

All is well on the border

A border, in its spatial and territorial configurations, is at once impenetrable and permeable. Through its architectural manifestation, a border diverges from its imaginary conception as a line of latitude and longitude, and takes form as a structure of oppression and segregation. The imagined possibilities of restricting movement are given structural form, as the simplest architectural gesture is to erect a wall separating *here* from *there*, *us* from *them*.¹ While architecture does not invent racism, its physical exertion provides the ideal territorial conditions for the perpetuation, rather than demise, of racism.² Beyond the architectural byproducts of intensified nationalism, and surveilled control of movement, it is worth remembering that all borders have openings that serve as entry points for transgressive openings.

All is well on the border proposes a selection of video works that consider geospatial boundaries as sites of confluence, propositioning them as more than political demarcations. The gathered works—by Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez, Mona Hatoum, and Julia Meltzer and David Thorne—coalesce body, memory and language as cartographies beyond physical terrain, mapping personal journeys of immigration, exile, statelessness, and the precarity of moving across sovereign borders. Taking its name from the same-titled 1997 documentary by renowned Lebanese artist and filmmaker Akram Zaatari, the exhibition responds to the revival of border paranoia, colonial anxieties, and Western xenophobia, which enforces institutional exclusion.³ At the same time, borders today are governed by paradoxical conditions, both foregrounded in renewed, nationalist policy across Europe and the U.S., and subverted in our highly interconnected, globalized world.

Historian Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* serves as a timely and necessary point of departure for our curatorial selection, which resonates with the current state of affairs driven by President Donald Trump's radicalization of the U.S. administration; the global refugee crisis, particularly from the Middle Eastern diaspora; the rise of xenophobia and hate crimes; the exodus of immigrants from safe havens in the West; and the erection of borders, barricading access to trade, travel and lawful immigration.

A nation is an “imagined political community,” in Anderson's terms, which is communally co-created and conceived in fraternity, governed by finite borders, and is resolutely sovereign.⁴ Our idea of the nation is founded on the collective understanding that they are political apparatuses with territorial boundaries, and with a populace that is united. It is the imagined sense of belonging that solidifies the nation as a geographical and political structure. In its counterpart, Anderson considers nationalism to possess a dangerously

¹ “Dear American Institute of Architecture, this is what you may need to build for Trump.” *The Funambulist*, thefunambulist.net/architectural-projects/dear-american-institute-architects-might-need-build-trump. Accessed 25 Feb 2017.

² Architecture and Racism: A Much Needed Conversation. *The Funambulist*, thefunambulist.net/architectural-projects/architecture-and-racism-a-much-needed-conversation. Accessed 25 Feb 2017.

³ Akram Zaatari, *All is well on the border*. Video, 1997. Vtape, www.vtape.org/video?vi=4009. Accessed 16 Oct 2016.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. 6-7.

pathological disposition, entrenched in the suspicion and hatred of the Other, and at times, closely aligned with racism.⁵

Of equal importance to our framework is architect Teddy Cruz's conceptualization of the Political Equator, a working diagram of our global border. The Political Equator is an imaginary line that begins at the US-Mexico border and encircles the world, revealing a sprawling corridor of global conflict between the 30 and 36 degrees North Parallel. As the imaginary line travels along the world atlas, its path delineates the most contentious entry points, including the US-Mexico border at Tijuana and San Diego, an increasingly militarized checkpoint for immigration from Latin America to the United States; the Strait of Gibraltar, where migration outpours from North Africa into Europe; the disputed Israeli-Palestinian border that separates the Middle East, and the contested frontiers of Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan; among others.⁶

The Political Equator, dispersed across continents, carves entry points into more than contested territories, its gives way to creative impulses borne from its precarious conditions. Cruz mentions that "the most relevant projects...[of] socio-economic inclusion and artistic experimentation will... emerge... from sites of scarcity, in the midst of conflict between geopolitical borders."⁷ Reflecting on the experience of marginal communities, their displacement rings as a humanitarian marker of necessitated inclusion.

Lost in Space (2005), by Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi, is centered on dispossession, displacement, whether willful or necessitated, and homelessness. Language becomes disjointed, divorced from the asylum seekers, professionals, and vagrants that she interviews and the disorienting narrative is woven in an autobiographical account of personal migratory experiences, precipitated by political turmoil or systemic failures in the public welfare system. Similarities are drawn between stateless and homeless communities, highlighting their shared aspirations, vulnerabilities, and abandonment by bureaucratic systems that acknowledge one's identity and provide opportunities for personal advancement. A Rwandan refugee suggests that the idea of the homeland isn't affixed to the land of origin, but to any nation that upholds to protect the liberties of its citizens.⁸ For others, living in the uncertain and liminal threshold of rootlessness can create a powerful sense of self-reinvention.

However, we are reminded that racism is systemic and perpetuated, and for the asylum seeker or immigrant who is visibly identified through markers of race, ethnic or religious convictions, the immigration processes can often be fraught with biases. For the subjects in Bal and Entekhabi's documentary, a "home" is cemented by the weight of multiple permutations in meaning, signifying more than an architectural dwelling affixed to a geographical location, for those who are lost in space a home can be the linguistic land of origin, a temporary space of belonging, a site of invasion that is rendered inaccessible, or

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Teddy Cruz. "The Political Equator." *deconcrete*, www.deconcrete.org/2012/01/18/the-political-equator. Accessed 24 Feb 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi, *Lost in Space*. Video, 2005. Vtape, <http://www.vtape.org/video?vi=5897>. Accessed 16 October 2016.

something that is yet to be found.

A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience (2005) is a performance poem by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez that contends with ultra-nationalism, cultures of isolationism, and intolerance to cultural diversity.⁹ It was composed in response to the War on Terror and the Iraq War, which resulted from the complexities of post-9/11 conditions, politics of exclusion, and contempt towards the Other.¹⁰ In the video, Gómez-Peña rests against a map of the North American continent, as if the body becomes an appendage of colonial memory where he localizes violence against the Latino Other. The performance disrupts what Gómez-Peña calls the “hegemonic map”, a binary cartography that proposes the “first” world as the center of global dominance.¹¹ With the aim to decolonize the body and reclaim language as a tool of agency, Gómez-Peña declares that he is “standing right on the border between ‘I’ and ‘we’”¹², a semiotic territory that repositions the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and their descendants as the conquered citizens of an occupied land at the center of the hegemonic map.

Providing critical commentary on the contradictory conditions of anti-immigration rhetoric, Gómez-Peña mentions: “... a closed border not only impedes people from coming in, but it also stops people from leaving. Isolationism works both ways... And isolationism in the age of globalization is a worrisome symptom of cultural entropy and political desperation.”¹³ The border is a point of convergence, a site for Gómez-Peña and Vazquez’s imagined cartographies, where divisive lines give way to latent openings.

Charting an autobiography of separation, homesickness and family, Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* (1988) is a personal narrative of her own involuntary exile in London during the Lebanese Civil War. Caught abroad at its outbreak, the video traces her own relationship with her mother—residing in Beirut—and the emotional, physical and cultural distances that emerged during their separation. Their correspondences in Arabic became a surrogate for the space between them, their evolving relationship in each others’ absence, and their respective longing for familial connection. Comprised from intimate, nude photographs Hatoum took of her mother, the video overlays the Arabic script from their letters over these images; a veiling of sorts marked by the radical exposure and vulnerability of body and sentiment.

The reading of her mother’s letters reveals the unease of their distance, of being women in a world marked by war and misogyny, and the challenge of Hatoum crossing uncomfortable boundaries of conversation: “I enjoy answering your questions, although they are

⁹ There are multiple accepted titles for this video across a number of exhibitions and publications. In his own writings, Gómez-Peña refers to the title of this work as *A declaration of poetic disobedience from the New Border*.

¹⁰ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Declaration of Poetic Disobedience.” *A Performance Cosmology: Testimony from the Future, Evidence of the Past*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 75.

¹¹ Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez, *Declaration of Poetic Disobedience*. Video, 2005. Vtape, www.vtape.org/video?vi=5821. Accessed 17 Oct 2016.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Border Hysteria and the War against Difference.” TDR vol. 52, No. 1: *War and Other Bad Shit*, 2008. 201.

sometimes... too probing for my liking... And for a moment they take my mind away from this terrible war that seems to go on forever.”¹⁴

Hatoum struggles with her dual experience of exile where, on the one hand, she has the luxury of movement while enduring the burden of nostalgia for home.¹⁵ This is a condition echoed by Edward Said, who states that “what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.”¹⁶

Julia Meltzer and David Thorne’s *Not a matter of if but when...* (2007) confronts the urgency and unease in Syria from 2005 to 2006, a period which coincided with growing unrest and political upheaval immediately beyond the country’s borders.¹⁷ The regional instability, which threatened to permeate into Syria, included the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri; the subsequent Cedar Revolution, which called for the removal of Syrian troops from Lebanon; Iraq’s descent into civil war; and the ascendance of Islamist militant group Hezbollah in neighboring countries.¹⁸

The film is a collaboration between Meltzer, Thorne and Syrian artist Rami Farah, who performs a series of disjointed, improvisational monologues exploring a range of broad and localized themes—from peace, hatred, family, fear, and vengeance—which anticipate the anxiety of living on the edges of war. In one such performance, Farah reads his own palm and divines a gruesome and fantastical account of the body horror of potential war: “I see a long life... But... [a] war is going to happen. A bomb will fall on us. My body will be blown to pieces... [The pieces] all gather together by chance and begin to put themselves in order once again.”¹⁹ Farah’s transformative performances bring together diverging perspectives in a metaphor for the human condition, where he gives voice to the Syrian people and a chorus of fears in the face of an uncertain future.

In its myriad conceptualisations, the border is a critical threshold that reveals the often invisible and multi-hyphenate margins of social, political, economic and religious topographies. Manifesting the precarious dynamics of belonging, the works in this exhibition contest the relevancy of nationalism, isolationism, and the West’s compounded fears of absorbing a mass influx of refugees. In their collaborations, Bal and Entekhabi, and Gómez-Peña and Vazquez, cope with the West’s cultural contempt for the Other. While Hatoum, Meltzer and Thorne universalize individual experiences, extrapolating localized accounts of exile and war to broad and wide-reaching understandings of love, family, and fear. Together,

¹⁴ Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*. Video, 1988. Vtape, www.vtape.org/video?vi=1771. Accessed 16 Oct 2016.

¹⁵ Kristy Bell. *Mona Hatoum: Unbomehy*. Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2008. 65.

¹⁶ Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays*. London: Granta Books, 1984. 185.

¹⁷ Full title: *Not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time in which expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or still to come*.

¹⁸ Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, *Not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time in which expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or still to come*. Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, www.meltzerthorne.com/nota. Accessed 11 February 2017.

¹⁹ Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, *Not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time in which expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or still to come*. Video, 2007. Vtape, www.vtape.org/video?vi=6268. Accessed 17 Oct 2016.

the works offer case studies of border states, turning phrase, image and perspective along nuanced freedoms and restrictions of movement. *All is well on the border* draws from lines that are neither definite nor divisive; they fracture, bend and blur.