

mezosfera.org (<http://mezosfera.org>)

[Zsuzsa László](http://mezosfera.org/author/laszlo_zsuzsa) (http://mezosfera.org/author/laszlo_zsuzsa)
(<http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we->

On East European Art: Positions We Can Start From

Interview with Maja and Reuben Fowkes from Translocal

Maja and Reuben Fowkes are art historians and curators, the co-curators of <http://www.translocal.org/> for Contemporary Art, a center for East European art and ecology that operates across the disciplines of contemporary art, and ecological thought. Their work focuses on the transition from the socialist era to contemporary artistic responses to the translocalization of globalization. Maja Fowkes completed her PhD at University of Cambridge and is the author of *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology*. Reuben Fowkes's thesis at the Essex University was on socialist realism in Eastern Europe. In 2010, their collaborative practice was awarded the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory. They are currently based in Budapest.



The Translocal Institute, Vegetal Mediations Book Salon, 2017

Zsuzsa László: *In the transnational positioning of our regional practice, we propose to revisit Hungary's former, now forgotten countries. What relevance do you think the legacy of the regional movements might have today from your point of view?*

Reuben Fowkes: If we look at monumental sculpture for example Third World revolutionary leaders were not immediately targeted for change in 1989, suggesting that initially people were relatively tolerant of internationalism and much less hostile than they were towards domestic figures. There has though been a more recent wave of renaming of street monuments that date back to the communist era and which attract attention to colonial struggles.

Maja Fowkes: There have been a lot of attempts recently to re-examine the Yugoslav Aligned Movement that was founded in Yugoslavia in the 1960s by artists, such as Milica Tomić and Jasmina Cibic. It is one of the movements that is considered worth recovering.



Jasmina Cibic, *Spielraum: Tear Down and Rebuild* (<http://jasminarebuild/>) (2015), production still, single channel HD video

ZsL: *It seems that just as Third World figures and themes are becoming crucial references in the globalized art world.*

MF: In a way, it relates to the empowerment of local and regional identity in the first post-communist decade for East Europe and the West, while second decade was dominated by looking into global histories. However, as soon as sufficient work had been done and narratives were more settled, regional art centers and project spheres. Meanwhile, the West has also been regionalized. This is only happening in East European but in other regions as well.

One year ago, we were at the College Art Association's [annu](http://www.collegeart.org/pdf/conference/caa-program)
(<http://www.collegeart.org/pdf/conference/caa-program>)
there was just one panel on East European art, but there were
global terms. Some of these discussed socialism through case
monuments sent from North Korea to African countries. We te
socialism very much belongs to us in Eastern Europe.

RF: There are two aspects here, on the one hand, there are str
comparing parallel regional histories of socialism, on the othe
internationalism more generally is becoming a distinct field of

ZsL: *Do you think that East-European Art as such can be reinv
emerging regional art platforms, such as the Asian Art aspire
the same methodology on similar platforms? Or is it only mar
branding?*

MF: We don't think that the market plays a significant role in c
does, it might seem like hijacking it. A few years ago we woul
European Art is an empowering, emancipatory concept. The p
belong, could use this discourse as something we all have in c
A position we can stand behind and speak from. If you speak
representing, for instance Asian art, it's not really a strong po
regional perspective—and there are a lot of other reasons to c
relevant statement. However, some art historians who were a
socialism are not so happy to embrace this concept, and I und
they prefer the notion of Central European art to East Europe
research on the topic of East European art history, it seems the
certain countries would lose independence and democratic sta
called Eastern Bloc, the idea of East European art is also rejec

RF: Before the changes in 1989, Eastern Europe was rather a
more concerned with universal themes. So it's only after '89 th
negotiate actively and internationally what East European art
interest of the West, there was more willingness to explore the
there were debates whether it was the "other" of the West, ar
a central theme. There is East European art as a creative, liber
arrived as a concept after Eastern Europe as a geopolitical re
again, and now the question is where we stand today. In the l
in our [article](http://translocal.org/pdfs/neweasteuropean) (<http://translocal.org/pdfs/neweasteuropean>)
East European,"^[1] the notion of East European is coming bac
geopolitically. There's a returning feeling that there are divisio
what's happening in Ukraine, and the threats to the Baltic, wil
back.

MF: In a sense, East European art can only exist in a liberated context associated with exclusion or the threat of losing independence. The term East European as a geopolitical concept is reinvading the region, it cannot function properly. In Poland people told us that they don't want to be East European. In Bulgaria they are also not happy being East European Europeans.

ZsL: *In your upcoming book on East European art, how could you define Europe?*

MF: We decided not to start with the definition of the region, but to start with such definitions, "Where is Eastern Europe?" And we hope to always start from geography and geopolitical categories, but not to stop there after all. We also discussed what should be the title and finally decided on *European Art*, so it's both, I think it works for most people. We also follow along the legacy of Piotr Piotrowski, focusing on so-called Eastern Europe: from the Baltics to the Balkans, could also be an important reference point. We don't include Russia, but we do look at the Baltic states, since they have been generally represented in East European art exhibitions and by Eastern European artists, although Albania was not in the Eastern Bloc.



Tamás St. Auby (superintendent of IPUT),
 NEWNEEFLUGREEZ (Neutral Weaponfree Near East
 European Fluxus Green Zone), 1989/1999/2002.
 Source: http://www.europe.culturebase.net/EUROPE_CULTLmedia=13

ZsL: *Yugoslavia is an interesting question as it wasn't part of the Iron Curtain. To look behind the Iron Curtain always integrated Yugoslav artists; many did not find it always evident or acceptable to participate in European art, like in the case of the exhibition Works and Word. Since in the seventies, there was still a utopian internationalist concept. Goran Djordjević called it, for instance, a "ghetto ex-*

MF: Yes, but it tells us more about artistic strategies, and I guess I would not like to be called Eastern Europeans either, but still I think Czechoslovakia also wanted the same universalism in the '70s. (https://monoskop.org/Goran_%C4%90or%C4%91evi%C4%86vi%C4%87) (<https://mladenstilinovic.com/>) were exactly the artists who "Europeanized" in their art.

After World War II, artist unions, the academy, and the whole Yugoslavia in the same way as in the rest of the region. Despite the Communist Movement, Yugoslavia still belonged to the socialist system. As the communist party in power, it was one-party system. After 1989, the Yugoslav system were counterbalanced by the war. While the system developed and transitioned neatly in the post-communist economic system, it was in turmoil for ten years.

ZsL: *Did you use specific criteria for your selection, such as with regard to East European art?*

RF: Yes we looked at what exhibitions of the region have been approached in art historical accounts, both national and international. Collections and museums have related to this region to define it. We are not inventing East European art, we are just historicizing it. We have many art and research projects, like tranzit.hu's art *Always Has Its Context* (<http://www.artalways.org/about-project/>) and all the similar ones.

ZsL: *You are saying that there is a consensual canon on which art history can be written? Do you also face a difference between the global and local institutions, like MoMA's C-map project (<https://www.moma.org/learning/international-program/global-research>), the market, and the choices they make, and the locally committed initiatives with the region more closely and consistently?*

MF: If a consensus is emerging, it is based on the negotiation between global institutions, collectors, curators, and art historians, as well as local comparative accounts. We see it unconditionally a conversation between global and local initiatives, as they are interdependent. We also consider *Bookmarks* exhibitions in an essay for *Tate Papers* (<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers>).

ZsL: *In this sense it is symptomatic that whereas the Ludwig Museum of Art, Budapest presents (<http://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/site.inc=kiallitas&kiallitasId=1003&menuId=43>) the Marinko Sudjic Collection (<https://www.avantgarde-museum.com/en/museum/about-collection/>) [4], the Kontakt Collection (<http://www.kontakt.at>) has a similar focus on East-European neo-avant-gardes, has just received a new space (<http://www.erstestiftung.org/blog/my-sweet-little-lamb-6>) in Vienna venues.*



"My sweet little lamb (Everything we see could also be otherwise)
Kontakt Art Collection, sixth episode, 2017. Photo: Damir Žižić
Source: <http://www.erstestiftung.org/blog/my-sweet-little-lamb>

R&MF: The Sudac exhibition in at the Ludwig Museum was a first of this collection, it was a great source of information on some overarching curatorial concept. The Kontakt collection was shown as a contemporary art project, while the selection of off-space by the first OFF-Biennale in Budapest in 2015, and it might be in the political contexts of the two countries. In terms of curatorial approach, *(Everything we see could also be otherwise)* was more eloquent than neo-avant-garde works in the Kontakt collection were subordinated to the exhibition display. In the case of the Sudac exhibition you might see the presentation of the Kontakt collection, an external context for the works.

ZsL: *On the level of the composition of collections it's also asking whether Hungarian neo-avant-garde outweighs all state collections. He runs— himself—a Research Institute "Avantgard Museum"*

R&MF: Sudac works in a very passionate and much quicker way than committees and fundraising, he reacts much quicker. But it's a fact that collections like this end up in public museums after some time. It's a compilation at the moment.

MF: About MoMA in New York, it is important that they do not impose and they are only started recently to catch up with what has been done and they are not imposing something on others from the center, but rather they were forced to reconsider their own canons. Of course, some things have changed but what is happening now with Tate, MoMA, and Pompidou, the world at large, and adapt to global changes.

ZsL: *Do you suggest that these big institutions in the centers of art are not canons, but just represent already written ones? But who write the canon in your lecture at the Invisible History of Exhibitions symposium (<http://hu.tranzit.org/en/event/0/2009-05-21/invisible-history-of-exhibitions-symposium>) 2009, saying that the canon is an empty structure and can be [5] So, after posing the question whether regional arts fit into the canon, ask if new or parallel structures are needed. And most importantly, where do they come from: market players, academia, artists, and what role do they play?*

MF: At the moment, it seems that art historians are unfortunately not the whole non-profit scene is very fragile, and not adequately valued by the mechanisms of art fairs and galleries.

RF: When the dust settles, they will have to reconsider the canon, which is not really accurate, but in time it has to settle. At the Contested Spheres (<http://translocal.org/contestedspheres/>) conference we opened a debate at the end, if there are outside (Western) and inside (local) views.

MF: We insisted on speaking together rather than speaking about movements are explained as being brought in a suitcase from the West. It is tradition to think about art history formed exclusively by such movements brought a catalogue, and this kind of thinking also needs to be challenged. A lot of other factors that played a role. Piotr Piotrowski wrote that Kantor came from Paris and brought informal in a suitcase, which you unpack it a bit. Today, in a globalized world, art historians are not in a position to position scenes and cannot be positioned in the old fashioned inside a situation all the concepts like self-colonialization have to be re-examined.

ZsL: *It's true on the level of individuals, but if you look at institutions, in certain scene, there are still harsh differences and it still happens. European Art are written or at least are financed by Western institutions. The Roma Cultural Institute, [7] which has just opened in Berlin, is a good example. [8]*

MF: Because of the economic situation the Western universities have positions which are utterly unjustified. But you can no longer have a reality when communist states were defining the biopolitics.

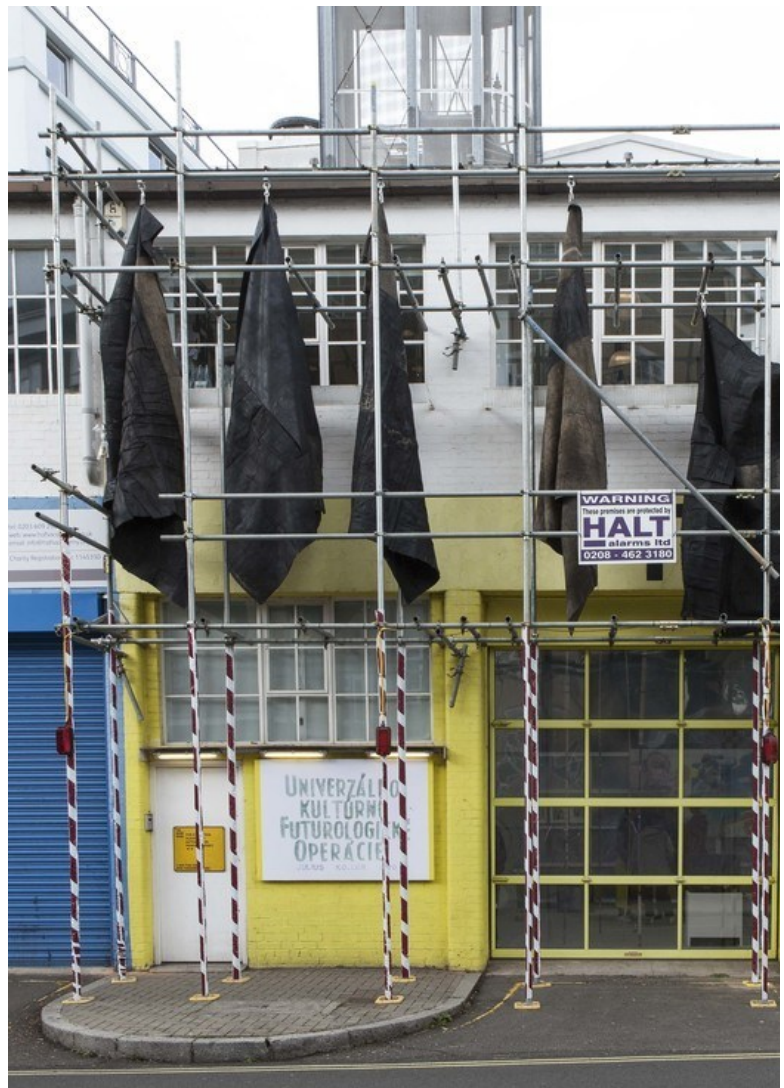
ZsL: *In this situation, when individual professional practices are geographically defined positions, is the whole emancipatory, transgressing from otherness to our own self—in Gayatri Spivak's terms? There's also a long tradition of hybrid identities, for instance, nostalgia for the homeland is transformed to rebuilding a symbol of another country. How has your practice been influenced by both of your different backgrounds, adding up to a fortunate mixture?*

MF: In the 1990s, Hungary was a very open scene, it had quite a different atmosphere in the nineties here, I just finished university in Zagreb, we did not know anything obviously, and when I saw the exhibitions *After the Wall* (<http://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/site.php?inc=kiallitas&kiallitasok&id=1949-1999>) [11] at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, they really thought this is what I would like to do. I did not want to stay in Hungary completely, I wanted to be transnational, and do comparative research in the region.

R&MF: It was the spirit of the 2000s, things seemed to be going in the right way to join the EU, there was internet and cheap flights, it was easier to move where you were based, there was a tendency for laws to make what you wanted. We were translocal from the beginning, and did so in Croatia and Britain respectively, and wanted to have the right to move between them. We believed that we can have these fluid, strongly connected to the region. There were many advantages. Translocal was at first a very practical term, meaning that you can move between places.

RF: The idea of translocality is always changing. Before it was about the global and counter-global, which wanted to understand what's going on. It shifted to civil connections between movements and people around the world. You cannot ignore climate change any more, it's selfish to think in terms of individual interests, ignoring what's happening with the planet; this not only affects the environment but the movement of ideas too.

ZsL: *This aspect of translocality might be different in a place like London where localities are represented, and it is often approached as a matter of circuits. How do you intend to relocate your practice to London or how do you intend to work with it?*



"Everything we see could also be otherwise (My sweet little lam
The Showroom, London, 2017. Photo: Daniel Brooke, Courtesy

RF: There are a lot of art projects that focus on local specificity: gardening, local communities, grounded in a local site and the Showroom's program (<http://www.theshowroom.org/program>)

MF: Regional art histories, contemporary art, and the environment are important. At the beginning Translocal was an online platform that had just a short materialized phase, and now we're in another

RF: We do not intend to go back to being an online platform. In Britain, it's still a question what shape the country will take, and discussions on it, it's potentially a truly interesting environment

MF: There's a huge constituency of people: artists, cultural institutions, fairs, in London representing East European art. And of course, many from the region working in the UK.

ZsL: *You propose in your book *The Green Bloc* some substantial differences between ecological concern and East European art. In the '50s it was an official policy whereas in the '70s-'80s, partly as a response to the more market-based socialisms in the region, it connects to dis-*



MF: I researched how artists responded to international ecology. In East European art, it has a longer history and it has continued in personally committed positions.

RF: It also connects to the economic effects of transition, when when levels of pollution were set, how artists reacted was a bit different elsewhere.

ZsL: *So being based in London, you keep on "believing in" Ec*

M&RF: I think it's really necessary to keep the region as such and to share experiences that defined the region before and after communism. There is a potential to think this way. The practice of Piotr Piotrowski can be a model for the specificities of each East European art scene, and made common to the region. It was very empowering to see that it's possible and to be following him have the responsibility to continue this. After his death, the national narrative cannot think that they can get the full story, with other practices under similar circumstances.

- [1] Maja and Reuben Fowkes, "Identity Crisis," *Art Monthly*,
- [2] <http://www.c3.hu/scca/butterfly/IPUT/project.html> (<http://www.c3.hu/scca/butterfly/IPUT/project.html>), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGgOHkkte68> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGgOHkkte68>)
- [3] Goran Djordjević, "Letter to de Appel" in *Works and Words*, 1988, p. 98.
- [4] <http://magazynszum.pl/rozmowy/historical-carriers-of-sudac/> (<http://magazynszum.pl/rozmowy/historical-carriers-of-sudac/>)
- [5] <https://www.dukeupress.edu/partisan-canons> (<https://www.dukeupress.edu/partisan-canons>)
- [6] Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, p. 72.
- [7] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/08/centre-institute-berlin> (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/08/centre-institute-berlin>)
- [8] <http://hungarianspectrum.org/tag/roma-parliament/> (<http://hungarianspectrum.org/tag/roma-parliament/>) <https://budapestbeacon.com/independent-roma-organization-district-8-offices/>
- [9] E.g. Spivak, G. Ch. 2000. "The Politics of Translation", in *Translation Studies Reader*. London. New York: Routledge.
- [10] <http://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibition/> (<http://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibition/>)
- [11] <https://frieze.com/article/aspects-positions-50-years-art> (<https://frieze.com/article/aspects-positions-50-years-art>)

Share this:

Twitter (<http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-star-share=twitter&nb=1>)

Facebook (<http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-share=facebook&nb=1>)

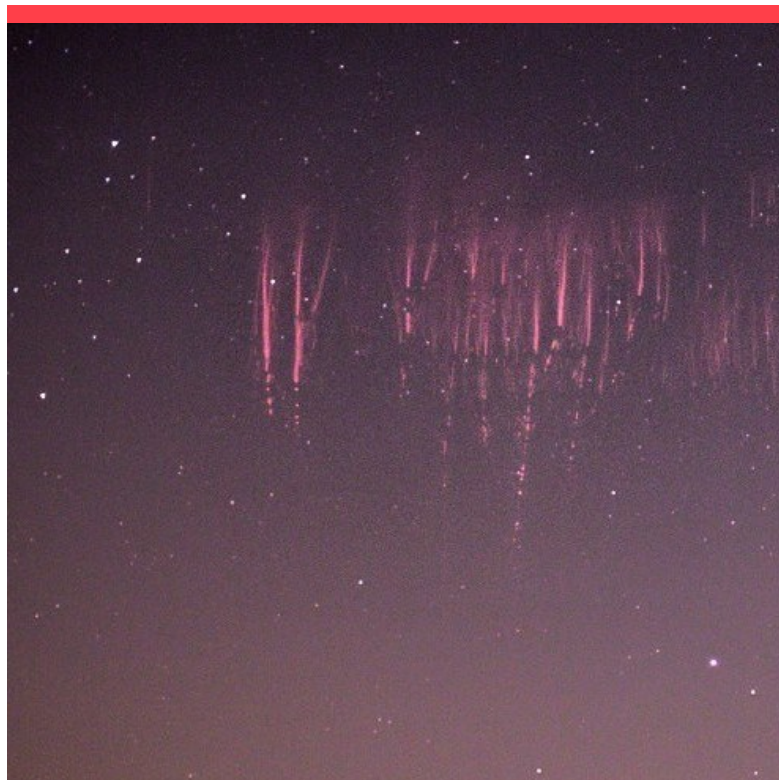
Tumblr (<http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-still-share=tumblr&nb=1>)

Email (<http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-stand-share=email&nb=1>)

Google (<http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-stand-share=google-plus-1&nb=1>)

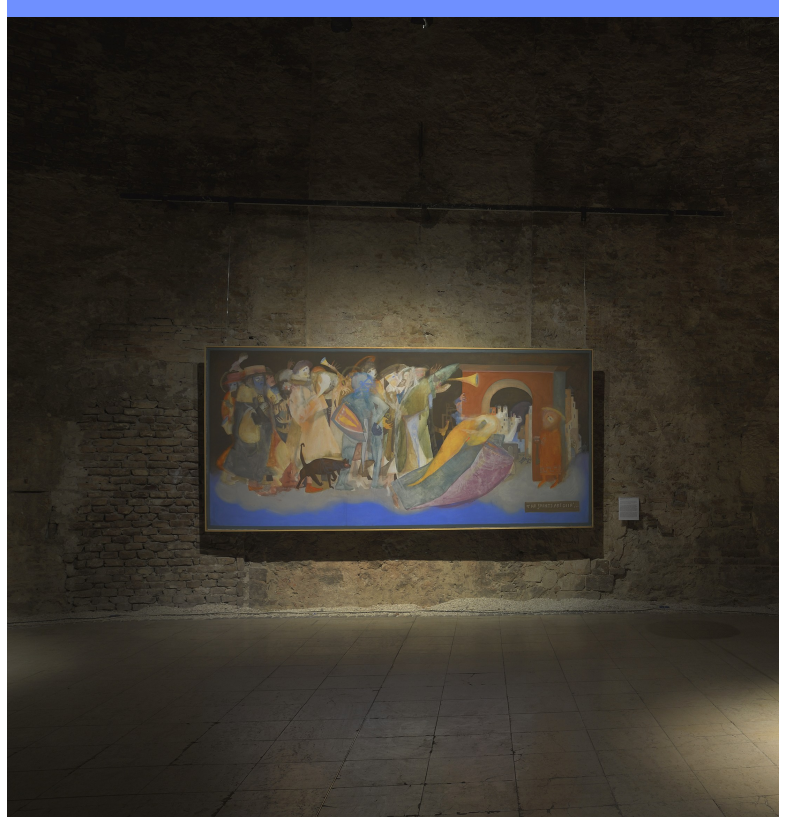
Category: **#4 Propositions for a Pan-Peripheral Network**
(<http://mezosfera.org/category/issue/4-proposition-for-c>)
(<http://mezosfera.org/category/issue/>)

Warning: Invalid argument supplied for foreach() in
[/is/htdocs/wp10587104_FL8PFUE8E5/www/tranzitblo](#)
[content/themes/fountain/tp/releated-content.php](#) on line



(<http://mezosfera.org/what-is-mezosfera/>)

What is Mezosfera? (<http://mezosfera.org/what-is>)
About tranzit.hu's new magazine on art and culture.



[\(http://mezosfera.org/parallel-nonsynchronism-times-and-europe/\)](http://mezosfera.org/parallel-nonsynchronism-times-and-europe/)

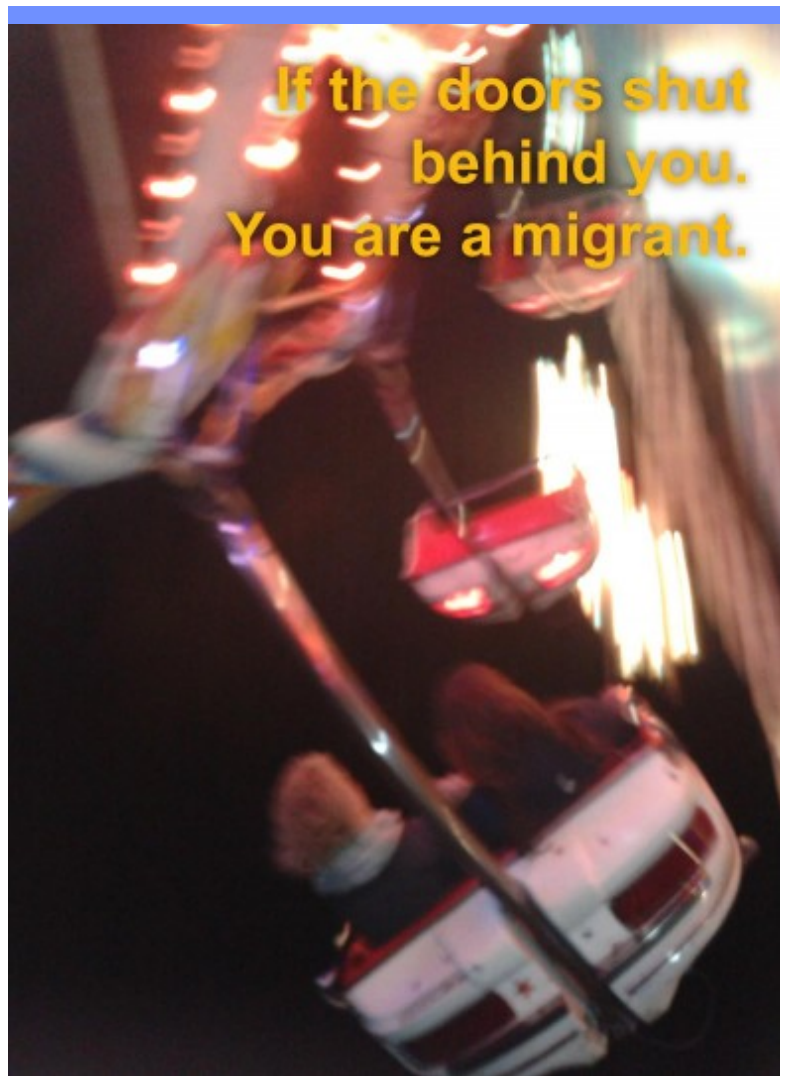
Parallel Nonsynchronism: Times and Places in Cold V
[\(http://mezosfera.org/parallel-nonsynchronism-tir-eastern-europe/\)](http://mezosfera.org/parallel-nonsynchronism-tir-eastern-europe/)

Fluchtl &Du?

[\(http://mezosfera.org/border-crossing-you%e2%80%a8/](http://mezosfera.org/border-crossing-you%e2%80%a8/)

Border Crossing & You (<http://mezosfera.org/bor-you%e2%80%a8/>)

Solidarity actions and campaigns in public space and discours



A Weird Geography (<http://mezosfera.org/a-wei>)

An introduction to issue #1

0 Comments tranzitblogen

 Recommend

 Tweet

 Share



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS[?]

Name

Be the first to comment.

 Subscribe

 Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd

0 Comments

© 2019 tranzit.hu - Contemporary Art

Main partner of tranzit is Erste Foun



ERSTE Stiftung