

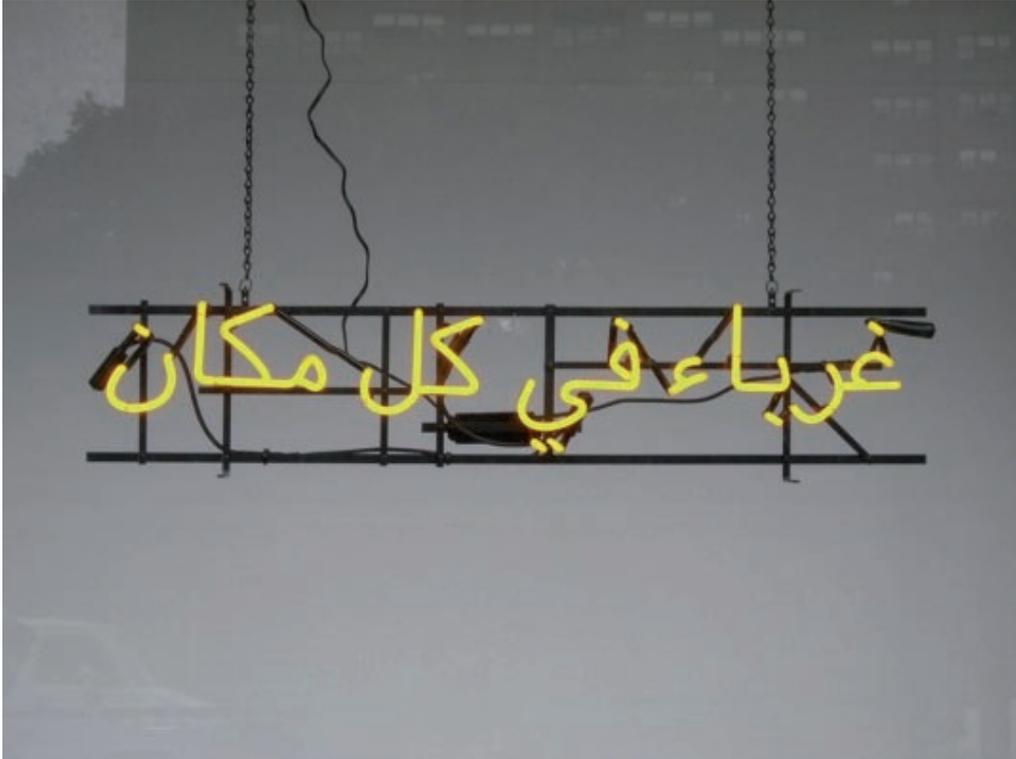
# The Aesthetics of Migration

## Marcelline Block

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*Claire Fontaine, Foreigners Everywhere (Arabic), 2005, window or wall mounted neon, fittings, cabling and transformers, 100 x 18 x 4.5 cm. Courtesy the artist, Reena Spaulings Fine Art and Metro Pictures, New York*

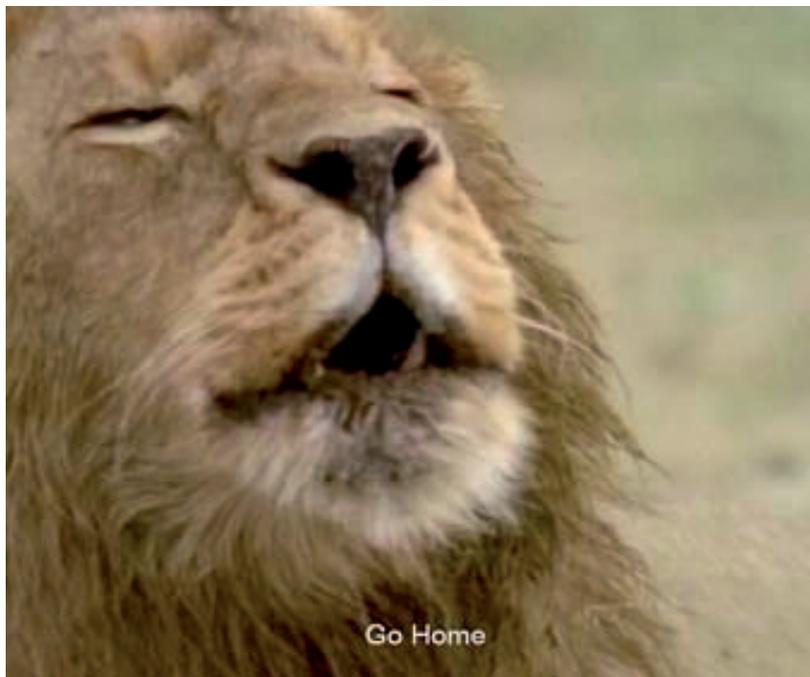
Curated by Niels Van Tomme, the travelling exhibition 'Where Do We Migrate To?' explores the aesthetic potential of the contemporary nomadic condition.<sup>1</sup> The show highlights migrants' experiences by pushing the boundaries of language and genre in order to endorse the idea that visual art can 'mediate across the borders and speak in immigrant tongues with multiple accents'.<sup>2</sup> Through their differing approaches and various voices – including the interrogation of the multifaceted concept of 'home' – this international group of nineteen artists and collectives foreground and frame problematics of globalised twentieth- and twenty-first-century transience. In 'Where Do We Migrate To?', immigration and foreignness are reconfigured as universal aspects of the human condition, inviting artists and viewers alike to recognise one another in the figure of the migrant.

The Paris-based collective Claire Fontaine displays a neon sign that spells the words 'Foreigners Everywhere' in Arabic. Since this sign was installed strategically above the gallery's wall-length window – facing in the street – in the edition of the show I saw, at Parsons in New York, it interacted not only with Parsons' exhibition site but also with the urban environment beyond it. In recuperating elements of the cityscape, Claire Fontaine's sign converges with the photographic prints of fire hydrants taken by Svetlana Boym in her *Hydrants Migrants* series (2007–ongoing). Boym's New York City fire hydrants are anthropomorphised as they metaphorically 'speak' the short texts, typed on white paper, which accompany the photograph of each hydrant. These hydrants are meant to give voice to the stories of the immigrants, including their myriad experiences in new surroundings where they struggle with nostalgia, despair, love and death, all the while speaking in the language of their adoptive homeland.

Since 2005, Claire Fontaine's neon signs have been displayed around the world in numerous languages, except for English. This contrasts with Boym's tales of the city, which are all spoken in English, a tongue not yet fully mastered by many of the characters in *Hydrants Migrants* who recount their stories. Claire Fontaine's sign redefines the experience of foreignness and estrangement as universal conditions, reminding the viewer that we can all be – or have been – a foreigner to something, someone, somewhere at some point in time, supporting the show's goal 'to imagine the migrant as a *figure*, a conceptual entity, through which we may recognise our present-day selves'.<sup>3</sup> 'Foreigners Everywhere', in calling into question the prevailing notion of the 'foreigner' as an outsider, gives new meaning to this term, recasting it as a crucial aspect of the human condition.

The Parisian cooperative Société Réaliste's *EU Green Card Lottery* (2005–present) is a brightly lit office cubicle situated at the outer edges of the gallery. The installation is nearly inconspicuous upon initial viewing, since this nondescript computer desk and chair, tucked away from most of the exhibition's other artworks, appears to perhaps function as part of the gallery's administration. Upon closer inspection of its computer screen, however, one notices the onscreen questionnaire in which spaces are left blank so that viewers can see for themselves what hoops green card seekers must go through in order to obtain legal resident status in the United States. *EU Green Card Lottery* emulates the United States Diversity Visa Lottery (DV) Program (a.k.a. the 'USA Green Card Lottery'), which bestows a permanent residency card to 50,000 lucky winners every year. Many more hopefuls, of course, cast their lot. Société Réaliste's blank form is a stark reminder of the surveillance policies implemented by modern states that use a high-tech bureaucracy to investigate potential immigrants.

Home and its discontents are interrogated throughout 'Where Do We Migrate To?'. *Homecoming* (2008), Brendan Fernandes's three-minute continuous loop video, depicts open-mouthed lions growling ferociously above the subtitle 'Go Home', a cry reminiscent of the



Brendan Fernandes, *Homecoming*, 2008, still from video, 3 min, loop. Courtesy the artist and Diaz Contemporary, Toronto

post-World War II slogan 'Yankee Go Home,' which was directed against the US military presence in Europe. This command, to 'Go Home,' questions the Heideggerian (im)possibility of 'home' that Aaron Schuster also discusses in the exhibition catalogue:

*it is not that man has abandoned his primordial home, but that this 'home' has abandoned*

*him, thrown him out, made him a stranger [...] it is not only we who leave home, but there is something in the nature of home as such that radically rejects us, that prevents us from 'dwelling' there [...] we can never be 'at home' at home, so that the problem of dwelling becomes that of finding a way to live this alienation without simply fleeing from it.*<sup>4</sup>

Is it that 'home' could only exist in its mythic forms and representations? In 'Where Do We Migrate To?' the impossibility of home as investigated by Fernandes's video and Schuster's essay underscores the complex volatility of home as a concept, symbol and reality. Home could be, as in Rousseau's formulation of the state of nature, 'a State that no longer exists, which perhaps had never existed, which probably will never exist, and of which it is nonetheless necessary to have the right concept'.<sup>5</sup> Yet the desire and search for home is not only a primordial impulse but is also a (post)modern concept/concern: while 'the experience of modernity has frequently been compared to transcendental homelessness' by Georg Lukács,<sup>6</sup> Novalis imparts that 'philosophy is really homesickness, the wish to be at home everywhere'.<sup>7</sup> As exemplified by Fernandes's video *Homecoming*, the notion of home is central to 'Where Do We Migrate To?', particularly in its manifestations of how its physical aspect intersects with the metaphysical search for home – in other words, this exhibition explores the human quest for belonging, a quest that bridges the geographical situation of 'home' and its philosophical theorisation.



Acconci Studio, *Mobile Linear City*, 1991, installation including six mobile housing units.  
Courtesy Acconci Studio

This bind is further highlighted by Acconci Studio's *Mobile Linear City* (1991), a blueprint including photographs and installation instructions for a portable city made of corrugated, galvanised steel, comprising six mobile housing units, all transportable by tractor-trailer. By transporting the city itself, rather than its inhabitants, this mobile city subverts the long-held notions of home as rooted firmly to a particular physical location or landscape, exemplifying modernity *qua* transcendental homelessness, and invoking André Gide's notion of home as 'a rolling house, travelling, [...] a shelter against a landscape'.<sup>8</sup>

Alienation and homelessness are also examined in German-born artist Andrea Geyer's *Interim* (2002), a stream of consciousness narrative throughout which image intersects with text in an illustrated eighty-page newspaper. Stacks of this newspaper are placed next to a park bench installed within the gallery, inviting the viewer to sit and read it. Geyer's oneiric, third person narrative – with slippages between numerous voices and modes of address – forms a haunting meditation on subjectivity, transience, and anomie as they are experienced by a female wanderer in her bus trip odyssey across the United States. *Interim*'s migratory experience – stamped by poverty, punctuated by encounters with the chaos of political upheaval – is marked by incidents of harassment which inform the marginalised condition of its protagonist, made invisible and victimised not only due to sexual difference but primarily due to her transience, reflected by her seemingly aimless, arbitrary and mostly solitary wanderings that criss-cross the US landscape. As the third person narrative opens, the female migrant – known

only as 'she' – quits her job, which appears to be in a restaurant kitchen; she then boards a bus headed for a large city. Her only belongings amount to cash in her pocket, one suitcase and a portable radio, which functions as a faithful companion and also becomes the narrative's second voice. The protagonist listens to it constantly, until she has to sell it in order to buy another bus ticket – this time, for the new journey that closes the narrative. Geyer, like Chantal Akerman – whose documentary *De l'autre côté (From the Other Side, 1999)*, about the US-Mexican border, was screened when 'Where Do We Migrate To?' premiered in Baltimore – concerns herself with the 'performative nature of the human body and the nomadic constitution of female identity',<sup>9</sup> recalling Virginia Woolf's iconic words: 'As a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world'.<sup>10</sup> For Geyer, now based in New York City, *Interim* is a personal reflection about being an outsider to the culture in which one is immersed:

*As a German artist living and working in New York the context of my experience on being a foreigner changes on an everyday-basis. This project reflects on the new awareness of the implications of cultural affiliation, not necessarily in an obvious manner, but in relation to the way the political has become a major visible signifying force within culture and in urban spaces, specifically in New York City.*<sup>11</sup>

Colour photographs interspersed throughout Geyer's text detail the female migrant's journey from open spaces along the Californian highways to the urban streetscapes of Gotham City: junkyards, outdoor basketball courts, brownstones, the Times Square subway station, shuttered storefronts as well as the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel during the World Economic Forum. Here, the hotel's renowned old-world elegance is transformed into a military compound barricaded and heavily guarded by armed riot police. Yet *Interim's* opening shots of looming landscapes devoid of human beings are just as cold and alienating as are the images of the urban space itself, depicting the ghostliness, for example, of empty seats in a movie theatre or the empty row of exercise machines glimpsed through a health club window. Voices filtering into the collective unconscious via the media of radio and television circulate throughout Geyer's narrative, such as a lengthy section of dialogue taken from an episode of *Seinfeld* (1990–98), which here serves as a trope of the 1990s zeitgeist and highlights the alienating aspects of city dwelling. In another theorisation of 'home', *Seinfeld's* protagonists discuss the phenomenon of city neighbours ignoring and refusing to greet one another in the communal spaces of their apartment lobbies. An image from *Interim* embodies this urban alienation: set against a backdrop of high-rise buildings, two people stand near each other yet remain back to back, facing away from one another, never acknowledging the other's presence.



Andrea Geyer, *Interim*, 2002, 80-page newspaper with photographs and text, detail. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne

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*Interim*'s collapsing of image, space and text comments upon the female migrant's plight and the urban dweller's relationship with his or her environment as metonymies for the human condition, conjuring two films (neither were featured in the exhibit itself). The first one is Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1982), whose images of crowds and anonymous individuals interacting with the modern cityscape is set to Philip Glass's poignant score. Second, *Interim*'s concluding words, in which the protagonist and a friend board a bus in search of 'palm trees and coconuts', evoke another bus journey taken south from New York City, that which is depicted in John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). In Schlesinger's film two male protagonists aim for their desired destination of Miami, which they will never reach together, since one of them dies along the way. Indeed, Geyer was inspired by *Midnight Cowboy*, specifically referencing the film in her artist's statement about this work:

*Interim is a project that relates the individual navigation in urban space directly to the navigation of cultural space. A female character enters an unknown urban space. Her movements are inspired by the main character in the 1969 film Midnight Cowboy in which a young man takes a Greyhound bus from his hometown in Texas to New York City to start a new life. But in the story of Interim the character's movements stay seemingly purposeless.*<sup>12</sup>

Works displayed in 'Where Do We Migrate To?' often require the participation of the viewer, who is invited to offer his or her response to the questions and challenges posed by the artists' pieces. Amitava Kumar's catalogue essay 'Who Is a Migrant?' concludes by daring the reader to submit a short poem in a space left deliberately blank on the essay's final page (in emulation of/homage to Bertolt Brecht).<sup>13</sup> Kumar's text parallels Adrian Piper's installation *Everything #4* (2004), an oval wood-framed Plexiglas mirror with the words 'everything will be taken away' written in gold leaf letters pasted across the mirror's face. Since this sentence is thus superimposed upon each viewer's reflection in the mirror, Piper's installation emphasises loss as central to the experience not only of migration – when one loses ties to home, family, culture, language and identity – but also to the human condition. Peering into this mirror, the viewer embarks upon an inward voyage, migrating toward 'the inner space of the psyche'<sup>14</sup> in order to explore his/her own catalogue of losses in the face of life's challenges: the loss of youthful dreams and noble ideals as well as the departure of loved ones serving as a constant reminder that each of us is marching toward the inevitability of death, that great equaliser and what Heidegger called the 'absolute master'.

The artworks in 'Where Do We Migrate To?' do not appear to provide an answer to the exhibit's titular question, but rather, recognise that 'human nature itself is undoubtedly shifting' and insist upon how 'we are all migrating into something else, towards somewhere else', thus suggesting that perhaps there is nowhere to migrate *to*, but rather, that there is somewhere to migrate *towards*.<sup>15</sup>

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## Footnotes

1. The exhibition's name is taken from an eponymous 2005 video made by one of its nineteen artists, Julika Rudelius. The show originated at the [Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland](#), Baltimore (17 March–30 April 2011) and is in the midst of the following tour: the [Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery of Parsons: The New School for Design](#), New York (2 February 2012–15 April 2012); Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans (30 June–7 October 2012) and Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts, El Paso (dates TBA).<sup>↑</sup>
2. Svetlana Boym, 'Immigrant Arts, Diasporic Intimacy, and Alternative Solidarity', in Niels Van Tomme (ed.), *Where Do We Migrate To?* (exh. cat.) Baltimore: Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, 2011, p. 25. <sup>↑</sup>
3. Niels Van Tomme, *Where Do We Migrate To?*, exhibition flyer.<sup>↑</sup>
4. Aaron Schuster, 'The Atopia of Philosophy', in Niels Van Tomme (ed.), *Where Do We Migrate To?*, *op. cit.*, p.36.<sup>↑</sup>
5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, preface, 'Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes', in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol.3., Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p.123. Translation the author's.<sup>↑</sup>
6. S. Boym, 'Immigrant Arts, Diasporic Intimacy, and Alternative Solidarity', in Niels Van Tomme (ed.), *Where Do We Migrate To?*, *op. cit.*, p.32.<sup>↑</sup>
7. Cited in A. Schuster, 'The Atopia of Philosophy', in Van Tomme (ed.), *Where Do We Migrate To?*, *op. cit.*, p.34.<sup>↑</sup>
8. André Gide, *Les nourritures terrestres*, Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1897, p.156. Translation the author's.<sup>↑</sup>
9. Marcelline Block, 'Dissidents of Patriarchy', in M. Block (ed.), *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p.li.<sup>↑</sup>
10. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* [1938]: London: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1966, p.109.<sup>↑</sup>
11. Andrea Geyer, [Artist's statement about Interim](#), 2002.<sup>↑</sup>
12. *Ibid.*<sup>↑</sup>
13. Amitava Kumar, 'Who Is a Migrant?', in N. Van Tomme (ed.), *Where Do We Migrate To?*, p.24.<sup>↑</sup>
14. A. Schuster, 'The Atopia of Philosophy', in *ibid.*, p.38.<sup>↑</sup>
15. N. Van Tomme, 'Where Do We Migrate To?', in *ibid.*, pp.11–12. <sup>↑</sup>