

Transborder

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A bridge – as philosophers have written – is something that connects two banks, but also indicates their separateness. This ambivalence is particularly evident in cities on border rivers, such as Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice, which are situated on the Oder and thus on the German-Polish border. The two cities are both a common organism and two separate parts. This state of dis:connectivity was diagnosed there by the artist and activist Michael Kurzwelly, who established Słubfurt – a town straddling the border – in 1999. This border city is a phenomenon in which transbordering processes can be observed, related to the permeability of the border and its complex, processual condition. This text is therefore both an analysis of the theoretical potential of the term ‘transborder’ and a case study of the city of Słubfurt as an optimal example of the term ‘transborder’ in practice.

‘Słubfurt is the first city worldwide being located halfly [sic] in Poland and halfly in Germany. The city has been created in 1999. Since 2000 it is registered in the European City Index (ECI).’ (Kurzwelly n.d.). Kurzwelly is aware that: ‘Divided cities are the wounds of history. The large ones cause suffering in the consciousness of the world, like the once-divided Berlin and the divided Jerusalem; the small ones only worry their neighbours.’ (Jajeśniak-Quast and Stokłosa 2000: 9). It is with and for these neighbours that the artist launched the initiative to found ‘Słubfurt’.

The experience of sharing/separating (both the German *teilen* and the Polish *dzielić* can mean both ‘to separate, divide’ and ‘to share’) goes perfectly to the heart of transborder processes. The words *teilen/dzielić* designate the primary categories of dis:connectivity as well. For two nations *share* the same geography, climate, and vegetation in these border regions. At the same time, the border *divides* these two nations into separate and different political, linguistic, and cultural spaces, which have separate, different approaches to the past, the present, and the future. All these phenomena intensify the dynamics evident in the border regions, and transborder processes become the subject of art.

Border art is thus a sensitive seismograph of the socio-political situation in the border zone, one which measures critical borderscaping processes and the processual ontology of the border, automatically becoming not merely an adequate but a fascinating, revealing field of border studies. The concept of borderscape and borderscaping, which underlines processuality, are naturally crucial to interdisciplinary analyses of works connected with dis:connectivity in the border zone. According to Schimanski and Wolfe, ‘[t]his neologism, inspired by Arjun Appadurai’s theory of “scapes” (1990), denotes a net of signs and versions of the border stretching out from its concrete site and insinuating itself into a multiplicity of

fields and locations, involving in effect everything taking part in the bordering process.’ (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, 7).

Ślubfurt as a fictitious town and processual border art phenomenon has its own parliament, language (‘Ślubfurtisch’), municipal coat of arms, newspaper, and even founding charter, drawn up by students at the European University Viadrina. In the city’s official history, in the section tellingly entitled *Erased Border* (German: *Ausradierte Grenze*, Polish: *Wymazana granica*), we can read about the ideas that united progressive-minded citizens of Ślubice and Frankfurt/Oder, who see a great opportunity in uniting the two cities: ‘This means that Ślubfurt is the first town anywhere in the world to be growing out of the future into the present, so to speak, and hence also to be changing its view of the past.’¹ The transborder strategies, however, are not only about cultural and artistic exchange, but also economic issues and migration policy (→ **Capital**, → **Postmigration/Migration**). In this context, the border appears as a membrane that is permeable from both sides to those who have the requisite documents.

Kurzweilly defines Ślubfurt both as a construct of reality and as ‘the utopia on the Oder’. (Kurzweilly 2019, n.p.). He sees the river as the city’s backbone, as what binds it together rather than what divides it. For Jouni Häkli, it functions as a boundary object that activates transnational communication and acts as a medium by which the divisive function of the border can be overcome (Häkli 2011, 24). Tim Wiese of Deutschlandfunk Kultur, who interviewed Kurzweilly in November 2019 (Kurzweilly 2019, n.p.), believes that this fantasy town has brought a great deal of civil engagement to the border region. In this context, the Oder bridge in Ślubfurt takes on particular significance, because it no longer plays the role of national border, but is a key artery of communication and interaction between the two halves of this fictitious, idealistic city. It is more a phantom border than a barrier, because a remarkable microclimate flourishes in the space between the cultures there. As an artist and curator, Kurzweilly holds the firm conviction that art is the best medium for initiating borderscaping processes and producing multidimensional border effects on the Oder border.

In Ślubfurt, the Oder is seen not as a river border, but rather as a boundary object that binds the borderscape together across national divides and supports socio-cultural communication between diverse actors. The border itself is thus deliberately blurred.

For 2020, Kurzweilly planned a revitalization of Ślubfurt, recording his vision in a revitalization plan. He paid most attention to the Oder as a border river and

¹ All quotations and information about Ślubfurt come from the website: <https://nowa-amerika.eu/slubfurt-3/>. Accessed 11 February 2024.

to the bridge over the Oder as a phenomenon of dis:connectivity: the bridge on the map was very wide, culverting a large area of the river's surface within the town. He envisaged a new quarter, designated 'Neue Siedlung' in the revitalization plan. Ślubfurt town hall was to be situated on this widened bridge, alongside other buildings and green spaces. In his vision, Kurzwelly, the subversive cartographer, thus bound the two banks of the Oder even closer together, and created yet more shared spaces than there are today. The extended surface of the Oder bridge would replace the existing narrow bridge and activate the Oder as a boundary object more intensively: as a stage for transnational, transborder communication and for German-Polish exchange.

However, Ślubfurt – as befits an ideal example of transborder processes – is not just about interaction between Poles and Germans. In the Bridge Plaza (German: *Brückenplatz*, Polish: *Plac Mostowy*), Kurzwelly runs a welcoming place where everyone can find refuge and asylum. On the Ślubfurt website, we read: 'Since 2016 the "Bridge Plaza" has become a new home for many new Ślubfurt residents.' Transborder processes develop here as simple and basic interactions of refugees with Ślubfurt residents and other newcomers.

In the context of the transborder meaning of the bridge, the very location and name of this asylum seem non-coincidental and take on metaphorical significance. Ślubfurt is thus becoming a special place not only because of the activation of transborder processes between Germany and Poland, but also because of the presence of refugees from Africa and Asia. Migrants bring their own border experiences, but also the experience of Otherness. The Bridge Plaza hosts concerts, theatrical performances, communal cooking, and people who find themselves in Ślubfurt with refugee status can also open their service points and workshops there. The market, the café and the intercultural garden are important elements. It is also simply a place to meet, be together, share experiences, celebrate dis:connectivity and make connections. Migration and flight thus cause a substantial change to self-awareness and the experience of alienness.

It is this place that Kurzwelly describes as 'the agora of Ślubfurt', as well as a laboratory for artists who analyse, initiate and interpret transborder and borderscaping processes. The existence of this asylum dynamises the German-Polish borderscape and enriches it with migration-related aspects. The transbordering processes initiated by Kurzwelly are therefore not only about integrating the inhabitants of Ślubfurt itself with each other, but also about supporting refugees who choose this utopia on the Oder as their place of residence after leaving their country. Ślubfurt thus becomes a dynamic and processual transborder and transcultural phenomenon (→ **Transcultural/Transculturation**), which focuses, as if through a lens, the processes associated with border areas in times of migration:

‘What emerges in the encounter between two (or perhaps many) cultures will always contain elements of both (or many) cultures, but also amounts, at least in part, to something distinct, for it possesses some new attribute proper only to itself.’ (Ortiz 2002, 260). Regardless of whether we call this phenomenon the transcultural or transculturation, Fernando Ortiz argues that both of the observed cultures engage in the cultural exchange with equal weight:

‘Every [...] transculturation is a process in which something is always given in return for what one receives, a system of give and take. It is a process in which both parts of the equation are modified, a process from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex, a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of traits, nor even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent.’ (Malinowski 1995, lviii).

And this is the precise nature of Kurzwelly’s work: at odds with both cultures – Polish and German, although it must be noted that both are deeply embedded in globalism and are already hybrids on their own: ‘[...] cultures are not pure, authentic and locally bounded; rather they are syncretic and hybridized products of interactions across space.’ (Barker 2011, 443). Słubfurt is becoming such a hybrid, within which important historical dates make their mark: 2004 – Poland’s accession to the European Union, 2007 – Poland joining the Schengen area, or 2015 as the time of Europe’s biggest migration crisis. As transculturalism theorists emphasise:

‘Unlike the static quality inherent to categories like the multicultural and intercultural, the notion of the transcultural suggests a dynamic vision of culture that cannot be grasped as a closed circle or some flat and monolithic surface, but must be seen as the field on which a continuous process of negotiation and transaction unfolds.’ (Deja 2015, 91).

To further strengthen this dynamic, Kurzwelly has established a multi-year project entitled the *Transbordering Laboratory*, which is a network of individuals and non-governmental organisations to link borderland areas of national states as cross-border regional entities *In Between*. The idea behind the project was described as follows:

‘Transbordering Laboratory is a research on and between European cities that are divided by borders. We aim to address the idea of forming new realities in such cities and areas. Hard borders became an issue again with the rise of nationalism and the pandemic, especially for citizens in the border territories.’ (Kosovel, Kurzwelly, and Rander 2022). The authors point out that many border cities began intensive transbordering processes in the 1990s, celebrating both their connection and disconnection. To support these processes, artists and activists are invited to contribute to the development of Europe with its common transborder regions. It is in such places that the fact that the border simultaneously divides and is shared by neighbouring cities becomes most apparent.

Within Kurzweily's project there is a strong emphasis on the role of artists and activists who make transborder processes more visible by analysing their dynamics. In addition, collaboration, learning from similar cities like Ślubfurt and awareness of current socio-political contexts are key. These cities of similar status are Cieszyn-Tesin, Haparanda-Tornio, Kerkrade-Herzogenrath, Komarno-Komarom, Nicosia, Nova Gorica-Gorizia, Ruse-Giurgiu and Valga-Valka. This network of cities wants to overcome the concept of the nation state and playfully look for and try out forms other than the dialectic of *us* and *them*. During the conferences held in each of these cities, strategies are to be developed to help achieve these goals. The *Transbordering Laboratory* is thus a project that works on the phenomenon of dis:connectivity, attempting to bring together that which is separated by an inter-state border into one community and one organism. Each of these cities has its own specificities; each can both learn something from Ślubfurt and identify new solutions for this utopia on the Oder.

Analysing the dynamics of transbordering, one must take into account the multiplicity shift and complexity shift recently diagnosed by Christian Wille in critical border studies. (Wille 2021) These are evidence that the field now not only focuses on processuality but also understands and implements concepts such as borderscapes, borderwork, and bordertextures. Wille stresses that while within the framework of the processual shift the border is defined as social production, and the relevant methodological principles in this case are decentralization and processualization, in the context of the multiplicity shift the border is construed as a multiple process, and the appropriate methods are multidimensionalization and multilocalization. (Wille 2021, 115) The complexity shift, in turn, uses a definition of the border as a complex formation, for which the optimal methodologies are texturing and relationing. Broadly speaking, the main thrust of these critical revisions of the potential of border studies is to accentuate more strongly the diversity of border-related social practices engaged in by a multitude of heterogeneous actors, agencies, and institutions initiating dis:connectivities. (Wille 2021, 110)

The German-Polish border in Ślubfurt is thus a discursive landscape of competing meanings. Transbordering is primarily about shaping the border not on the ground, but in people's mindscapes. It permits the establishment of a powerful connection between processes of social and political transformation, conceptual change, and local experience. I would therefore call Kurzweily an agent of dis:connectivity, who has for years tirelessly not only observed transborder processes, but has himself fuelled them and created the conditions for their intensive development. He works in both the local and the global field, enabling migrants in Ślubfurt to integrate with the people there and with others who have just arrived from Africa or Asia. The multi-year nature of this project, which has been further expanded to include the *Transbordering Laboratory* since 2022, contributes to the

creation of a phenomenon unparalleled anywhere else on this scale, in which – like through a lens – issues related to transcultural borderscaping processes, emblematic of the entire contemporary world, come into focus. This new borderland and transbordering community is unceasingly dis:connected.

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