

C4:1/5  
Title: untitled  
By: Sebastian Cichocki  
From: the Polish-Czech border in Cieszyn



C4:2/5  
Title: untitled  
By: Sebastian Cichocki  
From: the Polish-Czech border in Cieszyn



The southern border of Poland. The Czech Republic border-crossing point in Cieszyn. It's 29 July 2005. It's scorching—up to 35C in the shade. There's not one cloud in the sky, the hot air is stagnant.

The exchange rate of the Polish zloty to the Czech koruna is 1: 1,337.

The river dividing Cieszyn into two parts is called Olza. Millions of Poles associate this name first of all with chocolate bars produced at a nearby factory. There are two border bridges. The city looks as if it was cracked in half. The crack is filled with sluggish water. The river is shallow, especially in the heat wave. If it wasn't for the border guards' vigilant eyes, one could easily paddle to the other bank, knee deep in water.

Going a few years back in time, we would have witnessed a different scene:

- a. On the right-hand side there was a bridge for those who wanted to pass the border to the Czech Republic. They couldn't return to Poland using this one-way passage, however. That was the Friendship Bridge.
- b. On the left-hand side there was a bridge leading to Poland (one couldn't enter The Czech Republic, though)—the Liberty Bridge.

Two one-way bridges, one providing entry and one exit from the country, were a hindrance to small-time smugglers and helped control the flow of people between the countries.

Throughout years, groups of Poles would cross the border, going out over one bridge and returning over the other. They were called “*mrówki*” (ants), due to their persistence and resilience worthy of those social insects. “Ants” used to carry hectoliters of cheap, Czech alcohol and tons of sweets. In the pockets of their coats, in plastic bags, and backpacks. The differences in prices offered the local people the opportunity to earn some money, so they crossed the border repeatedly, escaping the vigilance of customs officers controlling the alcohol quota.

Some time ago, there used to be yet another bridge on the river Olza, which formed a passageway between the Polish and the Czech town centers. It was pulled down after the imposition of martial law in Poland, not being of any great importance then, as there was hardly any traffic left at the borders at that time. This separation had remarkable effects on the city, though. It isn't hard to see that the town dwellers remain trapped in their prejudices, nurturing a false sense of superiority.

Slowly but systematically, everything is changing. Both countries joined the European Union with childlike enthusiasm. Small differences in prices due to appreciation of the koruna have worked towards the end of alcohol-generated tourism. What's more, today it's the Czech visitors who come to Poland to do their shopping. They buy bags of vegetables or sweets in the hypermarkets located on the outskirts of Cieszyn—the German *Kaufland* or the French *Geant*.

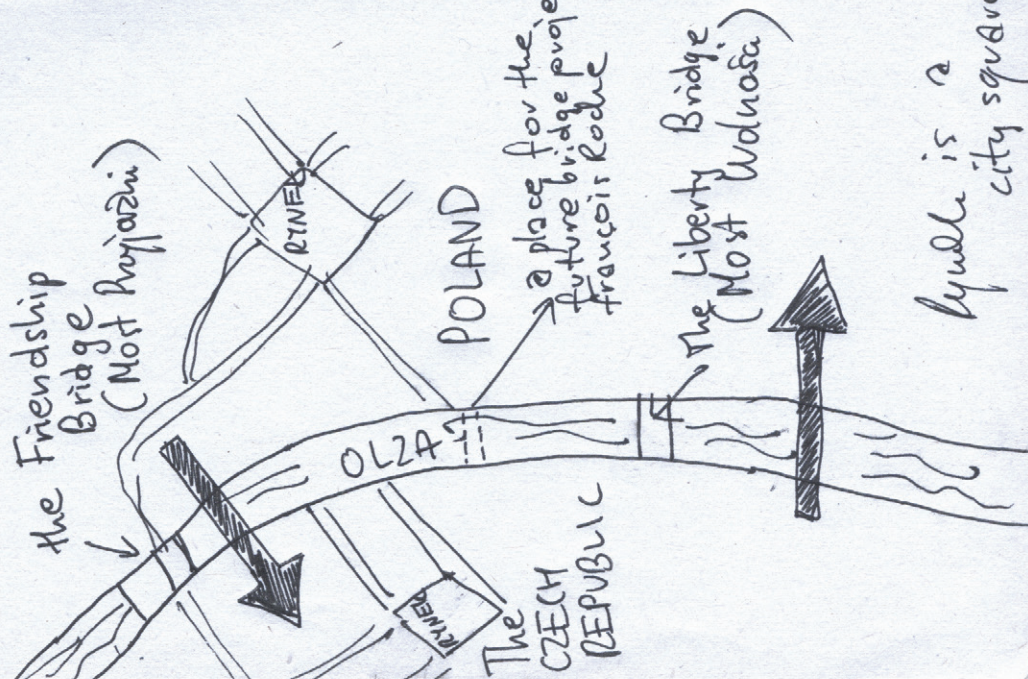
In the summer of 2004 in Cieszyn, the Danish group Superflex carried out their “Free Shop” project. In selected ice parlors, off-licenses and greengrocers, products were handed out free. The group watched how the local community shared the information and made the most of this unusual seller-buyer relation. Those “gaps” in the local economy made the death of Cieszyn's once-famous border marketplaces even more conspicuous.

Since 2004, we've been able to cross the bridges on the Olza in both directions, even though an identity card is still required to pass. In the small pavilion on the Friendship Bridge where petty smugglers used to be searched and the confiscated goods were stored, a supermarket has opened. Customers pay in zlotys or korunas and get the change in zlotys.

A project has recently been put forward to build a third passageway across the Olza River, between the two border crossing points, just where the old bridge used to be. The concept's originator is Francois Roche—a French architect and a visionary. The bridge, to be called Loophole (also due to the name's legal connotations) will show one extraordinary feature. Namely, the middle section of the construction will be in the shape of a knot—whoever decides to cross the bridge will be forced to turn for a moment and walk in the direction of the bank from which they set off. According to Roche, this emphasizes the state of suspension between the status of an emigrant and an immigrant.

Suspension is the right word expressing the atmosphere of the border crossing points on the Olza River. They are slowly crumbling down. The building where persistent smugglers were searched turned into a grocer's, bored customs officers are waiting for their inevitable dismissal, local people are walking along the river, commenting on the construction of Roche's hybrid bridge. The ticking of the clock wound up by Schengen is getting louder. The fate of the nearby exchange offices is settled—they will share the fate of the impressive, spontaneous marketplaces, now forever turned into empty, littered squares. The two bridges with bored border guards look like big waiting rooms with a river flowing in the middle. This place is almost transparent. It would be hard to notice, was it not for the winding river underneath.

e-flux report:  
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