# (At) Home and (On) the Road: Contemporary Photography Techniques of Documenting the Migration Phenomenon

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***Abstract:*** The current presentation includes several queries regarding the interaction of migration and globalization – one of the most significant phenomena of social transformation in recent decades, as well as the meanings that this interaction presents for artistic research and practice. The major social and cultural transformations that have taken place in recent decades following more intense migratory movements have sparked an interest among artists for creating visual discourses, which, by using languages specific to different genres and environments, contribute to the dissemination of knowledge about migrants and migratory experiences different from the discourses generally offered and exploited by the media and public opinion. In cultural studies, the mobility turn also influences how contemporary art reflects on the direct and indirect implications of migration. The selection of works we analysed (which mainly use the medium of documentary photography) challenges the way we understand the notions of space and time, by exploring ideas regarding the concepts of (*at)home* and *road,* which are, moreover, two of the notions that undergo most changes during migratory experiences. The artistic projects selected reconsider defining the concept of *(at)home* as the place where the individual builds his sense of belonging, referring only to the physical house and not just to a single house set in an immovable place, but considering multiple connotations of the idea of home. Migrants' personal narratives reveal the ways in which individuals move between multiple homes, developing attachments and reinventing their identities along the way. Considering both the international context of migration and the particular case of Romanian economic migration as a recent phenomenon with important socio-cultural implications, I sought to investigate through my own artistic practice how documentary photography can become an environment for reflection on the topic, by combining autobiographical elements and a subjective discourse added to the objective dimension.

***Keywords:*** migration; identity; globalization; home; diaspora; documentary photography; autoetnography.

The socio-cultural changes that have taken place for the past decades because of increased migration have generated a higher interest in creating specific visual discourses. Migration and the migratory experiences are now approached in

a different manner from the usual discourses of media and public opinion offered so far. The present article raises a number of questions on the migration/globalization interaction, a significant phenomenon of social changes that has taken place in the past decades[1] – and the contemporary artistic practices.

Migration is defined as the voluntary or forced displacement of a number of individuals or populations from a specific region to another, or from one country to another, due to economic, social, political, cultural or environmental factors[2]. Its fluctuant aspect is reflected in almost all fields of the contemporary life[3]. The increased mobility of individuals is an important characteristic of 21st century[4]: as nowadays, there are more regional and international migrants[5] than ever in the world history. There are around 244 billion migrants all over the world[6], and one in seven people is an internal or international migrant[7].

Migration, as a social representation of moving in time and space, is basically the oldest globalization expression[8] as it has been a historical characteristic of humanity since the nomadic movement of primitive people to the exodus of entire nations.

The Western European countries experimented a massive raise in the number of migrants after World War II, and in some countries, migration had started even earlier. An important example was offered by West Germany that recruited billions of workers from abroad shortly after the end of World War II. The new nation that was based on a capitalist economy started to bring workers into the country on a temporary basis. They were known as *Gastarbeiter* or *visiting workers* and came from Italy, Spain, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunis and Yugoslavia, to supplement the working force of the country that had lost over three billion men during the war. Although their hiring was temporary, as the German government considered it was the only solution to support the

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[1] Burcu Dogramaci, Birgit Mersmann, *Handbook of Art and Global Migration. Theories, Practices, and Challenges*, Berlin, De Gruyter Press, 2019, p. 10.

[2] "Diaspora", retrieved from https://dexonline.ro/definitie/migra%C8%9Bie/definitii

[3] Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, p. 1.

[4] Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015, p. 2.

[5] In this article, the generic term of *migrant* was used to include the numerous dislocation experiences: free or compulsory, historical or contemporary, emigration or immigration, refugee or economic migrant.

[6] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *World Migration Report 2018*, Geneva, Marie McAuliffe; Martin Ruhs (Editors), 2017, p. 6, retrieved from: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2018_en.pdf

[7] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *International Migration Report 2017: Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/404)*, 2017, retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf

[8] Célia Riboulet, *Habitar en la migración*, "Arte y Ciudad: Revista de Investigación", no. extra 3.1, 2013, p. 524, retrieved from https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/4704601.pdf

economic development at that time, many of these workers, mostly Turkish, settled down and later brought their families, becoming a visible presence in the German social life[9].

Besides the classic South-North migration that is considered te be basically inherited from colonialism, after the fall of communist regimes in Europe, another type of migration appears, that of former Soviet Union countries. The difficult transition toward capitalism and democracy was reflected into the major socio-economic issues that led to a massive integration of East European people into the international mobility that resulted in a massive East-West migration process[10].

Migration as a transnational movement of people, of material and immaterial cultures and lifestyles, leads to a deeper and more critical reflection on all elements involved in the migration process[11]. The amplitude and complexity of migration created new areas of study and investigation. Besides social, political and economic sciences that were founded basically on social and economic factors as a main reason for migration, the cultural influences of migration have also been explored by humanistic sciences and cultural studies, and the subject has been debated in postcolonial, diaspora, transnational studies, etc.[12]

The notions related to border, nation, citizenship, exile, diaspora, immigrant/emigrant, refugee, road, travelling, belonging and home have gradually changed their meaning along with the changes in the approaches to the ways and motivations of the migrants, influencing the contemporary migration debates. Consequently, the studies on the subject have tried to shed light on the nature of the migration experiences and the adjacent concepts[13].

A crucial moment in the development of these new studies is the so-called *mobility turn* of the 1990's, as a response to „understanding the historical and contemporary importance of the movement for the individuals and the society"[14]. This change in social sciences approaches is focused on the concept of mobility and disagrees with understanding migration as functioning only between sedentarism and deterritorialization. Contemporary life is undoubtedly

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[9] Amy A. DaPonte, *Candida Höfer's* Türken in Deutschland *as 'Counter-Publicity*, "Art Journal 75", 4, 2016, p. 20, retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/45142820

[10] Ramón Díaz Hernández, *Las migraciones internacionales o el gran desafío del siglo XXI*, "Vegueta", no. 6, 2001-2002, p. 250, retrieved from http://revistavegueta.ulpgc.es/ojs/index.php/revistavegueta/article/view/223

[11] Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration ...*, pp. 12-13.

[12] Dogramaci and Mersmann, *Handbook of Art and Global Migration ...*, p. 9.

[13] Ruth Erickson, Eva Respini, *Curators' Introducti*on, "When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration Through Contemporary Art", Boston/ New Haven/ London, Eva Respini and Ruth Erickson Press, Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; Yale University Press, 2019, p. 17.

[14] Anne Ring Petersen*, Migration into Art. Transcultural Identities and Art-making in a Globalised World*, "Rethinking Art's" Histories Series, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 2-3.

characterized by a mobility culture as both international migration and other types of mobility, such as tourism and travelling, have visibly changed the societies and politics of the past decades[15].

To make the extent to which the subject is nowadays debated in cultural studies more clear, we will briefly present in the lines below a number of theories regarding the characteristics and the effects of this socio-cultural phenomenon, followed by a series of documentary photography projects that captures various migration experiences, mostly economic, making use of (*at*) *home* and (*on*) *the road* concepts.

*The home* is a way of living or owning something. From an anthropological perspective, a home can be treated as such after a given space is used as a living place[16]. As part of the many issues resulting from the increase of global migration, *being at home* implies unconscious processes of integration and survival, on which the migrant builds his new identity in the adopting country[17].

Because of people's leaving their native home, we can talk about their having several *homes*, yet none of them actually becomes their real *home.* Sara Ahmed, for instance, points out the fact that the notion of *home* becomes unclear for the migrants as "belonging to a home turns into travelling with a home after you" and that "a nomadic conscience refuses to be part of any particular place and belongs to the whole world"[18].

*Being at home* becomes an idealistic place in the diasporic imagination[19]. Therefore, the place where one can best feel at home, *i.e.* a comfortable and familiar space, is (no longer) (only) the space he lives in, but mostly the space in which he is himself at his best. In such a space, the subject has a destination, a route, even a future although this may prove risky, as he may actually never fully reach that place[20].

Generally speaking, migration has been treated as a movement in space, a dislocation. As we have noticed, migration is, above all, moving from one place to another in search for a home, a place to live in. The main element of migration is consequently a continual movement from the native place, that becomes unclear in the migrant's mind, to his destination in which actually the migrant never fits[21]. This is the reason why migration, in the migrant's imagination "starts before he

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[15] Anne Ring Petersen, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
[16] Célia Riboulet, *Habitar en la migración*, *op. cit.*, p. 526.
[17] *Idem*, p. 523.
[18] Sara Ahmed, *Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement*, "International Journal of Cultural Studies", Vol. 2, issue 3, 1999, p. 338, retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200303
[19] *Idem*, p. 341.
[20] *Idem*, p. 331.
[21] Mieke Bal, *Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement*, "Exit", no. 32, 2008, p. 152, retrieved from https://transaestheticsfoundationdotorg.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/bal-mieke-migratory-aesthetics-double-movement-exit-32-december-2008-january-2009-150-61.pdf

leaves and never ends as no place corresponds to the migrant's image of a home"[22], basically the main purpose of moving. Consequently, the migrants' identity is shaped „by and when travelling" and is not "a closed subject that goes before movement"[23].

The experience of frequent moving may result in a new form of belonging. In the present globalized migration, "the migrant's figure is detached from the static preconception of *to be* in a place, which is replaced by *to become* a place, as a result of his movement or dislocation"[24]. Belonging means emotional attachment and the feeling of *home*, of hope for a better future and a basic element for the understanding of shaping and reshaping identity. However, in modern times people have started to get used to build their belonging by devoting themselves to a particular nation. For the last decades, the movement across borders has acquired a complex form of movement and articulated new forms of diasporic communities[25].

As the migration process leads to an unbalance in people's identity (migrants, their families left behind, or the newly formed communities), the changes in their identity has become a basic element of migration studies[26].

Migration involves changing the residence place, which leads to a symbolic and cultural reaccommodation to a new territory, and creating relationships with the new community the migrants choose to settle in[27]. As a consequence, after settling in, the migrant has to get used to, compare and appreciate a new world that can prove more or less similar to his native country. As such, the migration process has a powerful impact on the socio-territorial identity of the migrant, which can take different turns. His native identity may become even stronger or it can be rebuilt as a result of total assimilation into the new socio-territorial surrounding[28]. We may speak about a selective attitude of the migrant regarding the shaping of his identity[29], and this process usually takes place unconsciously, without the

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[22] Mieke Bal, Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro, *Introduction*, in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture. Conflict, Resistence and Agency*, edited by Mieke Bal and Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro, Brill Publishing, 2011, p. 11.

[23] Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration...*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[24] Dogramaci and Mersmann, *Handbook of Art and Global Migration...*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[25] Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration...*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[26] Anne Ring Petersen, *Migration into Art ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[27] Margarita de Jesus Quezada Ortega, *Migración, arraigo y apropiación del espacio en la recomposición de identidades socioterritoriales*, "Cultura y representaciones sociales. Identidad, territorio y migración", vol. 2, no. 3, September 2007, p. 36, retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265824588_Migracion_arraigo_y_apropiacion_del_espacio_en_la_recomposicion_de_identidades_socioterritoriales

[28] Margarita de Jesus Quezada Ortega, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[29] Daniel Castillo Torres, *Sentido de pertenencia y estereotipos de la otredad entre Europa y Latinoamérica (Alemania y Perú)*, "Revista Peruana de Antropología", Vol. 2, No. 3, December 2017, p. 205, retrieved from http://www.revistaperuanadeantropologia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ART-15.pdf

migrant being aware or reflecting on it[30].

The art works we will deal with in the lines to follow aim at reconsidering the notions of *home* and *travelling*, as basic elements of shaping the feeling of belonging. The projects deal with the migrant's condition in contemporary society, characterized by visibility/invisibility as well as by mobility/immobility, debating on the way migrants move from house to house, relocate, create new communities and new attachments, reinventing identities as a result of various migrating experiences.

One of the first cultural projects that reflects on the *Gastarbeiter* experience, the guest-workers mentioned in the first lines of the article, was a book entitled *A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe* that was published in 1975 by writer John Berger and photographer John Mohr. The book is a contextualized narrative rendering of the travel of a guest-worker from his recruitment place to Western Europe and back[31]. By combining a number of narrative strategies, the two focus on the migrant's personality and the actuality of migration. The work has a timeless value as it presents the interaction between the individual will and the global economic structures as a humanized rendering of the manner in which the wishes of the individuals and their hopes come true in the international work market[32].

Another work that reflects on the guest-workers subject is *Türken in Deutschland* (1979) by German photographer Candida Höfer. The photos she had taken for six years are about the constantly growing Turkish immigrant community in her native town, an aspect that became increasingly evident in the 1970's[33]. The images present the immigrants' daily life, at work and outside work, revealing the areas in which these communities were integrated and those in which they were left outside the dominant German culture[34].

Much as it illustrates a somewhat disadvantaged minority community, Höfer's photos are not focused on poor living conditions or exotic cultural practices; they are truthful and offer glimpses of family life[35]. The images betray openness and reciprocity, the subjects look straight into the camera, clearly of

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[30] Margarita de Jesus Quezada Ortega, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

[31] Begüm Özden Firat, The Seventh Man: Migration, Politics and Aesthetics, in Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture. Conflict, Resistance and Agency, edited by Mieke Bal and Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro, Brill Publishing, 2011, p. 128.

[32] Anna Cieslik, *Reviewed Work: A Seventh Man, 2010 by John Berger and Jean Mohr*, "Urban Studies", Vol. 49, No. 6, 2012, p. 1401, retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable26150924

[33] Burcu Dogramaci, *My Home Away from Home. Artistic Reflections on Immigration to Germany*, "The Culture of Migration Politics, Aesthetics and Histories", edited by S. P. Moslund, A. R. Petersen, M. Schramm, London, I.B. Tauris, 2015, p. 295.

[34] Amy A. DaPonte, *Candida Höfer's* Türken in Deutschland ..., *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[35] *Idem*, p. 18.

their own free will[36]. Höfer shows the Turkish immigrants as part of the German society, and the photos present them as negotiating their identities in the country they have settled in[37].

The *Take Care* project (2018 – until now) of Italian photographer Benedetta Ristori, includes a series of portraits of the migrant women in Italy that are caregivers for old people or children. The pictured women live together with the people they take care of, and the latter's homes become their homes all the way through their work contract. Yet these homes are never really their *home*, and the photos that were taken with the employers' permission, point out precisely this aspect[38]. The photos picture them with respect and dignity, despite the alleged inferiority of their work.

Ristori uses this project to signal an important phenomenon in the Italian society. With over one billion women employed as caretakers, most of whom come from Eastern Europe, Ristori is interested in pointing out the considerable gap between the Italian state need for these caregivers and its failure to acknowledge these women's rights and integrate them into the Italian society[39].

*Gone Away (2019 – until now)* is a developing project of journalistic investigation of the lives of Romanians in the diaspora by photographer Cosmin Bumbuț and journalist Elena Stanciu. The two live in a caravan among the Romanian communities whose migratory experiences and lives they present through texts and images. By getting documented on the lives of Romanians that settled in Spain, UK, Germany, Denmark, etc., they intend to find out the main reasons why the former left their country, the impact of their leaving on their families and how they integrated into their new country and lifestyle"[40].

Beginning of January 2019, the reports of the *Gone Away* project are based on journalistic investigations devoted to important social matters. The photos included in this project are snapshots of the daily life of Romanian migrants to the West, at home and at work, as well as portraits of the subjects, in which they look straight into the camera, with dignity and trust. The reports of Bumbuț and Stanciu are about Romanians belonging to various social positions, working in different places, from agriculture, cleaning services or taking care of old people to engineers, physicians, mayors or opera singers. Part of the project was presented in the Romanian Pavilion as part of the Biennale of Architecture in Venice in 2021, within the *Fading Borders* exhibition.

The last project that will be analysed in this article is also based on the Romanian migration subject and is the result of my own artistic practice. *Birds*

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[36] Amy A. DaPonte, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[37] *Ibidem*.

[38] Benedetta Ristori, "Take Care", retrieved from http://benedettaristori.com/take-care/

[39] *Ibidem*.

[40] Elena Stanciu, Cosmin Bumbuț, *The Wandering Project – About Us*, retrieved from https://teleleu.eu/despre-noi/

*of Care* is part of the artistic research within the doctoral studies that I started in 2019. The project, based on field research information, focuses on the understanding of contemporary Romanian economic migration from an artistic perspective. This involves photographic documentation of many life stories of the Romanians that have left their country. The main focus is my own interest in understanding the migratory experience of my family, with examples, and integrating the migratory experiences of other families or individuals as well as my one-year stay that had a great impact on me.

Therefore, this approach is based mostly on the need for a better understanding of migration phenomenon that deeply influenced my life and many other Romanians' whose relatives, friends or acquaintances left our country. My mother and my middle brother left for Spain, my older brother and his family, wife and children, left for the UK. I also have uncles, aunts, cousins that left our country many years ago. I have friends that live in Western Europe or in other parts of the world. Their leaving made me see and live life differently. This personal experience was a large part of my documentary research. The stories in this project, which I documented with photos, are presented from the perspective of my being left behind, at home, and incorporate auto-ethnographic elements to a certain extent.



Fig. 1 Ionela from Pitești with Santiago, an old man from Spain that she has been taking care of for 10 years, Bilbao, Spain, September 2021

Among the documentation strategies I would count living with the subjects, participative observation as a working method, snapshot aesthetics, self-reflexivity and autobiographic or auto-ethnographic elements, writings on personal experiences, performative elements, aesthetic approaches to various situations, seriality and sequentially.

The project will result in a photobook presenting the migration stories of almost 57 individuals or Romanian families, which were observed during the two-year travel documentation process in 440 places from 13 countries.



Fig. 2 Self-portrait in Ascen's house (on the right), an old lady from Spain that I took care of for a week, to go through my mother's experience myself, Muskiz, Spain, September, 2021

In *Birds of Care* I write about my family's life story, a personal, intimate but not unique story as it is very similar to the stories of many other Romanian migrants, of both those that have decided to come back and those that remained abroad.

The realities of all those stories are undoubtedly stronger than my life story, but I included mine among the others as it makes the whole project more authentic and relevant (Fig. 3-4).

Fig. 3 Romanian Building Workers, London, UK, September 2020



Fig. 4 Romanian workers led by Florin, a seasonal tree cutter in Galicia,
Lugo, Spain, November 2021

At first, my intention was to emphasize the geographic expansion of Romanian migration and the diversity of their works and life stories. My rendering of their lives was intended to be different from the national media or from that of the countries with large Romanian communities. The media information relies mostly on stereotypization (turning them into victims or shedding a bad light on them) as well as on the negative or dramatic aspects of migration. Instead, I wanted to focus, as objectively as possible, on the normality of their living and daily routine in another geographical background, in a different language and community.

The dynamic and active lifestyle I had to adopt for two years as a photographer within the European space, getting in touch with the Romanian migrants and living with them for a few days, made me experience their way of living myself.

Returning *home* every time and relating to the frequent state of being *on the* road is a manner of understanding the migration phenomenon by an ethnographic autobiographic process of reflection on the changes that take place in a society and the way migration is reflected on every individual and on the members of his family. *Birds of Care* has its roots in the migratory birds way of living, and it is about taking care of yourself and the others around you (family members, children) in a constant need to make life better.



Fig. 5 My mother and the old lady she was taking care of several hours a day, every afternoon, while her daughter was working as a seasonal ice cream seller in a Bizkaia harbour, Zierbena, Spain, September 2021

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