

SECESSION AS GESTURE AND GESTURE AS SECESSION (OR, THE FIFTH EXPEDITION TO THE REPUBLIC OF ZAQISTAN)

In the summer of 2005, artist Zaq Landsberg won two acres of Utah desert on eBay for \$610. The acres were cut out of a parcel owned by Michael Bartoe, and a deed was filed in August in the Box Elder County Recorder's Office. This happens more often than one would think. A person will somehow come into possession of a large tract of arguably useless land, and then sell it online as a real estate investment. The places commonly subject to these auctions are in west Texas or Utah, where much of the west was cut into 1x1 mile squares. Landsberg's four half-acre pieces are a narrow strip, identifiable only by GPS coordinates and is accessible by following a dirt road off of a Utah highway for fifteen miles up Terrace Mountain and then hiking two and a half miles on foot. His neighbors may be other eBay buyers or the U.S. government. He does not know and has no plans to find out. In a site so remote, it's not really clear if it matters. What does matter is that some of the land is in fact Zaq's—he is not arbitrarily choosing some place in the desert and staking a claim on it. He owns the deed to this site, and he can choose to do with it as he pleases, including declaring it a sovereign nation.¹ The Republic of Zaqistan declared its independence from the United States of America in November 2005.

The purchase of the land and the secession took place during the lower points of the second term of the Bush administration, which lent an air of tongue-in-cheek rebellion to the proceedings. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Iraq, Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, and countless other debacles, Landsberg figured that he could probably run a country about as well if not better than the U.S. Government. The official declaration of independence was held in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, essentially as a pretext for a ridiculous party². The secession had some of the same air of absurdist indulgence that marked the Bush administration (cabinet positions were handed out as party favors—there is a Zaqistani FEMA director as well as an official Zaqstronaut, Minister of Covert Ninja Action, and a Minister of Pointed and Sarcastic Remarkability). Of course, the silliness of Zaqistan's political system is also characteristic of many micronation and new country projects³. It is easy to create an exponentially expanding government for a place that one might never go to. To date, only three of the 83 official government members have even been out to Zaqistan. In total, thirteen people have ever been known to set foot in Zaqistan. I am one of them.

¹ Provided, of course, he continues to maintain the small monetary tribute he pays to the state of Utah once a year around April to maintain diplomatic relations. Landsberg insists this is not a tax.

² Couldn't the argument be made that this pretext underlies most "social practice" artwork?

³For those seeking more information on micronations or small-scale secession efforts, I recommend *How To Start Your Own Country* by Erwin Strauss and Issue 18 of *Cabinet* magazine, available online at http://www.cabinetmagazineftp.org/issuepdfs/Issue_18/18_Whole.pdf

When the opportunity to go to Zaqistan came in the summer of 2009, I took it because escape seemed the most natural and necessary move. They say that travel broadens the mind but I think I wanted to go because I felt my worldview was too broad—I was lost in a landscape of media noise, burdened with the privileged misfortune of being young, recently unemployed, and in possession of an expensive liberal education. I wanted to focus on something decidedly else, somewhere defiantly else, get lost in a new landscape. Leaving the country was good, but leaving it for a secessionist state was even better. What follows is a description of my experience with and in Zaqistan before, during, and after the expedition of 2009.

August 19: New York

I arrive at Zaq's house in Brooklyn before he does, and reflect on what position I might take as a participant in this journey. My relationship to Landsberg is mostly based in helping him flesh out ideas, or explaining to him why some ideas are bad. One of the first conversations we ever had was about whether or not his plans for an opulent wedding so he could get health insurance constituted performance art.⁴ Such an immodest proposal illustrates his penchant for drama. He performs in several aspects of his life, including keeping his hair just long enough to shake for effect when he's mad (or when he wants to remind you that his hair is very pretty), and walking with such force that one might mistake his coming down stairs for a tumbling body. This isn't to say he's fake. One of the most frustrating and admirable things about Zaq is that he is committed, sometimes to the point of arrogance. Petty grievances really will bother him for weeks. Being right about historical trivia really matters. And yes, he really does have his own country.

In addition to his hair and his walk, Landsberg talks a certain talk—he regularly employs an encyclopedic arsenal of slang. He doesn't tell stories, he spins yarns. People don't take charge of a situation, they quarterback it. And he doesn't discuss ideas. He powwows, and when he finally arrives home and suggests we powwow in the living room what he means is he wants to discuss plans for the trip. We leave in three days. While the list of supplies and the calendar of where we are staying is important, perhaps the most serious discussion revolves around what exactly Zaq is going to build, and what the rest of the team will help him build. It's established over the course of a few hours of discussion that it has to be "scary", "epic", "vague", and "ideally visible from Google Earth." There is discussion of a death ray, and a sand fortress. Zaq says that he wants the "what the fuck" factor to be high—that is to say, one might come upon this object and ask, "what the fuck is this and how did it get here?" When it's pointed out that it is pretty much impossible for someone to simply come upon the work, Zaq smiles. "That's the whole point."

Prior to the 2009 expedition there were three major landmarks: the robots, the tower, and the Zaqopolis. Two seven-foot tall robotic sentinels made of aluminum, two-by-fours, and dryer tubes stand along the Western borders of Zaqistan. A third robot stands on Mount Insurmountable, one of the few topographic peaks. Also on Insurmountable is a nine-foot tall tower of sandbags, an experiment in working with the

⁴ The verdict: not *good* performance art. But definitely marriage fraud.

nation's natural resources. Next to the tower is a deep pit from which the tower's base was culled. On the other side of Mount Insurmountable, along the far east border, lies the Zaqopolis, the capitol of Zaqistan and home to a small geodesic dome built from metal pipe and covered in surplus store camouflage netting. In general, the structures of the country imitate the kinds of important and necessary structures that "real" countries might have, addressing national needs that are practical (a shelter, the dome), dictatorial (a robot army), and megalomaniacal (one of Landsberg's long term goals is to build his own tomb in Zaqistan).

It is decided, after much discussion and Googling, that the best project for this year is a victory arch, a sort of entryway into the nation not unlike the Arc de Triomphe. The victory is yet to be determined. The materials will be the cheapest and most lightweight options available: plywood, two by fours, and vinyl floor tile printed to look like black marble. It is going to be the largest structure to stand in Zaqistan. It meets all of the aforementioned criteria: scary, vague, epic, and (potentially) Google Earth scaled. We can rest easy now—until tomorrow, when we actually have to start planning the drive from New York out to Utah to make it.

August 22: New York

We're behind schedule. Members of the expedition are running late, for various reasons, which isn't too much of an issue because Zaq isn't even really packed to leave yet. Also, he lost his cell phone the night before. Neither of these things seems particularly surprising. People arrive to 1014 Greene Avenue slowly and introductions are made. Most of the group knows Landsberg from attending NYU. Most also are involved in art in some way. All stare, look around a little, lethargic in the late August humidity, unsure of what's about to happen. It's the largest group to ever go to Zaqistan, hence the goal of building something so monumental.

Despite its limited residence and visitor count there are, according to Landsberg, between 200 and 300 individuals that hold titles to citizenship for Zaqistan. A large number of these titles were issued across South Asia, where Landsberg traveled for several months in 2008. In one instance, Landsberg issued titles of citizenship and cabinet positions to Tenzin Jamphel and Tenzin Choeying, Tibetan exiles born and living in India. To Landsberg's surprise, they remarked that Zaqistan was the only country to which they in fact held citizenship. Although born in India, they were born into the status of a refugee. In India, birthright is not a guarantee of citizenship. As they are Tibetan by descent, Chinese citizenship is not an option, either. Furthermore, there is the tricky matter of pride—it would be possible for Tibetan refugees to apply for and receive Indian citizenship, but to do so would be denying any possibility of regaining their home and their right to it.

Why would these refugees gladly accept citizenship to Landsberg's nation? Perhaps for the abstract comfort it offers—exile is a strange state of existence, in which one is simultaneously with and without a national identity. Maybe Zaqistani citizenship was appealing to Tibetan exiles for the same reason it appealed to those who decided to go on this adventure—its sense of possibility. By being so remote, so unlikely, so arguably ineffectual, micronations remain outside the conflicts of global politics and critique them at the same time. These are places that function, or propose to function, in

an alternate diplomatic sphere. They suggest that it is possible to not only imagine but also construct a place beyond the established terms of international relations.

But a new international identity or policy isn't on our minds as we prepare, finally, to leave. Around 6:30 in the evening, we pile into Zaq's car (a resplendent 2000 Toyota Sienna) to begin what initially seems like the most treacherous part of the journey: getting through the Holland Tunnel and the state of New Jersey.

August 23: Illinois

We arrive in Chicago following a twelve-hour drive that mostly took place in darkness. I recall only fragments—the confusion of entering utterly identical Flying Js in two different states, Ryan casually using the word “phenomenology” in conversation. Within those thirteen and a half hours of driving the repop of the group had quickly settled and so had seating arrangements.

Before going to explore the Windy City, we discuss some logistics related to building the arch. The wood and tools will be bought in Salt Lake, where the structure will be prefabricated in our Utah host's driveway. But to get the arch, and our possessions, and water, out to Zaqistan by only carrying it in would be nearly impossible. We'd discussed renting a truck, but the rates were far more than anyone wanted to pay, even split six ways. In New York I'd suggested posting an ad on Craigslist in Salt Lake, and to our surprise we'd found a Craigslist post that suited our needs exactly. Cody was looking for work, would haul for reasonably cheap, and had a cell phone number. Landsberg got on my phone and we eavesdropped intently. Zaq did not go into detail about the conceptual underpinnings of the project, sticking to the basics: three hours from Salt Lake, three hours back, a good five miles of serious off-roading. We'd cover gas, buy him lunch, he just had to name a price. Landsberg stepped outside to hammer out some details and we waited silently until he came back into the room.

“He'll do it, for a hundred dollars.”

“And he's cool with the off road driving?”

“He said his truck's a beast.”

Thus begins the legend of Cody.

August 24-26: Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah

There are two major problems with road trips, and stories about them. First, one never goes on a unique road trip through America—the highway system of the American West is so littered with nostalgia for the 1960s and, at times, the 1860s, that even the most sincere astonishment feels like a reenactment of someone else's moment—so why tell it again? Second, road trips are mostly spent *on the road*, and roads are often *boring*. So much gets lost in the hours of endless expanse and intermittent sleep. It is not merely that everything starts to look the same; it is that everything happens at the same time. The continuum of sites and non-sites—rest stops, gas stations, friend's couches, motel floors, ghost towns—develops a grit and texture that clings to the skin like that patina of dirt, sweat, and stale air inside the car. Eventually one can't even appreciate those moments of total silence and burned-down buildings in Wyoming fields. One just wants to shower this American landscape off, spit out this open space, and sleep in familiar sheets.

Anyway, the important thing on this trip was where we were going. Why read about the trip through America if the point was to get to a tiny piece of land that *isn't*?

And yet, without the American landscape there would *be* no Zaqistani landscape—physically, politically, or culturally. The unused, isolated site could only exist in a place like America, one of the few places where such land is both available and accessible, provided you have the means. So many of the means used by Landsberg to work on this project are cornerstones of American life—our supplies were bought largely at big-box hardware stores and Wal-Mart, our stops along the way were littered with identical gas stations and public restrooms, and our meals consisted of meat, dairy, starch, and black coffee. Zaqistan is, like the country it seceded from, largely reliant on imports.

Furthermore, the journey out to the site is a huge aspect of Zaqistani culture. There is, in fact, a Zaqistani culture. It thrives and resides primarily in Landsberg. It's not clear which he enjoys more: having adventures or talking about them. His storytelling style has produced a surprisingly rich folklore to the young nation. Despite being a project born of the information age, Zaqistan would be merely a clever premise without its oral tradition. When you hear Landsberg talk about Zaqistan, you want to go there—despite how inhospitable it is, despite the danger, despite the story of *The Time Zaq Got Heat Exhaustion and Could Only Walk A Tenth of a Mile Before Having to Vomit And Rain Was Fast Approaching As He Left Zaqistan*. I know that's what made me consider going.

The cultural significance of Zaqistan is not only in the myth that Landsberg has built for the place. It also lies in the fact it is a place, not a conceptual framework. To go there is no easy feat. Previous journeys in and out of Zaqistan have included physical dangers and automotive damage (the tale of *The Van Getting Stuck In The Mud* has taken on the epic quality of an Icelandic saga at this point, as has Landsberg's soccer-mom minivan). But Landsberg makes the pilgrimage to Zaqistan, and convinces others to go, because it is there and because it is his. Going to the desert implies a desire to be a little bit lost. Staking a claim and establishing landmarks suggests a desire to be grounded, with all of the tribulations and sacrifice that devotion to the land implies⁵.

The terms of nationalism and sovereignty are inevitably tied to performed gestures (acts of recognition, summits, and conventions) and ephemera (flags, passports, currency). The borders of the land are not beside the point, but they are abstracted into maps and diagrams and a language that is as much theater as politics, a language that often seems utterly irrelevant to realities of the ordinary citizen. When Zaq Landsberg uses the tools of globalized capitalism (online auctions, cheap manufacturing, oil, and subsidized foodstuffs) to claim authority over and enact autonomy within a patch of utterly desolate, uninhabitable desert, one has to recall the beginnings—and consider the twilight—of U.S. hegemonic power as it we have long understood it. The process of

⁵ The fact that Zaqistan is in Utah calls to attention the American West's legacy of being an inhospitable home to fringe communities. The Mormons, in their establishing of the territory, initially were largely independent from the United States of America. The State of Deseret, the original name for the far more expansive territory of the West claimed by the settlers, was the de facto governing body for the Great Basin before 1851, when the Utah Territory was created as part of the Compromise of 1850.

declaring independence reveals the intense, complex web of interdependence required to maintain the fiction that one can in fact go it alone, break away from civilization and create something if not new then something else. And the desire to do that, to make something else, *somewhere* else, lies least of all in the land and most of all in the pursuit of a good story.

August 27: Utah, Nevada, Zaqistan

After prefabricating the victory arch and buying food and supplies the day before, we waited for Cody that morning with some laughter that faintly masked our genuine anxiety. The project hinged on the ability of this total stranger whom only two of us had ever spoken to on the phone. His casual attitude toward the gig might prove a liability. Suppose he saw exactly what he was getting into and immediately bailed that day? Suppose he didn't show up at all? What if he drove up in a dilapidated pickup, barely capable of getting across town let alone into the desert? We did not really have the luxury to entertain these notions. It was going to work, and the word "or" wasn't in our vocabulary.

We were lucky that we didn't need other options. When Cody arrived in his beast, a monstrous white 4x4, and stepped out of the truck, it was immediately clear that we had found the perfect person to take this job. Wearing a straw cowboy hat, wraparound shades, and a lizard-like grin, Cody looked at the various gear we were loading into the truck bed with amusement and definitely seemed excited to not just go for but to be the ride. On the drive out to Zaqistan, Sam rode in Cody's truck. The anecdotes that Sam passed onto us revealed that Cody had done time for dealing meth, was working any odd job he could find (like this one), and had plenty of women troubles. This information was explained while Cody was in the bathroom of the café/bar we ate lunch in before the final push to Zaqistan. The small talk was uneasy—as we got closer and closer to Zaqistan we drew further and further out of our element. Montello, Nevada, is a town with two bars, one gas station, and one street. This was the kind of small town where gas stations literally ran out of gas, and the bar was crowded with regulars by early afternoon. This was our last stop before embarking on building the arch—now a very laborious reality, almost entirely dependent on a former convict we had found on the Internet.

After hours of empty expanse, we finally made the first turn onto the first dirt road. We used an alternate route from the one taken to walk in, along Terrace Mountain, opting for the flatter expanses that made for a five-mile drive. We parked the van and loaded any remaining gear into the truck. Zaq and Fran rode in the cab with Cody, while Ryan, Charles, Sam, and I climbed on top of our gear in the truck bed. As Cody's beast ambled through the rockier areas of desert brush and the van got smaller and smaller in the distance, Charles remarked, "No one will ever believe we did this. No one is going to understand." We moved further and further from civilization, into a place where the sameness was not manufactured by humans but by their absence in the environment.

The sighting of the first robot gleaming on the horizon reminded me of a trip I'd taken on the Staten Island Ferry during which I almost did not notice the Statue of Liberty. *Oh*, I'd thought at the time as the ferry went past. *It is actually right there*. When a landmark is on the horizon it seems somehow less tangible than when viewed in reproductions. Intellectual distance is far simpler to traverse than physical distance, and

the fact of the robots was as unexpected as the fact of the land itself. When we finally pulled to a stop (in a clearing shortly thereafter declared “Cody Point”), Landsberg got out of the truck and said (with unintentional cinematic swagger), “Welcome to Zaqistan.” But there wasn’t a lot of time to celebrate. We had to unload the truck and someone had to go back with Cody to move the van to the hiking route back into Zaqistan. Fran, Charles, and I stayed behind to set up camp.

“What time is it?” Charles asked me. It was about 5. “If they’re not back by 8, should we worry?”

“Probably,” I ventured.

August 27: Zaqistan

I’ve experienced only a few moments where my own death seemed a very real possibility. Perhaps the most unsettling of those moments was due to conceptual art. Now, to be fair, I wasn’t actually stranded in the desert, and I did overreact, but the Utah desert is not a good place to be left alone for extended periods of time. The silence is overpowering out there—you can hear your blood rushing through your body, wind and flies are deafening, and if you call out for help no one will hear you.

This is what I kept thinking as I waited with Fran and Charles for the other half of our expedition team to return from moving the car. I’d given up on the idea of getting out alive—we had enough water to last a few days but could probably only carry enough among all three of us to last half of one, provided we could find our way back to the dirt road and then back to the highway). I imagined accidents that could have held up the group—sprained ankles, snakes, homicidal and dehydrated maniacs. I concentrated on the fire we built as a beacon to attract our missing friends. We thought we’d seen a light in the distance by the mountains but it went out, and in the points east we could not discern between airplanes and flashlights. I tried to appreciate the expansive, glittering sky, in which there were more stars than I have ever seen and thought I might ever see again. I had come on this trip because I did not know if I fit in anywhere in this world. It seemed increasingly clear that I might have been correct.

In that darkness and silence, the sound of small talk between Ryan and Sam coming towards the camp was suddenly far more exhilarating than it had ever been from the confines of the Sienna. When the three other members of the team emerged from the darkness, they did not understand why I breathlessly hugged them and demanded they never, ever do that ever again. There was brief discussion of a buddy system and establishing better communication before it was decided that we just overreacted, which is how Zaq tells the story.

August 28: Zaqistan

The victory, or triumphal, arch tends to be constructed in cities to commemorate either a victorious battle or to celebrate a leader. It is thought that they were somehow related to the Roman triumph, or *triumphus*, a civil ceremony and rite in ancient Rome in which a military leader was celebrated for his success in battle or return from battles abroad. The triumphing general received near-divine or kingly status for the day of the triumph. The etymology of the word itself, *triumph*, is thought to go back to the Greek

thriambos, “hymn to Dionysus”—the god known mostly for being the patron of wine and ecstasy, but also that of epiphany and theater. The triumphal arch is an architectural set piece for the performing of a celebratory gesture in battle—the performing of military gesture to protect the nation-state. The Zaqistani arch, however, had no battle other than perhaps the process of the journey toward its own making. It celebrated the triumph of the act of triumph itself. The victory arch stands twelve feet tall by ten feet wide, with a depth of about three feet. The inner framework serves as a simple ladder that one can climb to stand on the top of the arch. From the top, one can survey the entire territory of Zaqistan and its surrounding regions. Technically, the arch is part of an annexation of U.S. territory into Zaqistan, as it stands just outside the northwest boundary. The vinyl façade is surprisingly effective in masking the simple materials used to construct the arch, but it still has the feel of being a set piece or imitation of something real, in part because of its scale.

I want to say that during the brief time spent in Zaqistan proper I was utterly immersed in the process, focused on the incredible foreign landscapes that photographs will never justly explain. But six people building a giant structure in the middle of nowhere isn't the picture of social realism that the previous paragraphs might have painted. The staple gun constantly jammed. The boys argued over logistics in what appeared to be a massive pissing contest. The women were delegated yet again to domestic tasks like preparing food. Egos aren't dissolved in dry heat and when travel is a form of escape a person is always looking over her shoulder for the thing she is running from. I cannot speak for the other members of the expedition but for me, the most difficult thing to encounter when alone in the desert was the sound of my own voice against the bright, startling silence. However, that dazzling singularity of the desert also makes Zaqistan and the victory arch so compelling. The arch was produced for no reason other than the manufacture its own importance. It was built from materials that present simulacra of grandeur. It exists in a site so remote that few will ever see it in person. It stands against a landscape that has no use for it and no resources to sustain it. It is defiant but it has nothing to contend with. It is utterly awesome. I found myself moved when I both viewed the arch against the sunset, and again when I surveyed the nation from the top of the structure. *We made this*, I thought. *I was part of making this. I don't know why we made this. But we did.* I felt, in a word, triumphant.

This contagious enthusiasm I think does not fall into “patriotism” because patriotism implies a history (and, as its etymology implies, a patriarchy) that is still forming and does not completely comply to the simplicities of historical narrative. Perhaps a better term might be “solidarity” as Brian Holmes has employed it, as “a way to name the...cooperation between human beings that takes place within the parameters of a shared imaginary, causing that imaginary to inhere to the real.”⁶ The arch is an enactment and analysis of the symbolic gestures employed to create the symbolic space of the nation-state. The future development of Zaqistan as a place, a work, and a culture will depend on the continued exploration of these gestures and the fine lines between labor and practice, solidarity and nationalism, and theater and politics.

⁶ Holmes, Brian. “Imaginary Maps, Global Solidarities.” Piet Zwart Institute, Media Design Research Publications. <http://pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/pubsfolder/bhimaginary/>

August 29, 30: Zaqistan, Utah, Nevada

When we left Zaqistan, we decided to drive out to visit a work that the nation is highly indebted to: Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. The piece, a 1,500 foot long coil of earth stretching into the Great Salt Lake, is about three hours from Zaqistan.⁷ While many essays about Smithson's work reflect on its remote and surreal location I was just excited to be on paved roads for at least a portion of the drive. Furthermore, we were not the only people visiting the piece that day—a couple with a kayak on the roof of their car and a golden retriever were already there when we arrived. Smithson's is a far more charted territory than Zaqistan, geographically and most certainly culturally. But like the country, it truly is a work that has to be encountered and studied in person to really understand it. First, it's not really that big or monumental when approached. If anything, it is a little humble. You don't look at the jetty, you look at the place the jetty is in. Utah, in its more remote patches, bears more of a resemblance to the moon than to anything recognizable on earth. It's no wonder it draws in both radical religions and artists.

While the landmarks of Zaqistan are a far cry from subtly blending into the landscape, both the nation and Smithson's jetty exist in environments totally unsuited to human habitation that suggest a new interpretation of these spaces. Both also rely on a mythology—an at times ambivalent antiheroic, anti-sublime one that stands in opposition to their settings. Smithson's lore is hinged to geology and history, Landsberg's to happenstance and improvisation. Both works are fraught with risk but ultimately appear seamless, and both beg the question: why and how the hell did this thing get made? Smithson had a gallery backing his efforts, and later the Dia Foundation to preserve it. So far, since the chief export of Zaqistan is its less-than-lucrative conceptual art, funding for national development has come from Landsberg's own pocket. Ironically, his main line of employment is contractual work in construction and fabrication.

After the jetty and returning what we could to the Salt Lake City Wal-Mart, our next stop on the drive was Las Vegas. (The process of powering through from northern Utah to Salt Lake City to Las Vegas is an essay in itself.) Following such a successful expedition it felt appropriate to celebrate. There was a familiar spirit to Vegas as well: like Zaqistan (and, even, like *Spiral Jetty*) it is something that fundamentally should not exist where it exists, and only exists through the extreme effort of human beings to make it so. Aesthetically, Zaqistan may have more in common with Vegas than with Smithson: The Strip is a landmark of imitation castles and cities, and Zaqistan is a nation defined by the imitation of monuments. But both the major earthworks and major spectacles of the American West are living testaments to the ability of human beings to sustain the unsustainable in the name of abstractions. Zaqistan is a place and a work indebted to that legacy.

Later: elsewhere

⁷ *Spiral Jetty* is also quite close to the Golden Spike National Historic Site, which commemorates the uniting of the Union and Pacific lines to create the first transcontinental railroad. En route to Zaqistan one passes the ghost town of Terrace, a stop along that railroad that collapsed after a quicker route was constructed and the original rail line was abandoned.

In the time since the 2009 expedition, Landsberg finally told me why he had been cagey in the past about referring to Zaqistan either as an art project or as a micronation. “At the end of the day,” he said, “I want it to be a real country.” This, to me, is what makes it more interesting than an art project or a micronation. According to the constitutive theory of statehood, a place needs the following to be recognized as sovereign: a permanent population, physical territory, a government, and recognition by other countries and/or the international community.⁸ The act of rewriting boundaries sounds quaint in an age where might is determined less by geography and more by political, economic, and military power. The importance of a permanent population might even be contested in a society so dependent on migratory, temporary labor and internationally networked citizens. And what of corporate states, private organizations that exist as multi-national entities but that operate with the same political power as nation-states? But while the first qualifiers of a nation-state can be contested, recognition is trickier to dismiss. Recognition generally takes the forms of trade, diplomatic relations, or declarations of warfare. It is both incredibly necessary and incredibly dangerous for the new nation to achieve recognition—once noticed by larger powers, they might be conquered or colonized rather than accepted. Recognition in international relations can be understood as the performance of nation-building. Zaqistan engages in performance as recognition—in learning, knowing, and repeating the gestures that describe and define the establishment and practice of nation making. By going through the motions of nation building as both theater, critique, and a practice of everyday life, Zaqistan offers a model of how to love America and leave it at the same time.

⁸ Although not codified in international law nor considered a necessary requirement in the 1933 Montevideo Convention of The Rights and Duties of States, recognition has played a major role in the legitimizing and dismissal of micronations and disputed territories within the international community.