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# Anthropological Journal of European Cultures

# The Glass Curtain
## Bridges from Ethnography to Art

### KATHARINA EISCH-ANGUS

**ABSTRACT**

In an interdisciplinary workshop in the former Iron Curtain borderlands of the Czech Republic and Bavaria seven multi-national artists and one European ethnologist revealed the cultural dynamics of boundaries both by exploring an expressive landscape and memory field, and by experiencing cultural difference as reflected in the co-operation and creation processes within the group. By using ethnographic approaches to assist the process of developing and conceptualising artworks and self-reflexive, ethno-psychoanalytic interpretation, the project followed the impact of twentieth-century border frictions and violence into collective identities, but also the arbitrary character of borders. The results suggest how a multi-perspective, subjectively informed methodology of approaching space and spatially expressed memory could be developed both for ethnology and for art, bridging the supposed gap between 'artistic' and 'scientific' methods by combining their strengths in a complementary way.

**KEYWORDS**

Art, borders, ethno-psychoanalysis, landscape, memory

The Czech–German border at Bayerisch Eisenstein is a significant starting point. Here the Iron Curtain had obviously and visibly cut through the main street, the fields and forests, and right through the historical Bavarian–Bohemian train station, closing off this Bavarian Forest village from its Bohemian neighbours for over forty years. With a complex system of barriers, observation and control points and restriction signs, with fears, rumours and projective legends of good and evil attached to it, this border had marked the Cold War, signifying an epochal break in European history as well as a deep separation line through collective memories, identities, relationships and everyday practices.

The famous Eisenstein train station, opened in 1877 as a junction point connecting the railroads to Prague and Munich, is an outstanding symbol of twentieth-century European history and its shifts and turning points, which can be told through stories of the opening and closing of borders. These are paradoxical stories, though, where frontier crossings could open up encounter and exchange, or, to the contrary, where violent intrusion could lead into violent closures, petrifying responses of friction that counteract the positive border functions of a mutual securing of difference and communication. The impressive granite building was designed to spread over the state border with two large wings representing the Bavarian side and Bohemian side. In 1918, after the breakdown of the Austrian and German Empires, the newly founded State of Czechoslovakia and the Weimar Republic superseded the old, familiar border authorities. Yet the lively rail border crossing point continued as a place for the exchange of goods and people, of cultural and economical osmosis. In its balance of reaching out to others whilst defining one's own otherness this border held a fluid and productive dialectic of opening and closing.

This balance started to tip in the 1930s when nationalistic and national socialist borderlines gained dominance in collective ideological awareness and reached out to the state boundary, increasingly affecting the Czech–German everyday culture of border crossing. The border area became a site of infringement and violence – until the Eisenstein checkpoints were overrun in 1938 by *Wehrmacht* troops marching into the German-speaking border areas following the Munich treaty and, in 1939, further on towards Prague, invading the country with death and terror. After the war, due to Nazi Germany's border violation, Czechoslovakia was drawn to marking an irreconcilable separation through the expulsion of its three million ethnic German population, re-erecting the border behind them as a cast-iron wall between Czechs and Germans and thus welding the break of a fruitful, seven hundred year long co-existence into the landscape, together with an amalgam of pain, blame and guilt.

The next epoch-making border crossing, which was again linked to a re-ordering of the world, happened in Bayerisch Eisenstein in 1990, when a gigantic march of 70,000 people across the road checkpoint put the Velvet Revolution slogan 'Back to Europe'. The local revolutionary citizens' forum group of Železná Ruda had called for a human chain between both border

places on 3 February 1990, having obtained a one-day intermission of visa requirements. All careful organisation was swept aside by the overwhelming response, which created, to use Victor Turner's term, an experience of 'communitas' in a liminal transition zone between an old, overthrown border and world system and the new, upcoming one. In 1991, the border train station was re-opened for rail traffic to Pilsen and Prague, and Bayerisch Eisenstein experienced itself moving from the periphery back into Europe's centre. However, the border area has since then remained an ambiguous zone of transition. Here the insecurities as well as the fascinations of change and encounter have brought about a new polarity of openness and closure that can be felt in new control systems and border regulations as well as in peoples' minds on both sides.

In 1999, these border ambiguities could be clearly observed around the Eisenstein train station and the nearby road crossing point, five years before the Czech Republic joined the European Union in May 2004 and eight years before the Schengen-treaty-based relaxation of checkpoint controls of December 2007. I had brought an artists' project group – comprising two Germans, an Austrian, two English, two Czechs and two Japanese – to this historical border site. Ten years after the worlds' eyes had turned to this forgotten section of the Iron Curtain and its revolutionary opening, this small yet international workshop might present some evidence for Thomas K. Schippers' questioning of a European 'border-crossing excitement' (personal note, 15 May 2009) linked to the actual attenuation of any seriously threatening borders.[1] Certainly the artists' response to our project points towards an awakening interest in Central and Eastern European border regions, which also documents itself academically in the 1990s rise of border anthropologies instigated by the domino-like breakdown and re-structuring of Eastern European borders from 1989. Despite this new curiosity the public interest on Czech–German borderlands remained restrained and largely tinted by the mutual resentments and adversary charges between 'Sudeten German' expellee organisations and Czech political groups. As a result, apart from expellee (auto)biographical testimony and oral histories, little anthropological research has happened in these areas. Rare examples are, for example, the sensitive field studies on memory and narration, experience and emotion in post-socialist contexts in the Western Bohemian–Bavarian borderlands by Elisabeth Fendl (Fendl 2002) and, in English, by Maruška Svášek (Svášek 2000; see also Eisch 1996–2007).

Strolling from one crossing point to the other, watching border controls and commuters, enjoying the view of meadows and woods spreading out to all sides, we wondered about the familiar and the foreign touching in a paradox of closeness and indistinctiveness. In front of the train station, between boundary signs, densely printed information boards, border posts, Bavarian, German and EU flags and flag-coloured poles and signage and a close-meshed fence, a pedestrians' way opened over the border. Here in pre-Second World War times locals would commute on their daily business as well as with occasional smuggled goods. Today this might similarly apply – anyway, we observed small groups wandering towards the neighbouring town of Železná Ruda for a cheap meal or low-taxed cigarettes. Our group decided to try their own step over the border. Suddenly I was called into a vivid discussion with two German border policemen, for translation. In the midst of it all were the Japanese women. 'No', we insisted 'they don't need a visa'; I had inquired at the embassy. But, so we learned, this was not at issue, not for this small crossing point restricted to European citizens. Of course Japanese were free over the international rail and road crossings, and, 'we wouldn't make such a fuss, but, you know, the Czech colleagues . . .'. Between embarrassment and amusement the state guards showed the two Japanese an absurd but legal crossing way that could hardly dilute the confusion of the group: right through the train station, along the platform over the border, then back through the building to join the group on the other side!

This arbitrariness of the border, which also shows differences between 'our' border and the capricious border of 'the others', became an irritating leitmotif of our project. We learnt how a border marks, classifies and snubs anonymously and incomprehensibly, how it allows passage whilst asserting a power of veto that can meet anybody at any time.

## Art, Fieldwork and Creativity

So, what was our project about? The workshop was organised in August 1999 in the framework of the international summer art academy *Bild-Werk Frauenau*, an open summer school centred in visual arts, and especially glass art, located in the traditional crystal glass producing area of the Bavarian Forest region in Eastern Bavaria (Eisch-Angus 2006). In a cross-border exchange of ideas, technology and glassmakers between the old Czech heartland of glassmaking and the neighbouring German regions, glass has for centuries

worked as a strong human intermediary and a prolific cultural and art medium. In co-operation with the British glass artist Mark Angus, I offered a two and a half weeks workshop: '*Making the Iron Curtain transparent – in Glass*'. Our plan was to trace the Czech–German border area, its land and village sites, its hidden signs and memories, and its signifiers from past and present, employing ethnographic methods as well as an imaginative, artistic eye. The results would be individual artworks in glass and other materials, and a small group exhibition. Ethnography as our starting point should also be able to lend itself to informing and structuring the artistic perception and the development of art objects and projects – given the affinity that open, multi-perspective research processes bear towards artistic activity.

What are these assumptions based on? I take it that culture can never be understood in terms of fixed, unchanging entities. Instead, it appears to follow the model of borders as spheres of dialogue and encounter, and of constant re-organisation through their dynamics of opening (its tendency towards interaction and penetrability), and closing (an assertiveness in ordering and defining difference and power). According to ethno-psychoanalyst Mario Erdheim, culture and identity comes about through movement and change through border interaction: '*Kultur ist das, was in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Fremden entsteht, sie stellt das Produkt der Veränderung des Eigenen durch die Aufnahme des Fremden dar*' [Culture is what comes about in the active experience of the foreign; it is the product of the changing of our 'Own' by the inclusion of the foreign 'Other'] (Erdheim 1993: 168, my translation). In semiotic terms, this is also expressed in Yuri M. Lotman's concept of the 'semiosphere' describing the creation of new meaning in the (metaphorical) 'border zones' of culture, where sign and language systems meet and penetrate into each other's spheres (J. Lotman 1990; Y. Lotman 1990: 131–150). Overall Lotman's cultural semiotic theory of boundaries has still not been adequately recognised in its analytical potential for anthropology; accordingly scholars largely refrain from systematically exploring the objective – spatial and social – borders of daily life in the contexts of structural ideological and textual boundaries. In contrast, recent approaches from semiotics and language studies into anthropology, based on the comprehensive thinking of Yuri M. Lotman, are worth mentioning (Montes and Taverna 2006; Schönle 2006).

Regardless of whether it investigates the past or the present, ethnographic research has to follow and reflect the cultural dynamics of its field within the spatial and temporal frames set by the proceedings of the researcher. Eth-

nographic findings must be referred back to the many-voiced contexts that open up through the research process, and interpretations need to withstand testing against their objective embodiment in the field. All of this makes good science, as George Marcus, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, and others have been telling us for over two decades (see, for example, Marcus 1992, 1995; Bochner and Ellis 2002). It also encourages us to trust open processes without pre-determined outcomes; it challenges us with the tangible and visible, yet polysemous realities of life, driven by the excitement of crossing borders into the unknown and foreign. Consequently, ethnographies, with their ways of generating interpretation and recognition in research and writing, need to accept themselves to some extent as '*Opera aperta*', open (art) work, as Umberto Eco has defined works of art and literature in their semantic and communicative pluralism, which is far from any apology for or legitimation for arbitrariness and randomness (Eco 1977: 85–89). In these respects, ethnographic work shares the sources of artistic creativity, but also its risks of personal, emotional and subjective involvement.

Both art and ethnography draw on their proximity to culture and to the collective unconscious where culture is entrenched and formed. From the 1960s psychoanalysts, Fritz Morgenthaler, Paul Parin and Goldy Parin-Matthèy applied psychoanalytic methods systematically in anthropological research, in order to understand unconscious cultural formations through individual field encounters. They conducted field research in Europe, Africa and New Guinea based on Freud's procedural and dialogic method of creating understanding through the development of transference and counter-transference within the psychoanalytic patient-analyst-relationship. Morgenthaler, Parin and Parin-Matthèy followed especially Georges Devereux' scientific observations of the distortion of field results through ignoring the emotional, aggressive or libidinous involvement of both the researcher and the researched (see, for example, Nadig 2004). Mario Erdheim, Maya Nadig and others, as present exponents of the Zurich school of ethno-psychoanalysis, have shown to what extent our subjective engagement in the field does not only bias our results, but can also push forward a process of understanding of the foreign Other through the dynamics of transference and counter-transference in research relationships. According to this perspective, fieldwork depends on empathy and open perception, but also on sensitivity towards the researcher's own reactions of blockage or aggression, irritation or identification. Allowing an open, self-reflective methodology, these subjective responses can be

analysed as reflections of the foreign culture as well as of our own culturally informed inhibitions. In this way the unconscious, as it shapes the emotional and symbolic manifestations of culture, shows an evocative presence in ethnographic recognition processes and research results just as it does in artists' developments of their themes and motifs, and their intuitive procedures of creating. The artistic and ethnographic exploration of the unknown and the foreign, in us and in the Other, takes place in the sphere of interaction between different subjectivities, which again can be understood, in metaphorical terms, as a vital cultural boundary zone. The acknowledgement of our projections and transferences assists the understanding of our fields and enables us to cross those borders in our work.

It is obvious that, whilst researching borders, the dynamics of borders and boundary areas would manifest themselves as cultural differences within our multi-national group, due to our diverse cultural reactions and to the historical experiences of our various countries. In the project our different, culturally and biographically formed ways of perception met an emotive landscape, where meanings, memories and narratives were evoked by multi-layered signs and inscriptions of past life and destruction, and of present changes. This borderland, visibly loaded as it is with memories and emotional attributions, makes it self-evident to what extent field research, like artistic work, refers to the perceptions of the ethnographer/artist as well as of all interaction partners. Here, as in most research fields, collectively shared memories and narratives, as well as self-descriptions and worldviews created in every culture, are grounded in the spatial, the visual and the concrete. Conversely, we encounter any landscape and living space as already culturally and symbolically charged. This circumscribes the domain of scientific competence of anthropology, which could inform artistic approaches with analytic terms, models and heuristic tools. On the other hand, scholarly formats have a tendency to lose the depth and complexity of visual and narrative references with more arid, abstract analysis; whereas art might lead us back to an imaginative understanding within spatio-concrete concepts.

Thus, in a process of research, discussion and creation, our project became an experiment of experiencing borders on three levels: firstly, in the historical border landscape, secondly, as a workshop project that could mirror – and transcend – cultural difference within our group, and, thirdly, as an interdisciplinary transition from ethnography to art.

## Experiences and Images of the Border

Accordingly, besides discussing our individual backgrounds, the course started artistically with exercises in glass and drawing, and ethnographically, with two day-long excursions into the field. From Bayerisch Eisenstein we crossed over to the Czech border town of Železná Ruda and further on into the overgrown, melancholic Bohemian Forest landscape, the former military no-go area of the Iron Curtain. In our second outing we walked to a deserted border village site high up in the mountains. Here, in true ethnographic manner, I encouraged the participants to write a field diary with observations, impressions, talks and questions of the day, no matter how insignificant, irritating or unresolved they might seem. The artists followed my suggestions their own way, by integrating the diary into their sketchbooks and combining it with photographs, found objects from nature or, for example, from piles of rubble and remains that had once been houses. In the following days I provided documents from my own border research (Eisch 1996), including maps, photographs and archive copies, which the participants could use both for their contents and for their visual, reminiscent qualities.

Observing, drawing and writing, the group started to create their own border-related images, experiencing the Czech–German border zone as absurd, arbitrary and ambiguous. They noted the complications of border crossings, for example in the way the two Japanese had come to experience them. In the legal grey areas, which had emerged from the rapid collision of the political systems as well as from the lopsided economic cross-border relations, the artists wondered about the garish bustle of gambling halls, prostitution and the Vietnamese traders with their stalls filled with garden gnomes, cheap cigarettes, alcohol and fake branded jeans. The Vietnamese ethnic minority of the Czech Republic, who arrived as foreign labourers in communist times, have established a closed market system for cheap consumption goods which flourishes especially in tourist and border areas. Also, the conspicuous omnipresence of prostitution and human trafficking are inhuman outcomes of new political and economic border constellations.

Walking over tangled meadows, we found the remains of barbed wire and traces of border posts, a paved helicopter landing pad in the wilderness, all speaking of the Cold War – just like the German air force radar towers that remain visible high on top of the Great Arber mountain. A wooden bridge over a small border stream far off in the forest was surrounded with all types

of border signs and symbols, which would strike us as both over-coded with meaning and yet strangely void of any sense.

The English group members started to tackle the border sign system directly, for example by trying to de-code its order by making drawings and rubbings of border stone symbols. Art teacher Florence[2] studied an old border stone in the floor of the central entrance hall of the Eisenstein train station. Looking at the 100-year-old building plan, she became fascinated by the symmetrical, architectural representation of this bi-national border-crossing point, over-laid with traces of use, destruction, dilapidation and new renovation. We then interpreted a locked door – placed on the boundary line and opposing all symmetry right in the middle of the building – as a symbol for the paradox of borders by indicating transition and togetherness through conspicuous closure and blockage.

This paradox is generally contained in the concept of a border – be it a territorial boundary line or any division in the realm of culture. Through their assertion of separation and exclusion borders inevitably also suggest the possibility (or impossibility) of transition and passage towards the excluded 'Other', which is outlined by the border line – or, vice versa. Adopting Yuri Lotman's structural analysis of Russian folk narratives, any boundary crossing is no more than an exception to the rules of the demarcating power that, by imposing its borders, defines and closes itself against a foreign sphere, which it considers as anarchic or chaotic, as not our own (Lotman 1974, Y. Lotman 1990). On this base any structurally 'forbidden' crossover will always refer the crossers back to the order that the borderline secures and stands for, be it a political structure, or, beyond that, an ideological or mythological, or social system.

This dialectic boundary mechanism was tangibly and forcefully affirmed when our group was confronted with the violent fault lines of the twentieth century still inscribed in the Czech borderlands of 1999. Most impressive, on our first borderland excursion, were the old cemeteries of previously German-inhabited villages along the Czech side. In the small village of Prášilý, formerly Stubenbach, the cemetery had been bulldozed, after having suffered shooting and demolition by soldiers stationed here in the Iron Curtain death zone. After 1989 present and previous villagers rebuilt the cemetery walls, re-erected grave stones and collected broken name boards, sculptures and cast iron parts. As a 'lieu de mémoire' it appeared as one of Pierre Nora's evocative 'Zwitterorte(n), dicht gesponnen aus Leben und Tod, Zeit und Ewigkeit – in einer Spirale des Kollektiven und des Individuellen, des Prosaischen und des Sakralen, des Un-

bewegten und des Beweglichen' [hybrid places, densely spun from life and death, time and eternity – in a spiral of the collective and the individual, the secular and the sacred] (Nora 1990: 27, my translation). A place between the worlds, where time stands still and, at the same time, seems condensed, this hidden border site opened as a threshold, a liminal sphere in all respects.

In their process of drawing, writing and photographing, puzzling together shards of village life and villagers' biographies, of violence and reconciliation, the group recorded feelings of grief and incomprehension, which were then, paradoxically, overlaid by a strong sense of peace. The cemetery pointed us to death as the – in a universal sense – last border to be faced, and it influenced our art projects as an overarching yet subliminal group theme. For example, in the next day's group talk the Austrian student, Marianne, introduced sketchbook drawings of her project plan to use the long, wavelike grass that covered the cemetery as well as the surrounding highland meadows. In combination with handwritten archive materials – like letters and applications for cross-border commuters' permits – she conceptualised the grass as illegible writing, narrating the biographies of people who formerly lived there and might be buried underneath.

Similarly, Keiko, a sixty-year-old Japanese woman, found her own boundary in this eloquently silent nature. She admired the giant maple trees along the cemetery walls. She understood the trees, which spanned many years, as quiet witnesses of past village peoples' lives, as well as of all the violence that occurred through the inflicting of frontiers up to the present day. In the group talk on the next day, Keiko started off in poor English, recalling the ash shadows of the people burned in the fire blast of Hiroshima – the haunting images of her youth. While she may not have been able to follow my historical information in detail, throughout the trip she was able to associate the old trees and the village and cemetery atmosphere with Japanese collective memory. Keiko, who was, not only by language but also by culture, separated the furthest from European experiences, could name the war in its leaden heaviness and unimaginable violence; based purely on intuition she could connect the Prášilý/Stubenbach cemetery to Hiroshima through the global border experience of 1945.

## Bridge Building – And a Boundary Dispute

Lenka, a young Czech art student, seemed to draw a different, yet fundamental boundary within the group by rejecting all Czech–German border issues as

purely my interest as an anthropologist and as a German citizen – her interest was working in glass, she insisted. On our first border trip she followed my explanations with a closed expression, keeping herself to Mark as the Englishman and the artist. One should not talk about all of that anymore, she said; this was the history of her grandparents, she did not want to hear about it.

However, in the Stubenbach cemetery – this absurd no-man's place between peace and violence – the border also seemed to open up for her. Amazed at the poetic ambience, she expressed her astonishment to find herself in a German cemetery in the Czech Republic, with a group talking mainly in English. For Lenka, addressing the conflict-laden Czech–German division and her own ambivalence about it became the first step to bridging it. Only two days later on our mountain walk we sat down next to a small border bridge for a storytelling break, and Lenka, spreading her arms wide, surprised the group with a charming story of a tree that could not decide which way to go with the wind. Back in the studio, she started, with Mark's help, to conceptualise this idea. 'Bridge', she wrote in Czech, German and English on her first sketch; after two more days, with exuberant joy, she surprised us with something she had been working on. For their final exhibition the group had been given a spacious old barn, in which an ascending ramp led up to a second floor level. High up over this ramp, between the roof timbers, Lenka had spun sparkling nylon threads, which she had interwoven with five matt-white glass strips. This fragile, floating bridge expressed perfectly the precarious uncertainty of a border situation – and bridged it at the same time. Now Lenka could release her tension and approach me as well as the border theme. In the following days she would carry the group away with her enthusiasm, her creativity and engaged artwork.

In this way the principal character of boundaries, the correlation of opening and closing, surfaced in the workshop as a constant ambivalence between unpredictably drawn borderlines and sudden moments of transition. At this point the other participants also started to translate their field findings into paintings and installations. More bridges arose in the barn, one of which was created by a German glass painter as a dichotomous arrangement of emotional border-associated terms like fear, love and hatred, over all of which levitated a glassy spirit figure. There were filigree window installations between inside and outside, and symbolic pathways – such as a tunnel leading from darkness into colourful light – which the two Japanese lined with subtle drawings of trees, keys and faces, mostly referring to the theme of peace.

However, a few days before the exhibition opening in the old barn the tension of crossing and closing, dialogue and delimitation, of mixing and of securing identities escalated within the group. All students had defined their individual exhibition spaces and were eagerly working on their installations. Mark – who was struck by the image of the dominating boundary significations around the little bridge we had found in the forest – had set up a row of heavy wooden border posts with their demarcation symbols in cast-glass tops, creating a perspective rising up along the ramp and crossing through and under Lenka's shiny bridge. However, Lenka, unexpectedly, reacted with shock and aggression, which prompted Mark to take his installation down. This created a deadlock: both felt their work destroyed by the intervention of the other. Where the Czech student sensed an intrusion into her space, a border violation, the English teacher talked about artistic dialogue and a logical extension of her theme.

In the subsequent group discussion a fundamental border conflict arose, between us as project leaders, lecturing on a meta-level about creative border spheres of dialogue, change and transition, and most participants, who insisted on the fearful demarcating of territories between individual artworks. The conflict was felt as a chasm within the group and project which, however, nobody wanted to argue out. We found ourselves stuck in different teaching traditions and cultural understandings of group hierarchies or group co-operation. Nobody responded to Mark's appeal to find a home for him as a 'displaced person'; the group seemed to disintegrate into silent individuals, manically working on finishing their pieces and the exhibition.

Only at the end of the summer school could the group together turn the corner, after the exhibition was opened as an autonomous, visual and spatial expression of our project work. Then, in a final talk, the participants wanted to express their individual perceptions of the group co-operation throughout the workshop, and of the controversial installations. It became obvious how Lenka's bridge and Mark's border posts belonged together in their polarity of heaviness and lightness, and, at the same time, how right Lenka's feelings about the nature of this border and its history were. Mark's exhibition display of a forceful demarcation line manifested a reality of friction and violence that Lenka had not wanted to look at, and which the group thought to have overcome in creative lightness. Even worse, for Lenka the Czech–German wound had been re-opened – by the English artist teacher whom she had trusted as an impartial confidant. Slowly we realised that stepping over borderlines

does not take the border away. Consequently, this did not seem to leave a chance for a solution to the conflict – until Mark, to Lenka's relief, resolved to tracing his poles symbolically as simple chalk marks on the floor. Overall, the resulting one-day exhibition was a startling success. Despite all careful segregation, all the individual artworks seemed to enter into dialogues with each other, as well as with the space around. Installations of border crossings, bridges, nests, harmonising circular shapes or a sparkling forest edge from turning glass leaves were linked by chalk marks, inscriptions and sign posts. At the entry visitors were confronted with the absurdity of borders through a mirror boundary post dangling down in the middle of the ramp, and forcing them to decide between two sides as they walked up Mark's chalk-drawn boundary line. During the opening to the public many viewers felt the depressive heaviness of the theme, which was also illustrated by maps and photographs of our field trips. Yet the exhibition still emanated lightness. Many findings and products from the field, like photographs, newspaper cuttings, drawings and rubbings, life stories, and so on, had been collaged into the art installations and worked to address also the interdisciplinary approach of the project. Likewise, a poster with key words from our field experiences in four languages – 'uncertainty', 'ambivalence', 'absurdity', 'balance', 'order', or 'memory', 'generation', 'death', 'heaviness', 'nature' – referred the visitors back to a reflexive, intercultural group process, our joint border walk.

## Art, Ethnography and the Cultural Dialectics of Borders

But what can we conclude from it all? Of course, we learnt about our historical heritage as European and world citizens of the twentieth century, and, following Freud, about our 'Gefühlserbschaften' [emotional inheritance] of biographical breaks and border experiences, which are unconsciously passed on through the generations just as they remain inscribed in landscapes and cultural sites. Although Freud mentioned this expression only once in his 1913 publication 'Totem und Tabu', Angela Moré interprets it as a central Freudian concept linking culture, memory and psyche (Moré 2007: 209–212).

We learnt too about borders and difference and the effects of their ambivalent and contradictory dynamics of opening and closing. Addressing a closed border brings, paradoxically, the other side in view, and can therefore be experienced as an act of crossing. This means, in phenomenological terms, that whilst every border, in delineating other entities, is pure 'difference', no

more than a negative form – it may be simultaneously experienced as a spatial and corporal zone by being concretely named and transcended. This mechanism can be understood as structuring every cultural space, be it in language, perception, mental mapping or ideology, whilst it also impels movement and change. Without borders – without difference – there is no culture, which makes the boundary a total cultural fact par excellence. What I identified as the paradox of borders, the correlation of opening and closing, of imposing order and transcending, is linked to this contradictory (aporetic) character: that boundaries can switch between abstract formality and very concrete presence.

This changeability also enabled the interchanging focus of our project from historical borderlines to the boundaries within the social group, as well as between art and ethnography. In each field we could learn about the border of the Other as different boundary themes and narratives translated from one level to the other. In general terms, when every semiotic space follows, as described by Lotman, a flexible, yet basically binary boundary structure, any group's self-images and models of the world are ordered according to a formal opposition of 'Us' and 'Them', 'Here' and 'There' (Lotman 1974, Y. Lotman 1990). This opposition can be thematic in mythological or ideological meta texts – it might be described as a spatial or social opposition, or formally translated into the plot structure of a story (a forbidden line which only the hero is able to cross) – or it is, as a political state border, inscribed into the countryside. It is an abstract, non-physical division line, which we strive to mark concretely and materialise, and which, in its restrictive assertion of order, invites us to experience it through border crossing. Each time, the boundary changes from a differential to a zonal existence when placed on another level of text or experience, which for its part appears structured by its own differentiating borders. Boundaries serve in this way as 'hinges' on which different sign systems align, associate and inform each other (Eisch 1996: 63f).

This fundamental cultural sign mechanism of all border phenomena can be seen as enabling our students to connect to the historical reality of the Bavarian–Bohemian border area from their individual cultural view points, and to transfer them into artistic images. On a meta-level, I could, in my field diary, detect and reflect on group processes by referring them back to our national standpoints and our historical and spatial border experiences. However, this process of understanding – and, consequently, the methodological

results of our project – would have hardly been possible without consciously inviting individual subjectivities and, moreover, artistic imagination into this exploration. However short and limited the workshop might have been in artistic and scientific terms, it shed some light onto the mutual potentials of combining artistic and ethnographic approaches (which apply also independently of choosing the rather exceptional theme of 'borders'). Ethnography, before all other forms of research, can structure, inform and inspire artistic perception and motif finding. In that sense, for example, it would be worthwhile for anthropologists and artists to engage in joint explorations, both on a practical and theoretical level, of the artistic use and reflection not only of field diaries but also of narrative interviews and other empirical material. My emphasis is hereby not only on mutual adaptations of ethnographic/artistic techniques, such as described by Judith Laister, but on an ongoing and direct methodological dialogue between anthropologists and artists and their disciplines (Laister 2008: 25–28). Laister reports an increased interest of artists in ethnographic approaches since the 1980s, even to the degree of (quoting Hal Foster) an 'ethnographic turn' in the arts. However, there seems still to be little conscious coming-together of anthropologists and artists for and about the exchange of researching methodologies.

On this basis, for example, anthropology could introduce systematic reflexivity into the formation of artworks and help link both the artistic topics and creators to their personal and socio-cultural contexts (as I could do through my participant observation and subsequent analysis, including supervision, of the development of border relations in the project). Artistic processes might also benefit from being slowed down in ethnographic procedures. Our project was, due to a shortage of time, in danger of just taking over ready-made image materials or historical explanations for integration into artworks. However, an extended and well-supervised research process could, with all its ramifications, widen the potentials of perception and creation into unforeseeable possibilities. For both sides it remains a basic truth that understanding and creativity need a process of discovery. For example, whilst I at first felt little incentive for an artistic recreation of border narratives that I had been researching more than a decade before, for me the visions and experiences produced within the group were greatly inspiring.

Lastly, we as anthropologists can learn from artists: about the relevance and the epistemic value of subjectivity and imagination, or about the possibilities of recognition beyond language. Twenty years after the 'writing cul-

ture' and the 'multi-sited ethnography' debates, it still seems that we cannot really allow ourselves these potentials and freedoms. Are we not still shy and inexperienced in approaching culture from its visual and sensual sides, in addressing its interactive, subjective and unconscious aspects? Maybe through considering art processes and collaborative artistic-ethnographic work we could learn not to reduce our potentials of perception and of anthropological interpretation because of a fear of appearing unscientific, by understanding and crossing the boundary between artistic and ethnographic experience – with all the arbitrariness that border zones have.

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## Notes

1. For their inspiration and analysis I am indebted to the Tübingen ethno-psychoanalytical supervision group for field researchers.

2. All names of workshop students have been changed.

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