



## The Moving Borders of Art

Anna Daneri and Serena Giordano

translated by Simonetta Caporale and Chris Gilmour

If we went to investigate the places where the border between one country and the next unfolds, we would see nothing but earth, asphalt and vegetation: no trace of an outline. The border does not exist, you can't see it, and it is exactly this lack of physical form which paradoxically makes it unquestionable. It is not born from the lay of the land, it is not a natural given, it is not tangible and it is not the consequence of a geological transformation. If this were the case one could remove it, as happened with the Berlin wall, and this physical destruction, tunnelling through a mountain or building a bridge, would result in its definitive elimination.

It is therefore difficult to oppose something which does not physically exist, but which exists in a very concrete way in the conditioning of those who find themselves on this side or that of an imaginary line. It brings to mind the film by Louis Buñuel in which a group of rich bourgeois people at a party find themselves unable to leave. Every time they try to cross the threshold of the house something pushes them back: the doors are not locked, no one has blocked them, but something stops the guests from leaving, something which is *inside each one of them*. Simply, the border is nothing but a set of pre-conceived and internalised ideas which define not so much the portions of territories, but rather identities which are internal and external to that territory. Its function of exclusion and inclusion is played out through definitions of others and of self: the border between man and woman, the border between rich and poor, between Muslim and Christian, between believer and agnostic and so on.

The internalisation of borders is seen in at least two ways, which are only seemingly different. The first is the more obvious and tangible way, of those who deny others access to a defined territory, and every day, foreigners, *a priori* aliens, who can never be citizens of the world, clash against this brutal and absurd border. The second is more subtle, but no less damaging, and is that which separates individuals in the name of the right to difference. This unquestionable right is often used to create imaginary categories, inexistent borders and identities which belong to no one.

## Capturing moving borders

The world of contemporary art might seem to be totally free and without borders. The languages are infinite, they mix together, and every artist can express themselves as they best see fit; through transgressions and provocations, abandoning the very idea of the artwork, or negating the condition of the artist. A world in which, apparently, there are no limits to free individual expression or to the continual re-invention of 'new differences' constantly opens up new directions. We are used to reading the history of art as a series of events in chronological order, with one event a direct consequence of another. But we could also consider reading it in a dimension which is not temporal, but rather spatial, thus recreating a geography rather than a chronology. Major states which unite smaller regions bordering on each other, where border crossings by artists are strongly determined by the identity they declare. This identity is determined by a series of commonly accepted conventions, which are unquestionable if considered from a temporal point of view, but which are much more problematic if we look at them in a spatial way. An example: some of Turner's seascapes, when seen from a nontemporal point of view, could be seen as examples of abstract expressionism, but from an exclusively temporal point of view they can only be placed in the field of romantic painting.

As with all borders, those of the geography of art also give rise to two essential phenomena. The first is the construction of collective identities through nationalist rhetoric (movements, trends and related subversions), the second is the exclusion of anyone who does not have a precise role within the geography as defined at that time. We could say that, in order to enter each individual state, one must show an identity card, and if this card is not in order you will be excluded. Another example: let's look at so called *Outsider art*. This label brings together the mentally ill, prisoners, solitary individuals and even the questionable sub-category of 'folk art' (art from places which have been defined by someone who is not familiar with them as being 'exotic'). Examining this phenomenon with slightly more objective eyes, these are certainly artists just like all the others, independent of events in their private lives. They make artwork, they show in private galleries and museums, their prices can be high, they are written about. However, in order to enter the world of 'normal' artists they must present a passport on which their identity as 'outsider' is clearly indicated (the mad, the primitive or the naïve). The simple definition of 'citizen of art' is not sufficient, in the same way that 'citizen of the world' is also insufficient outside the artworld. In both cases it will be necessary to specify a sort of belonging: a race (in the worst cases), a gender, a nationality. Only then, certified as outsiders, will the border open for these artists.

Both worlds live within their own borders, and, when someone crosses over, it is not as an artist, but as a madman. Whilst the immigration of the mad into the world of 'sane' art is impossible, 'tourism' for 'sane' artists in the world of the mad doesn't present any problems. Madness or 'socially unacceptable' behaviour can be worn by 'sane' artists as a tourist might wear a garland of flowers around their neck as they step off the boat in some exotic land. This type of *souvenir* (think of body art and self-harming practices, for example) is much appreciated in the homeland, and the stamp in the passport won by this journey has often been very useful, as we see in the vast range of rhetoric about madness and transgression in art.

As often happens outside the borders of art, in other – much more worrying – worlds, the construction of a collective identity and claiming the right to this identity leads to the construction of a terrible discrimination. The rhetoric of the excluded, the naïve, the deviant, becomes an essential ingredient for winning the right to citizenship. Presenting oneself as a simple artist and asking to be judged in terms of one's work, keeping one's own psychological state private, will not be enough to avoid exclusion: the border is well defined and well guarded. In considering outsider artists, we cannot talk of 'self-inflicted marginalisation', as these people are often manoeuvred by psychiatrists and specialised critics, but there can also be cases in which the artists do consent: consider the last Venice Biennale. This was an exhibition which, starting with the female curators, saw a substantial female contribution. Some of the artists stated that they accepted the invitation only because of the female curatorship, and a small female state was brought into existence. Like all small states this had its own rhetoric, well represented by, for example, the group *Guerrilla Girls*. This female collective, from the inside, states their objection to exclusion, but there is more to it. It is exactly this being excluded which makes them more attractive, and therefore included. The construction of a collective identity allows them to have a type of nationality (dangerously close to the idea of 'race', given that they proclaim themselves to be supporters of the rights of ethnic minorities).

These two examples (outsiders and women) are, respectively, examples of the two objectives of the nationalist rhetoric of the 'united states of art'. The first defines the exclusion of the foreigner, the stranger, the second defines inclusion, made possible by the construction of the borders of a minor state of female art, which groups together a range of different citizens (the artists) under the flag of the so-called 'female-specific'.

The internal organisation of these minor states is like that of a constitutional monarchy, in which a number of art historians play the roles of the king and queen, without power, but essential as representative icons; while critics play the part of true leaders of government with full powers. Furthermore, critics are the unquestionable strategists and geographers of art. They re-draw borders, decide the laws and re-invent the behaviour and identity of their citizens: movements and currents which exist in a more or less peaceful and agreed state of permanent war. The patriotism of art has nothing to do with the anachronistic divisions of the Venice Biennale based on countries, but with other concepts which are just as much of a pretext – conceptual, post-expressionist, transavantgarde, non-expressionist, and so on – rearranging an atlas 'artfully' drawn up by critics. And it is critics, in exchange for protecting their citizens, that gain consensus and space, thus becoming 'the artists of art'. Critics organise their armies, they choose generals and recruit soldiers, but even in the artworld there are forms of 'conscientious objection':

Although these festival (Fluxus) represented the first major public platform for our work we where all at odds with George Maciunas when he tried to organise us into a group, with a common strategy and aesthetic. He himself stood out as the most amazing, self-contradictory mixture of neo-Dadaism and Leninism. He tried manifestos. We all disagreed. He tried to create unity. We all disobeyed. He wanted to appoint us ambassadors of Fluxus. Everyone disassociated. But we where

at the same time rather amused by his innumerable slogan, diagrams designed to show the true connection and all the other propaganda material that gushed from him.<sup>1</sup>

Anderson's independent behaviour, and that of many other famous personalities connected with Fluxus, could be the expression of a small revolt, but we can also find genuine revolutions in contemporary art, where some artists have refused to submit to the will of the critics, despite understanding the essential function they play in promoting work for the market. They have not been collective revolutionaries, but individuals, and the most notable is without a doubt Andy Warhol. Simultaneously playing all the parts (critic of himself and artist) Warhol founded 'Warholand', a free state inside the territory of Pop art, politically autonomous and governed exclusively by himself. Like all absolute rulers, Warhol declared war on the countries which he saw as too powerful (abstract expressionism), was hated and feared by foreign enemies (the critics), had many internal enemies (those who described him as cynical and cruel), was loved by others for his generosity (Warhol promoted many artists through his Factory).

The following text illuminates what was his clear-sighted revolutionary project from the start:

In 1960 Leonard Kessler met Warhol coming out of an art shop with paint and canvases. "What are you doing, Andy?" he asked. Without blinking, Andy, answered: "I'm going to start Pop art". "Why?" asked Kessler. "Because I hate abstract expressionism, I hate it!" answered Andy. A few weeks later, while Ted Carrey was expressing his admiration before a Rauschenberg collage at the Museum of Modern Art, Andy spat out: "This is nothing, it's a piece of shit!" Carey replied: "If you really think it's all advertising, and that anyone could do it, why don't you do it?" And he answered: "Huh! I have to think of something different."<sup>2</sup>

On that afternoon in 1960, Warhol hadn't yet painted anything. The canvases were white and the tubes of paint unopened. Warhol the artist had not even started to work, but Warhol the critic was already active. Warhol didn't know what he was going to paint, but he knew he was going to 'start Pop art', 'thinking of something different'.

Since then, the borders have changed and re-formed many times and the minor states have multiplied under the influence of a few 'superpowers' who decide on their selection and production. We have passed through the cold war between conceptual and new-figurative, which, like all wars, had not been decided on by the citizens (the artists), but by those who redefine the borders (the critics). It is they who created 'war propaganda', which on both sides painted the enemy in simplistic terms, at times resorting to genuine smear campaigns, criminalising the other side with strong words.

These battles often used outdated categories and schemes which we thought were consigned to the past. Ideas such as the supremacy of painting (for which Michelangelo criticised Leonardo long ago) or the necessity to expand artistic activity to the real world (as if it was not part of the real world).

And we as citizens (and we hope also those who read this) do not recognise ourselves in nationalist rhetoric. In the same way, although they may be in the power of the politics

---

1 Andersen, E. (2002) 'What is?', in S. Solimano (ed.) *The Fluxus Constellation*. Genova: Neos.e, 27.

2 Bockris, V. (1991) *Andy Warhol*. Leonardo Paperback, 111, translated from Italian.

of art which grants or denies their right to citizenship, artists too work in a dimension in which, fortunately, there is still a degree of autonomy.

Language editing by Mike Garner.

**the authors**

Serena Giordano is Professor of Visual Arts at Università di Genova. Anna Daneri is associate curator of Fondazione Antonio Ratti and teaches at Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti in Bergamo. They both live in Genoa.

E-mail: [sgiordano@unige.it](mailto:sgiordano@unige.it) / [annadaneri@yahoo.it](mailto:annadaneri@yahoo.it)