Arrival Cities

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To close the conference, four of the researchers who had participated in the two days of exchange as presenters and moderators were invited to take part in a roundtable discussion: Rafael Cardoso, Partha Mitter, Elana Shapira and Elvan Zabunyan. With the roundtable discussion we intended to consider more deeply particular themes and issues that had emerged during the conference. Three questions were put to the participants as starting points for further reflections on exile and migration in art. The first question related to the type of person that had been at the centre of most of the research presented during the conference: the elite. In fact, in all the geographical areas studied during these two intense days, the vast majority of exiled artists examined belonged to a social and economic elite. Indeed, this seems to be a determining factor of our research, perhaps mainly because of the nature of the documentation and available sources. But it is worth questioning this situation and trying to find out how we can problematise this aspect by being aware of the existence of less visible social strata. The second point we chose to address was that of generations. How should we deal with the different experiences of exile of those who arrived as adults, already trained in their artistic fields, compared to others who arrived as children or even those who were born in their parents’ adopted country but who grew up in a communitarian environment, perhaps scarred by the foreign languages spoken, the specific customs, and the difficulty of accessing social and professional local networks? The last question was oriented to the art produced by the exiled artists and its potential theorisation. Can we make generalisations about how exile affects the production of art? Is it possible to theorise an aesthetic of exile? Can common characteristics be defined in the works of newly arrived individuals? The intense and rich debate which closed the conference, and follows here, opened up new perspectives for the study of the “Arrival Cities”, perhaps pointing to directions that future research could take.
**Rachel Lee:** I’m going to begin with a question for Partha which is about elites. Many of the exiled artists we discussed at the “Arrival Cities. Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies” conference belonged to economic or social elites. How do we address this in our research?

**Partha Mitter:** Of course, the class of the actors is an important factor that we might think about, because others that come to a new country are a very different kind of people—that is difficult to record; personal testimony is not often available. So that’s one thing. But then there’s the wider issue of nationalism. I’m thinking of Brazil but also other nationalisms. Asia and so on. I mean, usually the focus of nationhood is elite-based, intellectual, educated.

**Elvan Zabunyan:** The question of elites is interesting because it is also linked to languages. To be educated means you are able to speak the language if you’re arriving in a city or decide to go somewhere. And if we speak about art or an intellectual context, the position you occupied in your own country before going somewhere else is also important. The French photographer Marcel Gautherot was not from the elite. He decided to go to Brazil because of the ethnographic research he was doing in the context of indigenous Amazonia. He decided to stay there and to belong to the country. It is very important to consider this question of elites at different periods of time in different locations. I think that there are many examples of people in the arts that don’t belong to an elite today.

**Partha Mitter:** But are you thinking about simply the European elite?

**Elvan Zabunyan:** Not only the European elite but the elite who speak the European languages. And of course in the former colonies.

**Partha Mitter:** Can I briefly make a point about Britain? Indian artists, predominantly, came to Britain and they were from the elite strata; in other words, they were educated, but they were not given recognition as artists. Even academics had a lot of difficulties. It’s only recently, in the last eight or ten years, that a lot of research has been done on the ‘ordinary’ people; there’s a lot of material on the labourers and so on, from the late 19th century to the 1940s. And only as late as 2010 a joint universities project examined the contribution of the Indian elite in Britain.

**Elana Shapira:** I would differentiate between social elite and cultural elite. I think the social elite included refugees who came with financial support or kept some of their property. And there were those who had the extra financing to build up the gallery networks like the Askanasy Gallery in Rio de Janeiro. The friendships within this elite also turned it into a cultural elite. Education is a critical part of the cultural elite. The immigrants whom I worked on, Austrian émigrés, arrived
in New York almost completely broke. But they came from different cultural and social circles that allowed them to develop and promote their careers. Either they connected with institutions like the MoMA or they connected with universities. But I don’t think they ever became rich. None of them. Bernard Rudofsky, Frederick Kiesler and Josef Frank in New York were no doubt part of the canon, part of the bohemian elite, but they were not regarded as successful. Kiesler was not successful although he exhibited his works in prominent exhibitions at the MoMA. Rudofsky was successful to a certain extent, yet his ground-breaking exhibitions at the MoMA, *Are Clothes Modern?* and *Architecture Without Architects*, and his books contributed mainly to the public discourse. He did not succeed in becoming a major participant in mainstream modernism. So there was this tension. Being part of the elite did not mean financial success.

**RAFAEL CARDOSO:** I would echo that. Elitism is a wonderful term of abuse. I use it all the time, but we have to be really careful about what we mean by elite, what the definitions are. I can certainly say from the Brazilian experience that several of the refugees I talked about did not come from an elite background in Europe and, in a way, going to Brazil was an opportunity to reinvent themselves, because in some parts of Brazilian society a European is always seen as someone coming from the elite, whether it is true or not. So, for some with a working-class background in Europe, coming to Brazil was a chance to become part of a social and economic elite that they never belonged to at home. On the other hand, some of the refugee artists like August Zamoyski, who came from an aristocratic background, couldn't pay their bills in Brazil. He was teaching because he had no money. So, I think we have to be really careful. Whenever you have refugees, you have a situation where people are in trouble. This is an emergency situation where some people have gained, and some people have lost, and many people have been pushed out of their homes. When you’re dealing with refugees you really have to go case by case when you say whether these people are ascending or descending the social scale, and which social scale, because to be an elite Brazilian is certainly not to be an elite member of the European elite. It’s completely different. So, yes, elitism is a nice word to abuse people with, but let’s be careful with it.

**PARTHA MITTER:** I’m thinking about social and economic status, which of course can vary enormously, but can we use another criterion, of literacy? A generalisation, I know, but that criterion would be useful.

**RAFAEL CARDOSO:** Not for a visual artist though. Some of the painters and photographers had no real formal literary education and yet managed to achieve something as artists.
**Elana Shapira:** I think that literacy is very important. In many cases that I have researched, those who ‘made it’ as designers and architects were published. Take Victor Papanek, for example; it’s his texts that people refer to rather than the actual designs. Josef Frank failed to integrate into the American scene because he couldn’t find a publishing house for his book. Bernard Rudofsky advanced his career by publishing in journals. Of course, this is only an American example.

**Elvan Zabunyan:** It’s also interesting to emphasise that wherever you go you always stay a foreigner, even if you belong to the elite. If you are, for example, from a very wealthy family in an African country and you go to study in a country where there is racism, because you have money you will maybe be involved in circles where you are privileged, but still the difference in identity will be emphasised. I would like to mention the experience of Edward Said who said he was always in this very schizophrenic situation, and his biography was called *Out of Place*, so it was always a question of ‘Where should I be?’

**Partha Mitter:** But he always belonged to a very privileged class, even in America. No doubt he was deeply conscious of the Palestinian question. However wealthy he was – his father had a lot of money – he still felt deeply insecure about that.

**Elvan Zabunyan:** You said the word ‘insecurity’. I think this is part of displacement, even cultural displacement. When you come from abroad or wherever you experience migration, even if it’s a long, long time ago, a different generation, there’s always a feeling of insecurity. But artists can transform this insecurity into strength with their production.

**Laura Karp Lugo:** I would like to turn to the question of generation. Most of the artists we have been discussing left their countries after having studied or practised in their homeland. However, we wonder how to approach the work of artists who went into exile when they were young. You mentioned, Rafael, that half of your family have been in Brazil for many generations and the other half immigrated much more recently. Our question is, should we make distinctions before generations become local? And we were wondering if it depends on the degree of integration, or is it a matter of opportunity or context?

**Rafael Cardoso:** Yes, I think this is very important. Considering World War II, which is the period that I’m most familiar with, there was a hierarchy, a pecking order, of where refugees went. So, for example, Shanghai was open, but it was very difficult to get a visa, especially an immigrant visa, for the US. So, most of the highest level exiles and émigrés from Germany, for instance, ended up in the US. Thomas Mann and many of the rich and successful established writers and artists went to the US, except for the Communists, of course. The Communists
couldn't get into the US, so they went to Mexico because the government was open
to receiving Communist exiles. Brazil was neither a top destination nor a bottom
destination, but somewhere in the middle. Young artists and people who couldn't
get an affidavit to go to the US, people who couldn't get an immigrant visa, settled
for Brazil or Argentina, and this is interesting because a lot of the artists who went
to Brazil and Argentina went young, completely unrecognised in the countries
they were coming from, and became successful or noteworthy while they were
in South America. We have wonderful examples, like the painter Mira Schendel
and the architect Lina Bo Bardi, who are being reclaimed by the countries they
came from. They obviously are not Swiss or Italian, it's not that simple, they are
complicated cases. Mira Schendel is usually labelled Swiss/Brazilian. Where did
the artist become an artist? When did the artist become an artist? When do you
start being something else? I think that has a lot to do with generation. And of
course, as Partha said, the problems of success. If an artist goes to a country and
is not successful there, does that make them less of an artist?

**Partha Mitter:** It raises the question of the second generation. What happens?
Minorities are very seldom secure. In India, Muslims can never feel secure because
at any time they can be attacked. I'm thinking particularly of Britain, second
generation, third generation. Indians do integrate, some more successfully than
others, but are they treated as equals? The majority always makes the claim that
they inherited their country, and so the invention of tradition, nationalism etc.
We need to think about that. But then a lot of Indian artists have been forgotten.
They came and didn't succeed. Rasheed Araeen was a very important figure though
hardly known in Britain until his exhibition *The Other Story*. At the other end of
the scale is the world figure Anish Kapoor, for example.

**Elvan Zabunyan:** But I think this question of generation is complex. It is not just a
question of belonging to a family with children and grandchildren and that sort of
thing. Think about the context of Senegal, or Algeria, or particularly Martinique,
as the main thinkers of the 20th century are from Martinique – Frantz Fanon, Aimé
Césaire and Édouard Glissant. However currently no artists are really working with
that because the cultural, social and economic structures are completely decadent
due to the quasi-colonial situation the French Antilles are experiencing. The Dakar
biennial became something more visible, particularly at the moment it opened to
African-American artists, in 2006, when the national African approach started
to dissolve, becoming a diasporic feeling which opened other doors in the global
world. A young generation of contemporary artists started to have different models
within the continent or abroad. I think it's very important to see the generations,
for it's very complex. It's not about what you give to your own family or to your
spiritual or artistic or cultural family; it’s also the heritage of what happened to a major intellectual and literary movement. I think the question of generation is also a question of heritage and legacy of what were at some points the highlights of intellectual life and what remain afterwards as tools to think about all this.

**Elana Shapira:** Thinking about those who emigrated from Austria to America, there is the first generation of established professionals who had to restart their careers, and their children and grandchildren. Those who immigrated as mature people, as professionals, those who had to restart their professional life in New York or Chicago or Boston, those who came as teenagers, studied and finished high school and started careers as designers, and their children. What were their relationships to the place where they came from? They adapted their socialist Viennese heritage in a different manner and in a different context and passed it on to the next generation. They constantly reworked their heritage and passed it on to the next generation.

**Rachel Lee:** I would like to move now from a focus on the artists themselves to their productions. Thinking about aesthetics, we were wondering if it is possible to theorise an aesthetics of exile or if there are any commonalities that many exile artists share? We were thinking, for example, of Bruno Taut’s work in Istanbul which combines German Modernism and Japanese architecture, as well as an understanding of local building practices. Is this kind of hybridity perhaps typical? At the conference issues of portability and small-scale interventions were mentioned – is that something we should think about more? And in my own research I have also explored more gender-based aspects. I found that women architects and town planners that were in exile or emigrated abroad often engaged with regionalism and vernacular in a way that male architects and town planners possibly did not.

**Elana Shapira:** It’s a challenge. If you start with the painter Hedda Sterne, you have to take the psychological process of integrating into the scene into account, the networks, the language after Expressionism and her personal experience. The exilic aesthetic would be a kind of combination. You can't see her alone as an individual figure, but did she create her own specific language? I think it’s a lot about the language she creates. With regard to hybridity, I think immigrants translate. Their work relies on translations of earlier experiences, psychological experiences, earlier impressions of cities, like we heard today. Émigrés translate these and reclaim their own cultural language, intellectual language and education language. But they can’t live in a bubble. The idea of exilic aesthetics results from these processes that they have to go through. They have to communicate because they can’t live in a vacuum or they would not be accepted or be able to sell their
work or allowed to be presented to the public because locals need to have an echo of what they know already or what they expect from émigrés, according to the cultural stereotypes of émigrés selling their exoticism or specific language. There is a mutual need for dialogue. So émigrés rework a kind of ‘intellectual luggage,’ and psychological impressions and translate them in such a way that the people within their specific environment – Bombay, New York, Lisbon – can understand them.

**Partha Mitter:** We need to think a little bit more about, let’s say, the Viennese and other architects and artists we’ve been thinking about. They belong within a broad spectrum of Western culture. And it’s very interesting, they have their own heritage which they’re translating and they’re interacting with the local situation. But you have generations of South Asians in America. Think of Shahzia Sikander’s case – she doesn’t use her Muslim identity very much, but goes back to South Asian Hindu identity. She became very unpopular in Pakistan. She wanted to create something new in New York and she said, no I’m not a Pakistani artist. What she was doing was not exactly what people in Pakistan would do, like miniature painting. I mean she’s transforming miniature painting and doing something very different – videos. She’s one of the finest artists in the diaspora. You don’t always have to be under the same umbrella. It’s a wider issue.

**Rafael Cardoso:** I’m not completely convinced by this idea of an immigrant aesthetic. I think it has a lot to do with expectations. When we have a displaced artist there’s going to be a first moment of impact where there’s a clash. Someone’s coming from one culture to another culture so there are going to be misunderstandings, problems of translation. Then it really depends who’s moving where from where. A European artist moving to the Americas in the 1930s or 1940s is going to be received as a civilising influence, whereas if that same artist is moving to Asia they are not perceived as the same civilising influence. They are perceived as maybe someone useful for diplomatic reasons, but certainly not a superior culture moving in. We have the situation of what are the expectations, what does the local culture expect of these people who are coming in? And then, most of the artists – and I can only speak knowledgeably about the Brazilian experience – most of the artists who went to São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro took one of two roads. Either they tried to become Brazilian, act Brazilian, they often changed their names, converted to religions, tried to adopt an attitude where they would be embraced, some successfully. Others stood as outsiders. They said, this is what I do, like it or not. And, often, it wasn’t liked. A lot of those artists that we now see as canonical were certainly not canonical within their lifetime. They were actually floating around the margins and fringes of the art world in Brazil. And many of them disappeared. Actually in the Brazilian situation most people either assimilate or stand as outsiders.
Elvan Zabunyan: In literature the narrative is often linked to the author’s experience of displacement. But the words themselves, the aesthetic of writing itself, stays the same. If you come back to Creole, it’s the invention of language, but it doesn’t mean that it’s exile. It’s also a possibility to resist. The Beat Generation also invented a new language. It depends on what language you decide to use as an artist, as a writer, as a musician, and then how the art historians or the critics look at it. Even now, in France, when Picasso is mentioned he is still regarded as Spanish. So it makes things very complicated. The French did not give French nationality to Picasso. Another example could be Constantin Brancusi, as the French state refused to receive his work when he decided to donate it all after he had been living in Paris for decades. I think this is still discrimination. How to categorise someone’s identity? Why does one need to categorise it? But look at the case of an artist, like Adel Abdessemed, for example. He was born in Algeria. He left in 1995 when the director of his art school was assassinated in front of him. In 1995 he came to study in France, and in a decade he became famous because his work was bought by big collectors. When he is discussed in mainstream magazines he is not seen as an artist from Algeria. They write that he is Parisian.

Partha Mitter: Picasso remained Spanish.

Elvan Zabunyan: Yes.

Rafael Cardoso: There is one artist in Brazil who is definitely exile aesthetic and that would be Lasar Segall. When he was in Germany, in the Novembergruppe, he completely integrated into the Expressionist movement and aesthetic. Yet he was not treated as German but as Russian or Jewish or Lithuanian. He went to Brazil in 1923 and there he became Russian again and sometimes German, but always stayed Jewish. When the war began he became obsessed with exile themes and started painting a lot of Jewish themes. He’s never treated as a Brazilian artist; he’s always treated as Jewish-Brazilian, Lithuanian-Brazilian, an émigré artist, he’s never treated in any historiography as a local artist, and that’s very interesting because it reflects on his work. He goes through phases where he tries to be Brazilian and you can see critic-pleasing pictures which are very colourful with exotic animals.

Elana Shapira: When I was speaking about the designers I was speaking specifically about their testimonies when they arrived in New York or Chicago or London, and their impressions of the place and how they perceived the city as ‘a foreigner.’ So we start with what we call in literature their ‘authorial intent’ which develops and changes. But there is this first experience of observing a new place with an anthropological gaze. What is regarded as foreign and how it is absorbed into the work? Their criticism was patronising. Many Europeans came to the USA and
thought, ‘Look, no culture, no history. Look at the mass-consumption, the cheap production’. They were filled with criticism and they were working to subvert it. We have to be careful about the exilic reference here. I speak about a specific conscious reference to subverting. Was it a question of taste, good, bad taste, opening the discussion globally, their design for the new world, opening the perspective? It’s very interesting to me that some cities offered new identities for exiled artists. Vienna is one of these cities, and London, New York – the refugees are seen as New Yorkers, for example. They will attach themselves to the city and not to the state and this is all part of the processes they go through.

**Partha Mitter:** This is very interesting because Paris is like that. Many foreign artists don’t think of themselves as French, but as Parisians. So is there something specifically interesting about the cosmopolitan-ness of the big metropolises where you have your own identity within the urban environment that you don’t really have outside the city? This is probably true of New York. I’m not sure. You wouldn’t have something like that in Brazil. In São Paulo.

**Rafael Cardoso:** I think there’s a tension between Rio and São Paulo. It is definitely much harder to become an honorary citizen of Rio. The only way to become an honorary Carioca is to completely embrace the culture and become more Carioca than the Cariocas. You have to totally turn your back on everything you’ve ever been and become something else, whereas São Paulo is a little bit historically the opposite. It’s a little bit needy, it feels a little bit culturally deprived, so if anybody comes from outside and invests in it, they are embraced by the city. That is perhaps one reason why the São Paulo refugee experience is so well known internationally and the Rio refugee experience is not.

**Elvan Zabunyan:** It’s not just about exiles but also women artists or any non-Western artist. There is the question of the fragment. A lot of artists are working like diptychs, in the space in between, in the fragments, and a lot of women artists during the feminist years in the 1970s were working the fragment. And it is true that literature or language helps a lot with thinking about how you learn a language, and how you write in this new language. Kafka wrote in German. For me this was always a political statement, in a way, this notion of fragment, how you appropriate a foreign language to try to create with that language. It’s true that maybe if there is an aesthetic of displacement, the notion of fragment is important, for several fragments can unite and become one unity.

**Rafael Cardoso:** Can I ask, are you approximating the refugee experience to the condition of being a minority within your own culture? Like women and homosexuals?
Laura Karp Lugo and Rachel Lee

**Elvan Zabunyan:** No, not at all. It’s just that I work a lot on white feminist women in the 1970s. The notion of fragment was very important and this came also with the structure of language. I mentioned the Beat Generation, for example, the idea of cutting, how you put two images together.

**Partha Mitter:** But there is a distinction. And Kafka was an internal exile, of course.

**Elana Shapira:** Stuart Hall spoke about ‘diaspora identity’. He refers to the fact that people in the diaspora need to rework the past in order to look into the future. They need to come to terms with the past. He speaks about narratives of the past and positioning yourself in narratives of the past.

**Elvan Zabunyan:** The notion of diaspora is first linked to the Jewish experience, then you have the Armenians, the Greeks, the Africans, the Palestinians – so this experience of displacement becomes like a position to think about your own identity linked to a global situation. So I think what is interesting about diaspora is, you have people from one country everywhere, from one continent everywhere, with the possibility to create a global network.

**Rafael Cardoso:** This is called strategic essentialism. If you don’t have a story you have to make one up, and I have a really interesting example which is one of the artists I showed, Emeric Marcier, who is Romanian and Jewish. He went first to France, then he went to Brazil where he converted to Catholicism. He had a twin brother who was also an artist and who went to New York and stopped speaking to him because he couldn’t accept the fact that he had become a Catholic. So you have these two people, two Romanian artists, Jewish, twins, who go to two different places and take two completely different directions, and can you call that diaspora? Would it be wrong to call it diaspora?

**Elana Shapira:** You have to go to the individual case, and the individual case study. In a group that developed a collective aesthetics, you have to examine their writings, their interpretations of art, then you consider the specific individual and see if these have any echo in his or her works. But it’s about concrete experiences – people left one place under certain conditions. They fled or were forced or they wanted to go for economic reasons, these are concrete experiences shaping their ‘authorial intent’. Do we regard those who came like any other person or do we try to figure out the neighbourhood they lived in, the positions, the connections? Did they connect with other émigrés? Did locals in America or in Europe or Istanbul or Bombay want these émigrés as émigrés or did they welcome them because of their talents? The Americans searched for émigrés that ‘spoke’ the modernist language – a certain language that they wanted to ‘hear’, a progressive language. They wanted the émigrés that brought a certain heritage with them, a
certain language with them, and they wanted to transform it according to their own interests. This was part of émigré culture. I’m not going to essentialise the experience of the exile or the émigré, but I do think that the concrete historical experiences are relevant here, that people left a place under certain conditions and they were also stereotyped as émigrés.

Elvan Zabunyan: I wanted to talk about terminology. Cosmopolitanism, transnational, global, local – all these words we’re using in the context of our post-colonial global art history today. I want to speak about this methodology because it is really part of the way we name artists, artworks, or even writers. The terminology is linked to the translation of the way you understand a certain word. And, for example, it was interesting to me that we did not speak a lot about universalism, for example, in the last two days of the conference, when universalism is really the main question. Or internationalism. This still belongs to a Eurocentric terminology, but still it’s interesting for some cities, for example Istanbul. Istanbul has always been a very cosmopolitan city and in some maps in the early 20th century Turkey was in Europe. But in recent discussions about Turkey in Europe everybody forgot that Istanbul was a cosmopolitan city. You cannot compare the experience in New York with an experience in another city – it’s also how you write the historiographies, how you write art histories and it comes back to regionalism and to vernacular. I think it is also a question of scale and strategy and also of power. It is a question of institutional power.

Rachel Lee: This discussion has underlined the importance of essentializing neither exilic and migratory experiences nor the artworks that were produced through them. Because of their heterogenous and individual nature it seems crucial to explore them from a situated perspective, with a focus on the contexts in which they developed. As you have described, the urban contexts in which the exiled artists practised seem particularly key in this regard. However, as the cases are all so different, it makes theorising artistic exile a challenge. Perhaps it is easier to theorise the places than the artists themselves? This is something to keep thinking about. Thank you all very much for your thought-provoking inputs!

Laura Karp Lugo: Finally, I wanted to come back to what was said on the generational issue when we observe situations of exile. The exile experience is lived differently by each individual, depending on a multitude of conditions, related to language as well as social, economic and professional situations before departure. But above all, it was underlined in the discussion to what extent the experience of exile is transmitted from generation to generation, a heritage that conditions trajectories and exilic production. This raises questions about the consequences of exile for the second and third generation: What’s the impact of this heritage in the place that
exiles’ descendants occupy in their own society, which is not that of their parents or grandparents? What’s the impact of this heritage on their artistic production? Every life path will have its own answer. We are all contributing to these histories of exile. Thank you all for participating in this challenging conversation on a highly significant topic from any epoch.