

EXILES

In 2002, according to the United Nations' International Migration Report, 175 million people were living in a country they were not born in. Rather than set one fixed root against another, a mythologised 'origin' against an integrating and homogenising 'soil', wouldn't it be wiser to assign other conceptual categories to the process of mutation? With about ten million more immigrants every year worldwide, increasing professional nomadism, the globalisation of goods and services and the formation of transnational political entities, isn't it about time to invent new ways of understanding what cultural identity is?

SATURDAY 28 JUNE 2008  
TATE BRITAIN

**from 10:00**  
DUFFIELD ROOM  
**ULTRA-RED**  
**We Come from**  
**Your Future**

**14:00**  
AUDITORIUM  
**FLÁVIA MÜLLER**  
**MEDEIROS**  
and  
**NASRIN TABATABAI**  
A discussion on  
notions of exile

**16:30**  
MODERN BRITISH ART  
ROOMS 19, 20 AND 21  
**TANIA BRUGUERA**  
P6\_TA-PROV(2008)029

**16:30**  
AUDITORIUM  
**T.J. DEMOS**  
chaired by  
**EYAL WEIZMAN**  
Exiles

## THE ENDS OF EXILE: TOWARDS A COMING UNIVERSALITY?

T. J. DEMOS

### MODERNITY AS EXILE

VIEWS THROUGH THE LENS OF EXILE, modernity resembles a catastrophe, a storm of wreckage that propels redemption out of reach with implacable violence. Or so Walter Benjamin wrote about the storm from paradise that we call progress, as contemplated by the angel of history (he was thinking of Paul Klee's watercolour, *Angelus Novus* 1920). 'While the pile of debris before him grows skyward,' Benjamin famously wrote, he is cast backwards into the future as he views our present forlornly.<sup>1</sup> Gazing at that catastrophic modernity nearly fifty years later, the exiled Palestinian literary critic Edward Said rendered a verdict on the twentieth century that confirmed Benjamin's dark conclusion, written in the midst of an exile that ended in his suicide while attempting to escape the Nazis. 'Our age,' Said wrote, 'with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration.'<sup>2</sup>

Such is modernity as considered through the lens of exile, a period defined by the dislocating ravages and alienating effects of capitalism as much as by the psychic disequilibrium of traumatic *unheimlichkeit* – as it is comprehended in Marxist and Freudian thought. But modernity's darkness also intimates something more than what its mere political, economic and social circumstances suggest, which is clear in Benjamin's account of historical time that in effect leaves us all refugees in the present. Other philosophical diagnoses corroborate Benjamin's ontological account, defining our very epoch as one of 'transcendental homelessness',<sup>3</sup> according to Lukács; similarly Heidegger wrote that, 'Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world.'<sup>4</sup> But in Said's insistently political sense, modernity-as-exile – as glimpsed in Lamia Joreige's recent film, *A Journey* 2008, which shows a Palestinian refugee camp in 1948, the year of Israel's founding – identifies a counter-narrative and the repressed figure of the last century's otherwise celebrated glorious nationalisms, utopian political projects and vaunted technological achievements; for it reveals their failures, their human wreckage, the costs of their obscene audacity.<sup>5</sup>

I would like to open up that counter-narrative and that repressed figure here, yet avoid reading exile exclusively in the negative, as solely melancholic or chaotic, its identity metaphysically inscribed. As a wealth of literature, including personal and artistic testimonies, demonstrates, exile also unleashes a creative flight into the experience of multiplicity. Literally meaning 'to wander away',<sup>6</sup> its etymology possessing an ancient provenance – think of the epic biblical stories of wandering peoples and tragic banishments – exile suggests involuntary displacement as much as expatriation by choice, a harsh penal-like sentence as much as an earnest political commitment. Positioned adjacent to terms like diaspora (a geographical dispersal in the collective sense), refugee (the victim of persecution or forced expulsion) and migration (the traveller by choice, whether for economic necessity or, more recently, for ecological reasons), exile is both distinct and yet shares commonalities in its relation to the 'double consciousness' – in Paul Gilroy's terms – which is bestowed upon those who expe-

rience it. This 'double perspective' (in Said's words), a 'double frame' (in Homi K. Bhabha's), results from the bi-cultural knowledge it produces, generating in its positive expression a sensitivity towards difference (that of cultures, places and communities), and a newfound appreciation of the cultural character of one's origins when looking back from exile's awry vantage. In this sense, its transformative experience inspires both critical and creative energies, even among the existential vulnerability and material destitution it otherwise may bring.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Hannah Arendt would write of 'refugees driven from country to country' in the midst of the unprecedented genocide of the Holocaust *not* as mere victims; rather, they 'represent the vanguard of their peoples'.<sup>8</sup> The reason, she explained, was that henceforth, these figures, shed of their national ties (at least in 1943, before the founding of Israel), would be the creators of their own destiny ('History is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of Gentiles'). Likewise, Giorgio Agamben has recently proposed that in the present circumstances of massive demographic shifts – due to warfare and political repression, as much as emancipatory desire – the refugee represents 'the paradigm of a new historical consciousness', particularly because with that figure, we glimpse a future beyond the nation-state and its destructive exclusion of non-citizens.<sup>9</sup>

Keeping in mind, then, that exile designates a ruptured psycho-geography of fundamental ambivalence, calling up the longing for home and the embrace of elsewhere, and that it is antithetical to any unified meaning, let us consider some of the recent intersections of the geopolitical circumstances and the aesthetic negotiations of exile. These intersections in recent years have served multiple functions in contemporary art, oscillating between the calamitous and the creative: to find forms adequate to express the ravaging spatial and experiential effects of displacement; to invent archives capable of unleashing the hidden potential of historical consciousness; to discover innovative means to forge social bonds within transnational conditions that avoid sinking into regressive atavism or xenophobic hostility; to advance forms of life that reject the restrictive categories of identity and conventional modes of belonging; to direct the forces of mobility against the capture of commodification; and to resist the fundamentalist oppositions to, and equally the homogenising tendencies of globalisation – these are some of the various imperatives that have generated an aesthetics of exile over the last few decades.

## THE DIASPORIC

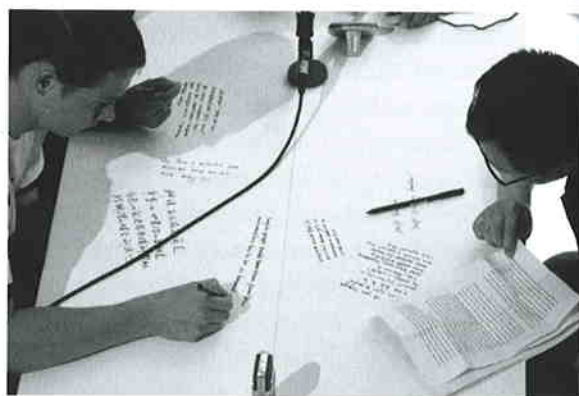
MONA HATOUM'S *MEASURES OF DISTANCE* 1988, a video that relates the impossible intimacy of the London-based artist's long-distance relationship with her Lebanese-Palestinian mother living in Beirut; Isaac Julien's film *Territories* 1984, which mediates postcolonial subjectivity (that of British African-Caribbean-ness, in the context of London's Notting Hill Carnival) by opening up its fissures and fluctuating contours through the disjunctive textures of cinematic palimpsests; and Black Audio Film Collective's classic *Handsworth Songs* 1986, a film that deploys hybrid representations, both documentary and poetic, to reveal the diversity of local perspectives on the race riots against Thatcher's repressive measures in a working class area in Birmingham – these works demonstrate a powerful intertwining of the so-

cial and political facts of dislocation with the aesthetics of exile, which distinguishes British practices in the 1980s. Of course there have been earlier artistic engagements with exile, such as the historical avant-garde's, as in New York and Zurich Dada, and in the later displacements of European artists during WWII, in which modernist forms – decontextualised readymades, disjunctive montage, visual and textual fragmentations, disorienting spaces – expressed the experiential terms of geopolitical dislocation.<sup>10</sup> One could also cite the artistic dealings with travel – whether owing to personal desires, the commitments to internationalism or the political necessity of escaping repressive military regimes – encountered in the formations of CoBrA, the Situationist International and Fluxus, as well as in the global developments of abstraction and conceptualism (the work of Gego, Bas Jan Ader, Hans Haacke, Hélio Oiticica, Cildo Meireles, On Kawara, Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama and Tehching Hsieh comes to mind).<sup>11</sup> However, it was in the British context that exile was poignantly and uniquely negotiated both thematically and formally, correlating with decolonisation struggles, the experience of diaspora in the wake of the crumbling of empire, and the engagement with the discourses of identity politics and multiculturalism.

Considering the way Hatoum has directed her experience of geopolitical displacement into a post-minimalist sculptural phenomenology of disjointed everyday spaces and uncanny domestic objects, Edward Said writes how in her work 'exile [is] figured and plotted'. Born into a displaced Palestinian family in Beirut, she was studying art in London and found herself stranded there when the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975. By enacting 'the paradox of dispossession as it takes possession of its place in the world', Said writes, Hatoum's projects draw out the 'irreconcilability' of strangeness and familiarity that defines the experience of living away from one's homeland.<sup>12</sup> Said's reading bears directly on *Measures of Distance*, which shows Hatoum's mother in the intimacy of her shower, while Arabic fragments of her correspondence with her daughter form a barrier over the image, expressing simultaneously the painful distance and the longings for closeness that mark the artist's experience. Kobena Mercer focuses similarly on the subversive aspects of related filmic disjunctions in Isaac Julien's *Territories*, for instance, in which he mounts a 'cultural struggle to decolonise and deterritorialise cinema as a site of political intervention'. By provoking a carnivalising of cinema as much as a cinema of carnival, Julien unleashes a 'dialogical tendency' appropriate to a 'diasporic people'. For Mercer, artists such as Julien and Black Audio Film Collective developed the techniques of montage, which, drawing on Bakhtin's notion of 'multi-acculturality' and 'inner dialectical quality' of the ideological sign, were posed against what Franz Fanon called the 'ideological fixity of the signs of colonial authority'.<sup>13</sup>

'If the exile was the figure of early modernity,' write Jean Fisher and Gerardo Mosquera, then 'the diasporic or immigrant was the figure of postmodernity with its decentered and deterritorialised subject'.<sup>14</sup> Yet while such a historical distinction accurately situates the diasporic within the context of postcolonial uprooting, the projects of artists such as Hatoum, Julien and Black Audio Film Collective (as well as Ceddo and Sankofa collectives in Britain) acted more as an oppositional force *against* the postmodern, in my view, than an affirmative expression of it. According to Fredric Jameson's now classic model, postmodernism – as both a periodising term and a cultural logic – designates the schizophrenic disorientation

and debilitating amnesia of the subject in the state of advanced multinational capitalism.<sup>15</sup> The geographical homogeneity of built space and the ahistorical imagery of the culture industry were seen by him to compromise the ability to situate oneself in time and space. Jameson's is surely a still relevant account for an expanded history of exile (one that views it as a signifier for a variety of forms of displacement in recent history), particularly in view of the forces of dislocation in the now global capitalist economy.<sup>16</sup> But rather than viewing the diasporic position within critical art practices as an expression of that immobilisation, a work like Black Audio Film Collective's *Signs of Empire* 1984 precisely resisted that culture of simulacral vacuity and mindless consumerism. It did so by determinedly recovering the historical conditions and examining the alienating effects of the legacy of imperial dominance, as found in the visual archive of exoticised and colonised peoples, juxtaposing these images with views of London's now-worn public monuments to imperialism. Given its plural sensitivities, the diasporic was uniquely situated to address the politics of difference, connecting with civil rights, feminist and anti-imperialist struggles, and resurrecting historical, political and cultural figures, like Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes in Julien's *Looking for Langston* 1988, in order to animate and empower current political engagements, thereby defying postmodernism's debilitating image regime.<sup>17</sup>



FOR THEIR PERFORMANCE, *We Come From Your Future*, sound art and activist collective **ULTRA-RED** collaborated with the anti-racist organisation The Monitoring Group to present a sound investigation into the future of anti-racism in the UK. The audience had the opportunity to contribute statements and to listen to invited speakers, including people who have been involved in the anti-racism movement for many years and those who have recently experienced racist violence, as well as participants in The Monitoring Group's 'Rural Racism' project, based in southwest Britain. The statements, written in the participants' different languages, were mounted on the wall after the discussions, forming a multilingual collage.



If the practices of Julien and Black Audio – and one could add Hatoum here as well – propose a ‘critical dialogism’, then it is, according to Mercer, one that challenges ‘the monologic exclusivity on which dominant versions of national identity and collective belonging are based’.<sup>18</sup> They do so by eliciting the ‘disjunctive time’ and ‘internal liminality’ of the marginal and the migrant, as Homi Bhabha has noted.<sup>19</sup> At stake here is not only the defiant retort that diasporic practices made to postmodernist amnesia and spatial perplexity, but also the critical vantage point they established on earlier and even contemporary, competing modes of identity defined within the multicultural and feminist formations of the time – particularly those that attempted to assert a branding of identity (whether in terms of race, gender, sexuality or nationality) as a ground from which to counteract the forces of political and social exclusion.<sup>20</sup> As is now well established, because diasporic experience ‘is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity’, in the words of Stuart Hall, it models ‘a conception of identity which lives in and through, not despite, difference’.<sup>21</sup> Black Audio Film Collective’s *Signs of Empire* proposes just this hybridity in terms of its complex tapestry of still images, texts and sounds – as does Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* – proposing structures that disrupt the purity of film and language alike. As a result, the categories of the visual, the auditory and the scriptural are rendered insufficient on their own, as necessarily dialogical and stranded in their incompleteness and therefore contingent on contextual determinations for their meanings. In other words, this work defeats essentialism through formal means, even while it commits to the particularities of ethnicity, race and gender that define the lived circumstances of the subject within a heterogeneous cultural frame.

Still, despite these highly nuanced artistic treatments of the effects of displacement on subjectivity, by the mid 1990s came the gradual institutionalisation of multiculturalism in Europe and North America – meaning the emergence of the pervasive administration of identity-based and minority-directed policies within dominant governmental, civil and educational institutions, contributing to a veritable ‘race industry’ of managerial practices.<sup>22</sup> As Chandra Mohanty wrote presciently, ‘In a post-Communist, post-national era, multiculturalism has been theorised as a paternalistic, top-down solution to the “problem” of minorities, a dangerous reification of “culture”, or a new way forward to a politics of “recognition” and “authenticity”. But is multiculturalism simply a novel project of social engineering, devised for the twenty-first century by well-meaning liberals or communitarians?’<sup>23</sup> Yet despite challenges such as Mohanty’s to these developments, the result has been the fixing of cultural, racial and sexual signs within the discourse of political correctness, which correlated in the 1990s both to the social divisiveness of identity politics and to the commodification of ethnic and racial difference within neo-liberal globalisation. For theorists like Slavoj Žižek, as well as Michael Hardt and Tony Negri, ‘multiculturalism’ has been instrumentalised as ‘the cultural logic of multinational capitalism’;<sup>24</sup> for others, such as Paul Gilroy, the imperative for critical intellectuals consequently becomes one of writing ‘against race’.<sup>25</sup> In other words, against the institutionalisation of multiculturalism – and its radically simplified notions of difference and cultural identity – we must continue to challenge static categories of subjectivity, whether those tied to geographical place – such as calls for a return to the local in order to resist the homogenising forces of globalisation<sup>26</sup>

– or those that continue the commitment, however fraught, to sexual and racial classes as a basis for a cultural politics of recognition.<sup>27</sup>

### THE NOMADIC

IT WAS IMPERATIVES such as these that contributed to the development in the 1990s of nomadism, which presents us with a second formation in this genealogy of contemporary art and exile. Rirkrit Tiravanija's installation of nomad kitchens in which the New York, Berlin and Thailand-based artist would cook free Thai food for guests, as in *Untitled (free)* at New York's 303 Gallery in 1992; Gabriel Orozco's *Yielding Stone* 1992, a ball representing the artist's weight in plasticine, rolled around New York City by the Mexican artist; and Francis Alÿs's *Paradox of Praxis* 1997, for which the Belgian artist moved a block of ice around the streets of his adopted Mexico City for nine hours until it disappeared – these projects exemplify the poetic lyricism and romantic sensibility of the nomadic. Freed from the constraints of fixed identity and detached from the postcolonial burdens of the struggle for minority recognition that sometimes reinforced those static conceptions of race, ethnicity and nationality, 'artistic nomadism' represents a new model of 'cosmopolitanism', according to critic Jean-Pierre Criqui. While the nomad is 'always carrying along ... a part of one's native country', he or she remains 'independent of the melancholy one ordinarily associates with uprooting', notes Criqui: the nomad is 'a mobile and polymorphous entity'.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike exile, then – whose 'essential sadness', for Said, 'can never be surmounted'<sup>29</sup> – nomadism embraces dislocation as a permanent home with lightness and joy. Indeed, positioned by Hardt and Negri as precisely a 'resistance to bondage', the nomadic represents a 'struggle against the slavery of belonging to a nation, an identity, and a people,' and a 'desertion from sovereignty and the limits it places on subjectivity', a desertion they see as 'entirely positive'.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, nomadism advances a critical strategy for resisting the double tendencies of globalisation: on the one hand, its creative mobility challenges the homogenising aspect of capitalism that renders all places and things alike<sup>31</sup>; on the other, nomadism defies the regressive returns to localism, tribalisation and essentialist identities that the backlash against cultural and economic globalisation sometimes inspires. As Achille Mbembe puts it, 'nomadic artists exercise their right to diaspora, their freedom to wander across the boundaries of various cultures, nations and media forms ... They adopt a tactic marked by cultural nomadism to escape the perverse consequence of tribal identity and, at the same time, claim the creation of what is symbol[ic] against the commoditisation of global economy'.<sup>32</sup>

Yet how critical is this strategy? One could ask, first of all, what means of social commonality or solidarity is available to this class of itinerant individuals? How does the nomadic avoid collapsing into the same debilitating loss of collective solidarity, the splintering of which plagued identity politics? For instance, even postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak has proposed – *pace* nomadism's anti-identitarian posture – the 'strategic' use of an opportunistic and temporary 'essentialism' to unite people in order to achieve specific political goals.<sup>33</sup>

Critics have also pointed out that nomadism's lyrical and romantic tendency is a non-critical one, where the poetic flight of fancy – which tends to dramatise first and foremost the artist's own privileged peripatetic existence – fails to reflexively consider the institutional, historical and geographical parameters in which the nomadic is inhabited, and ends up typically 'veiling the specific material circumstances of the gallery'.<sup>34</sup> In addition, despite the nomad's purported escape from identity, the art market's star system tends to reward individuals with widespread name recognition; consequently when the promoters of discursive sites and relational scenarios are marketed as exemplary artistic personalities, we encounter what Miwon Kwon describes as 'a hermetic implosion of (auto)biographical and subjectivist indulgences', which may be 'misrepresented as self-reflexivity'.<sup>35</sup> These tensions become particularly apparent when mid-career retrospectives are organised for artists like Tiravanija, exhibitions that deploy a monographic format that reaffirms authorial identity despite the artist's attempts to variously problematise that logic via collaborative procedures, the elimination of art objects and non-autobiographical projects.<sup>36</sup>

Still, one could argue that these dangers are more the results of the institutionalisation of the nomadic as an art world and mainstream cultural fashion rather than the unavoidable outcomes of artistic practices, and moreover that the nomadic nevertheless retains its radical potential when it comes to the critique of identity and belonging in a period marked by the troubling reassertion of nationalism, ethnicity, and religious fundamentalism. Perhaps the nomadic holds within itself a similar resistance to traditionalism as that one encounters in the expatriate avant-garde, the critical necessity of which has once again gained ground. In this regard, the shifts of emphases in the cultural expressions of exile over the course of modernity – from anti-nationalist exile, to postcolonial diaspora, to global nomadism – are not so clear cut, nor is their periodisation punctual or definitive. It is not surprising that Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, for instance, return to Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin in their discussions of the cultural and political effects of displacement; similarly Kobena Mercer, in his own theorisation of dialogism, revisits the Russian formalist Mikhail



**TANIA BRUGUERA** is a Cuban artist who divides her time between Havana and Chicago. Her interdisciplinary work focuses on the relationship between art, politics and life. Since 2002 she has been working on a series of projects in which she appropriates structures of power, creating political situations rather than just representing them. Here, **BRUGUERA** instructed the curators to 'fly post' the Tate Britain galleries with pages from the directive on the return policy for illegal immigrants (*P6\_TA-PROV(2008)0293* – the title of the intervention), approved by the European parliament just a few days before the Prologue. In the manner of a protest, the pages covered the rooms and obscured interpretation panels. The intervention was 'activated' by a gallery attendant, employed by **BRUGUERA**, who read out loud passages from the directive whenever visitors asked questions, whether relevant to the intervention or not. By obstructing the usual appearance and function of the gallery and humorously blurring intended participation with the confusion of those taken by surprise, the artist encouraged the audience to engage with issues of migration and exile. **BRUGUERA** was invited to participate in *Exiles* but was unable to obtain a visa to enter the UK. Her absence, though unfortunate, resonated with the themes of the day.