

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.¹ 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.'²

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',³ according to Lukács; similarly Heidegger wrote that, 'Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world.'⁴ 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.⁵

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',⁶ 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.⁷ 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'.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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.¹² 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-accentuality' and 'inner dialectical quality' of the ideological sign, were posed against what Franz Fanon called the 'ideological fixity of the signs of colonial authority'.¹³

'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'.¹⁴ 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