

“AT THE BORDER”: Three Different Artistic Ways of Mapping a Border

In memory of the Turkish author Sabahattin Ali, whose dead body was found in 1948 near the Maritsa river at the Bulgarian-Turkish border

I remember several times of crossing a border, travelling to different countries. That simultaneous feeling of anxiety triggered by encountering an unknown and the desire to experience something new still remains with me. The density and form of these feelings differ depending on the circumstances and purpose, of course. It is always a relevant question whether the crossing of the border is voluntary or not, whether it is temporary or permanent, whether it is legal or illegal, whether the “home” that is left behind can be visited again or not. In other words, each and every crossing of a border is a unique one depending on the person’s story.

While I am writing these lines, I am sitting within the borders of Scotty (its three walls and a window looking at Oranienstrasse), located in Berlin, I am surrounded by three artistic positions that deal with the notion of border, specifically the Bulgarian-Turkish border, where “Europe ends” and “a new geography begins”.

The concept of the exhibition and the artworks inspire several questions in my mind: What do the borders do to us? Triggering an impulse to cross? A curiosity for knowing what is beyond? Is a border necessarily a boundary? Do the borders really hold and protect us or do they limit us? What are ways of transgressing them, at least in imagination? Do the borders really separate or are they artificial attempts of separating?

In today’s world, nation states and the whole identity formation around them oblige us to stay within borders, even in our imagination. Identities are formed and separated from each other. However, is identity such a fixed entity? Is fluidity not a formative part of our being?

With all these questions in my mind, I try to understand the three artistic positions surrounding me.

In my opinion, the artistic positions in the exhibition “At The Border: A collection of materials related to the Bulgarian-Turkish border”, curated by Sigrun Drapatz, engage in attempts of questioning and envisioning borders, both in the concrete sense and at the metaphorical level. All the artists draw their own alternative maps of the border in their own ways and at different levels.

Janis Schroeder’s map of collected material

Janis Schroeder’s map is based upon a research process, where he collected materials that ended up in a sort of an archive. The archive he creates naturally contains his own impressions of the border, as well as documentary facts. The multimediality of the work (a video composing of the shootings made throughout the research, a diary kept meanwhile and a collection of materials – drawings, photographs, etc.). A night train crossing the border, a Bulgarian banknote waiting to be exchanged once the border is crossed, animals having the liberty of crossing the border without a passport... These are only some of the several details we come across when we look closer. The genuine curiosity and openness to experiencing of the artist while doing his research travel gives the work a certain sense of depth and uniqueness. In other words, we are not confronted with a stereotypical description of a border and thus we adopt the artist’s curious and surprised eyes and ears.

Ruken Aslan's map of travel through the lines

Ruken Aslan's map follows a different pattern. It is also based upon a research process, this time based upon her associations around the notion of the border through lines and each drawing is like a snapshot of the combination of her imagination with certain real-life elements, experiences. The result is a combination of twelve drawings titled as "Border-line Patterns" – without a beginning and an end – each of which has its own references. This reminds us of the dynamic nature of the thinking around the concept of border, in a way pushing the boundaries further, at least in our imagination. Associations are various and endless: Pippa Bacca¹, *sucuk ekme*, need for a hero, living next door, border-line therapy, Odysseus's tears, dreams, tickets, class, river... Through these associations, the artist takes us on a journey between the real and the fantasinal, blurring the boundary – or the border- between the two. She creates a dream-like state, that almost gives a feeling of getting lost in all these associations without boundaries.

Ayşe Tülay's map of (be)longing

Ayşe Tülay approaches the concept through her own life story and situates her daughter, for whom she applied for a Bulgarian citizenship, in a digital *peinture*, where the daughter gazes at a landscape at the border that reminds us of a feeling of longing, but longing for what? In the rather static two-screen installation, in which the daughter herself appears in a white gown, which was given to her as a present by her mother-in law on her wedding day, it is not easy to realise the moving of her hair with the wind. Standing at the top of a hill at the border, the gaze invites us to an imagination of what is going through her mind and what happens when one changes her national identity. This scenery makes us also question belonging and longing as states and feelings aroused by those states perhaps. Through the hard-to-realize moving nature of the video, the artist might be suggesting that these states and feelings are both static and changing, when one is urged to change his/her/their identity. The split of the daughter's body due to the two-screen setting can also be interpreted as a reference to a double-identity crisis.

Perhaps what is common to all the three mappings is a sort of connection between the two sides of the border. In other words, neither "Europe ends", nor "a new geography begins" in these mappings. There are natural ties and bonds between the two sides of the border. To keep these ties and bonds alive in our minds might help us envision and realize a world, where freedom of mobility, thought and expression prevails.

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¹ Pippa Bacca was an action-artist, who wore a wedding dress and hitchhiked starting in year 2008 from Italy with an aim of reaching Middle East as a symbolic act of peace. Unfortunately, she could not end her journey and was raped and killed in Gebze, a town near Istanbul.