

JILL BAIRD | ANTHONY SHELTON

# Nomadic Aesthetics and the Importance of Place

**SAFAR/VOYAGE BRINGS** together artists and writers to reflect upon migration, war, geopolitics, and aesthetics. The west coast of Canada may seem worlds apart from the issues, cultures, and artistic practices of Arab, Iranian, and Turkish artists. Not so. The ideas these writers and visual artists confront are not foreign to us. The resonances are many, including the legacy of colonialism, displacement by the state, neo-colonial incursions, categorization by others, community and conflict, beauty and philosophy. For these reasons *Safar/Voyage* fits well at the Museum of Anthropology—a unique museum with an interest in engaging in conversations that complicate fixed notions of culture, art, and diversity while also challenging standard exhibition practices.

Place matters. This introduction was written in Vancouver, in an institution that has an innovative history that ties it closely to diverse cultural communities. It is common practice here for people to state who they are by saying where they are from. As a sign of respect and recognition, Musqueam—the Aboriginal community whose traditional, unceded lands the University of British Columbia and MOA sit upon—are publically acknowledged at events and through the artworks

that greet visitors as they enter the building and its grounds. Along with the land on which it is located, the practices of MOA are always open to contestation; by acknowledging this we remind ourselves of the power of place and the role of museums as public institutions.

In *Safar/Voyage* we do not claim to represent place. We actively subvert the label “Middle East” in the texts in this publication and through the selection of visual works in the exhibition. The diversity of lived experience, history, and artistic vision gathered here cannot be comfortably held within a singular geographic territory, however politically and historically inscribed it may be.

Place is not the only thing that matters. “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars,”<sup>1</sup> wrote Walter Benjamin, and it is through art and its institutions, as well as universities and libraries, that the articulation of colonial and neo-colonial objects and ideas has most potently been fixed. Museums, as their critics have often reiterated, have historically reproduced and hybridized the various tropes of “otherness.”

Over the past thirty years, the complex and changing issues around the politics and poetics of representation, together with the structural

transformations taking place worldwide, have fuelled productive debates and projects within museums and galleries, forcing a much greater self-reflective and critical attitude. *Safar/Voyage* is a project on this continuum.

The lineage of *Safar/Voyage* can be traced back to *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris, 1989), a connection that Fereshteh Daftari illuminates in her essay, “Passport to Elsewhere.” Two years later, *Lotte oder der Transformation des Objekts* (*Lotte or the Transformation of the Object*; Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna, 1991) critiqued the exoticizing trope used by *Magiciens* in its selection and organization of artists and works. By the century’s end, *Kunst-Welten im Dialog* (*Global Art in Dialogue*; Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 1999–2000) rejected all tropes and proposed their replacement by relational histories. In the first decade of this century, *Images of Other Cultures* (National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 2001), *Die Tropen* (Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2008–9), and *The Potosí Principle* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2010) further extended these explorations through exhibitions.

*Lotte* sought to create a definitive break with primitivism and refocus attention on the global flows and disjunctions between production, consumption, and meanings, thereby reconfiguring the artist as a global and globalized person. *Kunst-Welten im Dialog* and *Images of Other Cultures* focused on the cultural and historical staging of difference that displayed the flow and interpenetration of ideas, designs, and transnational

capital—the first from an art historical perspective and the second from an anthropological standpoint. More recently, *Die Tropen* examined, through ethnography and contemporary art, the mutual influences between Germany and the equatorial world, and *The Potosí Principle* explored the juxtaposition of contemporary art with Andean Baroque paintings, revealing similarities between the capitalist economies of the eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries. Differences between the institutionalization of aesthetics, anthropology, economics, and ethics have become increasingly untenable.

The liberation of art and objects from tired categorizations leads to an ever closer interrogation of the nature of museums. The works of the eighteen artists represented in *Safar/Voyage*, and the visual essay in this book by Jayce Salloum, are complex, multilayered, and ambivalent; they emerge from the conflation of personal and socio-historical experiences and the fissures between local and universal conditions. Here, not only does place matter, but place shifts from the inside to the outside, from migrant to immigrant, from refugee to émigré. The works offer multiple voyages, all dependent on the interaction between the art and the perceptions of the individual interlocutors.

Fereshteh Daftari, curator of *Safar/Voyage*, offers the exhibition as a journey that takes many different routes, which in turn offer many different visions. As she asserts, “travel in the region is not a romantic adventure” in the early twenty-first century. The works do not reference

a static, well-ordered world in which geography and cultural and ethnic divisions are sharply and neatly ordered according to colonial or neo-colonial master narratives, but a world generated by crisis capitalism: subject to the constant disruption of borders, and to transgressions, aggression, the suspension of values, and the attempted erasure or reconfiguration of memory and history. The travel narratives of this world are not founded on curiosity or alterity or the romance of landscape and history. Instead, we see a deeply fractured and increasingly re-territorialized world, with transitory cultures and populations that criss-cross national borders.

This is a world in which state borders appear to be even more greatly materialized than ever before, while simultaneously highly permeable, capable of being transgressed by electronic media as well as capital, military technology, and the effects of international policy deals and decisions. Cultural identity goes beyond geographical territoriality—beyond the static declaration of place. Behind the apparent material expression of place lies a shifting classificatory logic based on destabilized sets of names and the denials of names and the identities they encode. The Middle East is itself one shifting classification of named countries, places, and peoples, imbued with different moral discourses by the West at different times in its history, a classification never free from narrative, visual, or sonic retorts, which push back against the external asymmetrical forces that have enforced and inscribed their hegemony.

The works in *Safar/Voyage* represent such retorts, questioning the predominant constitutive geography, ethics, and aesthetics that continue to imbue Western consciousness more than three decades after the disclosure of their political and ideological pretensions in Edward Said's highly influential book *Orientalism*.

The idea of travel or passage in these artists' works—constructed from themes of wandering, exile, migration, and homeland—overlaps with what the film scholar Teshome Gabriel identifies as a central theme in Black cinema and that for him constitutes a “nomadic aesthetic.” In this genre, land has been de-territorialized and converted into a “mythic wilderness” that articulates the journey essential to the very existence of Afro-American cinema or, in this case, contemporary Arab, Iranian, and Turkish art. Theory and criticism in the West, for Gabriel, are canonized as a “way of fixing rather than liberating their objects.” “A wandering life,” he writes, “produces a wandering aesthetics,” which possesses the potential to destabilize the boundary between the canon or script and that which constitutes it.<sup>2</sup> It thereby is released to endless interpretation through the memories, whims, and fantasies of its audiences.

The works represented in *Safar/Voyage* disclose a nomadic aesthetic that, by questioning the dividing line that separates them from a supposed physically fixed reality, defies the Western imagination. The self cannot exist without the other, but this nomadic aesthetic unsettles any easy distinction between them; it also creates a kind

of geographical and art-historical flux while, at the same time, provoking the materialization of political fissures that always lie hidden behind their discourses.

The permeability and immateriality of national, ethnic, or geographical borders, frontiers, or boundaries can also be applied to institutions themselves. Museums and galleries have themselves become deinstitutionalized through the growth of and dependency on electronic media that link institutions through their individual staff members. Writing in relation to the effects of digital networks, the cultural theorist Paul Virilio said, “Deprived of objective boundaries, the architectonic element begins to drift and float in an electronic ether, devoid of spatial dimensions, but inscribed in the singular temporality of an instantaneous diffusion.”<sup>3</sup> Through internationalized and nationalized professional institutions, interest groups, and personal relationships, curators, conservators, educators, administrators, and marketers are enmeshed in virtual and physical networks that transcend any one institution. These networks stimulate centripetal forces potentially at odds with the centrifugal forces that in the past guaranteed institutional coherency and stability. Intra-institutional networks are open-ended, ambiguous, and potentially contradictory. They eschew any necessary coherency or rational, concerted trajectory, creating in their place arenas of struggle, dissension, and liberation articulated globally.

Institutions must now continually attempt readjustment and recalibration between diverse subject positions and their related networks and the missions and visions that give the institutions their specificity. These movements or accommodations are inevitably always partial, unstable, and sometimes shifting but encourage new synergies and liberties of thought.

Whereas in the past, institutions and organizations such as the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Louvre had discrete identities, all that remains today are signs divorced from a specific “concrete reality.” The ethos of these institutions circulates freely in the highly refined atmosphere of twenty-first-century capitalism. Identity is no longer anchored to an institution or place; neither is it defined by a tradition or history, but by a sign made into a brand, which can be magically materialized anywhere in the world through temporary exhibitions and loans—providing, that is, that such spectacles are staged within an architectural idiom that carries the same “weight” as its original. Museums themselves travel through their exhibitions and exercise their transformative magic no longer within the confines of national borders, but across continents and regions.

Whether we talk of political, geographic, or cultural boundaries, or institutional delimitations of museums and galleries, we need to change the institutional imagination from the metaphor of solidity to that of liquidity.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-first-century reality can be better understood in terms of

liquid metaphors: ebbs, flows, and currents, as well as osmosis and permeability. Electronic media, the movement of capital, and the employment of cultural forces flow with fewer and fewer restraints across international and regional borders and boundaries. These liquid flows are two-way. As diverse external networks manifest themselves through their specific internal interlocutors, those same interlocutors project themselves externally through the increasingly dense networks they are tied into. The institution therefore becomes a nexus where its own visions, values, and missions are communicated externally; at the same time, those of innumerable other agencies are transmitted and circulated inside them. The external and internal begin to blend, diluting the sense of exclusivity while exacerbating what becomes defined as the “universal.”

This two-way permeability dissolves the dualism implicit in the discrimination between self and other or subject and object. Alterity, plus the system of binary discriminations that upholds it, begins their dissolution. Subject and object collapse into each other and become divided from other subject/objects by their own discriminate networks based on political positionalities. Truth criteria, reason, ethics, identity—all become relativized, blurred, and indeterminate, making postmodernist discourse into the legitimated ideology of an alienated, distanced, and fragmentary social reality. There are no interstitial spaces of creative becoming, as the critical theorist Homi Bhabha proposes,<sup>5</sup> because there are no solid

political or social blocks between which they can be forced into being. The museum is universalized through its own indeterminacy, its failure to materialize itself or fix and subjugate its operations to an ethos. It becomes part of an existential magma coursing through the veins of the world.

Museums are not only “here,” articulating the far away or “other,” but they are “there” too. The British Museum, the Metropolitan, and the Louvre are not the dematerialized centres of an equally old world civilization but the new metropolises of an unfolding world. At the same time, the other is present within our former culturally circumscribed environments. We and other, zones of peace and war, virtue and evil—all are indissolubly linked and implicated. As Virilio notes: “With the interfacing of computer terminals and video monitors, distinctions of here and there no longer mean anything.”<sup>6</sup> Mona Hatoum’s *Hot Spot* (2006) provides an image of this collusion between object (geographical) categories and subjects; when placed within a museum it radiates its own particular type of warning, which we would do well to consider.

This shift toward an epistemology of fluidity, permeability, and complexity is echoed in the essays by Fereshteh Daftari, Derek Gregory, Jayce Salloum, and Naghmeh Sohrabi and the artworks by the eighteen artists exhibited in *Safar/Voyage*. Fereshteh Daftari, in “Passport to Elsewhere,” offers itineraries instead of fixed notions of identities, geographies, and politics. Artist, viewer, and interlocutor choose their own trajectories. Daftari

uses the works in the exhibition as a compass, where orientation and placement is internal and external, global and local. As the exhibition's curator, Daftari provides us with layered insights into each of the works. Derek Gregory, in his essay "Middle of what? East of where?," asks what and where we are talking about. Gregory draws our attention to the imaginative geography that is the Middle East and unpacks something that is far from being an "innocent construction." Naghmeh Sohrabi turns our attention to the storied histories of nineteenth-century travellers to Europe from the Ottoman and Qajar empires, Egypt, and other Arab countries. Sohrabi's essay, "Travel to the West," speaks of travel writers whose experience of travel to Europe was markedly different from travels within the Islamic world and a world away from the European travellers' sense of the so-called Orient. Jayce Salloum's visual essay (*sites + demarcations*) is, in his own words, "a work in progress, completing the work in the sense that it can be read but as nonsense in the sense that it could be complete." Part of a much larger work, it is a journal of sorts—documenting, questioning, fracturing expectations.

These writers and artists give us something to think about, something that enlarges upon place, history, and representation. The journey of mind and spirit offered by *Safar/Voyage* is born from times like ours, when borders are both fluid and fixed, and when the complexities of histories are too easily forgotten, if ever known.

#### NOTES

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), trans. John Osborne, introduction by George Steiner (London: Verso, 1998), p. 34.
- 2 "A wandering life produces a wandering aesthetics. A traveling aesthetic requires traveling theory and criticism; yet theory and criticism are canonized, and thus become a way of fixing rather than liberating their objects." Teshome Gabriel, "Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and Black Independent Cinema: Traces of a Journey," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).
- 3 Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 3.
- 4 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).
- 5 Homi Bhabha, introduction to *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 6 Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, p. 13.