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Encountering Perspectives – Cross-Linking Memories

Dynamics and Travels of Cross-Cultural Dialogue Within Conceptual War Photography

Vision and memory depend on their co-existence. What we see – and by ‘see’ I mean what we perceive, recognize and sense – is shaped by our memories and experiences in life. This process functions equally vice versa: What we remember as much as what we forget is mainly formed by our gaze. Following Andreas Brøgger, this “duality between the process of taking data in through the eyes whilst simultaneously projecting our own image of the world onto what we see” unveils the mnemonic potential of vision (Brøgger 2010: 17).

Walter Benjamin’s famous quote: “Geschichte zerfällt in Bilder, nicht in Geschichten.” (“History decays into images, not into stories”) show us moreover that images *form* perceived reality (Benjamin 1982: 596).

Seeing understood as social practice is not isolated. Embedded into times of digital hastening and media representation, it is as much physical as cross/trans/inter-cultural and political. Artists face up to reflect on memory as well as memory practices. Particularly conceptual war photography can become an encounter and display for investigations on socially charged issues. Photography can be “externalization” and “trace” at once (see Erll 2011: 159; Ruchartz 2004), combining different layers of time and space as much as individual and collective memories.

Continued and hardened conflicts get inscribed into the memory of the persons concerned and affect the generations of postmemory (Hirsch 2008). Moreover

travelling memories caused by globalism, wars and economic reasons (Erell 2011) reach beyond borders and transform local to global issues.

But what is, when cultural borders do not lie side by side but on top of each other?

At this point, I would like to introduce to you the art project 'Connecting Narratives' which was created by Shai Kremer in 2014 till 2015. It exemplifies how art projects foster diverging memories to become converging memories by including contemporary changes and movements of memory practices and their interdependencies of societies, cultures, media, politics and not least photography itself.

Growing up in a small Kibbutz in Israel, Kremer experienced a life which seemed to be hallmarked by a kaleidoscopic environment. The geographical territory and its history were marked by impacts caused by the Israel-Palestine conflict. Not just a multitude of inhabitants and their families but their minds were torn apart. 18 years ago and traumatized by several experiences in his homeland, Kremer immigrated into the U.S..

'Connecting Narratives' is an interactive educational art project which is divided into three parts. Each part opens up a different kind of dialogue:

Part I = Inner dialogue

Part II = Intercultural dialogue

Part III = Public dialogue

The project broaches the issue of the *Green Line*, the demarcation line between Israel and its neighbouring countries inured in 1949. Since the Six-Day-War in 1967 in which the status of the *Green Line* became uncertain, the region remains a place of socially charged encounters of the coexisting collectives: it separated farmers from

their fields, divided villages and dismembered the inhabitants. Although there is no *physical* wall or border, it remains a crucial issue whose land it is¹.

The French Historian Pierre Nora shows in his theory of the *lieux de memoire* that sites have the intrinsic capacity to serve inner identity (see Nora 1984-1992). With this in mind I am going to introduce to you 'Connecting Narratives' to exemplify how it not just provides new perspectives on Nora's theory but proposes an initial approach for memory practices and cross-cultural dialogue.

Part I: Inner dialogue

The first part focusses on Kremer's own biography. The viewer experience eight mirror-like diptych photographs taken in New York City, Kremer's current hometown. Each piece consists of two identical photographs of a tree with unique light-painted lines, weaving through the branches. The light-lines change the visual structures of each diptych. Like in the pictures, there was and is no mark in landscape which indicates the *Green Line*. The green, diffused light lines consequently embody its immateriality. By juxtaposing two images, Kremer reveals the reality of multiple perspectives as much as narratives: one story can be experienced in as many ways as people have witnessed it. Moreover the progression of time can always change perspectives. And yet the lines are amalgamated into each other, connecting not just the pictures but the content.

The place which Kremer chose for his work is Prospect Park, close to his home. This visual dislocation reveals the movement of Kremer, both physical and mental. He took his memories of the *Green Line* with him but they changed again and again over the years. Reminding us of Nora's *lieux de memoire*, it is exactly *not* what Prospect Park incorporates. In the words of Astrid Erll:

Memories do not hold still – on the contrary, they seem to be constituted first of all through movement. What we are dealing with, therefore, is not so much

¹ Since 2000 Israel started building a barrier wall through the West Bank which partly follows the 1949 armistice line. For more information see: Steward 2013: 223.

(and perhaps not even metaphorically) 'sites' of memory, lieux de mémoire, but rather the 'travels' of memory, les voyages or les mouvements de mémoire. (ErlI 2011: 9)

Part II: Intercultural dialogue

After photographing the first part in his current neighborhood, Kremer travelled to Israel and stayed in the area along the *Green Line*. Being at the original site and talking to Israeli as well as Palestinian inhabitants, he realized that he needed another technique to symbolize not just the topic in a proper way but the explicit presence of its remains at the geographical site. By "remains" I allude to the disappearance of the *Green Line* from Israeli maps as much as public discourse. This falling into oblivion is –assessed by Kremer- caused by "social forgetting" which as Aleida Assmann argues "depends on devaluating and dismissing the experiences of an older generation by a younger generation." (Assmann 2014). At the same time, transgenerational phenomena of postmemory appear. Younger generations 'remember' but only through the former generation's stories, images, and behaviours among which they in turn grew up (Hirsch 1997: 106f.). Their social reality gets partially embedded in the reality of those who witnessed cultural trauma.

In Kremer's case, he recognized a hardening of social frontiers. The aesthetical conception consequently transformed to the more explicit token of fire. The lines carry the complexity of the conflict, its social consequences. Suddenly, Kremer's *voyage de mémoire* takes us to an explicit *lieux de mémoire* (vgl. Nora 1984-1992).

The main work of part II is "Family Circle". This diptych shows us again two akin photographs of the perambulated landscape. The former inserted sole fire line gets replaced by Israeli and Palestine people standing in a row and holding up lighted candles. Kremer explains: "From the process during the preparations I learned a lot about fear, mistrust and cynical approaches that -after all- can be healed surprisingly very fast when dealing directly human to human" (Kremer 2015). What we can *look at* are Palestinian and Israeli inhabitants of this intercultural and political region, a

region which has the capacity to initiate memories and postmemories. But what we can *see* is the act of gathering, dissolving super-imposed borders to appear on a single level of dialogue.

Part II exemplifies how art projects transform geographical sites to meeting points. Moreover, it serves as an intermediary, transferring 'there' into 'here' to educate the viewer on the interconnectedness of cross-linked memories.

Part III: *Public dialogue*

In the third and final part Kremer decided to integrate the museum as a forum for exchange.

Three walls offer maps or satellite photographs on the development and transformations of the *Green Line* through the years. The first wall, called "ORIGINAL", shows the 1949 ceasefire-agreements map and three enlarged segments of the *Green Line*. The second wall, called "HISTORICAL", offers a collection of different maps from Israeli and international sources. The third wall, named "CURRENT", showcases actual satellite and aerial photography. In contrast, the fourth wall "FUTURE" is blank. Paint buckets and brushes stand in front of it. The viewer is instructed to draw "his own interpretation of the *Green Line* (or whatever comes to mind, for that matter)" (Kremer 2014).

The third part functions as a catalyst in which the viewer's impressions of the first two parts converge. The maps and satellite pictures act as visual aids, showing the geographical transformations in time and moreover disclosing the intercultural conflicts caused by repression e.g. Israeli schoolbooks which do not picture the *Green Line*. By moving through the room, the viewer can experience historical shifts as well as discrepancies of different political and cultural interpretations and developments. At this juncture, the viewer decides his own physical and mental tempo and direction. The transformations of the viewer's opinion into a material trace and the transfers of interconnected and contradictory memories into the context of the museum, aims

intangible tensions to become tangible exchange. This participatory art piece made by museum visitors is reminiscent of "Family Circle". It amplifies the educational potential of art projects and adds the viewer's stance on it as a dynamic extension of the travelling dialogue.

Kremer's art project may be understood as a crossmapping of intercultural memories that become manifest in *voyages de memoire* which face different forms of memory practices. 'Connecting Narratives' moreover makes an attempt to artistically encounter interconnections of memory movements. Beside of its transformation into visual structures, Kremer creates a space in which the viewer cannot just perceive and experience the swapping of memory but *continue* memory practices.

He moreover creates a tangible chronotope. Michail Bakhtin argues that artistic objects should not be solely perceived in its actual spatiotemporal position. In contrast, in the

artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin 2002: 15)

Kremer consequently condenses time and space interspersed with crosslinked memories in his photographs as much as in the exhibition venue.

In conclusion, Kremer's project "Connecting Narratives" acts on contemporary tendencies in memory practices of different but interconnected cultural collectives. His own relation and exposure to the *Green Line* in combination with his experiences with the inhabitants induced Kremer to create an interactive art piece which fosters in- and outsiders to frame considerations on the *Green Line*. The chronotope quality of photographs is suited for visualizations of phenomena which influence memory cultures and practices like traumatic events and continuing conflicts. Cross-

movements between memories and media, sites, cultures and generations get consequently transformed into visual structures and physical movements of equally the contributors and viewers. The museum functions as a display and offers a place for the creation of a dialogic space.

When cultural borders challenge intercultural dialogue, counterstrategies become necessary. Conceptual war photography can be such a tool to encounter perspectives which seem to be hidden behind the aforementioned mental borders. Encountering crosslinked memories may therefore happen at the 'artistic crossroad' which preserves ideas of 'we' instead of 'us and them'.

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