

## Off-Site: Diasporic Imaginaries of the Balkan Edge

Through a series of exhibitions that approximate the Balkan space, *Off-Site* composes a set of research questions that center both an ontological condition and propose an epistemic shift in the contemporary state of post-Socialist identity and place: How can one complicate the historical binary of periphery and center to rethink edges as mobile sites of diasporic life?<sup>1</sup> In what ways can diaspora press itself against the southeast Balkans to introduce a critical discourse that arrives into the site from a place of both intimacy and dissonance? How, then, do we approach the production of knowledge from the edge?

The project includes three main sets of exhibitions—*IREXOD*, *BAJKAN*, *IREXODAT*—that range from online to on-site to pop-up, respectively. They draw acts of travel, arrival, and departure towards Bulgaria and the historical period of 1989, which catalyzed the largest wave of emigration that the country has witnessed. Each stage unfolds over the course of a year, with each year centered around one of three definitions of *преходът* (passage) as its theme. Each definition is an additive gradation of the preceding one, rendered more spatially and temporally specific. Movement and time cut across all three meanings of ‘passage.’

преходът = (n.) the passage

### 1. *IREXOD* (2021):

преходът = a change of state – (material)

This first stage locates the diasporic condition within its locales through material, affective, and haptic properties. The oblique globally-distributed edgeworks that constitute the Bulgarian diaspora—the communities and institutions in which they are embedded—will begin to define the first body of work. This stage invites artists to investigate a unit or building block integral to their own practice, nested within acts of passage, transmission, stillness, and translation between the frameworks of the non-western and western world. This kind of passage is especially invested in how and when these binaries erode at the site of contingency, lack, excess, reciprocity, asymmetry, and the off-key. This ‘change of state’ occurs when a condition is destabilized, uprooted, assimilated, adapted, and reversed: it can be both giving and not always kind. Stage (1) is where the event at which we end in stage (3) first takes place, such that the diasporic positionality is a timeline folded in on itself. We reach from the present to the future, and from the past to the present; at the crease where one superimposes on the other, the past suspends the future in a scalar manner.

### 2. *BAJKAN* (2022):

преходът = a change of place – (translation)

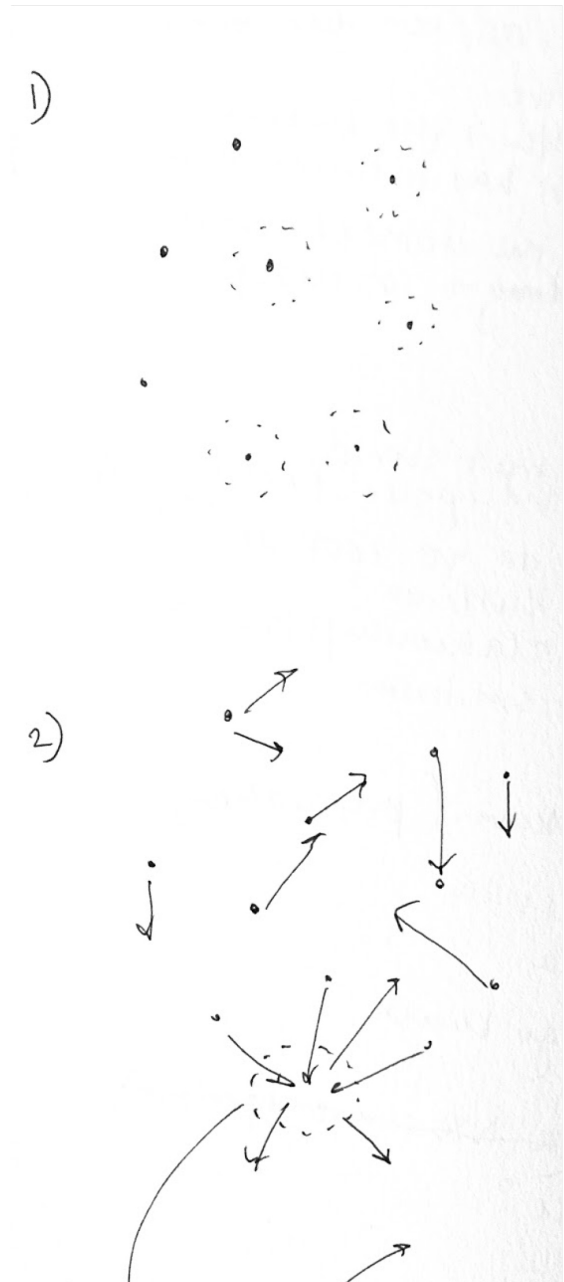
This second stage takes translation as a vector that projects diaspora into the Balkan space. It is a geographical movement from the outer edge of diasporic locales to the Balkans as a southeastern edge of Europe. Translation gestures towards displacement as an event initially catalyzed in 1989, and one that continues

to occur to this day, especially having witnessed a resurgence in 2007 with Bulgaria’s entry into the EU. As a network of movement between the diasporic condition and “home,” translation is a process of continual displacement and “homing,” or the illusion thereof. This stage figures cultural, linguistic, and economic translation at two sites: the first, the arrival of Bulgarian diaspora on-site to their country of origin, and the second, diasporic residents within Bulgaria who do not consider themselves Bulgarian. This definition of passage can encompass geographic vectors, such as the Balkan mountains that characterize mobility across the region; infrastructural vectors such as broadband networks that have enabled a growing IT-sector of out-sourced labor; or, the Balkan airlines slot allocations that defined emigration patterns post-1989.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In discourses of the early 2000’s, the Balkans are rendered a periphery in relation to the West as center. Provided that the Balkans are a layered geopolitical space that has been part of the imperial histories of the Byzantine empire, the Ottoman empire, and the USSR, we would like to problematize the binary of periphery - center, and west - non-west relations. If an edge is defined by a limit or adjacency, against what do the Balkans press themselves to render an edge, or contour a border? Or perhaps, the continuous Balkan edge can be found in the Balkans-as-bridge metaphor? How are these dynamics further complicated by Bulgaria’s entry into the EU in 2007?

<sup>2</sup> *Balkan* incorporates the logic into the other areas of the Bulgarian industry/culture which used it. *Balkantourist* for example was the biggest agency responsible for travel and vacations in the country and outside of it. It was formed in 1948 and incorporated the railway conglomerate “*Balkan*” in its formation. It gets privatized in 1995 during the big privatization wave and becomes property of one of the biggest mafia groups. *Balkan airlines* used to be called *TABSO* before it was rebranded in 1956. There was also the *Balkanton* which was a record label producing company.

<sup>3</sup> Historically, the term *balkanization* derives from the Balkan Wars, denoting the fragmentation into small nation-states with backward populations. The word has overtime loosened its direct affiliation with the Balkans and assumed a role in all kinds of contexts referencing fragmentation, in all cases, with a negative connotation. The way *balkanization* is employed in the context of stage (3) of the *Off-Site* exhibitions refers both to both the geographic specificity of the Balkans as well as the historical period of 1989, where the process of *balkanization* became one of diasporic dispersion.



4 In 2019, BBC reported that Bulgaria is the fastest-shrinking country in the world with a population expected to fall below 6 million in the next 50 years.

5 This regards cheap outsourced EU labor from west to east. Rey Chow speaks about this "electronic migration of migranthood... employing electronic immigrants from countries like India and the Soviet Union where there exist a large number of well-trained but jobless technical professions" (Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, p.179-180).

6 Madina Tostanova coins the term "ontology of the futureless." In one of her presentations, she quotes Boris Groys: "The post-Communist subject travels this route not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history...back to historical time. Post-Communist life is life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time." (Groys, *Art Power*, p. 155)

7 Maria Todorova first introduces the notion of scale in her book *Scaling the Balkans: Essays on Eastern European Entanglements*. She employs "change of scale" as opposed to "scalability," arguing that the latter "blocks the ability to notice the heterogeneity of the world" while the former "helps precisely to highlight this heterogeneity" (4)

8 "Off-modern" is first coined by Svetlana Boym who employs it as a "detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. [Off-modern] recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress. "Off-modern" follows a nonlinear conception of cultural evolution; it could follow spirals and zigzags, the movements of the chess knight and parallel lines that intertwine on occasion asymptotically." (Boym, *The Off-Modern*, 2017)

9 Para-site when paired with an off-site approach becomes an organizational principle for this project. Para-site within *Off-Site* extends Miwon Kwon's gesture of a para-art history into a curatorial approach (Questionnaire on the Contemporary, *October*, 2009). Rey Chow also brings para-site in relation to how academic fields assert and demarcate themselves. The notion of para-sites is situated within the borders of academic disciplines; at the same time, para-sites are what actively erode hegemonic thinking produced by the maintenance of said borders (Chow, "Tactics of Intervention" in *Writing Diaspora*, p.16). Furthermore, Chow's definition of entanglement, synchronous with Kwon's aporia resonance of para-site as something both "beside, side by side" and "irregular/amiss" (locational identities), adds a third delineation of the definition for para-site as "beyond, past" (temporal identities).

### 3. ПРЕХОДАТ (2023):

преходът = proper noun for the 1989 transition period – (condition)

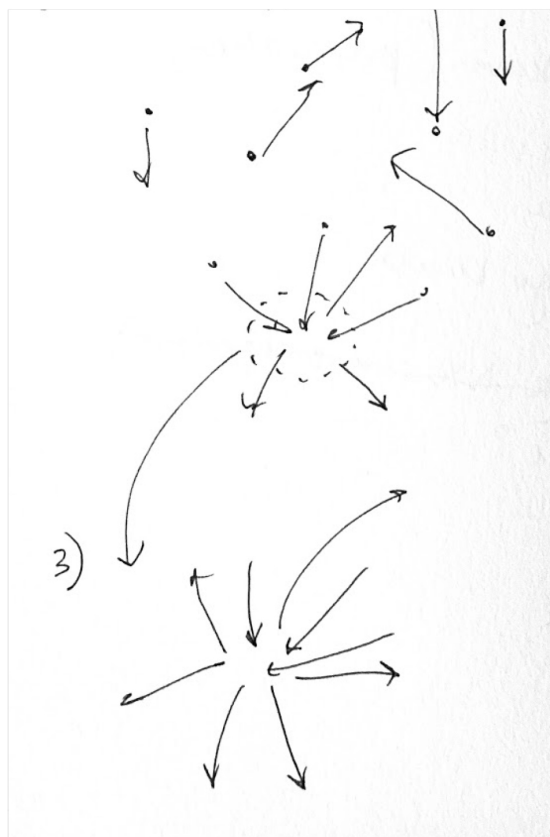
This third stage, grounded to the historical period of 1989, motions towards the event that catalyzed diasporic dispersion addressed in stage (1) and extends the gesture of Balkan from stage (2) into an act of balkanization.<sup>3</sup> Having continued to the present day, this dispersion has earned Bulgaria its title as the "fastest-shrinking country in the world" with the population projected to decline 23% by 2050.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the movement backwards towards a past parallels, if not foreshadows, a movement towards the future. In tracing outward vectors as the form of departure from Bulgaria in stage (2), stage (3) both completes the gesture of (1) and locates a different set of diasporic locales. The infrastructural shift from the locales of diasporic curators to vectors leading into diasporic locales is partnered with an exposition shift from on-line to pop-up, which ironically, is both off-site from the Balkans and on-site at the edge of the Balkans.

*Off-Site* then ranges—in three discrete sections—from material to translation to condition. Each stage will be organized and curated by Bulgarian diaspora, and platformed on an online website that will serve as both an active exhibition space as well as a repository of archived work. Programmed and stored on computer servers in Bulgaria, the website infrastructure is intimately connected to electronic migrant culture.<sup>5</sup>

The trajectory of these exhibitions is one that arcs outwards from the global edges of diasporic sites to arrive into an on-site exhibition in Sofia, Bulgaria by 2022. In a third gesture that traces diaspora through the airline Balkan flight departures from Bulgaria since 1989 to 2023, the project moves from sites of urban utopia and contemporary ruination to topics of historical amnesia and futurelessness.<sup>6</sup> Through this investigation into the spatial and temporal backwardness that is inherent to the Balkan space, we are tempted to ask: how can we re-imagine the scale of the Balkans?

While scholars have repeatedly raised the question of scale in relation to the Balkans, one has yet to witness the ways in which diaspora figure into this sense of scale.<sup>7</sup> The title *Off-Site* both indicates a virtual exhibition space that consolidates a dispersed group of artists, as well as the site for knowledge production grounded in various urban centers located outside of the Balkans. The "off-" furthermore asks one to recognize the possibility in re-framing the past through the lens of asynchronous modernisms.<sup>8</sup> Diasporic dispersion as an off-site condition provides the curatorial infrastructure to lead a para-site practice.<sup>9</sup>

The preposition 'off' in the title locates diasporic imaginaries as both 'part and parcel' of the Balkan space—from where they originate—and as an 'edge' to the Balkans, one that arrives into the Balkans as destination. *Off-Site*, therefore, proposes to complicate the notion of center and periphery not only between the Balkans and the rest, but most importantly, between diaspora (as the rest) and the Balkans. The edge then is



thrice removed: the Balkans as an edge (often regarded as a metaphorical bridge) between west and east, the diaspora as an edge to the Balkans, and finally, invited artists as an edge to the diaspora.

In physically anchoring the ungrounded nature of this work to Bulgaria, the diaspora becomes the infrastructure that renders an epistemic edge, contouring new modes of thought, practice, and material urgency. In compressing the future time of the BALKAN exhibition in 2022—and by extension the ПРЕХОДАТ exhibition in 2023—into a living time capsule of the present, what kind of futurities then can we extract, envision, and inhabit when contemporary time remains suspended? These questions not only underpin the premise of the first exhibition, but also introduce an archeological arc as a guiding principle for the on-site and pop-up exhibitions of BALKAN and ПРЕХОДАТ. Scale and time attract a method of extraction, display, and historical stratification that specifies the post-Socialist space as the site of active ruination. The act of urban erosion productively affords a gesture towards the past in the form of restoration and maintenance simultaneous with a gesture towards the future, one of demolition and reconstruction. The economic present of Eastern Europe with its ideological past overlays what has repeatedly been cited as a delayed temporality with the temporality, or rather vision, of a future attending the present. In the spirit of time travel, we venture to ask from our final exhibition destination to the present moment, what are the places of erosion where omission and betweenness become sites of radical making?

ARTISTS

Simulacra/Simulation

Alen Agaranov  
Elitza Koeva  
Noha Mokhtar

Practices of Care

Anya Yermakova  
Mariangela Mihai  
Zeynep Toraman

Sonic Knowing

Eric Maltz  
Ganavya Doraiswamy  
Nicolas Kisic Aguirre

Physics of Entropy

Nancy Valladares  
Nicole L'Huiller  
Nolan Oswald Dennis

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