

SOJOURN AS SITUATEDNESS THE NOMADIC AS A RELIABLE PERSPECTIVE

Michael Erlhoff

To where the other travels is shrouded in darkness..
(Ernst Bloch)

Transitions are becoming increasingly fluid and sojourns are becoming a fixture.

A few years ago, one of the last living representatives of the Frankfurt School quite insightfully stated that wanting to formulate a theory of the category of national character would be catastrophic, and yet its veracity would nonetheless prove itself empirically.

In its immanent plausibility, this statement is both unquestionable and part of our experience – and, yet, it becomes questionable when we take seriously the sojourns or even just the “transit,” because it is at this point where the new transitory aspects signal their lingering and where the chaos between empathy (as an expression of current place or location) and origin (as a form of what we bring with us, of the all-occupying, or at least as a form to write off the other as costly and billable) arises that has been worked on ever since Michel Leiris.

Karl Valentin once stated that “the stranger is strange only in a strange land,” thus providing the key statement for “Krefeld in der Fremde” (Krefeld in a strange land) and for pouring dejection over all those who deprive the category of the strange of any experience. On the other hand, those who try to embrace with ever-new, blissful enthusiasm the in-and-of-itself strange as something exotic while believing themselves able to directly “bag” it are not much better off, either.

This becomes all the more evident when at times an imagined immediacy tends to invade all areas of life, when everything strange coagulates as adventure and when, as the fancy takes us and without getting rid of any encrustations, we are able to travel around the world in mediated immediacy via the Internet; or when, by watching TV programs about other countries, we are able to participate, in long-established ways and with interiority, in faraway strangeness.

As Kurt Schwitters already stated long ago, when what seems to be real appears to be normal as the strange, and when the faraway appears mundane, then there is hardly a place left for us that would allow the thought of unhinging the world because then, not unlike amoeba, we swim about, wheeling and groundless, but at least merrily.

Obviously, we now have the obstinate problem of creating – within this permanent movement – at least temporary or even consciously-constructed fragile emplacement, or of accepting transitory emplacement and setting it against our imagination.

The fact that art, on this side of a long-obsolete centrality, can open up new perspectives is, given art's repeated love of the oceans, just as understandable as are the actions of people who permanently live in strange lands and try to comprehend these lands as new places.

When these two aspects – the experience of art and that of transit – link up, then, maybe, home could be described in a new way: as the ephemeral that arises only in transition, just like the self-consuming dawn. And, therefore, in a concrete fashion.

There are, of course, earlier examples of this: the familiar's longing for the strange has long been a focus of discourse. In Europe, this extends from Dürer's perspectives, which reach beyond the confines of place into a fleetingly imagined expanse while sensing depth, to Malevich, who with his "*Black Square*" still dreamed of opening a window onto eternity. Later, on the other side of the Atlantic, there were Barnett Newman and Marc Rothko, who promised material journeys in immanence; or, in a totally different way, George Brecht as tram driver and – quietly – Robert Filliou, the traveler *par excellence*, who carried his "*Galerie Légitime*" with him and always arranged everything around himself, thus constantly offering a fragile interior to the exterior.

The meaning of path and place, on the other hand, is visualized in Asian panoramas: the path always meant returning from the foreign to the sheltered, which, however, no longer held the promise of permanence. The journey never ends; it only leads us back, but now into the borrowed processuality of someone who sits at home by the river, dipping his feet into the water, thus participating in permanent movement.

And thus, far beyond every rivulet, the transitory becomes a way of life and home may present itself as departure.

But if the transitory is always ephemeral, then the passers-by are part of transition: angels with black hair.

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