

‘Border Crossings are not only physical’

Visual Culture

NCAD DUBLIN

National College of Art and Design
A Recognised College of University College Dublin

Student Name: Alex Fortune

Email Address: 20345036@student.ncad.ie

Year of Study: First Year

Semester: 2

Department (if applicable): School of Design (Illustration) & School of Education

Are you on the Joint Course? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Visual Culture Tutor: Silvia Loeffler

Essay Due Date: 12th April 2021

Word Count: 2,000 words

Please confirm the following by writing your initials in the space provided

I have credited the sources of all the images included in this submission. **Initials: A.F.**

I have the sources of all quoted and paraphrased text in this submission. **Initials: A.F.**

I confirm that this submission is my own work. **Initials: A.F**

Border Crossings are not only physical

Alex Fortune

A border crossing at its core can be defined as a place on the border between two areas, often used as a division of territory or as a means of separation. The images of road signs, maps, passport control and customs immediately spring to mind - ways of reminding us we are crossing over into a completely separate piece of land. But who are we to decide what is separated? Who are we when on either side of the border, and who are we in between? Questions like these come to the fore when discussing the idea of a border crossing - the action of crossing over from one place to the next, but when was this idea established and how relevant is it in modern day? I feel as though crossing a border is applicable to modern life in more ways than just its physical existence, and I find myself asking, who now has the right to cross over, or to belong? And are we consistently on one side of the border or the other, or do we live life in a constant state of 'in between'? Many artists, theorists and philosophers feel as though it is not up to us to decide where others belong, only our true selves, and it begs the question of if we necessarily need to 'belong' at all? Borders come into question in more ways than just the act of marking territory, and from drawing upon the work of artists and theorists, I feel as though borders are created throughout life, both physically and mentally. In this essay, I aim to explore both the physical aspect of a border crossing, and its implications in the modern world, but also the idea of an ideological border crossing - one that makes its way into our everyday life, and one we may not always cross over, but rather live alongside.

The idea of a border originated alongside the beginning of cartography, a western colonial discipline used to record the conquering and possession of native lands. Nowadays, cartography and the use of borders have taken on a much more modern and political approach. Artist Zarina Hashmi's work 'Atlas of my world I - VI', (2001) explores the more

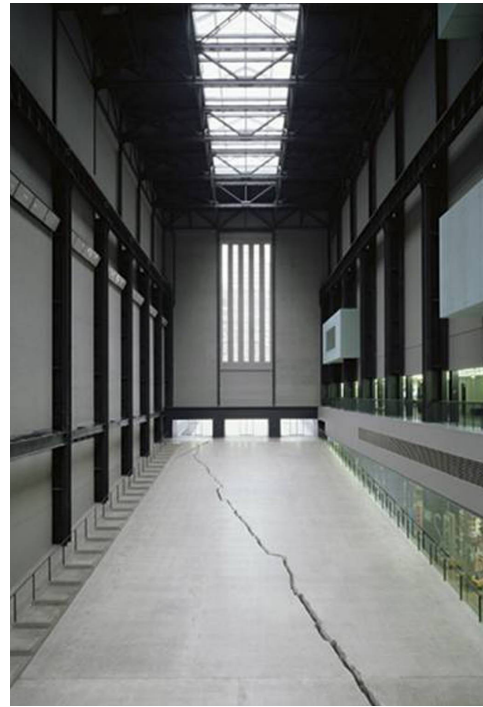
modern elements of a border crossing - uncomfortable divisions between both land and people. Her work focuses not only on the physical and geographical, but also the social boundaries and what happens if they too are crossed, exploring ideas of both separation and integration. The creation of a border itself immediately divides us into two groups - those who we want to keep out, and those who we want to keep in. This idea is also extremely applicable when we think of today's society. As discussed by O'Riordan (1999), Asylum seekers are often those who seem to exist directly on this border as an amalgamation of these two groups, not fully accepted on one side, and completely exiled on the other. When exploring these ideas, we must ask ourselves, why is it that refugees are deemed 'not to belong'? Who is it that is maintaining the idea of borders between territories, but also borders between people? Do we feel a sense of comfort as a society, using borders as a way to justify the division of 'us' from 'them'?

This idea was further explored by contemporary artist Emily Jacir, who in her photographic installation 'Where We Come From', (2001 - 2003), asks Palestinians living in exile 'If I could do anything for you anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?'. This simple yet profound question opens up opportunities for the woman wielding an American passport to cross both physical, but also psychological borders on behalf of those who could not. This once again brings up the question of a physical border, a border surrounding Palestine, much like any part of the world, that can only be crossed by those deemed eligible. Palestinians living in exile are unable to visit the territory they once called home, but a woman with seemingly no connection to the land can cross over and back freely? What makes certain people different to others, and why do we attempt to use a border as justification for keeping people out? The ideas explored by Bhaba (2004) bring up the point that those now living in exile on the other side of the border, are the same people who once lived within its limits. It creates a sense of 'cultural hybridity' - a combination of the life that once was, and the life

that now is, yet these are both central to the same unchanging person, all that has been altered is the borders they live within.

I believe that an important question hangs in the balance - are borders an imagined construct set to define us? Are we not the same on both sides of the border? It is here where the idea becomes clearly defined - physical borders do exist, but they are more often upheld due to an imagined construct of what should be placed where. It is often easier for us to justify living on one side or another, rather than addressing the truth - that we live in a constant imagined liminal space, the state of 'in between' dividing our human existence for us.

This idea is considered strongly by artist Doris Salcedo, who's work 'Shibboleth I - IV', (2007) was displayed in the Tate Britain, (Images Below).



‘Shibboleth I’ & ‘Shibboleth II’ (2007)

Digital print on paper

Tate Gallery (cited in White, 2014).

Salcedo also refers to ideas similar to that of Turner (1969), and Van Gennep, *et al.* (1960), in her work, including the idea of liminality, or the state of being constantly ‘in-between’. When viewing the artwork, the deep crack stretching across the floor symbolises a border, or divide between the two sides of the room. However, it becomes clear that if we were to cross that border, we would remain the same on both sides of it. The term ‘shibboleth’ itself refers to a custom, principle, or belief distinguishing a particular class or group of people, referring mainly to the pure ideology of dividing people, continuing the proposed idea of ‘us’ and ‘them’. However, if we remain the same no matter where we stand in relation to the border, then what purpose does it serve? Bhaba (2004) also raises important points about liminality - that we all live what is referred to as a ‘border existence’. Our only reasoning for living on one side of a border or the other, is our human desire to have a place we deem ‘home’, or a

place we can confine ourselves to. The border crossings may be physical to an extent, but only because we want them to be, craving something tangible that can serve as a marker for us. Some have a more traditional colonial view, feeling that borders can create not only a physical, but a class divide - dividing the upper from the middle and lower classes, or dividing the first from the developing world. Others enjoy the sense of security a border brings, and they appreciate the acknowledgement of when they are physically crossed. I myself feel as though it is human nature to want to belong, yet we also feel that we can decide if others can or cannot belong. We use physical border crossings as a way to dictate this, but we also create borders in society as it then becomes easier for us to deem a place as 'home', but as the artists I have previously mentioned explored in their work, if we are the same on both sides of a border, are we not the same when we enter or leave our homeland, or home space? What changes when we cross the threshold?

Tzelepis (2013) discusses this idea while also drawing upon artist Mona Hatoum's body of work. Often dealing with the idea of diaspora referring to the (often forced) dispersion of people beyond where they themselves deem 'home', we are encouraged to 'displace our established notions of home' and continually question our ideas of 'borders and boundaries, exile and belonging, displacement and emplacement', (Tzelepis, 2013 p.169). As I have previously mentioned, people want to create borders both physically and mentally in order to create their own identity. It is a pure desire for belonging that causes us to adhere ourselves to such rigid boundaries and it is through this concept that we can see clearly the establishment of ideological and imagined border crossings - we refuse to acknowledge that if we so choose, the world could be borderless. We could live liminally, in the constant state of 'in between' - in between countries, in between territories or in between identities, but as explained by Turner (1969), we crave tangibility and find a sense of comfort in belonging to a

single area, space, or group of people. Borders are constantly re-established, re-located and re-embodied, and our existence and notions of home at their core ultimately come down to a 'location with no fixed points' (Tzelepis, 2013, p.170). The concept of 'home' goes hand in hand with the feeling of belonging, and the feeling of comfort. 'Home' is wherever we feel comfortable, accepted and at ease. However, human nature dislikes this concept, thus introducing physical and mental borders (Van Gennep, *et al*, 1960), in order to segregate us and create a more palpable and clear definition of 'home', yet through these imagined borders we also dictate where others should deem as their 'home', whether they feel comfortable there or not.

Another important aspect when looking at the creation of imagined borders is discovered when we reflect on the current Covid-19 pandemic. We can no longer physically cross borders between countries, counties or our surrounding area, yet other borders have become completely blurred - namely, the borders between our home and work life, and our private and public space. These are ultimately ideological borders that often naturally go unnoticed, but due to the current climate we feel less and less separation between them, constantly living in yet another state of 'in-between'.

O'Connell (2021) discusses this through the idea of working from home, boundaries are now being continually crossed. They may not be physical, and can also often go unnoticed, but no longer is there a plethora of spaces dedicated to both home and work life, it has all merged into one. Daily, we cross the mental border of work and play, yet we reside in the same spot, many using just one space to work and also relax. No longer is our private space private, as gone are the days of 'leaving work at the office' - this idea is too difficult when your office has now become your kitchen table. Our private space has now become public, with work meetings or college classes taking place from our bedrooms, and essays being corrected or written from our kitchen counter. Wall (2021) brings up an employee's 'right to disconnect' -

a new legislation created to try and once again establish a border between work and relaxation. It is clear in this current situation that imagined borders have just as tangible implications as physical ones, and once again we are looking for a way to divide things, creating a border that we can cross to return to our work identity and can cross back over to remove ourselves from it.

The creation of border crossings are a natural human instinct, reflecting our innate desire to segregate, divide and belong to something bigger than ourselves. A physical border crossing often has implications for many, be it their inability to return to the territory they dub 'home', or their inability to cross over into a new life. However, border crossings and their implications, as we have seen, are not only physical. Discussed by various artists and

theologists, when exploring their work we continuously see the concept of liminal space, raising the idea that we as humans all live a border existence. Border crossings are created by ourselves to allow us to feel as though we belong to something, and it is often easier to identify with and call something 'home' when it is confined, but in reality, our existence is, and is located wherever we so desire. We are the same on both sides of the border, in between, and also if the border were never to exist at all. We can argue that a border marks territory, and with the use of passport control and customs we can see physically the effects of it, but in actuality we are constructing borders in an almost performative way. We enjoy the idea of separation, almost inducing an engrained 'tribe mentality' within us. We know that our existence is the same on both sides of the border, but we like to have border crossings established so we feel as though we belong, and have a space we can call home. Border crossings surround us, both physically and mentally in everyday life, and due to the effect of colonisation and human nature, there are some we cannot cross, just as we decide who cannot cross our borders. But our existence is not rigid, and borders are continuously changing, being re-evaluated, re-located and also re-imagined, at times heightened by the

ongoing worldwide pandemic. However for now while we cannot cross physical borders, perhaps we can examine the root of our own ideologically implemented borders, and question are they necessarily as rigid as we thought? If we are the same on both sides, perhaps they can be opened, and crossed as we transition into accepting life in a state of in between.

Bibliography:

Bhabha, H. (2004) *The Location of Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Gennep, A., Vizedom, M., and Caffee, G. (1960) *The Rites of Passage*. 2nd Ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, K. (2003) 'Luc Tuymans; Yoko Inoue; Emily Jacir', *The New York Times*, 9 May. Available at: luc-tuymans-yoko-inoue-emily-jacir.html (Accessed 9 April 2021).

O'Connell, J. (2021) 'The truth about working from home: 'It's the first time i've ever burnt out'', *The Irish Times*, March 27. Available at: the-truth-about-working-from-home-it-s-the-first-time-i-ve-ever-burnt-out-1.4519933 (Accessed 9 April 2021).

O'Riordan, T. (1999) 'Irish Treatment of Refugees', *The Irish Times*, 14 April. Available at: irish-treatment-of-refugees-1.173550 (Accessed 8 April 2021).

The Irish Times (1998) 'Treatment of Asylum Seekers', 8 July. Available at: treatment-of-asylum-seekers-1.171015 (Accessed 9 April 2021).

Turner, V. W. (1969). *The Ritual Process*. Penguin.

Tzelepis, E. (2013) 'Dis-Placing the World: Nomadic Politics in Mona Hatoum's Living Cartographies of Passages', *The Greek Review of Social Research*. 140, pp. 169-184.

Wall, M. (2021) 'All Employees set to have right to disconnect from work today', *The Irish Times*, April 1. Available at: all-employees-set-to-have-right-to-disconnect-from-work-from-today-1.4525512 (Accessed: 8 April 2021).

White, C. (2014) 'Doris Salcedo, Shibboleth II, 2007'. Available at: salcedo-shibboleth-ii-p20335 (Accessed 9 April 2021).