

Grenze (Glas, Schrift, Körper)
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Gestellt

There is always a moment in all art when we are ‚gestellt‘. From that point on we carry the memory of the position of our bodies as we sensed the artwork in its materiality, even as it moved us into other, imaginary places.

We are walking through a forest, along a vague path spread with dead leaves, somewhere in the middle of Europe. In this space criss-crossed by nations and the traces of empires, a border might appear inside this entropy of hundreds, thousands of trees. Two painted posts. A warning sign.

Instead, two trees, not posts, two trees with painted markings. We knew that we were approaching an artwork; we had already been following the protocol, readying ourselves to cross from the quotidian into the sublime, to be ‚gestellt‘. The artwork ‚gestellt‘ us: the random markings on the trees, white daubs, suddenly become writing: the word WIR. To see this word, we must stand at the correct spot and let the jagged stripes on the two tree trunks align.

Umgekehrt

But this artwork moves us into multiple positions. Walking past the two trees, crossing from one side to the other, we watch the paint reconfigure into randomness and then back again. Another word forms: ICH. We have crossed the border between two named territories, and become aware of its two faces. ÖSTERREICH – ČESKÁ REPUBLIKA. WIR – ICH. Nations are the places in which the ICH becomes part of, and may lose itself into, the WIR. The artwork situates the ICH in a tension with the WIR, as we read ourselves against other, implied readers. Somewhere among the trees lurks a DU, perhaps even a SIE and an ER. »Wieviel ICH brauchen wir—wieviel WIR?« asks the artist. »Wie sehr wird das ICH vom WIR geprägt und wie bringen wir das alles zusammen?«

We are reaching a point of aporia and disorientation. Within the clarity of the line, the border hides a double, in-between space, an epistemological no-man’s land. Positioned on one side, we can read the word WIR, but we cannot read the word ICH at the same time; we can only imagine ourselves on the other side, reading it. The border is never knowable, as our bodies, positioned on one side or the other or in the confusion in between, will not allow us to see the border from both sides at once.

Gewendet

In between the trees hangs a vertical, flat wire net with small glass rectangles fixed onto it. This part of the artwork is what the artist calls a ‚Membran‘, invoking another figuration of the border, a surface which both protects and lets in. On the glass surfaces we can read, not very clearly, hand-writing: multiple ICHs and WIRs. The artwork situates and embodies us once again; this time not from one or the other side of the two trees, but in-between, and turning our gaze at right angles to the path. We are caught in the double vector of the border-crossing, moving from one side of the border to the other, but looking at an angle in order to glimpse the writing on the shimmering bits of glass.

The membrane, with its writing, evokes the page of a text (textus, weave). Passing alongside this membrane-page and looking into it at the same time, the material installation and intervention in the forest evokes the literary artwork. As we turn from one page to the next of a book, moving alongside the outer edges of the pages, we look into the book, reading for an often obscure meaning. When we read, we are bodies gestellt in relationship to the material text, just as we are gestellt by the Membran between the trees. We cross not only from one end of the book to the other, but also into the text.

Gespiegelt

The glass rectangles on the Membran strung out between the two trees are made of either ‚Floatglas‘ or ‚Spionglas‘. This Draht-Glas-Fahne, as the artist calls it, hanging at a border, creates a place both of insight and reflection. Spionglas varies according to the light, between allowing us to see through and reflecting ourselves. When we cross borders, we are sometimes forced to stop and show our passports, those documents which connect the individual ICH with the national WIR. We are asked to identify ourselves, and perhaps reflect on our own identities.

In his essay on these internal borderings which he calls heterotopias, Michel Foucault writes on the mirror: »Im Spiegel sehe ich mich da, wo ich nicht bin: in einem unwirklichen Raum, der sich virtuell hinter der Oberfläche auftut; [...], eine Art Schatten, der mir meine eigene Sichtbarkeit gibt, der mich mich erblicken läßt, wo ich abwesend bin [...]. Aber [...] vom Spiegel aus entdecke ich mich als abwesend auf dem Platz, wo ich bin, da ich mich dort sehe; von diesem Blick aus, der sich auf mich richtet, und aus der Tiefe dieses virtuellen Raumes hinter dem Glas kehre ich zu mir zurück und beginne meine Augen wieder auf mich zu richten und mich da wieder einzufinden, wo ich bin«. The switching between transparency and mirroring gestellt us in both a real and imaginary place.

Geteilt

Glass can be a powerful and political figuration of the border. In contemporary novels, as Gianna Zocco has shown, windows often signify a male gaze. In Carlos Fuentes' *La Frontera de Cristal*, the glass surface of a New York skyscraper becomes a border between the male seasonal worker from Mexico and the female US office worker. In the refugee and deportation memoirs of Amal Aden and Maria Amel, the glass booths of immigration personnel, the glass windows of a holding facility, the glass lenses of press cameras, and a mirror on the floor in a body search room are symbols of traumatic alienation, culminating in Amalie's fantasy of self-harm using the shards of a broken mirror. In Yoko Tawada's story *Das Leipzig des Lichts und der Gelatine*, glass layered with gelatine becomes both a symbol of personal relations, the ICH and the WIR (»Dann können beide, nur von der Glasplatte voneinander getrennt, ihre Körper vereinigen.«) and of identity politics (»Mann und Frau – das heißt: der Westen und der Osten.«), but also a medium of printing and ambivalent expression (»Wenn ich zum Beispiel vor einer mit Gelatine beschichteten Glasplatte stehe und meinen Körper fest dagegen drücke, verändert sich die Gelatine an den Stellen, die von den Augen und dem Mund feucht werden, und läßt das Licht durch.«)

In these rhetorical and literary examples, glass is both an epistemological and a symbolic border, and thus part of a political aesthetic, what Jacques Rancière has called a ‚partage du sensible‘, a bordering and a sharing of that which can be sensed. It is easy to reduce the sensible to seeing, etc.; with the help of the painted trees and the membrane, we become aware that it is also a matter of being moved, positioned, embodied.

Written after visiting the Intervention ICH-WIR (Sabine Müller-Funk 2017) at Kunst in der Natur in Gars am Kamp/NÖ in company of the artist.