefore, the only way it can continue legitimizing itself is by creating fictitious terror, a culture of fear in its population, in order to guarantee the *personal security* of its people. This brings us to Agamben: the state invents an enemy, an unreal external threat, which can be terrorists or the "invasion" of migrating people, enabling it to build fences along the borders and heavily arm police forces, in order to publicly justify its role as the protector of *personal security*. It creates fear and terror in order to legitimize itself. For this reason, I think that analyzing the way in which we are constructing and categorizing *the other* is a necessary task at the moment. It goes without saying that *nationality* plays an essential role in this process. Returning to your question, keeping the failing structure of the nation-state in mind, we need to focus on building collectivities that can foster a feeling of belonging and community that allows us to feel secure independently from the state. At this point, on a conceptual level, my project resonates with political initiatives of post-state self-organization that allow us to break the social contract with the state and create new social contracts based on popular, grassroots self-organization.

KE: *Statelessness is often discussed as a state of exception and, in this sense, your project is also challenging the possible to create an exception and break with the norm. How is the notion of exception relevant to your artistic practice and thinking?*

NG: Alongside reflecting on my own position in society, I am also interested in using the privileges that the art world provides me with, as a resource in my artistic practice. As we all know, in the course of history, artists have strived to secure the autonomy of art and in this way, liberate themselves from politics, religion, and other powers that have instrumentalized art for their own interests. However, the resulting autonomy can quickly become something problematic, in the sense that it can neutralize artistic production and result in disengagement, confining art to the realm of the symbolic, where it can be exploited by capital. At the same time, we can use this autonomy for our own interests. This is where the exception comes into play: we can use the space of "tolerance" provided by the autonomy of art to generate spaces of exception. In my practice, for example, I use art as an "umbrella of protection" that allows me to work with certain illegalities as meaningful resources. When the "state of exception" that Agamben talks about becomes the rule, we can use art to produce micro-exceptions. Although they only open up fleeting, temporary spaces, I see their potential in the way they generate other possibilities, other frameworks of meaning that create cracks in the system and thus sabotage the hegemonic discourse.



KE: *You stress the significance and the seeming impossibility of self-determination on an individual level when it comes to deciding about our own nationality, calling it the “prison of the possible.” Self-determination is at the same time an important prerogative of the nation-state in international law, which can be seen as an emancipatory development in the late 19th-early 20th century, and it has played an important role in struggles against colonialism. How do you plan to apply self-determination on an individual level?*

NG: Yes, the right to self-determination was articulated in an international context during World War I and is recognized as a political principle. Later on, in 1960, it became a fundamental right, adopted in the declaration that granted independence to colonial countries and people, stating: **“All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”** Drawing on these developments, I started a legal investigation in collaboration with a lawyer, in which we ask ourselves: is it possible that a person exercises the right to self-determination individually? Furthermore, is it possible to exercise this right to renounce nationality and therefore the homeland? Is there a legal way in the current jurisdiction to exercise self-determination on an individual level? The investigation revealed that one cannot exercise the right to self-determination individually, because the configuration and definition of this right is based on a collectivity of people who have the right to decide to whom they subject themselves to, how they are organized, and finally, how they live. The most interesting about the study is that it revealed that the right to self-determination aims *“to establish a unit of collectivity that demands to be acknowledged as a state or nation,”* meaning that the only option seems to be reproducing the current system and creating another state. With my proposal, I want to avoid reproducing this and therefore I appeal for my individual right to decide whether or not I want to be a part of a nation-state that is, I am fighting for the freedom of renouncing what has been attributed to me unilaterally: my nationality. At this point in the legal investigation, it seems that we have only one option: to file a demand to the state for not guaranteeing a basic right with the aim of exercising it. According to Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, **all human beings are born free**. However, this article and “human right,” as we have seen above, is reduced to being purely rhetorical, a mere lip service.

KE: *Could renouncing nationality become the next wave of liberation movements? Do you see your work as a singular, symbolic act, or could you also imagine it having a domino effect and repercussions in the political arena and not only the artistic field?*

NG: My work is an artistic project that takes a radical political position as its point of departure. It is based on a singular and extremely personal experience, but at the same time, it envisages a collective subject. I am certain that it could have a domino effect, as I have already received several mails from strangers, asking me about the process with the intention of replicating it. It is not surprising that many people do not want to construct a homeland out of an accident: the state is a fictive, imaginary community, and nationality has more to do with tax laws than with identity. As Marx put it, the bourgeoisie invented nationalism, in order to divide the working class. As I see it, it is exactly for this reason that the state is rejecting my request to become stateless, as it would have political impact and could be used by other people.

Interview by Katalin Erdődi.

The present text is a revised version of the eponymous interview published in [How to build a manifesto for the future of a festival. Not only but also. Italian and English edition cur. Blanga-Gubbay D., Piazza L. A., 2016, Santarcangelo Festival Teatro.](#)

About the artist

The work of Núria Güell analyzes how power oppresses and affects subjectivity through submission, specifically by means of established legality and hegemonic morality. Her resources for artistic intervention are based on flirting with established powers and with the privileges of the art world, as well as the complicity with different allies. Her practice mingles with her own life developing as disruptive tactics in specific contexts with the aim of subverting the imposed relations of power and questioning the commonly assumed identifications. Read more at nuriaguell.net

To Mr. Juan Manuel Sánchez-Bustamante, GOVERNMENT SUBDELEGATE IN GIRONA

Ms. Núria Güell Serra, of legal age, with address at 17411 Vidreres, C/Puigmal, 667 and holding Tax ID code 45546965L; appears before the office of the Government Subdelegate in Girona and, in accordance with the law,

DECLARES:

I.- That I do not feel identified with the structure of the nation-state, with the nationalist processes or the concept of fatherland.

II.- I believe that the concept of national identity is an artificial construction as there are no parameters that identify it: as various specialists have claimed, and as is universally known, not all persons who live in the same nation-state speak the same language and not all persons who speak the same language belong to the same nation-state. Nor is it the fact that all those who share a belief are compatriots. Neither is it the case with blood, as there are brothers of different nationalities, just as there are monarchs of different nations who are family. Neither is it the case with culture, as every cultural creation constitutes world heritage and beyond the specific, it alludes to the universal. Neither is it a matter of territory, as State borders are arbitrary, the result of agreements, trading, mediation and/or wars, and they change with historical, political and/or economic events with the aim of exercising a function of control over flows and bodies. Therefore, national identity is a constructed concept that is instilled in us by means of operations of symbolic production.

III.- In the 18th century, it was important to create the concept of nation-state in order to oppose feudalism and absolute monarchies, and with this change in beliefs, it was permitted to defend individual liberties and democratic advances in European societies, which, in legal terms, put an end to subjects and vassals. But I believe that, in this day and age, a segregative concept exists that pushes us to outdo others.

IV.- There are countless horrors committed in the name of nationalism, as well as it being the basis that supports xenophobia and racism, at their peaks throughout Europe.

V.- History shows us that the origins of the nation-state are violent and that it is based on war and conquest as a way of affirming one's existence.

VI.- Today, there are cases where, in my point of view, the state institutions themselves are the authors of the crimes and they are committed in the name of the security of the nation, whereby, without having a say in it, I am included.

VII.- I prefer to form part of a common community, voluntarily chosen and not imposed.

VIII.- I have never signed a contract accepting the State as my legal sphere and the fatherland as a superior value to pay homage to. And it aggrieves me when political leaders take on the office of spokesperson for a supposed collective will in which they include me through national identity.

IX.- I do not believe that national identity represents me.

On account of the foregoing,

I REQUEST OF THE GOVERNMENT SUBDELEGATE OFFICE: That, this document having been presented, it accepts it for processing and, by virtue thereof, it agrees to grant me renunciation of Spanish nationality, thereby permitting me not to have any nationality that identifies me.

It is this Justice that is requested in Dublin, on fourth February two thousand and fifteen.

With thanks in advance for your attention.

Kind regards,

Signature:

Núria Güell Serra

© Núria Güell: *Stateless by Choice. On the Prison of the Possible*, 2015–2016

A contribution to issue #1: *A Weird Geography* edited by Katalin Erdödi

Notes:

1. The interview took place on March 17, 2016, when the so-called Balkan Route (from Greece to Austria or Germany) was closed to Afghani citizens, after having been open only to citizens of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan for several weeks, thus limiting the freedom of movement of non-Syrian/Iraqi/Afghani citizens from Greece onwards. Discrimination against asylum-seekers with the "wrong nationality" was harshly criticized by human rights experts and activists, see: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/11/greece/macedonia-asylum-seekers-trapped-border> ↔

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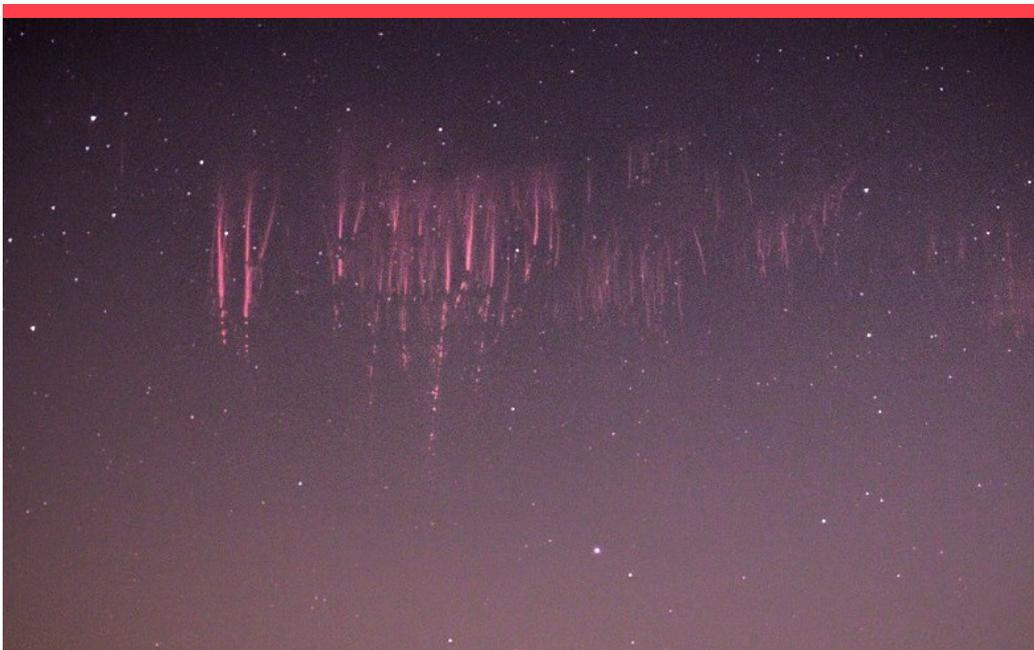


Catearv: #1 A Weird Georaphv. issue



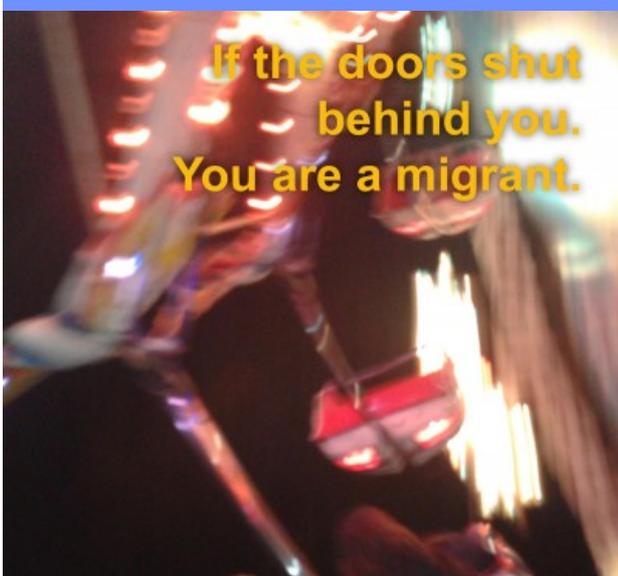
The Steamroller Advances Relentlessly

The National Salon at the Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest



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A Weird Geography

An introduction to issue #1



Refugees' Library

An on-going project initiated by Marina Naprushkina

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