

TRANSDISCIPLINARY AND TRANSNATIONAL MANIFESTATIONS IN OJĀRS FELDBERGS' ART: THE CONCEPT OF BORDERS

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Abstract

In this article the author examines the concepts of transdisciplinarity and transnationalism as methodological tools in art analysis. By applying these tools to the case study of Latvian artist Ojārs Feldbergs and addressing the concept of borders in his art, the author questions knowledge production systems, especially in terms of Western art discourse. The author doubts that in our hybrid globalised world it is still possible to look at artists and their oeuvre through a monoethnic perspective. It is important to be aware of parallel processes, intercultural encounters and sources of inspiration beyond the borders of one country or discipline. Yet, in doing so, the centre-periphery relationship should be addressed critically and the dictate of cultural metropolises as centres should be avoided. Given that Feldbergs' art cannot be seen as a constituent of isolated elements – object (sculpture), space (environment), time, spectatorship – but, indeed, as a complex whole, which is hybrid and synthesised, it is crucial to define Feldbergs' artistic strategies addressing the concept of borders – both physical and symbolic.

Keywords: *the concept of borders, transnational, transdisciplinary, Ojārs Feldbergs, performance.*

As the title of the article suggests, the concepts of “transdisciplinary” and “transnational” will be applied to the case study of Latvian artist Ojārs Feldbergs' (1947) art. Thus, it is already implied that a critical disciplinary methodology will be

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used as a theoretical and analytical framework. One of the goals of such an approach, especially in terms of the application of “transnational”, is to address the discourse of art history and the subtle politics of constructing (writing) a history on the basis of comparisons between the region of East-Central Europe and the West. Traditionally, *“the cultural experiences of the Western world and their description (...) serve as a universal model, providing paths for ‘peripheries’ to follow”* [Hock 2018: 2]. In this paradigm, art and culture in the region of East-Central Europe are seen as marginal, peripheral, back-ward and mostly copying the centre, namely, the West. Looking through this perspective, we ignore *“the fact that cultural metropolises within a hierarchically-defined art geography may possess political, economic, and epistemic power, but they, too, are rooted in specific contexts, very much like any other location. Experiences and patterns observed there are particular as well and, hence, should have no stronger claim for general validity as processes unfolding at the margins”* [Hock 2018: 3]. However, as all complex terms, “transnationalism”, too, can only be seen as productive in certain contexts and it definitely cannot be universalised to all possible situations.

To integrate the theoretical framework in case analysis, Ojārs Feldbergs must be introduced. In Latvian cultural and art environment, Feldbergs is mostly known as a prominent sculptor whose works have been exhibited on a global scale. In 1991, being inspired by similar practices abroad, Feldbergs founded an open-air art park *Pedvāle* (Figure 1). The art park exhibiting sculptures and works of Land Art of



Figure 1. The Pedvāle Art Park (personal archive of O. Feldbergs).



Figure 2. Ojārs Feldbergs performing with the performance group “Animist” at the Pedvāle Art Park for the film “Homo Ludens” (photo: Anna Maskava, 2021).

both local and foreign artists, along with the renovated Pedvāle Manor have become a significant cultural heritage and art site in Latvia. However, to a lesser degree, Feldbergs is acknowledged as a performance artist – both by scholarly circles and himself.¹ When asked about the performative qualities so vividly manifested in his works of art, Feldbergs replies that he sees performance art and its tools as part of the range of artistic devices that can be employed in his creative practice. For him, it is not only the stone as a material in sculpture, but also the landscape and environment, a relationship with the spectator and performative actions that contribute to the evocative and affective qualities of the work of art. As Feldbergs admits, “*I construct imaginative situations*” (2021), and in many ways Feldbergs can be defined as *Homo Ludens* – a man who plays (Figure 2).²

¹ Indeed, only one Master’s Thesis has been dedicated to this subject so far. See Zanda Jankovska’s Master’s Thesis “Performances of the Pedvāle Open-Air Museum (1991–2009)”, Art Academy of Latvia (2010).

² “Homo Ludens” is also a title of the film (2021) dedicated to Ojārs Feldbergs (the author of the article Laine Kristberga is the producer of the film); available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2V-8R85g8Q&ab_channel=LatvijasPerformancesm%C4%81kslascentrs

A play and playing has a range of semantic varieties. In English a ‘play’ can also refer to dramaturgical work, whereas in Latvian *spēle* stands not only for play, but also for acting, as, for example, in *aktierspēle*. The semantics already indicate that despite Feldbergs is avoiding any terminology related to performance art, performance and performing certainly form an integral part of the play and playing. Given that Feldbergs’ art cannot be seen as a constituent of isolated elements – object (sculpture), space (environment), time, spectatorship – but, indeed, as a complex whole, which is hybrid and synthesised, it is crucial to define Feldbergs’ artistic strategies addressing the concept of borders – both physical and symbolic. Hence, the concepts of transdisciplinarity and transnationalism can be seen as useful.

“Transdisciplinary” and consequently “transdisciplinarity” mean “*transcending the established framework of (academic) disciplines*” [Bernstein 2015: 5]. The terms are relatively recent; for the first time they were used in 1970 by the Swiss philosopher and psychologist Jean Piaget at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Congress in Nice, France. These terms are beneficial in knowledge production and epistemic systems, namely, they are useful in addressing the question of a dialogue between different fields of knowledge. An important figure in devising a theory for transdisciplinary work is Romanian theoretical physicist Basarab Nicolescu (1942). According to him, “*transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines. Its goal is the understanding of the present world, of which one of the imperatives is the unity of knowledge*” [Nicolescu 2014: 19]. The unity of knowledge is jeopardised – Nicolescu even claims that there is “*a catastrophe of knowledge in some sense*” [Nicolescu 2007: 77] – because in comparison to the first universities, where seven disciplines existed divided between *trivium* and *quadrivium* (corresponding to the modern division of Exact Sciences and Humanities), in 2000 there were more than 8,000 disciplines registered and “8,000 disciplines means 8,000 ways to look for reality” [Nicolescu 2007: 77].

Undeniably, since the mid-20th century many tremendous changes have occurred not only in terms of the geopolitical situation, but also the transfer and hybridisation between disciplines and thus knowledge production. Since then, cross-over disciplines characterised by interdisciplinarity, diversity and criticism of previously accepted ‘truths’, such as “*African American (‘Black’, at first), women’s studies, and ethnic studies*” [Repko et al. 2020: 38] have emerged with a great emphasis on the discursive integration of the political into the social and *vice versa*. They have been accompanied by environmental studies, human ecology, cultural geography and the studies of the Anthropocene offering new concepts, theories and methodology to

speculate on the interaction between the natural landscape and humans. These are signs of modern education systems,¹ yet also of knowledge hybridisation “[reflecting] *the complexity of human life*” [Obrilliant 2021].

In the context of art and cultural production, “*a transdisciplinary artwork is a work that cannot be labelled with the name of a well-established discipline like music, theatre or visual art*” [Craenen]. Moreover, “*transdisciplinary artists (..) experience the framework of a discipline as limiting (..). That brings them to a point where they are no longer even interested in confirming their work as being part of an existing discipline, and in the most extreme cases, as part of the field we call ‘art’*” [Craenen]. In this context, “*transdisciplinarity presupposes an attitude of openness and curiosity, combined with a willingness to accept the possibility of other dimensions (..) entering practice*” [Craenen]. On certain occasions, transdisciplinary research is defined as research which “*occurs when researchers collaborate with stakeholders from outside the academic world. Knowledge from outside the academic world, as well as stakeholder values, is integrated with academic knowledge. Together, these insights determine what problem is studied and how this is done, and which interventions are selected to address the problem*” [Kestra et al. 2016: 32]. Such an approach would imply collective and collaborative dimensions, involving several interlocutors. In the current neoliberal political climate, such forms of cooperation resulting not only in research, but also cultural production have become quite a norm in the art and cultural environment, too. However, this strategy has also been criticised by artists and art critics. For example, British art historian Claire Bishop argues that a cultural policy which demands added economic and social value in any art project can result in an unethical situation where socially vulnerable groups can become the objects of social pornography [Bishop 2012: 22]. Thus, attention must be drawn to the forms and methods, and perhaps inherent hierarchical structures, when pursuing transdisciplinary projects with pluralistic authorship.

The second set of terms viewed in this paper is “transnational” and consequently “transnationalism”, which consist of “trans” and “national”, whereby “trans” from Latin translates as “across, beyond, through” and “national” contains “natio”, in Latin meaning “tribe, people, birth”. How to determine the hypothetical social and ethnic (not political or geographical) borders between nations, since the term “transnationalism” suggests the crossing of borders? What does it mean to belong to a certain nation in the 21st century? Theoreticians such as Eric Hobsbawm (1992), Anne-Marie Thiesse (1999), Ernest Gellner (1989) argue that the concept of nationhood and the first nation-states date back to the 19th century. “*National*

¹ Surely, knowledge production takes place also beyond officially recognized ‘education systems.’

territory is an integral component in the process of inventing nations and nation-states”, it is also “*a basic building block in the national collective imagination*” [Kahn, Bint 2014: 222]. Although the concept of the nation-state has been vital in European identity, today it is rather argued that a true nation-state does not exist, since nearly every country in the world contains more than one national group and “*most, if not all nation-states are polyethnic*” [Zijlmans 2014]. Moreover, the sense of national belonging has been transformed by the dynamics of globalization and, consequently, has affected the concept of borders in humanities as well. Since the 1990s scholars in humanities have been continuously questioning the concept of national borders as a human construct and doubting that the national paradigm can be seen as a foundational premise for a discipline [Simal-González 2018: 277].

If we look at the case of Latvia, the question of national identity is particularly complicated. Due to the rather brief history of the state of Latvia (founded in 1918 and the statehood being interrupted by German and Russian occupation regimes) and complex history, involving forced displacement, repressions, and liminal identities – neither Latvian, nor emigrée –, Latvian national identity has been often tested. During the period of Soviet occupation, when all-encompassing Russification policy was implemented, specifically targeting Latvian language and culture, it was especially difficult to maintain Latvianness not only as a concept, but also as a set of practices, behaviours and attitudes. Assimilation into the USSR and becoming part of one homogenic empire that speaks one language – Russian, would have been the ideal scenario for the Soviet authorities and consequently the inevitable end of Latvian national identity. Although Latvia regained its independence in 1991, the consequences of Russian occupation lasting for half a century are still evident in the cultural, social and political environment. Besides, in the current geopolitical situation that started on 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, the threat of warfare and subsequent colonisation has become outspoken again. Imperialistic nostalgia for the once lost USSR has been continuously articulated in the political rhetoric of the president of Russia Vladimir Putin. In these circumstances, the concept of transnationalism whereby ethnic, social and cultural boundaries dissolve or become fluid can be seen as too slippery.

On the other hand, if we emphasise national as something particular – a set of characteristic features that serves as a foundation for a discipline, for example, art, we also risk of basing our conclusions on generalised assumptions. In the context of art production, it is very problematic to talk about one homogenic “Latvian art” or “Latvian artists”. Surely, the concept of Latvian art has been seen as foundational in forming Latvian national identity. Since the establishment of Latvian state in 1918, museology experts and art historians have tried to forge a canon of culture and art, where certain works and names would belong to. However, we are also very

eager to recognize Latvianness when we address such world-known artists as, for example, Vija Celmiņš (1938) or Mark Rothko (1903–1970). Yet, when we visit the websites of influential Western art institutions, such as MOMA, Celmins is defined as “*American, born in Latvia*” and Mark Rothko is “*American, born in Russia (now Latvia)*” [Moma.org]. The place of birth does not grant one particular identity, even more so in a global and postcolonial world. Artistic expression, too, can be seen as “*unidentifiable with a precise culture or precise territory*” [Scafirimuto 2021: 117].

In this context it is important to address the very discourse of art history, namely, how the art history has been produced since its invention as a discipline in the 19th century. Here, the theoretical framework of “transnationalism” becomes a productive revisionist framework since it suggests a “*way of understanding, researching and curating that encourages the idea that art, artists and art histories are connected beyond their countries of origin. The word ‘transnational’ encourages us all to challenge and revise dominant art histories by highlighting the global exchanges and flow of artists and ideas*” [Tate.org.uk]. According to such a view, we should avoid the Eurocentric or West-centric predisposition and rather opt for more parallel and pluralistic histories acknowledging peripheries and regions, whereby the Baltic States are unequivocally defined as a periphery. For nearly half a century to the rest of the world, the Baltic region had remained hidden behind the Iron Curtain. It resulted in somewhat vague recognition of particular countries – Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia – even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, because in the Cold War narrative there used to be only one Soviet enemy – the USSR. In the aftermath of the occupation regime, Latvia from many perspectives is still considered a post-Soviet space, which of course is a derogatory term implying something backwards, stagnating, corrupted etc.

Here, the concept of borders becomes pivotal – how a nation-state is incorporated into a massive Soviet empire for half a century, how it affects not only the physical borders of the countries, but also the symbolic borders – such as those of national identity, culture, works of art, disciplines of art, as well as art histories. Can we, as a result of a hybrid identity, claim that we should rather be discussing “borderless art”? Who is the transnational artist? When analysing, for example, Mexican-American performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s artistic practice, French art historian Guglielmo Scafirimuto claims that “*the transnational artist is a border crosser, politically and aesthetically*” [Scafirimuto 2021: 125]. Can this framework be applied to Ojārs Feldbergs, too?

Surely, Feldbergs cannot be considered a transnational artist in a physical / nomadic sense, as one who would have lived in exile or who would be a migrant artist – foreigner – in another country. Yet, transnational manifestations in terms of the concept of borders can definitely be explored in his art. The first instance of both



Figure 3. The granite blocks made by Ojārs Feldbergs during the Barricades (personal archive of O. Feldbergs, 1991).

real and symbolic borders in transnational context is provided by Feldbergs himself, when he reflects on the granite blocks made by him during the Barricades in Old Riga in 1991 (Figure 3):

“During the barricades of January 1991, I had built my own barricade from granite stone blocks in Old Riga. It remained there until 21 August 1991, blocking the way of OMON’s military mobile units and allowing the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia to adopt the Constitutional Law ‘On the Statehood of the Republic of Latvia’ restoring the independence of our state. Later I realised that this barricade was also a symbolic border. On the one side of this border my life lived during the Soviet times remained, whereas on the other – the life in the liberated Latvia started” [Feldbergs 2012: 8].

Thus, Feldbergs contemplates on both – the physical and symbolic borders of Latvia. The physical borders of Latvia were violated by the USSR when Latvia was annexed and incorporated in the Soviet empire; however, symbolic borders are the ones that separate the colonial from the postcolonial, the traumatic Soviet past, in which Feldbergs’ father was deported to remote and harsh territories of Russia twice [Feldbergs 2021], from the democracy-orientated present, the ideology saturated cultural and belief systems from the freedom of speech. The symbolic border thus

emerges as a site of struggle, conflict and negotiation. It is a metaphorical wound, which needs to be healed to overcome the trauma.

The concept of transnational borders also emerges in the Pedvāle Open-Air Art Park. First of all, transnationalism is expressed through sculptural and Land Art objects that have been produced by artists from other countries such as the USA, the UK, India, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Belarus, Lithuania, Estonia. Although helpful in terms of definitions and discourse, it is problematic to refer to Land Art, when characterising the Pedvāle Art Park and works of art exhibited there. When the Pedvāle Art Park was founded in 1991, it could not be based on the discipline of Land Art, since it did not exist as a conceptual movement in Latvia. Similarly to other comparatively new and experimental disciplines, such as performance art, it lacked systematic knowledge and was practiced rather intuitively. Land Art emerged in the West in the 1960s and according to a definition, it “is characterised by an immediate and visceral interaction with landscape, nature and the environment” [Tufnell 2006: 15]. Interaction with landscape in Feldbergs’ case was established through the discipline of sculpture; however, when sculptural objects are integrated into landscape and environment and, moreover, landscape and environment are being sculpted as objects, certain reciprocity between the artist, object, landscape, spectator, action, and codes of communication emerges. In this sense, the Pedvāle Open-Air Art Park becomes a site of synthesis, where “*natural landscape, cultural heritage and art [are integrated] into a single environment*” [Pedvāle]. The concept of Land Art, thus would be a point of departure from the perspective of Western art discourse, yet it only echoes with local practices and should not be seen as a guiding principle.

Second, the very idea of the open-air art park resulted from Feldbergs’ travels in the 1990s, when he visited several open-air parks in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan. These encounters with other cultures inspired him and motivated to establish a park in Latvia:

“For tens of years I had cherished an idea of an open-air art park where I could exhibit my sculptures. (...) I purchased the land and later also obtained the buildings of the manor. (...) I wanted to create my works of art and integrate them into the landscape, as well as invite other artists to participate in the implementation of my dreams. Along with the time of [National] Awakening I had an opportunity to travel around the world and visit art museums and parks. Within several years I visited [open-air parks in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan]” [Feldbergs 2012:10].

Third, we could also look at Pedvāle itself as a site that is positioned outside and beyond the borders of an institutional space – be it a gallery or a museum. If we draw

comparisons with the development of Land Art in the West, it was precisely this anti-hierarchical and anti-institutional drive that motivated Western artists to create art outdoors in natural landscape and environment. In Soviet Latvia, on the contrary, the art system did not function within art market (because there was no such market); it was regulated and censored by the state. Sculpture as a traditional discipline had to fulfil the ideological function. By founding an open-air art space in 1991, when Latvia regained national independence, Feldbergs provided experimental grounds for different type of art making. Pedvāle became a meeting point, co-creation and exhibition site gathering local and international artists. In this sense, Pedvāle was definitely positioned outside the institutional borders, yet it also needed support because the manor and estate were cultural and historical objects that required proper restoration and maintenance. At the time Feldbergs acquired the estate, it was in a horrible state – just ruins and overgrown fields polluted with garbage and waste. Being motivated by nostalgic attachment to the land of his ancestors, as well as by desire to clean up the mess after the nihilistic and destructive attitude towards nature and ecosystem in the Soviet period, Feldbergs obtained the land along with the ruins of the manor. Yet, it took nearly 30 years to finally restore the buildings and turn the manor into an artist residency, popular amongst international artists (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Ojārs Feldbergs with the performance group “Animist” at the opening of the Pedvāle Manor after its restoration (photo: Monta Šmitiņa, 2020).

As such, Pedvāle became a life-long project and mission for Feldbergs characterised by the artist as metaphorical and symbiotic mode of co-existence:

“The borders of the Pedvāle real estate were marked and fixed in the land register. Within these borders my world developed (...). In my thoughts and feelings, I merged with this territory. Its borders were like the contours of a body, its land like a body – flesh. My body merged with this landscape of nature and our bodies as if grew together” [Feldbergs 2012: 10].

Moreover, transgression of disciplines or transdisciplinary manifestations can be observed in Feldbergs' performative strategies that often become integrated in his works of art, such as the series *Games with the Stone* or otherwise called *The Performance of Stone Planting* that has been implemented since 2007 (Figure 5). It started as a funny experiment to test whether stones grow, since farmers had the so-called stone works, where stones had to be removed from the fields every spring. Feldbergs, in his turn, organised the collective works of stone planting. Over time, he developed the concept and named the stone seed *Petraflora Pedvalensis* [Feldbergs



Figure 5. Stone planting at Pedvāle in 2007
(personal archive of O. Feldbergs).

2012: 242]. The performance is also socially engaging and participatory with ritualistic and even shamanistic qualities attributed to the process, because when a stone seed is planted in the soil the person who plants it makes a wish and whispers a wish to the stone:

“Stone planting became a spiritual ritual during which the planters passed their message to the stone seed, and simultaneously with the stone seed that was planted into the soil, a wish was also planted in the planter’s soul. During the ritual a bonfire is lit, leaves of the tree of life are burned, sacred spring water of Pedvāle is drunk and poured into the fire so that along the vapour a message is carried to the Great Spirit in the sky. Thus, the four primary elements of the world – earth, fire, water and air – become connected. Many people from all over the world have planted their stone seeds in the stone field of Pedvāle (..). Each planter has passed a personal message to the stone (..) Thus, the soil becomes spiritual. The stone seeds grown along with the planters’ faith and hopes” [Feldbergs 2012: 242].

There is, thus, reciprocity and dynamic relationship between the artist, object, landscape, and spectator. Performance art becomes a conceptual territory where disciplinary borders are tested and transgressed. It should be also added that this performance piece has transnational features, too, since Feldbergs has been planting stones all over the world when visiting other countries for the purposes of his art projects.

Overall, a stone for Feldbergs bears performative qualities. A stone is not only material or substance for a work of art to be implemented in the discipline of sculpture, for Feldbergs it is also a semiotic sign and a dialogic partner in art. As Feldbergs argues: *“I realized that we both – the stone and me – could create a sign, a symbol, that, being materialised in a poetic form, communicated and informed about a certain concept or natural element” [Pedvale].* A stone also indicates a border between the artist and the work of art, because without the touch of the artist a stone is just a stone. Through the artistic (physical) touch and gesture, a stone is transformed into a meaningful object of art. Whereas through performative engagement of spectators the border between the object of art and spectators is erased. Since the concept of open-air art park anticipates navigation through the park, as well as interaction with the objects, spectators can touch the objects, sit or stand on them, which of course, would not be possible in a gallery or museum space (unless specifically instructed). Spectators thus have an opportunity to build a relationship with stone sculptures, empathically “feel” them not as anonymous numb material, but soulful (neopagan) ancestors who have “seen” and “experienced” events and processes many centuries before us [Feldbergs 2021]. The relationship model between the artist, the object of

art, spectators and space thus is experiential, affective and epistemological. Through the shared experience, feelings and senses, concepts and engagement with the work of art and other spectators, as well as the artist and the space, a stone sculpture becomes more than just an object – it becomes a vehicle for a dialogue between different fields of knowledge. It is an example of transdisciplinary art, and thus, Feldbergs cannot be regarded merely as a sculptor, but, indeed, a transdisciplinary artist.

With the help of this case study and analysis of terminology, we can conclude that there are multiple and complex factors that need to be considered. First of all, we should discuss the methodology used in art history to address the question of analytic tools that are employed in constructing a discourse. Secondly, we should also examine art production – how individuals operate on their own or within systems or networks, what are the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, whether we “look beyond national boundaries to transcultural and transnational exchanges, and processes of interculturalization” [Zijlmans 2014] and pay attention to “the artworks that do or do not transcend or challenge national or geographical determinations (..) in our era of globalization, postcolonialism, and post-communism” [Zijlmans 2014]. The concepts of transnationalism and transdisciplinarity open up hermeneutical opportunities for critical reflection on these issues, although we must remain cautious in drawing too generalised conclusions. These frameworks should be carefully examined in each particular context. Third, when analysing art, we should look beyond the narrow scope of discipline-based analysis and instead opt for more integral and holistic approaches, because it will ensure a more nuanced understanding of artistic practices. Hence, the question of borders is a useful point of departure.

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