

— Dmitry Vilensky

FROM NOMADS TO ROOTS, AND BACK

THE TRANSFORMATION OF NOMADISM

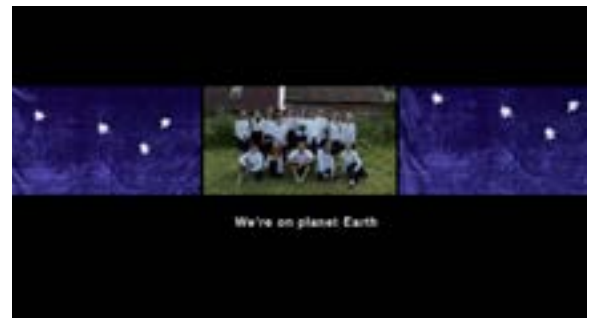
Political tendencies also provide us with signs that a local agenda is prevailing. Michael Marder identifies this new agency in his description of the Occupy movement: 'Its staying power is bound to the protesters staying in their chosen gathering place, their defiant perseverance in a locale'.¹

The trend, across art and politics, begs the question: are these changes to be taken seriously as a political force in the art world? Or are they merely part of a fad that valorises and exploits local communities and grassroots movements? Will the cultural sector make serious efforts to descale the art ecosystem and to restructure its funding system so that it will be able to support truly reproductive situated artistic work?

Before we draw conclusions it makes sense to take a close look at the idea of nomadism and to consider why this revolutionary concept became so seductive, and how it transformed in the years after its introduction by Deleuze in the early 1970s.

Former citizens of the USSR, such as myself, who became tentatively stateless at the beginning of the 1990s, have been particularly susceptible to a benevolent enthusiasm for nomadism. As the economy of the global art scene grew at an accelerated speed, it offered

us the mobile existence of the wanderer. Local networks and peer allegiances emerged with, and were negotiated through, global relationships. It is no exaggeration to say that nomadic ways of thinking and acting had become hegemonic. We did not ask, 'where do you live?', but rather, 'where are you based?'



In her 2014 article, 'Nomads and Migrants: Deleuze, Braidotti and the European Union', Eva Aldea celebrates nomadism without its liberating negative state of mind. Instead, we hear speculations from an administrative perspective, claiming that elites should carefully promote a nomadic consciousness, and eliminate any form of belonging, because such attachments create reactionary localism and nationalism.

Aldea insists on nomadic approaches as the most advanced and progressive resources for the construction of a new European Union. A symptomatic quotation: 'Media producers, often elite, and media consumers from all strata of

society are responsible for creating a social imaginary that reflects and enables nomadic thinking rather than a sedentary one. Only by means of a collective effort to create representations adequate to the European Union that we already inhabit, can the sense of fear, anxiety and loss of identity that a move from a sedentary to a nomadic relationship to place entails be counteracted. This effort may yet prove crucial to the project of the European Union as whole.² This normalised interpretation of nomadism openly manifests its instrumentalisation by what Deleuze would call the despotic monsters of the State. For him, the circulation of capital and art are examples of such monstrosity.

Deleuze was searching, passionately and desperately, for a revolutionary subjectivity, when he wrote that *‘the revolutionary problem today is to find some unity in our various struggles without falling back on the despotic and bureaucratic organisation of the party or State apparatus: we want a war-machine that would not recreate a State apparatus, a nomadic unity in relation with the Outside, that would not recreate the despotic internal unity’*.³

Even now, I believe that Deleuze’s suggestion of the figure of the nomad as a model of revolutionary subjectivity (in contradistinction to the failed subjectivity of worker and peasant), was crucial for the development of social movements after 1968. As such, it continues to be a dominant concept in activist circles and for those who are trying to build horizontal organisations. But as we have observed from the beginning, lately, something has happened with this radicalism. Right now, we understand that we need to develop basic strategies of survival rather than to speculate on permanent revolution. Ecological crisis has brought with it a recognition of the need for militant environmentalism. This tendency has become more evident and relevant during the pandemic, as we have become aware of the domestic requirements for sustainable local production, from food to relationships. New environmentalism includes urgent measures for the cultivation

of symbiosis between humans, nature, and non-living matter. It also needs to reinvent new support structures for common living – structures which are not subjugated by alienated capitalist modes of relating. The militancy of new environmentalism is revealed when we recognise its anti-capitalist nature.



ART AND NOMADIC LIFE

The art world recently moved from a local model of development – national schools – to a nomadic one. Arguably, this happened only during the late postmodernist period. This does not mean that artists never travelled before 1989: Albrecht Dürer went to Venice to study in the fifteenth century, and then returned to Nuremberg. More recently, many artists travelled to Paris and stayed there, participating in exhibitions and studio visits. These artists became part of the rich Parisian art life, or else they returned home with new knowledge and ideas. A similar process occurred after the Russian Revolution, when Moscow and the USSR attracted artists from Mexico and other countries. These artists came to see the developments of the new Soviet Union and they also contributed to local life before returning their country of origin. In the 1970s hundreds of artists relocated to New York, just as their predecessors had moved to Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. There has been yet more migration within nation states. Artists moved to metropolises – cultural centres at which new meaning was produced and from which it was exported – even while remaining within the so-called national schools.

Only later was the hegemony of nomadic relations established. It was attended by the swift growth of globalism, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the marketization of the arts. Artistic circulation became increasingly enmeshed with the circulation of global capital, which penetrated every sphere of human activity. The affinity between art and nomadism has come about as a product of these movements and groundless networks. This means that travelling has become a default mode for relating to space. Some artists may stay in one place for a long time, or even forever. However, their relationship to the place they occupy is consistently subjugated to the principle of movement.

All this certainly has some positive aspects. Art always needs a certain distancing and estrangement. Art also depends upon the proliferation of diversity and the creolisation of experiences, methods, languages, and bodies. New places which lie outside existing centres sometimes call for visibility. When they attain it, they embed themselves into a new circulation of biennales and art fairs, or contributing to 'the international of the margins', a term coined by John Roberts.⁴ But at a certain moment – very recently – it became clear that there is something wrong with this model, and that it is deeply intertwined with the new monsters of despotism. Unlike at the time of Deleuze's writing, the newborn monsters are not represented by national states or direct repressions, but are the flexible machines of profit extraction and soft control whose foundations lie with deterritorialised fluidity.

What to do? Any return to localism and roots sounds deeply suspicious because reterritorialisation has been instrumentalised by right-wing forces which take advantage of crisis and disillusionment to advance conservative and nationalist agendas. What form of subjectivity do we need, then, in the art world, and what kind of institutions and projects should it seed? I would advocate for the idea of militant cultural environmentalism, an approach which

protects the diversity of many unknown and well-known species, and which celebrates endangered and yet-unborn ideas. Today, under growing pressure to take urgent steps to save the climate and ecology, we should not forget that we also need to save certain cultural phenomena. This may seem obvious, when we speak about the cultural heritage and activity of indigenous groups, but I would include several other phenomena that are threatened by extinction.

Following Walter Benjamin (and other messianic thinkers), we should treat progress as a series of catastrophes, but this does not mean that we should cease in our efforts to rescue some crucial emancipatory meanings from the past. This is about the necessity to rescue all dead, ghosts, utopias and to keep pursuing negative politics. It is related to the possibility that we might reimagine the world as something different from what it is and what it has been. What we need to defend is not our shabby, semi-ruined, colonised-by-capital cultural environment and its unjust histories, but all possibilities for the defence of another world which is hidden in plain sight.

CONCLUSION

Bruno Latour has recently and deservedly received attention for his passionate writings advocating for the concepts of territory and earth. He reminds us that the political left should reconsider class compositions as geo-social phenomena, and that we might start to speak about territory, protection, traditions and belonging. How, then, might we differentiate this new agency from reactionary localism? My guess is that it could, in fact, be rather easy, because our new agency must be combined with justice, equality, and radical hospitality towards humans and other species. Territory and national state must be disconnected – just as Kurds and Zapatistas have been trying to realise for decades.



Within the globalised cultural agenda, we need expropriation and we need to de-scale global cultural finances, in favour of the localisation of culture for sustainable use by local communities and its workers. We need to rebuild an art economy within a culture of care, solidarity and participation. We need to face this new biopolitical regime of control and isolation, with its endlessly innovative technologies for the extraction of profit from human separation. Art and culture need to be as brave as those people around the world who have been protesting social and racial injustices in the midst of a pandemic. The new sovereign monsters of power are looking for new ways to destroy society. But it makes little sense to demand a U-turn when any new society would be born out of isolations, screens, illness and fear. This new society will survive only if it embraces the revolutionary function of nomadism as a search for new people and new land. Not in some vague place beyond the horizon, but right here, directly beneath your feet, is where new roots will grow. As Donna Haraway reminds us, you have to be here, not everywhere.

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This text is an edited and updated version of a talk delivered at 'Art in times of collapsing systems', a conference organised by Luxembourg Art Week, 4-5 November 2019.

REFERENCES

1. See: <https://www.michaelmarder.org/articles/texts-in-pdf/>.
2. Eva Aldea is an independent researcher and writer. She is author of *Magical Realism and Gilles Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature* (Continuum 2010). She writes and speaks on critical theory and philosophy. For full article see: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/nomads-and-migrants-deleuze-braidotti-and-european-union-in-2014/>.
3. Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix (1987) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
4. See Roberts, John (2015) *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, London: Verso.

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Dmitry Vilensky (born in Leningrad in 1964) is an artist, educator and cultural environmentalist with no art degrees. He elicits situations and relationships. No one knows what he is up to right now: perhaps he is editing a new issue of Chto Delat's newspaper, or maybe administering the Chto Delat Mutual Aid Fund, or editing a film, or talking with the participants of the School of Engaged Art, or making a set for a new play, or sitting in the assembly at Rosa's House of Culture editing presentation for another conference... Most likely, he is doing all this and dozens of other activities at the same time, surrounded by various comradely compositions of bodies and minds in his hometown of Saint Petersburg, at Zoom and in many other places around the world.