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Walls and border art: the politics of art display

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ABSTRACT

This detour through art aims at demonstrating the performative function of contemporary walls and barriers, designed to impose a geopolitical vision through landscape changes. The text assesses the link between art and borders by formulating the hypothesis that a “border art” (art on the border, art born from the border, art against the border, etc.) is emerging. It tries to understand how the closing up of a border not only reactivates cultural production on an international border, but also transforms the latter’s meaning. On the USA / Mexico border for instance, the building up of the security fence since 2006 seems to have been accompanied by a strong artistic upsurge. This can be nuanced by analyzing the changes of the nature of artistic production, with more mobile works, marked by a strong presence of videos and performances, as is the fixity imposed by the line inferred a fluid creative answer.

RESUME

Ce “détour” par l’art vise à démontrer la fonction performative des murs et barrières contemporains, destinés à imposer un discours géopolitique dans le paysage. Le texte se confronte avec le lien art-frontières en posant l’hypothèse de l’émergence d’un « art de la frontière » (dont l’expression anglaise *border art* rend mieux compte de l’ambivalence entre lieu et causalité : art sur la frontière, art né de la frontière, contre la frontière, etc.). Il cherche à comprendre comment la fermeture d’une frontière non seulement réactive la production culturelle sur la frontière internationale, mais en transforme également le sens. Sur la frontière USA / Mexique par exemple, il semble que, depuis 2006, l’érection de la barrière de sécurité ait été accompagnée d’une recrudescence artistique. Celle-ci peut être nuancée par une évolution de la nature de la production artistique, avec plus d’œuvres mobiles marquées notamment par la vidéo, et la performance, comme ci la fixité imposée par la ligne inférait une réponse créative fluide.

KEY WORDS : border, wall, barrier, art, performance, landscape, artscape, USA, Mexico

MOTS CLES : frontière, mur, barrière, art, performance, paysage, « artscape », Etats-Unis, Mexique

Behind the global discourse on the opening of borders (Moore 2003), obstruction processes appear more and more frequent and generalized, but we actually have to admit that international borders are paradoxically both opening and closing (Amilhat Szary 2007). Indeed, in our increasingly globalised world, we are witnessing a relapse of border demarcation and of closing up of national spaces. By demarcation, I do not mean the ultimate steps of boundary delimitations which are allowed by GPS positioning, but all forms of border manifestation, amongst which art production is a fast growing expression. These forms of art production occurring on borders and boundaries constitute the core of this text which questions the meanings of transferring art displays to the politically sensitive places that international boundaries constitute. My central hypothesis is spatial translation affects the meaning of art works as well as the meaning of place, and this text is particularly focused on the analysis of the political interferences of this artistic and political process.

The case of barrier-building in non conflictive zones, such as on the USA / Mexico border illustrates this very powerfully (Foucher 2007, Ballif et Rosière 2009). In other even more pacified borderlands, landscape and

heritage valorization of borders have been assessed, one example is the “Two banks garden” of Kehl, Germany and Strasburg, France¹, which includes a cross border footbridge over a river which ownership was the case for three wars. Indeed, this points to the fact that in contexts of political integration, and open limits, planning development projects root themselves in the border, valorizing or “instrumentalizing” the borderland: they bring its visibility out along with meaning and value, and actually contradict its predicted disappearance (Fall 2003; Charlot 2006; Fourny 2005; Reitel, Zander, Piermay et al. 2002; Reitel à paraître). The announced “borderless world” seems on the contrary paved with what one could call “walls” on the one hand, or “bridges” on the other, or both. The materiality and visibility of both, question the spatial structures of borders. Indeed they seem to contradict the virtual character of surveillance mechanisms, the reticular aspect of control devices (mobile customs patrols, airports), and the fluidity of commercial and financial flows. These manifestations of what we could call the re-location and signification of the border functions seem to spark off a certain process of re-territorialization of the border line itself, through its “inscription” in the ground. The analysis of this process is central to this paper: this apparent contradiction between *meaning* and *shape* implies that the new tagging of borders has multiples finalities that go way beyond their primary governmental functional appearance.

Why do governments take the decision to materialize the closing of their national space? It is often asserted that this is done in order to stop – or to control at best – flows (of migrants, terrorists, etc.), but this type of answers rapidly appears to be very unsatisfactory. Recent research on walls can grossly be divided between those who offer to understand them either through the analytical lens of security paradigms changes (Anderson 2000; Zurek et Salter 2005; Walters 2006; Brunet-Jailly 2007; Van Houtum et Pijpers 2007) or through that of a critical approach of globalization (Ballif et Rosière 2009), or even through the denunciation of the encirclement of the Western world (Andreas et Snyder 2000; Andreas et Biersteker 2003; Van Houtum et Pijpers 2007). These authors all draw our attention on the fact that this pretention to control and differentiate flow may seem illusory when opposed to the possible means of technically skirting the obstacle (traffickers satellite guidance in the deserts of the USA / Mexico border for example) or of paying more to by-pass the barrier through other routes. All this encompasses us to go further and formulate another question : what does one want to signify when thus making the limits of his territory more visible ?

“The temptation of the wall is not new” tell us the poets : “Each time that a culture or a civilization has not been able to think the other, to think itself with the other, to think the other within itself, these stiff preserves of stones, iron, barbed-wire or closed ideologies have raised, have fallen, and yet come back to us in new stridences.” (Glissant et Chamoiseau 2007². Behind a sign, the academic questions the semantic depth: in spite of the apparent proximity conveyed by mediatic images, walls are not all equivalent. A few tentative balances exist, which try to contextualize walls amongst other contemporary borders, which take either a cartographic (Foucher 2007; Ballif et Rosière 2009) or a chronological (Vallet et David 2012) aspect. But their results appear as very heterogeneous since these authors do not submit to one unified definition of the security barrier or closed border. While assessing three aspects of security politics (military, migratory and social security), walls answer diverse – sometimes complementary functions : protection, consolidation of territorial gains, separation. Rather than to stop enemy armies, these new walls seem to be justified by a preventive narrative: by freezing the conditions of conflict, they are supposed to reduce it when it is often quite the opposite that happens. If walls appear as the paragon of hard barriers, further analysis reveals that they are not as linear as they may seem in the first place and E. Weizman qualifies the Israeli / West bank « security fence » of a “moving border” (Weizman 2007, Brown 2009, Parizot 2010).

Our aim is to determine what form of promethean representation of the world can bring the instigators of such projects to believe that an artifact, however tall and technological may it be, will be able to contain global flows. Understanding walls as narratives lead us to detect that a certain conception of power and

¹ The “*Jardin des Deux Rives / Garten der Zwei Ufer*”, opened in 2004. The park is designed by the German Rüdiger Brosk, the footbridge by the French Marc Mimram.

² « La tentation du mur n’est pas nouvelle (...). Chaque fois qu’une culture ou qu’une civilisation n’a pas réussi à penser l’autre, à se penser avec l’autre, à penser l’autre en soi, ces raides préservations de pierres, de fer, de barbelés, ou d’idéologies closes, se sont élevées, effondrées, et nous reviennent encore dans de nouvelles stridences. »

politics is at stake when, paradoxically, most walls are built by democracies. The closed border plays the role of a new symptom (an original assemblage of old political modalities) revealing the evolution of the relationship of our societies to their space. The need for spatial border demarcation that walls express participates to a need of showing the intangible: the issue is no longer to reassure the community on its coherence but on its mere existence, opposing an inside to an outside by tracing a wall. Both the existence of the State and that of the nation on which it can build are at stake through this kind of representation of power. Only they can justify the possibility of investing so much material and symbolic energy.

This text offers to understand the wall as projection of political intentionality which amounts to imposing a transformation of spatial markers, concerning both those who live within the concerned landscape, but also (and above all?) those who will receive its images. This implies to consider closed borders as material artifact which performative power is extremely powerful. This complex proposal can be evidenced by the interventions which artists undertake on walled borders, thus trying to transform the imposed image. If the work of art can first of all appear as a kind of symbolic crossing of the border, it also gives food for thought on the closing of borders defined as a landscape intervention. To the violence of the wall can only be opposed its diversion. By becoming the back-up of artistic productions which embody various figures of contestation, the wall allows the population which had been deprived of expression to seize the word. The Berlin wall is often quoted as the most characteristic example, even if it was only painted on one side. The research on which the text is built upon is based on the report that a growing number of artistic projects are located on the US-Mexico borderland. Some are referenced and analyzed, and it seems that a geopolitical focus is emerging (Berelowitz 2006; Iglesias Prieto 2007). What this paper will endeavor to understand is that fencing a border not only activates but re-activates a cultural production on the significances and meanings of international limits but also transform the original meaning of the fence itself. On the USA / Mexican border for instance, it seems that since 2006, building the security-fence building has been accompanied by an artistic recrudescence, which is nuanced by a shift in the nature of the production, with more mobile artworks, notably performances and cinematic projects. Everything happens as if the fixity imposed the line inferred a fluid response. If it can easily be understood that "Where social scientists describe discursively, artists create symbolic models that succinctly capture intense personal experiences in the social environment and structure" (Berelowitz 2006), but the political weight of these artistic displays has yet to be discussed more extensively.

In this context, a geographer's conceptual toolbox can be very useful to analyse and explain the relationship of the artwork with the space/place it is located onto. Landscape theory appears as one of those tools, when used as a geopolitical narrative. Hence, I will present the geo-political conditions of the genesis of the art productions that lead to border displays, and on the conditions of reception of such creations. The USA / Mexico border appears as a very fertile fieldwork to improve our understanding and knowledge on the politics of art display.

1/ A state of art: from landscape to artscape, *via* land art.

Traditionally the way geographical thinking would be able to deal with art production would be for the analysis to focus on the relationship between artists and space. This would first base on landscape analysis, but also take into account the artistic manifestations of geographical documents (i.e. drawn cartouches on old maps) but also the map itself, which for a long time balanced aesthetics and scientific priorities (Vanci et Wermester 2006, Cosgrove 2006). Geography can thus resort to art to analyze space. One of the first attempts in this field was by Dennis Cosgrove who showed how, during the modern period, landscape was naturalizing power. According to Cosgrove's readings of Flemish and English paintings, landscape featured the

territorialization of the national communities, and in the making in various European places (Cosgrove et Daniels 1988; Cosgrove 1998) What I am suggesting here is we can understand our post-modernity at the light of the artistic production resulting from the closing down of the USA / Mexican border.

One cannot but acknowledge that landscape also results from power because « together imposes and represents a visual order » (Zukin 1991; Mitchell 1994). On the USA / Mexican border, the *landscape dimension* is well documented: the boundary definition was largely set on a landscape estimate, according to the drawings and reports from the scientific member of the « US-Mexico Boundary Survey » commission and from the artists that went with them (Hall 1996). Border landscapes are most often scrutinized to determine the conditions of environmental bifurcations that follow the political separation (Rumley et Minghi 1991). However, if stress is often put on the fact that the border impact leads to land use differentiation (such as ranching and farm sizes for example) it can also be evidenced that the multiplicity of exchanges in the borderlands lead to some cultural sharing (such as the architectural rapprochements built on the hybridization of traditional and post-modern elements in the cities of the USA / Mexico border, cf. . Arreola et Curtis 1994; Herzog 1999).

If landscape illustrates the consubstantiality of power and the control of the material reality, its questioning can help us to understand what the gesture of commanding means: making landscapes, whether by picturing it or by building a wall through it, consists in projecting one's intention over a portion of space that has been defined by the sight of it. The aim of this research is not to work on the traditional border impact, but on the landscape disruptions that the building of the fence generates. I will work on the wall as defined as a landscape intervention. The following descriptive images illustrate this idea: the present-day security fence crossing the Arizona desert is compared to the 1976 *Running Fence* erected by Christo and Jeanne Claude a little further north in the Sonoma and Marin Counties, California. The visual effect of both "installations" can be compared, but the suppleness of the materials used by Christo convey the absurdity of the enclosure of the desert whereas the contemporary fence is not put up for debate.



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Figures 1-2: The border crossing the Californian deserts : the Secure Border Initiative, 2006 vs from Christo's Running Fence,1976

The fences the USA are currently building on their southern border constitute a material object worth observing. Indeed, the concrete (and barbed-wire, and second-hand gulf war TOLES) artefact is of at least two interesting for two reasons:

- First it expresses a relationship concerned with the politics of space control (based on the supposed capacity of the fence to hold back flows thanks to the existence of an obstacle - a very promethean project). It is also marking the desire to write a discontinuity in the southern space, assuming that it is not or no long is perceptible)

- Because of its material dimension, the fence become the original medium for analysis : on one hand the closing up of the landscape arouses the irrepressible wish to know the other side, to which the wall is supposed to make impossible, on the other hand, the strength of this intervention on landscape stimulates a multitude of landscape reactions. Words and colors plated on its surface subvert the wall and stress its symbolic as well as functional roles.

The link between art and territory is not new, and the first artists who experimented out-of- place creation and invented land art in the 1960's took two directions. For some, getting away from the museums and the traditional creation / display places meant leaving the city and working on and in nature (cf. Robert Smithson and inaccessible places, Jean Verame and the deserts, Frans Kracjberg and the Amazonian forest). For others, the reflexion on territory led to the exploration and contestation of borders (the oil barrels that Christo set up to cut Visconti street in 1961, for instance, directly address the absurdity of the Berlin wall; the underwater dam built by Peter Hutchinson in 1969, mimics boundary making; whereas, the same year Lawrence Weiner stages border transgression in *Terminal Boundaries*). Minimal art reformulated the question of display. In this sense, the contemporary artistic wave can first appear as a similar response to comparable political stimuli.

However, if one goes beyond land art, it appears that not only space is omnipresent in the contemporary art production, but so is the questioning of space itself. It is known that many visual artists use the term "geography" to explain their work. The exhibitions "Geography and the Politics of Mobility" (2003, Generali Foundation in Vienna) by Ursula Biemann and the "Mobile Transborder Archive" (a scenario project for inSite 2005 between San Diego and Tijuana) illustrate this trend. Both work on the concept of territory and borders, originating in the intensification of cross-boundary mobility and the growing restrictions put to movements across.. From an analytical point of view, everything is under construction. For geographers, the relationship to images has long appeared as self-evident, photography appear as mere illustrations and yet their biases were only questioned recently (Rogoff 2000; Sanders 2007). Geographers only recently started to explore this relationship between territory and art(cf. Foster et Lorimer 2007), with a special emphasis on re-visiting land art (Volvey 2002; Volvey 2003; Volvey 2005; Volvey 2009). The stress on the aesthetics of representation is even newer(cf. Savary 2005 who demonstrates how style builds urban landscape representation). My contention is that it is useful to draw upon other disciplinary literatures to get over these obstacles. In particular, the recent breakthroughs in visual anthropology are very promising as the discipline distances itself from the ethnographic interpretation of images (Evans et Hall 1999, Van Leeuwen et Jewitt 2001; 2007). This complex work on images which has proven very fertile in the studying of cultural miscegenation on the American continent (Gruzinski 1988; Segre 2007) could stimulate border analysis.

What we offer to do in this text is to set up the basis for a visual geography that will question the power of the eye through the analysis on an emergent artistic focus on the hardening of the border. Based on the idea of artscapes (Galofaro 2003), we propose the study art on the border as a "borderscape".

2/ Is there any such thing as border art?

Just as a wall provokes, a movement of the eye bounces against it. Just like on the movie screen the wall tears the frame, the walled border constitutes an object that deflects scientific landscape approaches. That is why I suggest looking at walls through the artistic production that it arouses and which represents a kind of subversion of the violence imposed on landscape by the ruling power. This also means that I think the artistic representation is so strong that it influences the way those receiving the art work will then relate to the landscape. Political landscape can therefore be

as much transformed as highlighted by what we can tentatively call an “artscape” or “borderscape”.

Borders can of course constitute good settings and have been very many times given a cinematographic existence (Torrans 2002; Malagamba 2003). This kind of featuring has led to studies with exhaustive claims and typology: Elena D’ell’Agnese’s research team has thus viewed a good quantity of Mexican and American movies to define the types of “loci” that the border endorses, according to the way in which it can (or not) be crossed (Dell’Agnese 2005). In these fiction works however, as well as in the analysis which has been drawn from them, the aesthetic part of the place is not considered. And what we want to do here is to go beyond an analysis that considers the border as the context of the imaginary creation, to try and understand why the boundary allows the opening up of the creative field, contributing to an aesthetic renewal. From this point of view, the USA / Mexico border represents a fertile artistic mould : zone of cultural exchange, it has seen the rapid development varied forms of hybrid and popular art (Valenzuela Arce 1998; Herrera-Sobek 2000; Torrans 2002; Saldívar 2006). We will concentrate on the recent trends of this cultural production, as much as, from the 1970’s, an art that builds up to address politics surges, rooting in the border. At a time when visual arts were committing to a very special link with concept, different artistic events accompanied the contestation movements. Rupert García’s painted silk screen called « ¡Cesen Deportación ! », shown in 1972 to denounce the inhumanity of treatment to which the migrant *bracero* were submitted in now acknowledged for its pioneering role; it reflects direct influences from conceptual and pop arts. In literature, the expression goes through a vast diversification process and theater becomes a place of rejection of the violence that the border embodies for the migrants.

But it is certainly from the 1980’s onward that this border becomes, as such, an issue and a central theme for numerous artists living under the influence of the area of flows and exchanges between Mexico and the United States. A first performance by Sara-Jo Berman and Guillermo Gómez-Peña leads to their initiating of the Poyesis Genetica performance troupe in 1980, thanks to the support of the Casa de la Cultura de Tijuana, creating the “first border performance art milieu (1983-4)” (Gómez-Peña 1991).

The foundation of the Border Arts Workshop / Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW / TAF)³ roots into the history of the Chicano movement and its demand for civil rights for the Hispanic community of the United States. This group of artists has initiated a series of exhibitions that have marked the spirits of the border area inhabitants who were able to see them or at least here from them. An regular publication launched in 1986, *La Línea Qsuebrada/ The Broken Line*, was thought as a “bilingual/experimental magazine that was instrumental to the definition of a border aesthetics” (Gómez-Peña 1991). The group also participated in focusing on a very special mode of artistic expression, that of performances (Gómez-Peña 1992; Fusco 2000; Gómez-Peña 2000). One of the founding members of the Group, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, has specialized in this kind of work: his textual production often goes with the artistic event in order to insist on the objectives given to his work : the questioning of art and its display (« what lies behind and under the realization of a

³ Cf. leur site internet (<http://www.borderartworkshop.com/index.html>) et deux beaux catalogues :

-The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989: A documentation of 5 years of interdisciplinary art projects dealing with U.S.-Mexico border issues (a binational perspective). *Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989: Documentación de 5 años de proyectos de arte interdisciplinario sobre asuntos de la frontera de Estados Unidos con México (una perspectiva binacional)*. **San Diego, CA: Border Art Workshop / Taller de Arte Fronterizo, 1988** / catalogue de l’exposition *Vidas Perdidas / Lost Lives* de 1989

La Frontera / The Border: Art about the Mexico / United States border experience. **San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993**, **Chávez, Patricio and Madeleine Grynstejn, curators**, catalogue d’une exposition de 1993, projet *Dos Ciudades / Two Cities* issu d’une collaboration entre le Centro Cultural de la Raza et le Museum of Contemporary Art de San Diego.

performance art, especially in the crossing of very volatile geographical and cultural borders », (Gómez-Peña 2000) as well as the reassessment of place as such⁴.

This artistic production has known a first growth period which coincided with the perspective of border opening that the NAFTA seemed to be promoting. The first bi-national art fair on that border, InSITE, was held in 1994. This creative wave has not remained unknown, of course (Yúdice 2003a; Yúdice 2003b), and an analysis corpus is being produced (Fox 1999). Facing this expression which touches literature (theater, novels, poetry, but also comics), music, plastic arts and cinematography, we propose to restrain this discussion to the analysis of these two last creative types, because of their visual nature. We will not study cinema as such but video production as part of visual installations: it very much accompanies performances, with a similar ability to counter balance fixed aspect of the wall by its fluidity. This conjunction of imaginaries tends to prove that the artistic phenomenon goes way past the individuality of each work of art and fits into a socio-spatial including relationship

The specific statement of the Border Art Workshop could not be enough to testify of the existence of such a thing a "border art". The growing success of the InSITE fairs which repeated themselves in 1997, 2001 and 2005, attracting every time more diversified artists could also be a testimony to that assessment. Studying the interaction between the fencing of the border and artistic activity at the USA / Mexico border seems indeed to suggest that as the walling process expanded inland, so did the art production. Another border art workshop has emerged in Nogales, Taller Yonke⁵. Their interventions go from murals to wall interventions. Their proposal is to "experiment visual art in spaces that are of everyday use for human beings, art for the masses, in which the main elements of the creation process are the relation to place or site, and to the people who use it on a daily basis"⁶.

Such a declaration sounds very much like the situationist proclamations on the political impact of art display. In that context, it was not as much about bringing art to the streets, that about constructing the urban experience as art. In this case, I think that border art is being strengthened by the harshening of border politics and that this factual coincidence lays the ground for a geopolitical analysis of a renewed display of art.

3/ Far from disappearing, borders are more visible

The acknowledgment of border art allows me to reformulate a geopolitical debate, that of the political visibility of borders. I do suggest that walls constitute a form of "visibilization" of political action, such as the connection between the two photos of Christo's Running Fence and the Security Fence induces. One can wonder on what kind of promethean representation of the world⁷ lead the instigators of such projects to believe that such artifacts, as high and technological as they may be, will be able to contain a planetary flow? How can they make abstraction of the vanity of such enterprises (cf. Duras 1978) ? Why do they chose this kind of spatial solution and what

⁴"Border culture is a project of "redefinition" that conceives of the border not only as the limits of two countries, but also as a cardinal intersection of many realities. In this sense, the border is not an abyss that will have to save us from threatening otherness, but a place where the so-called otherness yields, becomes us, and therefore comprehensible." Gómez-Peña 1986/

⁵ cf. the border art section of their website : <http://www.muralesfrontera.org/Arte-Fronterizo.html> , and their works : *Border Dynamics*, winter 2003, *Paseo de Humanidad*, winter 2004, Mural "*Taniperla*", spring 2005, *Muro Invisible*, winter 2009.

⁶ "Su propuesta es la de experimentar con el arte visual en los espacios de uso cotidiano del ser humano, arte para las masas, donde los elementos principales del proceso de creación es la relación del espacio o sitio, y las personas que cotidianamente lo usan. Su relación en el proceso de elaboración, y después cuando se convierte en un punto de referencia." <http://www.muralesfrontera.org/quienessomos.html>

⁷ "The Secure Fence Act Builds On Progress Securing The Border", *Fact Sheet: The Secure Fence Act of 2006*, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061026-1.html>

meaning do they give it in such paradoxical situations?

If some research has been led to explain the setting of these walls around the western world (Andreas et Snyder 2000; Andreas et Biersteker 2003), none really tackles the anthropological issues of these political projects. To my knowledge, political anthropology or geography have not concentrated on the question of artefact. What seems to be new is the need for inscription, demarcation of intention into space. For its interpretation, it seems we can relay on stimulating work on the appearance of politics: from the 1980's especially (going along with the "theatrical" treatment of political behaviors), some scholars have submitted the occidental political systems to the analysis grid initially built to understand the clannish functioning of indigenous societies. It then belongs to Georges Balandier to have first insisted on the possibility of reading the political arena as a true theatrical "stage" (Balandier 1980). This approach got interested in the forms through which the political power was getting conscious of its intervention power on the representation it gives of itself. This concerns the possibility for power to reflect towards the community which it represents (being elected by her, in democracy) an image of "coherence and cohesion" and of the "efficiency of the link" (Abélès 1990; Abélès et Jeudy 1997).

The field is then open to research on all the elements that accompany the « staging of politics »: the recurring symbols, but also the rituals and the forms of dramatic art made possible by the technological progress of the media and their growing participation in the formation of public opinion. This paper does make the hypothesis that the will of spatial inscription of the border stands out for the same type of socio-anthropological functioning, this need to show the intangible⁸. However, in this case what is needed is not to reassure the community on its coherence but on its very existence by distinguishing the inside from the outside thanks to a wall. It would be the very existence of the state, and that of the nation on which the state can rely upon which could be at stake through this kind of representation of power. Therefore the justification of such material and symbolic investments: locking oneself up allows oneself to prove his own existence as well as the fact that the community can last along.

Getting into border landscapes in a period of profound change of boundary regimes which makes them less visible : when « boundaries cease to be purely external realities, they become also, and maybe before anything, what Fichte, in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, had superbly called the « internal boundaries », *innere Grenzen*, that is to say, as he himself writes, located 'every and nowhere' "⁹ (cited by Balibar 1996b). If "borders are no longer on the *edge* of politics but [...] *objects*, or more exactly *things* in the very space of politics"¹⁰ (Balibar 1996a), the landscape where they are set will appear as spaces of visibilization of politics.

The materialization of a concrete wall does not only symbolise the barrier function performed by any border, but it also prevents from seeing what is happening on the other side. The more the « other side » becomes invisible and unknown , the more it gets frightening (Newman 2003)... and thus fatally desirable and attractive. The movie by Chantal Akerman (Akerman 2002) illustrates well the way the wall induces distinction in a landscape that had always previously been felt as homogeneous, thus conferring a profound meaning to transgression, to the crossing of the barrier artificially imposed to the eye and to the will. In this perspective, we sense that not only walls do express this phenomenon, but also all sorts of efforts to materialize open borders. The multiplication of objects that are entitled to materially demarcate the boundary while authorizing cross-relations could be called "bridges". We have mentioned them in our introduction but our

⁸ L'utilité politique du paysage commence à être étudiée au niveau local, les politiques paysagères pouvant être mises en œuvre pour « empaysager » un projet, cf. Debarbieux 2008.

⁹ « les frontières cessent d'être des réalités purement extérieures, elles deviennent aussi et peut-être avant tout ce que Fichte dans ses *Reden an die deutsche Nation* avait superbement appelé les 'frontières intérieures' : *innere Grenzen*, c'est-à-dire, il le dit lui-même, invisibles, situées 'partout et nulle part' » Balibar 1996b quoting Fichte : *Speech to the German Nation*, 1807.

¹⁰ « les frontières ne sont plus le *bord* du politique mais [...] des *objets*, disons plus exactement des *choses* dans l'espace même du politique ».

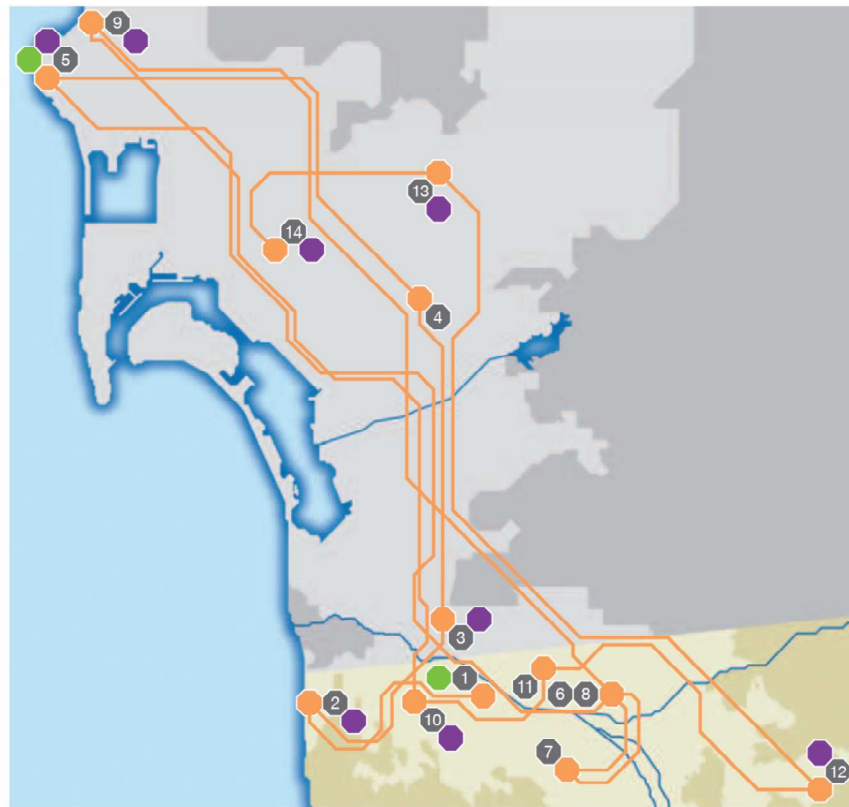
purpose is not to treat them here. The reflexion on the materiality and visibility of contemporary borders help us to put up hypothesis on the implications of art display in such places. In a context where the relationship to the spectator is part of the art production itself (O'Doherty 1976; O'Doherty, Architecture et Project 2007), the politics of display and their geo-graphic need to be clarified. This perspective is suggested in a few texts which art my constitute a dimension of politics : “the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics” (Bleiker 2001).

4/ Where is border art displayed?

From our first research, we are able to produce an attempt list and typology of the places or border art display. On the first hand, it appears that some galleries and cultural centers have played a polarizing role in the expansion of border art between San Diego and Tijuana. We have already mentioned the Casa de la Cultura, en Tijuana, but the Centro de la Raza, home to the Chicano community in San Diego has gained a growing legitimacy in that field over the years. Noticeably enough, these two exhibition halls are located in the biggest twin towns of the border. In that sense, the geography of art display would not differ much from that of many other social phenomena of the area. Our hypothesis that the walling of the border deports artistic activity towards the interior twin towns, following the demarcation process. The bursting out of creative focus in Arizona / Sonora seems to be an indirect result of the progression of the Security Fence.

The localization of display can also be questioned in its complex interaction between space and time. Our first analysis reveals that there are seldom occurrences of permanent border art display. It is mainly expressed through performances, temporary exhibitions and exceptional art fairs, the InSITE editions. This ephemeral character is important for the interpretation of the spatial construction at stake.

Finally, a large part of the work is done on the wall itself. Many interesting events took place on the beach, notably the carved mirrors installed on the railings by Valeskia Soares, in the *Parque de la Amistad / Friendship Park*, before it was closed to public access in December 2008. A lot of photographs of ornamented spontaneous altars erected to the migrants who died in the crossing of the wall are generally constitute the image that common sense builds of “border art”. A very interesting installation can be mentioned to suggest the power of this type of display, although it can already appear as a little old. Silvia Gruner’s work called *The Middle of the Road/La mitad del camino* was dedicated to the installation of 111 gypsum little statues of an Aztec goddess, Tlatzoltéotl, directly hung on the metal grid. The display was made with the help of the inhabitants of the Colonia Libertad, in the suburbs of Tijuana. The artist’s intention was to underline the crossing status of the area and to make a comforting gesture towards the illegal migrants, since this goddess is traditionally associated to motherhood and baby delivery, also wishing to show those leaving the country that they were not abandoning their culture behind in their villages. The success of the work was confirmed of the report of illegal crossings on behalf of the American immigration officers who came to rob some statuettes whereas some migrants actually ran away with one of them.



Symbology > Simbología

- Location > Sitio
- Mobile Archive visit > Visita del Archivo móvil
- Video screenings > Proyecciones de video
- Exhibits > Exhibiciones

Figure 3 : Another vision of the border: the reticular spaces of art display, *Insite* exhibition places on both sides of the USA / Mexico border (<http://www.insite05.org/>)

The illustration taken from the InSITE 2005 webpage illustrates an unseen shape of the border : by insisting on the exhibition sites rather than on the boundary, one gets an image of a reticular border. Not only does the “exhibition [appear] as communicative space” (to use the seminar title on the architectures of discourse of Ute Meta Bauer’s -2005 InSITE curator), but display helps to evidence new territorialities.

5/ What are the contents of border art?

My first analysis, although based on secondary sources because of the distance, has let me to propose a first typology of the artistic production on borders. When figurative, the plastic works two appear to scenarize two main thematics: barbed wire and body appear as two main figures¹¹. The works of the Border Art Workshop, and mainly that of Terry Allen or David Abalos work on various possibilities incorporating barbed wire into their work wich includes a good many

¹¹ Mundane art seems to follow the same paths: we found trace, on the No More Deaths website (No More Deaths - No Mas Muertes - Tempe Student Auctions Art to Benefit NMD.mht), of a Student Art Auctions organized in Tempe to benefit NMD. The winner’s drawing, a painting by Gabe Kaplan, a seventh grade student at Dobson Montessori School in Mesa, figures barbed wire crossing the Statue of Liberty, thus evoking the contractions he feels his country is going through. Kaplan’s narrative that accompanies the piece reads: *Deporting illegal immigrants solves nothing. We’re a nation of immigrants. Most of our ancestors emigrated here from other countries, yet many of us have little tolerance for Mexican immigrants. Not all immigrants are bad. Countless have jobs and have been contributing to society for quite awhile. Sometimes they were brought over when they were children and have grown up here as Americans. They might not even speak Spanish. We’ve come to depend on the work of migrants in agriculture and construction. By deporting illegal immigrants we are making the people who are a vital part of our economy leave. Some of the workers came across a huge expanse of desert to get into America. The number of border deaths is going up every year. We need to change the process of becoming an American citizen to help prevent so many people from dying. Unless we change some of our laws people will keep being sent back to Mexico or dying in the desert.*

installations (Fox 1999). One of the realizations which I find most inspiring on that theme is Michael Schnorr's *Burning Fence* realized in 1991, where the artist reproduced a fence in wood covered by cloth, which he moistened with gasoline and to which he then set fire.

The second recurrent theme is that of the body and its suffering. The embodiment of the border by the implied artists certainly appeals to Foucauldian biopolitics and should have to be questioned further into that direction. This perspective brings together the figurative representation of the body in a variety of visual arts, including photo and video, but also a strong accent put on performances. The works by Guillermo Gomez-Peña are the most famous, but he is joined in that dynamic by a number of others. Performance is quite development in Latin America, with a number of famous Colombian performers, with a desire to address political and social violence in a different way. It is now expanding to Central America, with a group of active women performers¹², amongst whom Maria Adela Diaz has directly addressed the border problematics (in *Caution*, or *Borderline*, where she shuts herself into a wooden case thrown to sea, to address the issue of illegal migration).

One interesting example of that perspective is an event presented to the InSITE fair in its 2005 edition. Javier Téllez's work entitled *One Flew Over The Void/Bala perdida* concluded with a show inspired by Dave Smith, the canon ball man. The show figured mental patients with whom the artist worked to question all kinds of borders together, and the artist launched himself over a reproduction of the barrier at Tijuana, evidencing in his way the tensions that grow within a border zone.

The body work also includes the spectator's participation, especially calling on the power of the bouncing eye. In a work for InSITE 2001, Valeskia Soares used carved mirrors that he set on the barrier fence at the Parque de la Amistad / Friendship park in San Diego – Tijuana. Looking at the other, one bumped into his own image, but quotations from Italo Calvino's text *The invisible cities*, were written so that only people from the other side could actually read them. Another illustration of this orientation is Cristina Fernandez's installation, called *Llegadas y Salidas* (Insite 97). She set up the reproduction of an old brass marine telescope in front of the fence in Colonia Libertad, to suggest that migrants, like seamen in search of new lands, could use the tool to discover new territories and estimate the difficulty in conquering them.

These works raise the question of the impact of art border: who receives it and with what consequences? We are aware that there is a sense of "Quixotic gesture" in this kind of cultural production, as the Australian artist Ian Howard puts it, comparing his border rubbings to Don Quixote's conquests. The question of the reception of border art and its impact will constitute an important component of our field work.

Concluding perspectives

The artistic production on the USA / Mexico borderland area can be seen as a resistance scene, where shifting narratives have followed one another, from Chicano Civil Rights claims (Border Arts Workshop) to open borders hope (cf. Fluid Border Performances by Guillermo de la Peña when NAFTA was launched). We have thrived to characterize what we could see as a paradoxical barrier times artistic explosion. It is based on the sense that artistic work is strong enough not only to renew the perspectives of landscape perception but also ensure it with a strong capacity of political influence. "*Thousands of artists in the U.S. and other countries are currently crossing different kinds of borders. And as they do it, they are making a new kind of art, an art of fusion and displacement that shatters the distorting mirrors of the "Western avant-garde"*" wrote one the border artists (Gómez-Peña 1991): we hope to have been able to demonstrate how the contemporary border art scene renews the debate on the display of art but also how, by

¹² They significantly appear in the "Elles@centrepompidou" exhibition organized by the French Pompidou Museum between May 2000 and May 2010 dedicated to women artists in the collections of the modern art museum.

questioning the public and private modes of display in disputes places, it contributes to the emergence of art geopolitics .

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