

New Borderlands

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As an artist and curator, I am not a specialist in the field of border and migration studies. But several events or artistic research projects relating to this subject in the art field of the last ten years could lead one to state that the involvement of visual arts, cultural production, visual culture studies, and its critique also reflects a growing awareness and demand for the reflexivity in the migration-related professional field itself, and this is: how to re-present its “object” of study. The question of representation in my opinion includes how artists and researchers deal with existing images, terms, narratives, and preconceptions of migration, borders, and citizenship today. As in the contemporary scientific, political, and artistic work dealing with migration, borders and citizenship, different problems of description and representations emerged. Terms, like *migration* or the new German expression “with migration background”, for example, tried to avoid former expressions like immigration and emigration, and also tried to acknowledge the realities of new forms of citizenship within Europe. Still, these terms manifest concepts of citizenship and belongings related to the nation-state. Moreover, they still prescribe identities as different and other towards national citizenship that would have a non-migratory history, even though this is hardly a reality for any citizen today. The question of descriptive terms and methodological preconceptions needs critical examination.

Behind this specific reflexivity lies the main question: How is it possible to translate transnational and translocal existences into new terms and imaginaries, which do not re-establish the concepts of border and nation from the backdoor? What does it mean for border and migration studies and its forms of representation, be they textual or visual—both to be considered as mediums of curatorial approaches as well—if the radical potential inherent in migration, which challenges the given national political pre-conceptions, is taken further and beyond its limitations?

So what can be learned from the field of visual arts? I would like to remind us that, within the modernist movement at the beginning of the 20th century, it was representation in its factual sense—as a signifier of a reality—that got into a deep crisis. To document, depict, and show the existing, visual artists, poets, and writers radically questioned the material world. The idea that a painting or sculpture would be able to represent a factual reality was denied. Instead, the modernist artists started undermining the logics of visual narratives by cutting, collaging, and mixing materials and forms, deconstructing meaning, experimenting with non-figurative expressions and poetic imaginaries beyond the traditional mode of depicting. The materiality, tactility, as well as the imaginary of the visual or sculptural came into the foreground. Another path to criticize the ideological use of realism—like constructed in Historicisms, for example—was taken by Berthold Brecht’s use of “Entfremdungs-” (alienation) techniques to point back to the problem of representation itself, to one’s own involvement in power relations and existing societal and material structures. Deconstructing forms and narratives, going beyond figurative representation and ideological realism, searching for a new aesthetic language, was one of the major forces and excitements for modernist artists worldwide. I am saying this since not only male Western artists were forming this movement, as art history wanted us make to believe, as artists in the post-colonies were similarly

engaged in deconstructing existing traditions of figuration that were entangled with colonial historicism and Orientalism.

With this modernist precondition of the visual arts in mind, it is astonishing that in the 1980s a “Return of the Real”, or from the 1990s onward “The Artist as Ethnographer”, became a matter of fact in contemporary art discourses and practices as the art historian Hal Foster has discussed in publications with the same title. With this article I will not go into the detail of Foster’s arguments, but would like to quote Brandon Hopkin’s annotations to his studies:

The focal points of Foster’s investigation are the politics of alterity in the institutions of art. He posits that the site of political transformation is always perceived as being elsewhere, in the repressed other—for the modern artist in the proletariat, for the post-modern artist in the post-colonial, the subaltern, the subcultural—and that perception of this elsewhere is distorted by a realist assumption (that the other has an authenticity lacking in the self) and a primitivist assumption (wherein there is a mapping over of the other, such that the here-and-now self is superior to the there-and-then other). This is why the artist must resist the tendency to project political truth onto this constructed other. Foster claims as well that anthropology, as the science of alterity, has become the lingua franca of artistic practice and critical discourse. Though this was also intended to undermine the authority of the anthropologist, it may actually reinforce it by positioning the anthropologist as the expert reader. (...) The anthropological model is still what operates successful both in art’s critique of its own institutions (the biennale, the museum, the gallery) and in its ethnographic investigations of the cultural other.¹

Thus, it is not only visual arts production and its history of constructing alterity and its search for the repressed that needs critical examinations, as Foster has rightly suggested, researchers’ and theorists’ relations to descriptive terms and visual cultures also need reflection when they are grounded in the fact that political transformations “are perceived as being elsewhere”, outside of one’s own field of practice and power relations. This is also true for assumptions of migration being depicted in a binary construction of victims or traitors, or being answered with so called “Welcome cultures”, while migration policies are harshened. Thus, these concepts have to be critically reflected, countered, challenged, and put into question radically when producing culture, images, films, and exhibitions. This obligation is on our shoulders. We need to think before we act or speak in the name of others.

What to be learned from the visual arts’ complex relation to questions of representation is the scepticism about and the impossibility of the representation of “reality”, thus the acceptance of the very fact that every representation is an abstraction and a creation, one that leads viewers and readers to see and understand the world in a specific way. A starting point for a discussion is how to actually re-present a movement, a person in transit, a study, an insight, or a hypothesis?

Moreover, if we add Stuart Hall’s groundbreaking insights that meaning is not simply fixed or determined by the sender nor is the message transparent nor the audience a passive recipient of meaning, then representation is a manifold and complex set of material and immaterial, human and non-human actors. A book or film aiming to provide a new account of transit migration today never does guarantee the way how an audience will read or view it, or what political impact it

might produce. Thus, the social, cultural, and political context in which new representations of migration emerge is of similar importance and needs much more transdisciplinary analysis and careful handling.

An example of how we tried to answer representational problematics in the TRANSIT MIGRATION project was the MigMap project²: “Mapping the Mappers” – The Maps took into account that the modern state is under constant pressure to re-adapt its functions and technologies as a response to the transnational movements of people. And that individual European nation-states are incorporated into a larger system of supra-states, trading blocs, which also have the function of “managing” migration and thus questioning the sovereignty of the nation-state as the only actor. Travellers without passport or permits, caught up in the transnational dynamics of this current migration and border regime, might seek a better life across several different homelands with periodic diasporan relocation, and can only do so if they disregard or subvert the increasingly discriminating techniques, tactics, and strategies for controlling borders, even if this may become life-threatening.

Another example of an experimental way to force a different understanding of transnational existence can be found in the work of the sociologist Dana Diminescu in Paris, who is trying to break through traditional representations of migrant lives by studying the usage of new communication technologies, mobile phones, net platforms, money transfers, as well as family Skype sessions. With the help of net-specialists, artists’ and designers’ web platforms were created that show the translocality and connectedness of relatives and friends, that day by day cross the existing border regimes via digital communication tools. Diminescu’s “Connected Migrant”³ points to new realities, living and interacting in several places the same time.

Looking beyond the visual arts context into media and filmmaking, it can be argued that the Camcorder Revolution of the last twenty years has also fuelled the “anthropological turn” mentioned by Hal Foster. With the help of small, pay- and moveable cameras, people who are themselves on the move have been depicted in their everyday experience of border crossings. Thus, with the new waves of migration since 1989 it has been possible to constitute a new way of “watching and gazing at” migration.

The images of travel and border crossings have largely arrived in the official as well as in the independent media and thus became an autonomous genre. This travel image of migration is a thoroughly negative one, as the countless sensational documentaries of border crossings at the external boundaries of the European Union make clear. In these new images, it is mainly men from the Global South, on their own, who have been the main subjects, presented as victims or perpetrators of the border. These current representations of migration have determined contemporary discourse on the subject and how migration is popularly perceived.

These images also frequently contain colonial narratives in which migrants are presented as members of an underdeveloped territory. Moreover, the new male figures of migration also conceal the clandestine, transnational movements by women worldwide. The male migrant stranded at the borders of the European Union produces a new image of Europe itself, which no longer is structured internally by migration, but is “threatened” by it on the periphery.

The *EU external border* has become in the post-Fordist migration regime a hotspot for the “image of migration”, which seems magically to attract both the

documenting and controlling eye of cameras. In this newly evolving way of gazing at border crossings that has been established in the countless Arte and festival films, the fact that crossers as protagonists develop their own strategies, with which they actively respond to the conditions at the borders, is often erased, as well as the fact that “borders” are not at all located at the fringes of the EU, but that the border is internalized. The fact that most of these journeys cannot take place without connections, without social networks, friends, and relations, who have pre-structured the path and are already living abroad, remains cut out of the current “migration image”. Instead of accepting the national container as an ontological fact, the concept of the autonomy of migration has been established to counter or prior assumptions on what migration actually does, as Serhat Karakayali and Manuela Bojadžijev express:

The original focus of the debate that started roughly fifteen years ago surrounding the concept of the autonomy of migration was a critique of the metaphor of ‘Fortress Europe’. An important aspect of this critique was its questioning of the presumption that migration policies were exclusively determined by states and the institutions of border control. The metaphor of the ‘Fortress’ also had consequences for the understanding of the political, and this served to illuminate the debate over the last ten years. In other words, how does critical knowledge about migration ‘ally’ itself with political stratagems? While revealing the deadly realities of the border regime was intended to mobilize a humanistic public against such a ‘Fortress’, this strategy did not address the tricks and ruses used by migrants to slip over borders unnoticed. These issues mostly became the preserve of right-wing opponents of immigration, engaged in the baiting of ‘asylum cheats’ and ‘illegals’. In the tragic tale told by supporters of ‘Fortress Europe’, the “migrant’s perspective” ultimately resembles an obituary—that is, it is assumed that they will absolutely fail. Hence the Mediterranean is often described as a mass grave, and rightly so. In light of a skewed discussion in which the ‘migrant’s perspective’ is only ever included as a supplement to the discourse of walling-off, we ask ourselves wherein a possible alternative conception could arise and, therefore, what political project could be articulated through migration? In the first instance, it is an appeal to investigate ‘Fortress Europe’ from the perspective of the practices of migration.⁴

Nevertheless this figure of an *illegal immigrant* implies in its practice knowledge of migration via third nation arrangements, identifying the holes in the fence of the border controls, the means to become invisible or to become *someone else* against or for the categories of identity maintained by State control, while in everyday life, the illegalized traveller must face the necessity of continually having to represent someone else, depending on the context, without being able to articulate it. The practices of the border regime, the controls, and the new security provisions are ambivalently intertwined with the practices and strategies of clandestine movements.

In this context it is worth reflecting on Željimir Žilnik’s Kenedi Hasani Trilogy⁵ as a counter strategy to the Euro-American media coverage that we hear and watch day by day: after his participation in filming of “Kenedi Returns Home” (2004), the main actor of Žilnik’s trilogy, Kenedi Hasani, decided to undertake a series of clandestine travels to EU countries where his father, mother, brothers, and sisters live. During one of his crossings of the Hungarian-Austrian border in 2003, he is captured by the border police and spends a couple of months in a refugee camp. He

manages to escape to Austria and then to Germany and Holland. The film crew meets him in Vienna in January 2005 at a screening of “Kenedi Returns Home” at the University, thus the context of representation, abstraction, and his transnational existence gets into the dialogue. The second film recounts Kenedi’s experience of his two-year refugee status and his return to Serbia, where Kenedi decides to build a house in Novi Sad, because the other members of the family are in the “process of readmission” and are arriving soon. In the third film, Kenedi is in huge debt after having built the house for his family. He finds himself searching for any kind of work to support himself, for as little as 10 EUR per day, a scarce amount to help him relieve his debt. Ultimately, Kenedi decides to look for money in the sex business. Initially offering his services to older ladies and widows, he expands his “business” to offer sex to wealthy men. When he finds out about new liberal European laws on gay marriages, Kenedi sees prospects in looking for “marriage material” to renew his search for a legal status in the EU. The opportunity arises during the EXIT Music Festival, when he meets Max, a guy from Munich. “But will their promising relationship bring the solution to Kenedi’s problems?”, asks the promo text in the end.

In Žilnik’s so-called docu-dramas, the filmmaker tries out different settings for a reversal of existing ethnological roles in a way that protagonists of a societal field are creating the film plot in dialogue with the filmmaker, thus are directing the camera eye and are also acting in front of it. The audience of Žilnik’s films are therefore repeatedly confronted with the question: is it a documentary or is it a fiction? As the object of study, the classical documentary genre, is put into the role of the subject/artist, the storyteller and plot maker turns, like Kenedi, partially into a film star. Not only are the screen and its visual vocabulary used to show an alternate narrative but the cinema apparatus is always misused to put existing power relations into question. The desire for self-invention and role-playing is put into play. Thus, in some parts of Žilnik’s EU border films, the *actor* is taking the role of the documentary interviewer, or is creating *reality effects* due to his playing in a specific environment like a police station; thus the films are creating a situation rather than re-enacting one or following scenes from the outside.

What the three Kenedi films have in common is that they show *actors* in a double sense: a director/actor in a film as well as multiple actors in and of the EU border regime. It also shows that the refusal of refugee status, the harsh border police, and police in general will not hinder Kenedi from trying again and again choosing each time very different strategies and identities to subvert or affirm existing laws as well as creating niches of survival and self-creation. The “actors” in Žilnik’s films are subjects, with prospects, wishes, and failures, they are involved in deviant practices and are not fitting into national *integration* norms even though they are trying to fulfil their dream of a decent life with Western standards. The question if the intellectual milieu that is depicted in the last film has any solutions for Kenedi’s problem stays as an open question to us, too.

What we can witness in Žilnik’s film is that, through the self-organization of migration, civil rights are also differentiated and regulated into different, stratified spaces. These contemporary transnational existences of people who live and communicate in and beyond different global locations are still highly under-represented in contemporary knowledge and art production. Even though those transnational existences produce a horizontal movement alongside migration, encompass wide areas, and radically question the idea of a citizen’s right to be bound to a nation, the transnational traveller—as Želimir Žilnik has put him on screen—is not yet a popular image.

Instead of thinking from within the national container, migration has the potential to function as a model for an understanding of different patterns of movement and residency that points to a post-national future in which neither place of birth nor so-called origin can be decisive in the constitution of the civil rights of the citizen. This would be a task to be investigated and represented, as well as struggled for, or as Serhat Karakayali and Manuela Bojadžijev have argued:

...[C]ritical efforts must be directed towards developing the institutions and practices of citizenship that are not tied to the nation-state, while simultaneously minimizing hierarchies arising through the new differentiation of jurisdictions. In this respect, an opportunity emerges: the demand for rights and justice must move beyond the guarantee of citizenship. Accordingly, classifications of citizenship and statelessness need to be overcome. Aspects of citizenship that are connected to the permeability of borders, and already underlie their deterritorialization, should be considered in terms of the limits within the concept of citizenship itself. In other words, migrants without papers should not only be thought of as objects of exclusion; rather, their appropriation of citizenship (for example, the ability to organize education and accommodation, medical care and work, despite their lack of recognized status) should be understood as challenges and redefinitions of the very limits of our understanding of citizenship.⁶

A social and political organization beyond borders also implies an unrelenting effort to understand and translate different languages, and concepts expressed in the struggle for rights. To engage in these processes would be to open the possibility of articulating subjectivity differently in the future—beyond the nation-state.

Captions

1 Želimir Žilnik, *Kenedi goes back home*, Serbia and Montenegro, 2003, film still. Courtesy of the artist.

2 Želimir Žilnik, *Kenedi lost and found*, Serbia and Montenegro, 2005, film still. Courtesy of the artist.

3 Želimir Žilnik, *Kenedi is getting married*; Serbia, 2007, filmstill. Courtesy of the artist.

Notes

1 Brandon Hopkins, *Theories of Media*, University of Chicago, Winter 2003; annotation on Hal Foster, *The Artist as Ethnographer*, in "The Return of the Real", The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996.

2 cf. Labor k3000: MigMap. A Virtual Cartography of European Migration Policies. Accessed 19.04.2016. <http://www.transitmigration.org/migmap/>.

3 cf. Dana Diminescu (2016). The connected migrant: an epistemological manifesto. Accessed 19.04.2016. <http://diasporaslab.hypotheses.org/115>.

4 Manuela Bojadžijev and Serhat Karakayali, *Recuperating the Sideshows of Capitalism. The Autonomy of Migration Today*. Accessed 18.4.2016. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/recuperating-the-sideshows-of-capitalism-the-autonomy-of-migration-today/>.

5 Želimir Žilnik's Trilogy contains "Kenedi se vraća kući", 2003 (Kenedi Goes Back Home), "Gde je bio Kenedi 2 godine", 2005 (Kenedi, Lost and Found), "Kenedi se ženi", 2007 (Kenedi is Getting Married).

6 Manuela Bojadžijev and Serhat Karakayali, *Recuperating the Sideshows of Capitalism. The Autonomy of Migration Today*.



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