

Overcoming the Borders Within: 'Walking Through Walls' at Gropius Bau

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Article by Denisa Tomkova // Oct. 22, 2019

The exhibition 'Walking Through Walls' at Gropius Bau reflects on the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a historical event, the fall symbolized hope for a shared future together in a newly united Europe, which eventually led to the project of an enlarged European Union. This post-1989 transformation has had an impact on politics, economics and even art on both sides of the Wall. 'Walking Through Walls'—curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath—creates a dialogue with the fragments of the Berlin Wall outside the gallery's windows in several exhibited works. But it also shifts the focus further from the Berlin Wall to walls in a much broader sense: to those that are visible and those that are not. The exhibition comments on today's political climate, from the rise of extreme nationalism and populism to the migration beyond European borders as well as countless other physical and metaphorical boundaries.

In the corridor, Marina Abramović and Ulay's 'Light/Dark' (1978) shows the artists sitting across from one another, slapping each other's faces increasingly rapidly and aggressively. The curators read this performance as a metaphor for "an ongoing confrontation between two opposing entities who destroy each other, while they attempt to create something together, due to their unwillingness to compromise." In the same corridor, a work by Christian Odzuck is exhibited: in a conceptual way, the artist utilizes the Gropius Bau's round plenum corridor for his project 'Panopticonism' (2019). The artwork is a symbolic gesture, visible to the exhibition visitors solely by the printed stack of brochures documenting this artwork. The work itself "happens" in the visitors' imaginations and depends on their awareness of philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of

the panopticon. The panopticon is based on the architectural form of a prison with a high central tower that allows the guards to constantly see inside of each cell without interaction. This architectural design was used by Foucault as a metaphor for modern mechanisms of disciplinary power and surveillance. Odzuck's design was inspired by the round foyer's layout and the Gropius Bau's location beside the former Berlin Wall and its watchtowers. The work comments on the renewed meaning of the panopticon in relation to today's digital technologies.

There is another reference to Foucault in the exhibition, in the work of Nadia Kaabi-Linke. Her 'All Along the Watchtower' (2012/2019) echoes Foucault's concept of "heterotopia." The artwork is airbrushed on the wall, which makes the effect of a haunting watchtower visible only in shadow. The reference here is also to the fragments of the Berlin Wall just outside the window, where the watchtowers used to stand. Kaabi-Linke and Odzuck both comment on the fact that surveillance and control does not always have to be visible to be present.

The video and sound installation work by Smadar Dreyfus, 'Mother's Day' (2006-2008), considers an event from March 21st, 2006, when Syrian Druze students from the Israeli occupied Golan Heights arrived from Damascus to bless their mothers, who gathered across the valley on the other side of the militarised fence. The Golan Heights is the area that was annexed by Israel from Syria in 1967, during the Six-Day War and, since then, has been claimed by both countries. The situation in the region today is devastating and, as the result of the Syrian War, the Syrian Druze community is even more divided. Dreyfus recorded the voices from the megaphone communication of the families separated by the occupation. The installation space is very dark, the only light coming from the flashing video installation where excerpts of text in English translation are presented on the big screen, combined with the audio recordings of the mothers and their children.

Walking into the dimly-lit installation, I struggled to see in front of me, wondering if I'd run into another person, or perhaps a wall. I only stopped walking when I hit the the ramp that separates the viewers from the projection screen and physically emphasises the distance between. By creating a dark and disorienting environment, Dreyfus intentionally transmits the emotional distress of standing in the middle of the valley, trying to overcome the physical distance of separation. The work comments on the absurdity of forced separation as well as the political situation in the region, in which the ongoing war separates communities even more.

In the durational performance by Dora García, 'Two Planets Have Been Colliding For Thousands Of Years,' two performers are positioned facing each other with their gazes interlocked, each within one of two circles painted on the floor. When one of the performers moves the other must move so she alters her position in order to maintain the same distance as at the beginning of the performance. This, however, becomes impossible at some point, since the two circles are not concentric. This work reminds us of the walls that are not visible but still determine the course of our actions. Not everyone can choose their position within this world. For many, the position of the "other" was assigned to them without their knowledge; as is the case for refugees escaping their

homes and facing dehumanizing conditions when they arrive in Europe.

The exhibition 'Walking Through Walls' invites us to reflect on the many different ways we can think about walls; contemporary walls that separates us from each other, physically and metaphorically. The exhibition shows us that even as one wall falls, another is erected. There have been many exhibitions on the theme of walls, borders and migration since the recent "migration crisis" but 'Walking Through Walls' stands out in the way it adds nuance and diversity to the topic. The exhibition presents the works of 28 international artists, in a wide variety of media, such as painting, sculpture, photography, film, sound installation, site-specific interventions and performance. Formally, the exhibition is interactive and engaging while, at the same time, it presents a critical and intelligent inquiry into the issue of the walls that divide us.

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Exhibition Info

GROPIUS BAU (https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/berliner-festspiele/programm/bfs-gesamtprogramm/programmdetail_274530.html)

Group Show: 'Walking Through Walls'

Exhibition: Sept. 12, 2019 – Jan. 19, 2020

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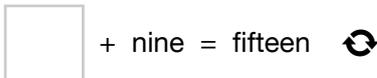
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