

EastBordNet

**COST Action IS0803**  
**STSM Report on Photography Project**

**Photographing/Observing the Border(s) at the  
Nicosia 'Green Line'**

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Report:

**Cyprus Photography Project (STSM)**

Attached to WG/WS:

**WG1 Borders 2009**

On:

**15-21 December 2009**

Location:

**Nicosia, Cyprus**

## **Photographing/observing the border(s) at the Nicosia 'green line'**

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Since the division of Cyprus in 1974, but even more since the opening of the checkpoints between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot sides of the island in 2003, the border between north and south parts of the capital Nicosia is materialized through multiple crossings: political, material, experiential. The 'green line' of Nicosia has had numerous guises, among them as a 'river, a bridge, and a dead-zone', as an 'in-between space' contested as much underground as on the street level (Papadakis 2009).

The second part of the EastBordNet photography project concerns the in/visibility of this line, and the methodological and epistemological issues involved in a project of photographing in a 'no-photography' borderland.

The Cyprus photography project has already had and will continue influencing my research: I am about to begin fieldwork on queer festivals in former Yugoslavian countries in which taking photographs will be an important methodological approach. Before the project began, I thought that my main interests in participating in the photography project in Cyprus related to the possibilities of researching the visibility/invisibility of borders through visual methods. Photographing along the 'green line' is explicitly prohibited: disregarding the warning signs and the presence of soldiers could get the photographer and researchers in trouble – rendering the border visible at this particular site is prohibited. The coping tactics involved a lot of surreptitious use and hiding of the camera, as well as repeated expeditions in smaller groups. I learned a lot about photographing in fieldwork from observing Lena's way of making a camera a 'natural' and inconspicuous object in social situations, and approaching people she wanted to photograph in a way that did not put them on guard, not even children – quite the contrary.

The 'green line' of Nicosia and Cyprus has repeatedly intrigued and challenged our small research 'team': the paradox of this 'photogenic border' (Lena Malm) consisted of its overwhelming materiality and obvious presence and effects in the daily life of people, combined with the restrictions placed on photographing it. Although it is forbidden to photograph along the 'green line', the Internet spills over with touristy shots of iconic barricaded streets, Ledra palace, two sets of flags facing each other, among others.

The challenge for a photographer/researcher, in Cypriot borderlands, consists of developing intuitive skills of quickly slipping the camera in and out without becoming too visible herself, while on the spot engaging in seeing the 'borderliness' (Sarah Green) of this potent 'line' as indeed in process

and as multidimensional – running on the street level and underground (Yiannis Papadakis), cutting across and bringing together in ways that might or might not be/come visual.

As the days passed, I became more aware of my second concern: looking for the instances of visibility/invisibility of social identities at border-crossings. I have previously participated in a travelling feminist activist project ‘Balkan women for peace’ that problematized the crossing of borders as a collective act that drew attention to the constructedness of what counts as a ‘border’. This project experience was also documented by a professional photographer and by a film crew (see: <http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/uk/programmes/femmes.html>), and I was hoping to bring some of the insights and questions it raised to the photography project in Cyprus. Since my research interests focus on the intersections of gender and sexuality with other categories such as class, religion and ethnicity, within one self and in the space of the social, I became very interested in following the traces of borderlines of gender and sexuality in the border spaces of Nicosia and Limassol that we visited. Some ‘traces’ (Sarah Green) were barely visible/porous – preserved as Sevina’s memory tied to a particular house in Limassol where a local trans person lived, and as a small photograph kept on the wall of a neighbourhood store.

Others resemble ‘tidemarks’ (Sarah Green) in liveliness and simultaneity that characterises their negotiations of intersectionality of borders. One such ‘tidemark’ was the performance we saw in a packed gay-friendly cafe on the northern side of Nicosia/Lefkoshia: a queer male academic was performing an elegant masculine version of belly dancing to a small crowd of Turkish Cypriot lgbt community, some guests from the Greek Cypriot side, and our ‘border team’. The borders that Stavros Karayanni was crossing to the rhythm of music (in Turkish) were several and complicated: those of a loaded feminized/orientalized dance genre; those of masculinity and how a masculine body should move; those of heteronormativity locked in a particular relation to ethnicity, religion and conflict in Cyprus; and the borders of cultural belonging – shifting in this performance both for him and for his variously positioned spectators. Indeed, I was thrilled to find his book ‘Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance’ (Wilfrid Laurier University Press: 2004), so I can continue to follow the trail of his dancing.

Another ‘tidemark’ came to sight when I asked Olga whether the two lgbt communities of the divided Nicosia cooperated. It’s interesting that you should ask that, she said. Her feeling is that they might be the ones who cooperate the most. This might be no more than a key question for some future research, but for me it ties interestingly with the strong networking among lgbt, feminist and peace movements of former Yugoslavia: not conforming to the sexuality/gender expression norms within a nation-state seems to generate some openings for reaching out and working across borders.

Reference List:

Papadakis, Yiannis. Nicosia after 1960: a River, a Bridge, and a Dead Zone. EastBordNet Working Paper, 2009:

[http://www.eastbordnet.org/working\\_papers/open/documents/Papadakis\\_Nicosia\\_after\\_1960\\_090414.pdf](http://www.eastbordnet.org/working_papers/open/documents/Papadakis_Nicosia_after_1960_090414.pdf) .