NANTES SCHOOL OF ART RESEARCH PLATFORM

:::::: ART BORDER RESEARCH ::::::::

The issue of “art and territory” is widely traversed by notions of mobility, boundary and border. What is art and artists develop and create around these issues? On the axis “Art and Border”, the research platform of Nantes School of Art is in partnership with the High School of Art and Design of Geneva (HEAD-Genève), and form the initial core of a large group of courses, universities and artistic structures and French international initiative to develop the artistic Nantes international Association of “border studies”.

STATEMENT

WHAT MAKES A BORDER?

Borders are complex and are rooted at the very heart of contemporary transformation.

First and foremost, a border is a political “construction”, physically ranging from great mountains to a humble wall, also considered organic, more or less stable and hermetic. To observers a border is both a line that separates and creates discontinuity whilst also being a contact zone (giving place to a wide range of symbolic, material, peaceful or violent exchange). The scientific study of borders was created essentially from political and strategic preoccupations in the 19th century, and since then, much has changed: once a simple line in the sand, a border now occupies a whole zone; once nothing more than a physical barrier, are now considered as a cultural entity. These new approaches have fed off progress in other disciplines. Just as the world and communities change, the way we look at borders is also under transformation.

These geographical, political and national frontiers are under scrutiny, challenged by the speed in which we can travel, by mass population mobility (tourism, migration, professional mobility), by financial mobility and business transactions and of course virtual exchange, the exchange of images and information crossing the globe in a heartbeat and carrying with them the global phenomena of urbanization and globalization. But just as we are tearing down the old walls, new boundaries and separations are being erected in their place (forced inactivity, a retreat behind communal, national and ethical lines). Other barriers are springing up. New borders are being laid, and this time the driving force is a combination of religion, dominant economical philosophies, political systems, armed conflicts, cultural clashes, history, topography and landscape. As the world struggles for a sense of completion and balance, these borders are constantly destroyed and rebuilt upon linguistic, cultural and political lines.

In his article “What is a border?”, the philosopher Etienne Balibar writes: “The idea of a simple expression of what is a border is by definition an absurdity. Marking a border means staking out a territory, declaring its frontiers and therefore defining or imposing an identity. But likewise, defining and identifying in general is nothing more than drawing up a border and laying boundaries (in Greek “horos”, in Latin “finis” or “terminus”, in German “Grenze”, in French “frontière” etc.). A theoretician who wants to define the term border is caught in a loop, as the representation of the border is the condition for any definition”. This text is a reminder that borders are zones where misunderstanding and socio-cultural distance is magnified, as they seal off and create one entity just as much as they exclude another. However, faced with such a wide range of border perspectives and situations, so as not to arrive at any forced and over-simplistic conclusion, Balibar continues: “to understand the unstable world in which we live, we need to grasp complex ideas, or dialectics”.

1 Marie Louise Pratt designates with this term the spaces in « which geographically and historically separated people come into contact with each other and establish relationships which normally imply coercive conditions, radical inequality and conflict ».
2 The geographers who studied this from the mid-19th century constructed methods and initiated a train of thought, by way of the study of borders, about the ideas of territorial policy and power. Borders were first considered as a spatial marker for the geopolitical action of a state between two phases of expansion, or in other words, the reach of a State and the shape it takes (margin or line).
3 AUGE M., Pour une anthropologie de la mobilité (For an anthropologist of mobility), Rivages pocket.
He also attempts to make this idea more approachable by designating within it four characteristics: over-determination, polysemy (“it doesn’t have the same meaning for everybody”), heterogeneity and ubiquity of territorialisation (there are always several boundary functions, some frontiers are not fixed to borders in the geographical, political-administrative sense of the word”) fulfilled simultaneously by “borders” between a distinct social or material flux and between distinct rights and laws”). This point of view is similar to that of many observers: a border is laid in a place of tension between antagonistic forms of logic, and often beyond officially stated boundaries. Balibar also writes that we won’t necessarily find borders where we expect to; a true appreciation of the placing of a border comes after we have taken into account more than just the simple voluntary inhibition to cross an imaginary line in the sand. The anthropologist James Clifford, himself studying a series of locations where culture is in transition — places he names “border zones”, shares this opinion. Finding just as many cultures in collision and under change in an art gallery, in Mayan ruins or the New York subway.

Currently, the word “border” is a very popular one, in its usual meaning as well as being a metaphor for a multitude of realities which are viewed as boundaries, part of our propensity to divide the world into separable subjects and objects. This may come as a shock, but borders are a necessity. Without this referential core and foundation, how can we distinguish between others and ourselves? Distinction is necessary to avoid disappearing in fusion.

Reflecting upon borders necessitates reflection from different perspectives in order to try and apprehend the contradictions throughout history, enabling a reconsideration of time and to understand the immediate present. It is as important to return to the historical complexity of this idea as it is to pursue phenomenological descriptions, institutional modality, the legal implications and the various facets and realities of these spatial-temporality, the moving trajectories of identities and cultures.

Artists have undertaken this work. Boundary realities are the subject of a growing number of works. They are observed, practiced, denounced, even deformed and transfigured beyond simple binary opposition by bringing the discontinuities, circles of influence and relationships to the forefront. In other words, certain artists have developed a frontier mentality. An invitation to both think about borders and think the border, all the while remaining attentive in both cases to the fact there is more than one side to the border, and that it creates an interior as well as an exterior. As a liminal thought, the border is considered to be a threshold, not a barrier.

These works often deconstruct the idea of a border through shift- by shifting a border; we can shift meaning, for example moving from territorial logic to a trans-territorial dynamic. A Derridian deconstruction is a good example of such a strategy. In other words, how can we think in terms of de-frontalization, re-frontalization and trans-frontalization (this is another way of depicting the incessant de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation games of Deleuze and Guattari)? Contrary to the fixed gaze of classical cartography, such an approach instead focuses on the moving trajectories of identities and cultures.

In consequence, to take it down to the very essence of identity and difference, does this liminal way of thinking not tend to define identity, no longer in relation to the centre but in terms of the separating border? If the border-barrier ensures eventual confrontation, the border-threshold prepares us for exchange. It is no longer a line of separation but a tangent. It also becomes a tool to trace movement, decentralization, schism, transformation, subversion, contamination; in short, all the effects of temptation from the other, a liminal impulse or desire for liminality.

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6 For example, borders in traditional societies, as opposed to those established by nation-states, are never fixed and linear. They are, in general, blurred margins, ending up as a sort of jigsaw puzzle of spaces going from a highly appropriated space (the heart space) towards zones considered foreign and often dangerous. Far from being unknown and ignored entities, these marginal zones are a part of the imagination of the indigenous peoples. They are, in the same way, a place of practices, exchanges and conflicts which promote social vitality, knowledge of the next man, a place which reinforces cultural identity and a space with a high symbolic value which promotes cultural diffusion. What’s more, the functions attributed by these societies to the border zone is evidence that they are part of a network, and aren’t the source of any real spatial rupture.