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Editorial

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We are increasingly faced with premodern foundation myths coming from right-wing propaganda and grassroots movements alike. They tell us that some things don't change and they ask us to think about how original communities are constituted. And we start to wonder whether these original communities are new synthetic fabrications concocted by the limits of communication and exchange, by the failed promises of a liberal democracy or a thriving economy that does not reach people who thought they were entitled to it, and who thus start to look elsewhere. Or do these communities actually contain some real claim to a historical line that was violently interrupted by economic and geopolitical shifts that became most pronounced in the 1990s? Have we simply gotten so high on a period of information fever and lateral planetary spread that we simply forgot about entire swaths of the globe that have basically been on another wavelength the entire time?

In Beirut there is a nightclub called B 018 that architect Bernard Khouri designed in the late 1990s. In addition to being a great club, it is also well known for its macabre design: built a decade after the end of more than fifteen years of constant fighting in Lebanon, the building is set completely underground and is reminiscent of a crypt. The site of the club is also the site of a refugee camp that saw a massacre of its Palestinian, Kurdish, and Southern Lebanese inhabitants at the hands of local Christian militias in the late 1970s. Even if the club is a memorial to the dead and a chilling parody of amnesiac Lebanese frivolity, its most cruel joke is ultimately on the claims of public memorials to speak to collective memory in general, especially in a place where the civil war never reached any formal conclusion.

In place of a naive belief in the possibility of ever memorializing a collective loss, at B 018 there is a dress code, and on most nights you can hear the club responsibly pumping out the hits of the '80s, '90s, and 2000s. It doesn't claim to resolve all contradictions into a kind of hopeful utopia to be eventually used against you, but actually explodes them further, and hands them to you as they are. No one is trying to nationalize your desires into any kind of heroic totalitarian mythos. This is no small feat, considering that it is typical for people who fear for their safety and survival to seek out symbolic forms of belonging and togetherness that appear to stabilize their families and communities. People begin to ask for the nation, the race, the creed, the sectarian, the rooted, the indigenous. The old greatness must be restored. Sentimental resources are called in to keep the community together when material resources fall short.

What is clear in these new origin myths is that the nation as a functional structure is less and less of an actor, regressing either to a role as manager and regulator of a market economy, or as a fragmentary or backward fossil playing host to corruption and opportunism. Even today's most unapologetically authoritarian states are little more than an umbrella for the whims of an inner circle of rulers. But when faced with the question of what a state should or could be, and what its responsibilities are, we simply don't care. And yet we have to admit that when the idea of a nation breaks off from the structural base of the state, things start to get extremely weird. The nation starts to morph into a floating signifier for all manner of original communities – and can be used by original and synthetic communities alike to recompose and assemble a myth of togetherness for whatever end they please.

Whatever is causing this to happen in so many places, it appears that fewer people are immune to its effects – in spite of education, class, and wealth – that it moves in many directions simultaneously. For artists and artworks this poses a problem of representation whereby a reinvigorated need to explore cultural origins will not assume any fixed or easily discernible form familiar to traditional authoritarian declarations. Rather, it will seize upon artists' own lives and priorities, infusing the content of their work with sentimental origin quests, and it will inflect the decisions made by collectors, acquisition departments, and curators. It will accent the way an artist situates his or her work in relation to the world, and to other places in the world where these works may circulate. Everything might look like business as usual when a massive gravitational shift builds itself firmly into already existing lines of thought in artistic discourse, with contextual specificity and cultural sensitivity ascending from artistic strategies or signs of curatorial good faith to become dominant criteria and battleground sites of proxy wars waged in museum auditoriums. A responsible artist might consider carrying small arms to the opening in case anyone has a problem with large-format C-prints of landscapes from a certain corner in that dark cavernous place where you should not go.

And yet some artists who might appear to be moving back to their mythical home to purify themselves might at the same time be permanently purging themselves of the lure of origin. In the cycles of decomposition and recomposition, others might push instead for the granting of statehood to synthetic subcultural milieux which for some reason attain a legitimate status alongside more historically situated tribes and peoples. A promised land of

gamers and alcoholics, for instance. A continent for indebted MFAs, rich in coltan deposits and with its own stock market harvesting bitcoin. Finally, a place gay Bolsheviks can call their own.

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