

Rainer Fuchs: Borders and Barriers as Thresholds

Thoughts on Agnieszka Kalinowska

Existential limit experiences and their causes in society are a central theme in several works by Agnieszka Kalinowska. In “Draughty House” she focuses on the histories of asylum seekers, mixing aspects of documentary, film, and sculpture as a method of making their personal stories public. In the spring of 2009, the artist asked asylum seekers from different countries living in Austria to talk about where they come from, why they left, what their expectations were, and what their experiences have been so far in their new and foreign environment. As a space for them to tell their stories and for her to film them, she created a sculptural setting out of bast fibers woven into a something that resembles a stretched, organic fence. The construction is held in place by cords hanging from the ceiling, creating a barrier that divides the room into a front and back.

While filming, the protagonists are located behind the sculpture, leaving their bodies and facial expressions either almost completely obscured from view or only visible as fragmented silhouettes. As a space behind, and from, which people speak, the sculpture acquires an extremely ambivalent function. On the one hand, it gives them the chance to articulate themselves from a position of relative security and anonymity, protecting them from potentially voyeuristic eyes or political persecution. On the other hand, the cagelike structure also symbolizes the restriction of their personal freedom and their literal life in the shadows. Placing immigrants at an imaginary border symbolizes an attempt to overcome and shift this border while also dismantling its accompanying traditional and national images of society. In this respect, the asylum seekers are “colonials, postcolonials, migrants, minorities – wandering peoples who will not be contained within the *heim* of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation.(...) They articulate the death-in-life of the idea of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation (...).”¹ Their many different stories are woven into a narrative about immigration and globalization in which each person's experiences and intentions not only reflect society's general living conditions, but also the dissolving and shifting of national identities and territories.

Kalinowska produced “Draughty House” for her exhibition at the MUMOK in 2009. By thematicizing a charged sociopolitical problem in the art world, she connects this world to the historical processes of real, everyday life. She found the asylum seekers with the help of Ute Bock who, despite much harassment, has been working tirelessly and selflessly for many years, helping refugees and asylum seekers who are faced with rejection, hostility, and dire need in their new environment. Their arrival

in the new country, something which they have looked forward to, often means arriving in a new kind of ghetto where they are isolated from life in society. The title “Draughty House” therefore signifies a place not meant for dwelling in a meaningful and fulfilling way, but rather an inhospitable floodgate that perfidiously regulates, channels, and paralyzes life.

The project not only highlights the structures at hand; it also utilizes the museum as a space of intensified public and media attention. The video was therefore also filmed in one of its publicly accessible spaces, allowing visitors to witness the production process. The background noise of this area open to the public intermingles with the murmur of passersby and the acoustics of the technical equipment, such as the elevator. They become an integral part of the work, along with the distinct architecture of the MUMOK’s lobby and its basalt lava wall paneling, the dark grayness of which intensifies the situation’s oppressiveness.

“The Fence” exists within the exhibition as a solitary sculpture interacting with the space around it and as a central motif in the video. It does not fade into a filmic image, but remains present as a real object – a physical divide and border in space, suggesting a front and back, an in and out, that is also perceptible to the audience. While its rough organic material confronts us with a spatial situation of power and helplessness, it also integrates us into it and works as a social divide along which social distinctions and conflicts, also those relating to our own social positions, are discussed and made visible. We are not just addressed by this work and its protagonists, but indirectly we are the ones being talked about and defined as the agents responsible for the immigrants’ social context. The protagonists do not merely tell us their stories to assure themselves; the stories are also a form of addressing, communicating with, and appealing to the audience in a potentially critical way. We feel spoken to as representatives of a society that assures and aggrandizes itself by erecting all sorts of fences and borders around it, some of which are not necessarily physically noticeable or visible. Our role as passive listeners and viewers who expect a pure artistic experience is also critically questioned in this work. Far from a rigid object, the sculpture is a kind of living fence that could grow until it suffocates and covers everything in its reach, or it could be pruned or even taken down if not left to its own devices. Kalinowska’s work allows such thoughts to develop without didactically demanding them. She confronts us with images and information that are otherwise repressed. “Draughty House” takes a stand against sweeping conflicts under a rug and turning them into taboos and against building fences to maintain and reinforce them. As a work of art, the fence therefore takes on the symbolic function of a potential threshold.

Within the context of social barriers and dividing lines, prompting us to look more closely at the relations between personal and social experiences, the fragility of concepts of national identity also serves as a primary motif in the video installation “Doormen.” In this work, Kalinowska interviewed

doormen/doorwomen working in high scale hotels in New York about their private lives and work environments. The resulting interviews have been assembled into a kind of roundtable discussion, creating the impression that each person is telling the other about themselves while the listening viewer stands in the center of the semicircle of projections.

This vocational group and social class, which is otherwise rather invisible or ignored, is turned into a threshold motif for looking more closely at processes of society and contemporary history. They are professional watchers of society – people whose gift of observation is also observed by Kalinowska. Always silent and discrete, here they are called upon to speak. Their personal and occupational anecdotes are mixed with remarks about politics of the day and of the world. The protagonists from different countries stand for an ethnically diverse America and for the immigrants who are trying to achieve their American dream in the melting pot of New York City. They personify the very American identity and contemporary history that they talk about.

The others, who are usually in the spotlight and are treated as the elite of society and the media, remain invisible, or are only outlined in the narratives of the doormen/doorwomen. Kalinowska does not cater to the voyeurism of the tabloid press; instead she counteracts it. She suggests a view of society that is the opposite of the paparazzi principle and the sideways glances of voyeurism. It is not the glorified heroes and charisma from the top, but rather the story from the bottom that is portrayed here. This creates a more differentiated picture than any commercial report on society because it does not pretend to forget class differences, but rather shows them as still existing preconditions for society to function.

This work also settles the score with the idea of national identity as something homogenous, natural, and God-given, and with the convenient categories of homegrown and foreign. Works such as these stand up against naturalizing and leveling history by treating national identity as a variable historical construct. They oppose the “epistemology of imperialism. At its core is the supremely stubborn thesis that everyone is principally and irreducibly a member of some race or category, and that race or category cannot ever be assimilated to or accepted by others—except as itself. Thus came into being such invented essences as the Oriental or Englishness, as Frenchness, Africanness, or American exceptionalism, as if each of those had a Platonic idea behind it that guaranteed it as pure and unchanging from the beginning to the end of time.”²) “Doormen” works to counteract the historically blind pathos of American exceptionalism by revealing the multiethnic patchwork American identity as the result of not always being able to emigrate from emerging nations by choice, but rather by necessity.

Kalinowska brings the work closer to reality by attempting to integrate the audience into what is happening and by putting them in a position in which their experience of reality is intensified. In the videos discussed here, she creates installations of situations which subvert all neutral points of view in a variety of ways. In “Draughty House” the woven sculpture and the talking protagonists direct our gaze toward that which is behind, thus destroying the fiction of an artwork simply standing in front of us, while in “Doormen” we are spatially integrated into the situation in which the projections create an arena, with us in its middle as the focus of action.

The third piece shown in this exhibition in Vienna is “Emergency Exit II,” which also lacks a neutral cinematic perspective. The action’s intense realism – a young woman trying to work her way through a ventilation duct in which there is also a rat – is intensified by the projection of this work high up where such ducts are usually located. It is a claustrophobic spectacle with an oppressive urgency that reminds us of escape scenes in films and feeds on our fear of menacing threats. Spaces such as these generally seem to reflect and intensify the emotional landscape of their protagonists. But this precarious, existential condition is anything but a hermetic, purely personal trauma; rather it is a symptom of society. That the protagonist is a young woman can be interpreted as a reference to gender roles and the Sisyphus struggle against their traditional hierarchies and channeling power. We, the audience, are also potential protagonists with our own memories and fears. High over our heads and out of our reach, this work’s forceful and traumatic narrative slips even deeper under our skin. Like “Draughty House” it also sets up a barrier while trying to overcome it at the same time, albeit with an uncertain outcome, bringing us closer to the protagonist and letting us identify with her. In this way, disassociation and distance, isolation and resistance form yet another threshold toward emphatic closeness.

1) Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 236.

(Übers.Vorschlag : „Akteure des Kolonialismus, Postkolonialismus, Migranten, Minderheiten, wandernde Völker, die nicht mit einbezogen werden in das Heim der nationalen Kultur und ihren einstimmigen Diskurs, sondern selbst Zeichen einer sich verschiebenden Grenze sind, welche die Grenzziehungen der modernen Nation verfremdet (...) Sie bringen zum Ausdruck, dass die Idee der Nation als ‚imaginiertes Gemeinschaft‘ ausstirbt.“)

- 2) Edward W. Said, "The Politics of Knowledge," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 376-377.

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