



## On the nomadic identity of migrating lifestyles

Matt Rodda

### review of

Rand, S. and Felty, H. (2013) *Life between borders: The nomadic life of curators and artists*. New York: apexart (PB, pp. 112, \$14.95, ISBN 978-1-933347-65-3).

In *Life between borders: The nomadic life of curators and artists* ten international art professionals address the effect of frequent travel and movement on their lives, perspectives and identities. Today, travelling the globe is projected as an essential part of how curators and artists are supposed to work. Words like nomad, migration, dislocation, deterritorialisation, and connectivity, among others, have appeared with increasing frequency and enthusiasm in descriptions of art practices over the last two decades. The art world's protagonists are defined as highly networked individuals for whom to travel, live in new places and engage with different cultures is part and parcel of a continuing search for meaningful encounters. *Life between borders* does not dispute this description. Where this volume stands out from other texts in the field of globalisation theory, though, is that it presents a subjective rather than objective approach. The underlying theme of the book concerns what effect a migrating life has on the formation of identity. Issues of relocation, belonging and the homogenisation of language and culture are also raised here. In fact, when the editors invited authors to contribute to this collection they asked them to be 'honest and personal about what they address' [10]. The diverse group of contributors that responded to this call certainly do that. Within the book's 112 pages the reader is confronted with life experiences and stories, the idiosyncrasies of travel, self reflection and concerns over cultural identity. Thanks to the honesty with which these authors

candidly handle the subject, the reader will find that *Life between borders* presents a balanced look at both the benefits and dangers of nomadism in the lives of its protagonists.

The book is published by apexart, a non-profit visual arts organization in Lower Manhattan that runs a contemporary art exhibition space, residency program, book publishing, and public programs. The editors, Steven Rand and Heather Felty, are both affiliated with the organisation. Steven Rand founded apexart in 1994 and Heather Felty has been affiliated with the organisation since 1999. The impetus behind publishing this intriguing publication comes from apexart's residency programme, which offers what they call Inbound Residencies (to NYC) and Outbound Residencies (to another international city). These residencies aim to create experiences of 'cultural immersion' [8] by placing participants in situations that take them outside of normal art world sensibilities. *Life between borders* compliments the aim of that residency programme by making explicit the norm that they seek to displace. As Felty's Introduction to the book states, the primary goal of the publication is to 'consider the formation of identity in what has become the norm of a nomadic, migrating lifestyle' [12]. But she is quick to point out that a distinction needs to be made between these terms, nomad and migrant. Drawing on a definition that is often cited on this subject from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988) in their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus*, she differentiates between 'migrants' and 'nomads' based on the impetus for movement. The difference is founded on the relationship to the place that one occupies at any given time. Migrant people belong in a place but move as an exceptional activity, usually the result of some form of strife or upheaval. In contrast, the nomadic lifestyle is undertaken through movement and is characterized precisely by that movement. Of course a number of distinctions between the two terms have either become blurred or changed. For instance, art world nomads are no longer characterised as moving by ground, this is now the migrant life. Today's nomadic artist instead takes advantage of cheap air fares to travel freely between fairs, biennials and exhibitions, and not for survival but for networking and exposure. Indeed many of the contributors focus on this point of distinction, or lack thereof, as demonstrated by the first essay from Pascal Gielen.

In his essay 'Nomadeology: The aestheticisation of nomadic existence', Gielen makes a case for the study of nomadeology (with an 'e') as distinct from nomadology (a title of a chapter from *A thousand plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari). Nomadeology, he argues, focuses on how the term nomad and the concept of nomadology has become part of an ideology in the minds of art workers. This nomadeology deserves our attention and critique, we are told, because it presents a distinctively 'one-sided interpretation of nomadology' that is built up around the positive (romanticised) aspects of travel, mobility and

unattachment [19]. The resultant positive aura of nomadism, and its aestheticisation, is seen to serve the dominant interests of today's neo-liberal hegemony with all of its post-Fordist working conditions. In contrast to this ideology, the concept of nomadeology asks how artists can form a kind of interventionism or 'counter-hegemony' to the neoliberal ideal of nomad [23]. Furthermore, the author asks if artistic strategies like those of the Situationist International – identified with the libertarian Marxist movements, whose subversive political pranks took art onto the streets to liberate everyday life from advanced capitalism – can be applied to a nomadic position and, if they can, how politically effective such strategies might be. While some examples from the visual arts are presented to illustrate what this counter-hegemony might look like (Francis Alÿs and Markus Miessen), the conclusion remains rather sceptical. Gielen posits that nomadic individuals, such as freelancers, artists, curators, consultants and other free agents operate from an inherently problematic stance because of their 'highly individual position' [25]. The argument is that these individuals are too weak to develop 'sufficient strength to accumulate any appreciable political influence' [25]. In his opinion, if nomadism is to succeed as an artistic strategy in a political sense it needs to be 'communist': which is to say stateless, and in this particular case a form of statelessness that arises 'precisely because it is nomadic' [28].

'Real encounters', an essay by Lamia Joreige, also draws on Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between the terms nomad and migrant. However she argues that today's artist better fits the ideal of the migrant than the nomad. In her opinion the migrant acts as a kind of tourist who can be categorised as one who visits a location for only practical reasons. The migrant is also 'easily categorised' and 'poses no problem of recognition upon arrival or departure' [32]. In contrast, the nomad is a rootless individual in a state of vital displacement who breaks down mechanisms of recognition. The nomadic artist is more like the migrant, then, because they are easily recognised and identifiable when they visit a new culture or place. This change is apparently a bad thing, because it means artists have lost the ability to be ignorant, to miss-use language, linguistic conventions and norms. The central proposition of the essay, then, is that homogenisation of the global community, caused by increased mobility, reduces the chance for one to cause distortions in the preconceptions of others. This is a problem for the author because it is precisely these kinds of distortions that create what she calls 'real encounters'. A 'real encounter' is defined as taking place when a 'displacement of methods and practices is experienced by those who take part in the encounter', so long as the displacement is both created and actively pursued by both (or all) parties involved [37]. Joreige gives a number of examples to back this up, most notably drawing on personal experiences from a residency she did in London (with the Serpentine Gallery) where her practice

became ineffectual. Her most compelling argument, though, focuses on the language of art. Joreige proposes that the references artists use, what we may think of generally as 'art speak', relies on a generalisation of language. This generalisation produces 'a false faith that the specificity of cultures and of works can be transmitted adequately through a homogenised language' [35]. The presence of the artist (due to ease of mobility) in combination with a homogenised language therefore leads to a false feeling that 'a community has been birthed' [36]. This sense of global community is problematic for Joreige because it 'covers over essential inequalities and misunderstandings' [36]. In short, it produces an 'illusory encounter' [37]. A real encounter, by contrast, would arise precisely from 'the impossibility of a common language'. Unfortunately the author is purposely vague on further pinning down what does and does not create 'real encounters'. However she does state that 'there is no direct relationship between today's itinerant lifestyles and the sort of encounter artists deeply value' [38]. Instead of championing nomadism, this essay finishes with an intriguing argument that places value on 'a kind of figure of artist that does not travel' [32]. Instead of holding up the nomadic artist as an ideal, she posits it is the artist who stays put that we should look to for generating real encounters.

Jimmie Durham's 'Building a nomadic library' presents a completely different type of text to the preceding two essays. In this contribution the author reflects on his reading habits and how literature has shaped his sense of identity. On the move for most of his life, Durham notes that the reading material that has been available to him has often been popular literature – because that is what is generally available from book stores at train stations and airports – or encountered by happenchance donations from people he met along the way. As a result his nomadic library also includes an eclectic mix of poetry, philosophy and reference books. In the pages of his essay, although this text more correctly fits in a category of subjective prose, we are therefore presented with a timeline of his life marked not by important places or people but by his intersection with reading. The manner by which Durham encounters literature can be summarised by the phrase 'she introduced me to...' [42]. This phrase highlights the importance he places on random encounters with other readers, and their generosity, as a catalyst for discovery. In this regard reading is seen as a social act. Moreover, Durham proposes that the community of readers is founded on equality. This is because one enters into an engagement with literature (or at least he did) from the position of an 'interested party' as opposed to for necessity (such as education). In many ways Durham's revelation, that his mobile life can be encapsulated in the library of what he has read (although he rarely keeps the books), can be seen as a microcosm of the kind of mobility and global community that *Life between borders* aims to address. Unstated questions arise as

we go through Durham's essay: how do we enter into relations with people as we travel, what is the minimum common link that brings people together, and what is it we retain from such exchanges? Durham writes 'I remember pretty well almost every novel I've ever read', but reflects that 'when I read for information I do not retain the knowledge' [39-40]. The same can be said of this essay. 'Building a nomadic library' is not something a scholar reads for information. Nevertheless it is a text that will stay with you. That is perhaps the point and, in its own way, why this essay is successful within the remit of the editor's vision to create a resource that resonates with its readers.

In 'The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone moving', Gitanjali Dang is concerned with the price artists pay for mobility. The nomadic character of art, she asserts, demands constant motion and an 'unremitting peripatetic extroversion from its players' [47]. Motion is closely linked here with being visible, which in turn is equated with being productive. The art industry's nomadic protagonists are therefore framed as 'the ultimate arbiter[s] of visibility', and the wider nomadic tendencies of contemporary art as an 'aggressive strain of capitalist globalism' that promotes neoliberal ideals [45]. This need for constant mobility is an issue for Dang because it 'deceives members of the fraternity into mistakenly believing that they can parry the inevitable flat line forever' [47]. Whereby movement is seen as an imperative for career development and success, while being still is associated with stagnation and death (of said career). Dang, drawing on the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of contemporary (Agamben, 2009) argues that contemporary art is often not contemporary because the constant striving for mobility negates any time for introspection. In place of contemporaneity, she suggests that art has irony as its own 'slovenly contemporaneity' [47]. The relation Dang draws out between irony and mobility resonates with the previous comments by Joreige on the use of language by art nomads. Both irony and language contain a certain amount of 'insider's patois' [48]. Against this mainstream insider trend, Dang puts forward a number of projects and networks that propose a counter-idea of an 'aesthetic that is irony free and a nomadism that is less belligerent' [51]. To identify what this aesthetic may be she draws a distinction between visual art and what she calls 'the aesthetic project'. Visual art, she posits, relies heavily on visibility for survival and therefore instils a gap between the artist and the art. In comparison, the aesthetic project aims to keep this gap to a minimum. The difference being that the aesthetic project requires one to 'embody your aesthetic' and operate out of the 'sanctuary' of that position [51]. To bring this idea into reality Dang opened her own itinerant art lab called Khanabadosh in September 2012. The word 'Khanabadosh' refers to people who carry their homes with them, in a similar way to how turtles carry their homes on their backs. Again a parallel can be drawn here to Joreige's argument in favour of an artist that does not move as an

opposition to today's nomadic artist. Seen from a different perspective, Dang does not propose an artistic methodology of staying still, but rather foregrounds the benefits of an artist who moves with one's home. Mobility in this way is more contained and to some extent slowed down. Moreover, through a process of slowing down the author argues that a position of introspection is crucially able to return to artistic practice. The essay concludes by proposing that nomadism can remain contemporary, then, if it is performed 'in a less aggressive manner' and by way of a 'course correction': one where 'hunting and gathering' (mobility for the accruement of visibility) gets replaced by 'looking and finding' (introspection) [54].

Niels Van Tomme's 'The trouble with the migrant metaphor' is another text that questions the previously mentioned collapsing of the terms 'nomad' and 'migrant' into a single hybrid concept. The author's critique of blurring these terms in contemporary discourse, especially where art and artistic practice is concerned, focuses on a need to maintain the different positions of experience in each case (between artist nomads and displaced migrants). The difference, he posits, can be summarised by that between inclusion and exclusion respectively. The movement of migrants, the excluded, is marked by 'existential disruption' [56]. In contrast, the movement of artist nomads is characterised by a 'privilege of free choice'. This difference can also be spelled out as that between movement according to a 'life', and movement according to a 'lifestyle' [56]. In order to show examples of how art might manage to tread a better line between these definitions, and without blurring them, the author draws on two artworks: Damir Nikšić's *The immigrant song* (2008) and Claire Fontaine's *Foreigners everywhere* (since 2005). Nikšić's film shows the Bosnian artist repetitively singing a song about immigration – going back and forth between statements of wanting/choosing to be somewhere versus the opposing viewpoint of being allowed to be there – which brings into question radical expressions of exclusion. Fontaine's artwork, consisting of neon signs that read in various languages (except English) 'Foreigners everywhere', highlights a common point of social antagonism in migrant life. Drawing on these examples Van Tomme urges artists to forego establishing 'tenuous links' between art nomadism and the migrant paradigm and, instead, asks them to 'find novel ways of joining the fight against the injustices these people [migrants] inevitably face' [61]. Artists and curators, he asserts, are in a unique position to do exactly this. Sadly though, the text does not elaborate any further on what these 'novel ways of joining the fight' might look like.

Melissa Chia's essay, 'Reflections on curating Asian art', is formed into two parts. The first part begins like many texts in this book with a statement about the increased mobility of artists' lives. Specifically, the author focuses her

investigation on the greater sense of communication being felt across the art world and the new work dynamic this has brought about. Historically she traces this change as a movement away from previous imperatives to settle in traditional art centres (New York, London, Paris) to looking outside of these centres. This movement of de-centralisation (or perhaps one should say a pulling in of the outside) started in the 90s and is often viewed for its positive effect on creating interest in artists from South Africa, China and South Korea, among others. Looking back on this historical turn, Chia investigates what impact this change has actually had on global thinking, predominantly from the perspective of Asian contemporary art. She looks particularly into how the rise of large thematic pan-Asian art exhibitions in Europe and the United States has brought about a re-writing of art historical canon in the West. Along with this there has been a gradual move from interest in Asian art organised by nation-state to monographic exhibitions of specific artists. Indeed the author sees this last shift, from treating artists as a ‘national representative’ to ‘an individual’, as significant because it marks a move away from seeing artists as geo-political symbols [65]. While these trends are positive, the author asks if a real equalising of art history has actually taken place. Or, more sceptically, whether the dominance of what is canon in art history still remains firmly in the West. Frustratingly these questions are left up in the air as the author moves briskly on to her personal experiences as a curator in the early 90s in Asia. While Chia’s insights are helpful for fleshing out the wider issues that she raised in the first section, they do not directly answer the question she had posed. Nevertheless her account of how the ability to speak English became an important factor in Asia, and her attack on international curators for parachuting into Asian cities to select artworks with little or no local knowledge or understanding, are interesting. Both of these points highlight dangerous disconnects between local and international. This also leads the author to appraise how curatorial imperatives need to be set on obtaining local information and spending time to get to know a culture. Remarkably a common theme is starting to develop at this stage in the book around an argument for slowing down mobility. Here, though, this fascinating standpoint is presented from a curatorial perspective and framed by the intention to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

Yannis Ziogas’s ‘Risk and danger: Six incidents of a nomadic process. The Paradigm of Visual march to Prespes’ presents six accounts from the author’s involvement in a project called *Visual march to Prespes*. The *Visual march to Prespes* is a nomadic residency that invites art students, artists and theoreticians to explore the landscape of Prespes on the northern border of Greece (an area greatly affected by the Greek Civil War, 1946-49). Ziogas tells us that by participating he aimed to initiate new relationships between himself and the environment he travelled through. What comes to the fore though, which

constitutes the central theme of his text, is the extent to which the new relationship he hoped to find was shaped by danger and risk. This essay stands apart from the other essays in the book because the relationships it questions are primarily drawn between the artist's body and the environment. While many of the other contributors focus on the issue of how nomadism shapes cultural, social and economic identity, Ziogas brings the issue of travel back to its traditional format of walking from point A to point B. He argues that the incidents we collect on our journeys shape one's nomadic character. To illustrate this point Ziogas reflects on six incidents from *Visual march to Prespes* that happened to him between 2007 and 2010. These include weather phenomena, dangerous wildlife, unexpected encounters, fatigue and pain, and the spectre of death. Through each incident Ziogas builds up a representation of how danger operates as a key influence on nomadic identity, arguing that it 'allows people to see their limitations' and highlights the personal trajectory of discovery as one 'either [tries] to move beyond them or accept them and stay in their current status' [71]. To conclude, the author argues that to be nomadic, especially in the physical sense of travelling across a landscape by foot, takes us outside of the norm. This is seen as an important catalyst for the production of new possibilities that help us to 'move beyond the profane and established' [77].

The essay 'Crossing cultures: Reflections on language' presents Mekbib Gemedà's reflection on how crossing or coming across languages can be a transformational experience. The pages of the essay draw together different accounts of his experience learning different languages. The text follows a largely chronological order that progresses through Gemedà's growing up, moving to different countries, learning or having trouble learning new languages, and adopting new cultures. Through these accounts he describes a process of 'forming different identities' and reflects on how these identities create 'a sense of connection and disconnection' [81]. For instance he notes how learning English was both a catalyst that opened up global connections, but at the same time distanced him from the local (Amharic is his mother tongue). The process of moving through languages here becomes a movement from the familiar to the uncertain. In a similar vein to the other essays here that deal with the role of language in nomadism (Joreige and Dang), Gemedà presents language as a significant power in shaping our identities and way of perceiving of reality. It is certainly apparent that, for him, the exposure to multiple languages has created 'the global identity [he] was longing for' [86].

Mahita El Bacha Urieta also confesses to being a compulsive nomad. In the essay 'Rooted in disorientation' she presents an autobiographical account of her nomadic compulsion. When faced with a question about where she calls home, for instance, she responds that for her home is 'standing in my own shoes' [89].

Over the course of the essay she builds up a picture of what standing in her shoes means to her, and how her sense of identity is informed precisely by a sense of dislocation. Indeed what she calls her ‘free-flowing existence in identity formation’ is defined by a connection between identity and whatever language she was currently learning or living amongst at the time [90]. While reading this text one can see similarities between Urieta’s reflections and the preceding comments by Gemedá. What this author brings to the subject though is a treatment of the duplicity of nomadic identity expressed by a simultaneous sense of being ‘confused, lost, schizophrenic, uprooted’, while also being ‘free, flexible, multi-cultural [and] always in flux’ [90]. For the author the revelation of her life has been that she can be at peace with these duplicitous natures. The only true sense of home, she argues, is therefore the one we carry inside ourselves. This proposition resonates with Dang’s comments on the importance of carrying one’s home with you as a method for staying connected to one’s identity, even when feeling disconnected in a new place. In contrast to Dang’s idea of slowing down of the pace of travel, Urieta instead argues that we embrace our sense of nomadic up-rootedness. For her the migrating nature of nomadic identity defines a ‘transnational identity’, which is constantly compiled and added to as we move and add new reference points to its root [92-93]. This leads her to question whether it might be time to start looking beyond the art biennial and the ‘bubble’ created by such events. The problem with the format of the biennial, she suggests, is that it is stagnated in its globalisation. This is because biennials maintain a composed set of associations, language and culture for the ‘art people’ who habitually travel with them. By looking beyond the cultivated multiculturalism of art nomadism that surrounds biennials, the author returns to a question that was put forth by the editors of this book: to consider what actual possibility might there be for a ‘truly multicultural society and a world without boundaries?’ [100] The author’s response is that we are already experiencing this society. The issue that remains, as she sees it, is not a definition of State boundaries but of the organisation of society that maintains racial, ethnic, social and economic divides. Moreover, Urieta locates the problem of organising society ‘in our minds and in the way in which our minds function’, suggesting that we are wired to ‘cultural-centralism’ [100]. While some discussion is given on ways in which this cultural centralism is constructed, for instance in how countries like Singapore and Vietnam package a specific sense of themselves (Singapore as a cosmopolitan melting pot with ‘high quality standards’, while Vietnam projects cultural archetypes in line with a touristic experience that is themed from its past trauma) no clear presentation is made on alternative formats for a true multiculturalism, except to place the task at the hands of individuals and one’s being aware of the packaged multiculturalism surrounding us and the importance of looking beyond it and our own projections.

The final essay in this collection finishes with an optimistic turn. Sébastien Sanz de Santamaría's 'Global nomad lady' recalls how, although he didn't know it at as a child, he was born into a life of global nomadism. That revelation came to him when he attended a school talk about the subject. The essay presents the author's looking back to this seminal moment and the slow realisation over the course of his life just how accurate the term 'global nomad' describes him. He recounts difficulty settling down, frequent job changes and insecurity. However he also points out how knowing that these traits belonged to his identity made it easier to define where he was from, or rather, where he had been [106]. Although Santamaría seemingly focuses on negative aspects of being a global nomad, as opposed to positive aspects such as being multi-lingual, he frames these negative aspects and the 'curse to roam the lands' as a good thing [110]. The positive point he centres on is how being in an unknown place heightens ones senses. Framed as a kind of travel induced hyper-sensitivity, he argues that this state of mind is important for an artist because it 'feeds into one's creativity' [107]. In response to the issue of borders, he states that while they are most likely here to stay, the 'nomadic lifestyle somehow causes them to evaporate, or at least become less important' [109]. In fact he likens borders to road signs, in that they simply indicating a change of location rather than a barrier. Santamaría's optimism for nomadism could be criticised here for forgetting that not everyone (especially migrants) has the same experience and ease of travel as him. But viewed within the wider content of the book this optimism adds to the balance of what is, overall, a diverse selection of opinions.

*Life between borders* is a volume that celebrates its author's personal reflections. At times this emphasis on subjectivity proves frustrating, especially where insightful speculations and propositions are made and then not followed up as one would expect of a more academically structured text. It is therefore helpful to think this book in terms of Durham's essay 'Building a nomadic library'. *Life between borders* is not a collection of information in the form of facts, figures and academic referencing. It is a collection of reflection, prose, diary entries, experiences and honest opinions. For scholars of globalisation theory, *Life between borders* will be an essential volume in one's nomadic library not because it creates new theory, but because it leads theory from a position of life and practice. The editors state that they want the book to be treated as 'a resource to spark further investigation into this ever-evolving topic' [16]. This reader can certainly see a number of themes developed here that deserve further research. For instance the intriguing calls for a slowing down of mobility (Dang), or for nomads to stay at home (Joreige). Such propositions could, for instance, feed into workerist theory as a discourse on modes of refusal (Negri, 2005) against today's neoliberal working conditions. The book will also certainly resonate with other artists or curators. But its resonance is not limited to this demographic. While

many of the experiences are specific to each author, the issues, concerns and intonations have a wider applicability that will include the readership of *ephemera*. In reading *Life between borders* one encounters and comes to understand something new about the nomadic lives of workers in the arts. This knowledge, like the nomadic artists it derives from, is not confined by borders. This reader can foresee that the insights provided here will cross disciplinary subjects and fields of study, and offer new appraisals of nomadism that will impact how we view the organisation of our migrating lifestyles.

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