Unfolding Identities

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In recent years, it has become de rigueur for major art exhibitions that survey large swaths of global art developments to draw parallels between the nomad as a figure of creative resistance and the cultural figure of the artist. The disseminations of contemporary artistic interest worldwide signal a decentralization from a more historically particularized and syndicated understanding of art to one that has seen a shift of emphasis from aesthetic concerns to social issues, from static to temporal processes or events, from object-oriented to site-specificity, and from art that is declarative to art that can double as non-art. In conjunction with social and political activism and emergent anti-imperialist movements, critical practices and institutions are looking for new modes of production and participation and new spaces of critique in the overlapping fields of culture, urbanism, and politics. Notably, conceptual artists have extended the reach of art into multiple and overlapping public and private domains, with art taking multifarious forms and penetrating many media and channels, including Internet and community-based practices.

It is understandable that as the world shrinks ever faster, the trope of the nomad has become increasingly popular in terms of lending theory to emergent forms of reterritorialized and delocalized social movements and neo-tribal collectivities. Mobility in the form of human migration and communication (i.e., the rise of mobile telephony) signals the potential for a new radicalism that can challenge what Henri Lefebvre called the “representations of space.”\(^1\) For Lefebvre, such representations of space meant the encoding of hegemonic power into the built environment so as to be experienced by the individual as a disembodied and naturalized assemblage of segmented, spatial spectacles.

The channelling of nomadic movements by the state, institutions, and other dominant forces is challenged by the metonymic power of the rhizome, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari saw as an endlessly creative, decentring, and variegating set of machinic assemblages with the capacity for new and often provisional collectivities that can escape and even break down processes of encoding and enframing. “How many people today live in a language that is not their own?” asked Deleuze and Guattari in *From Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature.*\(^2\) In other words, how many people lead lives that are able to transgress the delineations between theory and reality? Confronted by codes of “language, literature, thought, desire, action, social institutions, and material reality,” the nomad is protean in its adaptive capacity and signifies a subversive force from within any system in order to, as Deleuze and Guattari famously said, secure “c’est de sortir, c’est d’en sortir.”\(^3\)

According to Homi Bhabha, the nomad is an “unfixing” figure, as much a traveller of undetermined movement as a tropic figure of critical


\(^{2}\) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *From Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

\(^{3}\) Ibid.
Nomads in the form of immigrants or refugees are impervious to borders, not necessarily by choice, but often by lack of choice; the barriers of containment nonetheless heavily mark their transgressive bodies. Nomads operate at the thresholds of space and politics, language and power, and in so doing, constantly negotiate and produce new concepts of transcultural identities, both personal and collective, that are destabilizing to established orders, systems, and codifications.

Mobility, for Arjun Appadurai, has become an emblematic concept of life within the globalized world, understood in fluid terms of cultural “flows” and “scapes.” Mobility is conceived of in all its aleatory complexity, from diasporic movements to the circulation of resources and ideas. But nomadology, in the truest sense, is available not only to the poor and those without official papers, it is even more accessible to the privileged and the powerful. This is an often under-considered aspect of much of the writing about nomadic resistance, lending such writings an air of idealism and/or abstraction. In this cat-and-mouse game played between containment and elusiveness, the winner is overwhelmingly the cat.

The forces of globalization are not total. Nor are they isomorphic. Rather, they are full of disjunctures in which meaning and identity are re-grounded as much as they are uprooted. While much has been written in terms of an individual’s localized relationship to structures and processes of dominant power, issues of longing and belonging, of a desire for attachment, have been de-emphasized. Longing and belonging compel the nomad; they are not exclusively terms attached to notions of stability and rootedness. Here it is worth recalling Antonio Gramsci’s famous theory of hegemony and the ambiguous desire on the part of individuals to be accepted within the norms produced and perpetuated within a social order that often operates in their disfavour.

Nomadology as a tool to theorize the multiple means by which travelling individuals negotiate and renegotiate subject positions in the context of codifications of family and community groups, gender, skin colour, economic and social class, and nationstates is useful but problematic in terms of the often devastating psychological and physical damage borne by these same individuals during the very process of negotiating subject positions. Deleuze’s idea of “limitless postponements” of postmodern “societies of control” seem utopian, since “limitless postponements” themselves are configured as stratagems of control. Stress, social loneliness, feelings of exclusion, powerlessness in the sense of the inability to control or even have a say in one’s own future, physical duress, lack of education or under-education resulting in a deficiency of skills, hunger, and illness are all characteristics of the
experiences of the poor. Poverty and other examples of global distress are as much a multifarious and rhizomic condition as they are expressions of containment and control.

Many artists have responded to global social problems by adopting a documentary model of practice, a model that further collapses, at the very least, the conventional distinctions between art and non-art. At the same time, there is a pedagogical aspect (and even a shock aspect) to the documentary art so prevalent in such seminal exhibitions as Documenta 11. The shock is not the modernist “shock of the new” but the shock of recognizing the complexity and diversity of social experiences and subject matter in the world to which art, confined largely to Euro-American terrain and perspectives, has until recently failed to engage.

Until recently, an obstinately normative narrative continued to push to the margins artists of difference, such as women artists and artists of colour, from the vast expanse of the developing world. Criticality in art was highly circumscribed by the prevailing Euro-American codes of art historical understanding, not by the politics of difference with its intersections of postcolonial, feminist, and anti-racist debates.

The forces of globalization have pushed to the fore issues of identity as they relate to geography (or locality), politics, history, and questions of ethnicity, gender, and race. But they have also propelled the global oligarchs to map the world according to their desires, to assert their will over the world’s resources and its many exploitable peoples. The playing out of cultural symbols and histories, the delineations of various groups and ethnic definition and assimilation, and the interplay between traditional and modern concepts of identity and space are also key concerns. Questions of constitution regarding disciplines by methods of interdisciplinarity are creatively examined by many of today’s artists. And that is to be expected, for it is through the various group identities of difference—identities that elude the development of rigid definitions—through their very bodies, such diversely rich ideas for the enactment of new political analysis can eventuate.

Issues of exclusion and cultural marginality are particularly resonant today in the Arab world, as is the supposed incompatibility of religious traditionalism with secular enlightenment and modernity, which provides the pretext for imperialist enforcement in Iraq. The Emirate of Sharjah, recognized by UNESCO as one of the world’s great heritage sites, is located at the crossroads of one of the world’s most complex geographic intersections. In terms of the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq sit to the north; Pakistan, India, and China to the east; Saudi Arabia to the south; Israel, Palestine, and the continent of Africa to the west.
The orbit of departure and arrival into the United Arab Emirates is just as likely, if not much more so, to be Delhi, Colombo, and Addis Ababa as it is Paris, London, and Rome. The world beyond the so-called West is full of such orbits, which are scarcely thought about let alone imagined to exist as anything worth knowing except to serve as alimentation for further Orientalism.

The cultural emirate of Sharjah makes for a particularly fecund heterotopic space, a “counter site,” as Michel Foucault defined it in his 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces” (my mind deviates to Robert Smithson’s notion of a non-site), in which “the real sites, all of the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” Such sites would include the complex ways in which modernity and traditionalism co-exist that, according to Foucault, presuppose “a system of opening and closing that both isolates them (as heterotopias) and makes them penetrable.”

In recent years, Arab intellectuals from Edward Said to Mohammed Abed al-Jabri have offered radical new perspectives that find in the past the basis for a pluralistic exegesis of the Arab context today. The geopolitical location of Sharjah, within a framework of rich cultural heritage and contemporaneity, provides a diversity of openings for intellectual dialogue and creative activity. Within the considerations here outlined, in a culture rooted in actual nomads and Bedouins, and not just metaphorical ones, there is much dramatic evidence challenging the most entrenched preconceptions of what it means to actually experience and partake in the offerings of this part of the world.

The problems here are global in scope, albeit more underlined in terms of questions of religion, gender, and Arab identity; the struggle of self-affirmation, of the maintenance of tradition in terms of a historical rather than ahistorical reading; of an engagement with the West in a manner not philologically and methodologically Orientalist but mutually contributive; of negotiating the flows of globalization with regard to the interplay of local, regional, and international considerations in ways which are not merely assimilative of Euro-American values but permissive and acknowledging of natal perspectives.

The Sharjah Biennial offers a unique context for artists to fill their symbolic roles as nomads and contribute to the creative and intellectual dialogue ensuing in this vital and often misunderstood region of the world. The distrust of art as a function of institutions, so common in the Euro-American context where the administration of art is more developed—that is, where the political economy of the art world that maintains the categorical status of art is extremely developed—is less...
germane in Sharjah, where contemporary art is less enfolded within an art system.

On the contrary, art can be more greatly empowered in such a situation; in effect, it can repair its earlier vital role, away from the emasculating context of the Euro-American situation where irony often offers the limits of critical expression. Art can bear content more complexly, if not necessarily more freely; it can offer meaning, experience, and emotional effect. In what Raymond Williams called “structures of feelings”—that is, issues of friendship, happiness, longing, and belonging—art can imaginatively and politically help in the understanding of the world. In Sharjah, as in other sites of the so-called periphery, art can rediscover its collective impulse, as a practice of critical reflection and longing.

I would like to add a few personal words. It is a cliché to say so, but art is indeed a voyage of discovery and self-discovery. As an artist, I have found both discovery and self-discovery in extending my practice to beyond just making my own works of art for exhibition. I have found that the true heart of art beats strongly in many parts of the world, often more strongly than in the so-called centre, and often it does so in the furthest reaches of the world, places such as Senegal, Mexico, Nigeria, Indonesia, Brazil, Cuba, and many other points of the so-called periphery. Being an artist often means a life of non-identity with one’s environment. Artists also long to belong, but the curse and saving grace of art are that it can never entirely belong.