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(t)here. started out as a Vitrine exhibition at Concordia University, in concordance with the 2016 World Social Forum that would be held in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. It is its first time held in a developed country, and therefore is an important occasion to rethink the way we see borders, identity and migration.

The texts of this online publication, as well as the wall texts exhibited in the Vitrine come from the hard work of a handful of authors, and former students of Dr. Alice Ming Way Jim's class on postcolonialism called "ARTH 379 - Postcolonial Theory in Art History: Migration and Mobility in Contemporary Art" from Winter 2016. The selection was done by its organizers: Camille Devaux, naakita feldman-kiss and Coltrane McDowell.

(t)here. is presented in partnership with Concordia University's Ethnocultural Art Histories Research Group (EAHR), sponsored by the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for the Study of Canadian Art. We would also like to thank the Fine Arts Student Relations, the Department of Art History, Concordia University and the World Social Forum. A special thank you to Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim for her advice and help.

For the associated panel discussion, see our **Facebook event**.



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## Redefining the Border: Postcommodity's Focus on Community and Indigeneity

By Elyse Bergeron

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Image 1: Postcommodity. *Repellent Fence*. 2015. Installation view at US/Mexico border, Douglas, Arizona/Agua Prieta,

Sonoca. Land art installation and community engagement (Earth, cinder block, para-cord, PVC spheres, helium).

**URL**

Fifty feet above the Arizona desert near Douglas floats a large yellow balloon marked with four target-like red and blue circles. Twenty-five other balloons bob in the hot wind for the next two miles southward toward the United States/Mexico border, marking an ancient trade route in Agua Prieta, Sonora.<sup>1 2</sup> This monumental suture across one of the world's most notorious borders is art collective Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence/Valla Repelente*, their most recent land-art/intervention/installation using the scare eye balloon, an icon from Native American culture that is recurrent in their work.<sup>3</sup> The event took place between the 9th and 12th of October, in 2015, and required extensive cooperation between the artists and the United States, Mexican, and Indigenous communities, along with their governments. For Postcommodity, this involvement comprised an essential feature of the installation, which sought to

“bi-directionally reach across the U.S./Mexico border as a suture that stitches the peoples of the Americas together—symbolically demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Western Hemisphere by recognizing the land, indigenous peoples, history, relationships, movement and communication.”<sup>4</sup>

Considering the piece's socially engaged criticism of the border, and its unique status within the genre of land art, *Repellent Fence* reads as an active participant in the subversion of border definitions, considering the work's intrinsic indigeneity and its physical negation of the border, which attempt to reunite separated communities. The piece focuses on this mending more than it does its aesthetic components, while defying the land art genre through its ephemerality and non-imposition.

*Repellent Fence* displays the collective's engagement with Indigenous issues, growing from the artists' political and social relationship to Arizona, where they grew up, and some of the members' ethnicities. This engagement justifies the presence of Indigenous visual and conceptual cues in the work. Therefore, Postcommodity suggests a border outside of the colonial history of its initial conception. If powerful nations impose territorial delimitation to secure and delimitate their population, the focus and inspiration for *Repellent Fence* is rather the dispersion of Indigenous communities.<sup>5</sup> Arizona and Sonora's connection by the thread of balloons symbolizes the reuniting of the tribes divided by the border. This type of work inherently calls upon a certain political activism which Postcommodity hopes is “respectful public dialogue driven by the rich and dynamic environment of the borderlands.”<sup>6</sup>

For Diveena S. Marcus, Indigenous activism always touches upon indigeneity through an “underground social network” that is particular to the Native communities throughout the Americas.<sup>7</sup> This concept is especially noticeable in Canada's Idle No More movement and the earlier Ghost Dance, which was meant as a call of support amongst Native American tribes being driven off their lands by

American colonizers in the latter half of the 1800s.<sup>8</sup> For Marcus, this alliance between tribes became necessary to ensure Indigenous survival as American settlers were homogenizing Native peoples into a single community. Idle No More thus became the new Ghost Dance, as Canada's First Nations communities regrouped to protest the passing of bills and laws that would violate and diminish their inherent territorial rights.<sup>9</sup> Through the medium of art, Postcommodity's involvement with Indigenous communities plays into Marcus' concept of the underground social network by connecting the various tribes that have been separated by the US/Mexico border. The unification and support among these Indigenous tribes lets them and the viewers of *Repellent Fence* look past the border and its divisiveness to see the relation between neighboring communities, and understand borderlands as rich cultural territories.

As mentioned, *Repellent Fence* results from cooperation between the United States and Mexico, and their respective Indigenous communities, which leads to its status as activist border art. The suture as metaphor for communal reconciliation emerged from community planning meetings in Douglas and Agua Prieta. The community's interpretation of the piece became the basis from which Postcommodity constructed and defended their work.<sup>10</sup> Within the genre of land art, *Repellent Fence* subverts the classical notions and definitions to better suit the needs of the affected populations. It had to be a temporary piece that would leave no marks behind, quite contrary to land art's usual practices.<sup>11</sup> The work was designed to be the result of cooperation between communities rather than a highly conceptualized visual artifact. Consequently, the piece resulted from a collective agreement of communities within the borderlands rather than the artists imposing their vision.

Postcommodity perceived the launch of the piece and its temporality as a celebration of communal work and activism.<sup>12</sup> Chris Rumford and Chris Perkins have studied such a social engagement with the border, in their "The Politics of (Un)Fixity and the Vernacularisation of Borders," where they call for a study that focuses primarily on borderland populations and their connectivity.<sup>13</sup> They deny the objective nature of the border and emphasize its presence as a process that is mobile insofar as people seek to cross it, also disagreeing with the nation state as its owner.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Rumford and Perkins are interested in how everyday borderland communities interact with the border to tentatively redefine the ways in which borders are studied. Postcommodity's engagement with the Indigenous, United States, and Mexican communities to produce their work certainly acts accordingly with such a statement, where *Repellent Fence* becomes the explicit result of borderland communities interacting and reacting to the border.

Although Rumford and Perkins' article focuses on sociological and economic aspects, their conceptions of the border have definitely influenced artists and art writers to rethink the subject in their own practices. Sarah Mekdjian and Celeste Ianniciello notably analyze the border with the aim of redefining it through the investigation of certain artworks that have dealt with the borders beyond its usual understandings. While Mekdjian explicitly draws from Rumford and Perkins'

studies to set the characteristics from which she conducts her own artistic analysis,<sup>15</sup> Ianniciello seeks mainly to present border artworks that are more affirmative and positive, which subvert the divisive areas meant to protect some populations while oppressing others.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, Mekdjian's emphasis on the border's mobility which expands from Rumford and Perkins' article, focuses on migrants' mapping processes to understand their personal perception and experiences.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Postcommodity's installation as a suture across the Americano-Mexican border, such as defined by the Douglas and Agua Prieta communities, can be understood as these borderland populations' personal conception and experience. This way of working recalls Rumford and Perkin's vernacular approach where the interactions of ordinary people with the border are more important than those of governments. For Mekdjian, such method "also involve[s] the redefinition of the links between migrants and border politics: rather than being considered merely as targets – objects – of border politics, migrants are also treated as subjects, whose journeys have a part to play in the evolution of contemporary borderities."<sup>18</sup> This way, redefining the border allows not only migrants, but also borderland populations in this case, to redefine themselves, giving viewers of *Repellent Fence* for example, a more personal understanding of these people in a context where they have set their own narrative.

Ianniciello's criteria for more affirmative border art involves a relationship between space and time, past and present, and geography and history, where artists make use of the normalized signs and symbols understood to represent geographies or borderities and subvert them through artistic manipulations. Often, the art presents characteristics of personal experience and memory. To the author, they consist of the "living archives of migrant memories and border-crossing geographies."<sup>19</sup> *Repellent Fence's* inspiration comes from the experience of growing up around the agricultural industry of Arizona, which often hired Mexican migrants for cheap in order to do dangerous labor, as well as from the extremely conservative political climate highly unfavorable to Native and Mexican American rights.<sup>20</sup> Despite the hatred and violence emerging from those environments, Postcommodity chose to address the situation with space for engagement and dialogue while maintaining a critical view. *Repellent Fence* is a monumental piece – impossible to avoid – while also quiet and peaceful. It does not seek to speak over anyone, but it represents the spirit of communities joining together to share a lived experience about the border. The work certainly challenges our perception of it, but does so affirmatively, openly, and collectively.

Ianniciello claims that "[t]he margins of our nations are rendered mobile and permeable just like memory, which is entangled by new instances coming from other places and other time."<sup>21</sup> *Repellent Fence's* crossing between the United States and Mexico is a reminder of the eminent border being continuously crossed through the piece's permanent state in both countries. The installation as an agent of memory awakens new thoughts and new considerations over one's pre-conceived notions of the border. Its rigidity is overcome by the swaying of the

scare eye balloons as a metaphor for mobility. The balloons take a path outside what is known and normalized, towards a new understanding of a population's struggle.

So what does *Repellent Fence* repel? Does it repel the border itself? Or does it repel its hegemonic and colonial definition? Postcommodity's Indigenous perspective and incentive towards dialogue, and social engagement with communities from both sides of the border as well as with government agents reads as a participation in redefinitions of the border toward mobility, flexibility, and vernacularism. *Repellent Fence* is also quite unique among other works of the land art genre considering its disregard for physical presence and permanence.

Yet its short-lived presentation and site specificity has made it difficult for many to view the work in person. If *Repellent Fence* in its nature participates in border subversions, it only does so momentarily, limiting the impact upon which its live experience could affect many. Its ephemerality being well justified however compels one to think about ways to make the work live on. Such thoughts validate the need for art writers to keep bringing out new dimensions to artworks and make them linger in the minds of readers, permanently affecting the ways people think of art and its necessity.

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21. Ianniciello, 30.

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## A Living archive of Immigrants' Memories: Erasure (2011) by Dinh Q. Lê

By Marie Chaumont

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Image 1: Lê, Dinh Q. *Erasure*. 2011. Exhibition view at Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Australia. Single

channel video, boat, found photographs, rocks, online archive. Dimensions variable. **URL**

Postcolonial studies have been making a significant contribution to our understanding of the history of colonialism and its ongoing impact on contemporary society. Despite the growing acknowledgement of the discourse, racial segregation is still apparent today as the number of immigrants from the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Africa continues to rise. In host countries, refugees are subjected to physical and psychological violence as the media disseminates their image as a threat to national security. This reaction is engendered by the public's lack of knowledge about the lived experience of new settlers, since their history of migration is often told "merely 'on behalf of' or 'for' immigrants who actually experienced it."<sup>1</sup> That history is an archival record of memories that others selected, neglecting the actual memories that the experienced migrant desired to preserve. Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Lê challenges the hegemonic history of immigration, using his experience as a boat refugee and applying it to various contexts. In his video installation called *Erasure* (2011), visitors are invited to look at the Australian history of immigration through a visceral experience where countless black-white family photos are scattered around a wreckage of a ship boat. Lê invites visitors to pick up those photos, and bring them to the rear of the room where they can scan and add them to an online photographic archive. Behind the archival space, the large screen shows the video of the installation's nineteenth century European boat burning violently, reminiscent of the obstacles that British settlers underwent on their way to Australia. The history that Lê recreates in this work is a story of immigrants erased from the 'official' history of the nation. This essay will examine how *Erasure* serves as a living archive for immigrants' memories, analyzing three critical events in Australian immigration history.

Lê starts his construction of an alternative narrative to the history of Australia by calling attention to the settlement of European immigrants in the nineteenth century. The first settlements of European migrants are recorded to be British criminals sent by the government due to the overpopulation of criminals in the main land.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the country was created by British migrants – an erroneous statement itself, considering the Indigenous communities – has been erased from the people's memory, and the amnesia has driven the nation to restrict the entry of non-white settlers until today. H.I. London's "White Australia" anti-immigration laws against non-European migrants since the 1850's are notorious in the Asian history of immigration.<sup>3</sup> In 1901, the Commonwealth of Australia proposed the Immigration Restriction Bill to exclude colored immigrants, asserting the superiority of the Anglo-Saxons over other races in reference to Darwinism.<sup>4</sup> The nation's quest for anti-immigration came from a denial of their origins as expatriates, in order to forge a new country made of a single homogeneous group. According to Jacques Derrida, this is "an active forgetting" that produces repression in order to "take a disguised route to satisfaction."<sup>5</sup> In seeking a treatment for this voluntary amnesia, Lê uses the video of the nineteenth-century European vessel in flame to remind visitors of the history of European migration and the violence that the new settlers experienced during their journey. Along with

the image, the sounds of whirly winds and burning wood enhance the visitors' experience as witnesses of the tragedy, or even as a potential migrants left alone on the shore. Zoe Butt suggests that the artist attempts to "humanize the inherited historical phobia of 'Other.'"<sup>6</sup> The migrants' experience of violence on their way over, witnessed in the work, addresses questions concerning the way the government eliminates the event from a memory of the nation.

Stories of refugees are often described as tragedies and generalized as such to avoid an examination of singular events in preference for a collective memory. The record of a collective memory conceals individuals' distinct experience, even though a united narrative cannot be shaped by singular expressions, as the term 'migration' shows a limitation to describe each case of dislocation.<sup>7</sup> Lê's archive underlines individuals' memories of migration by documenting family photos of Vietnamese refugees during the Vietnam War. The photos which cover the floor were purchased by the artist at Ho Chi Minh City's antique store where he was hoping to come across the photos of his own family. Each image of individuals and their families were likely lost while fleeing from encroaching danger by jumping on a boat in desperation.<sup>8</sup> The year 1975 marks a drastic rise in the number of Vietnamese boat people that sought asylum to escape from the communist re-education camps and the forced de-urbanization.<sup>9</sup> Australia became a destinations for settlement, yet over 100,000 boat people lost their lives on their way over.<sup>10</sup> With the Australian media reporting this historical incident, calling the government for moral obligation, the Prime Minister Malcom Fraser accepted a larger number of refugees.<sup>11</sup> However, the next Prime Minister Gough Whitlam began to reject the entry of Vietnamese refugees, even for those approved by the Foreign Minister.<sup>12</sup> Alluding to this Australian history concerning Vietnamese refugees, Lê tries to revive and commemorate the erased stories of not only those who succeeded in resettling, but also those who were sent back to Communist Vietnam, and those who lost their lives in transit. The photos saved and catalogued in the online archive by visitors continue to exist in an open virtual space as a living story of those individuals' life. Unlike conventional archives, the digital archive does not undermine the individual stories by creating a monologue narrative as it can be easily transformed and reproduced by the participation of Australian audience.<sup>13</sup> By entrusting them with the creation of this archive, the artist emphasizes the importance of engagement in discussions regarding the country's anti-immigration movement.

As Michel Foucault argues, archives are the accumulated records of past events grouped together or blurred in accordance with specific regularities.<sup>14</sup> Archives explain how one should look at the events, rather than actually putting them in relation with future events.<sup>15</sup> Lê's method of recording events is contradictory to this aspect of archives, as the artist not only collects fragments of memories, but also links them to current events, suggesting a repeated history of migration. In Erasure, the wreckage of a fishing boat references to the 2011 Christmas Island incident that involved a devastating number of asylum seekers from Iran and Iraq. The artist recreated the aftermath of the devastating incident

by placing remnants of their belongings such as clothes and shoes around the life-size model of the Indonesian wooden boat carrying them, which capsized because of terrible weather conditions. The island, known as a gate for Asian boat refugees despite its reputation for unpredictable weather, has been handling migrants in a detention center since the late 1980's. Although the acceptance of refugees by the Australian government has been acknowledged as a sympathetic action towards the rise in number of boat refugees across the world, the humanitarian aspect of it only serves to hide their endorsement of anti-refugee legislations, such as the 'People Swap.' In the same year as the Christmas Island boat incident, the government consented an agreement with Malaysia to accept 4000 refugees from them in exchange for the 800 asylum seekers who arrived in Australia by boat that they would receive.<sup>16</sup> While this policy was rejected by the High Court as an illegal act, its goal lives on in the form of an increasing border control that Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister, justifies as an undertaking for protecting Australian citizens.<sup>17</sup> Lê's use of the wreckage in the installation is his response to this constant anti-immigration violence against individuals. Simultaneously, it suggests his desire to remind the audience that those refugees took this dangerous journey simply and at most "for the chance to have a decent life."<sup>18</sup> This installation as an archive of boat refugees speaks to the country's current events, as discussions unfolds concerning the continuing anti-immigration movement.

Lê's provoking installation, Erasure shows the importance archive has in recording the memory of migrants. In tracing Australian's immigration waves, from European settlers to the current asylum seekers from Iraq and Iran, the artist attempts to retrieve the stories of individuals erased and lost in the nation's official history. In the interactive space, those stories continue to survive not as artifacts but rather as a living memory connecting the past with the present. In doing so, it calls attention to the ongoing crisis of immigration and the rise in the policies countering it in Australia. The artist's engagement with this segment of Australian history comes from his personal experience as a boat refugee and immigrant in the United States. The language he uses to describe the condition of refugees avoids the clichés shown in the media. Rather than depicting them as victims, Lê uses his position to give prominence to the fact that every individual is entitled to human rights, regardless of ethnicity.

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4. London, *Non-White Immigration and "White Australia" Policy*, 12.

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12. Ibid., 195.
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## Factory of Mist(akes) or; Why There's No Academic Essay Here

By **nick cabelli**

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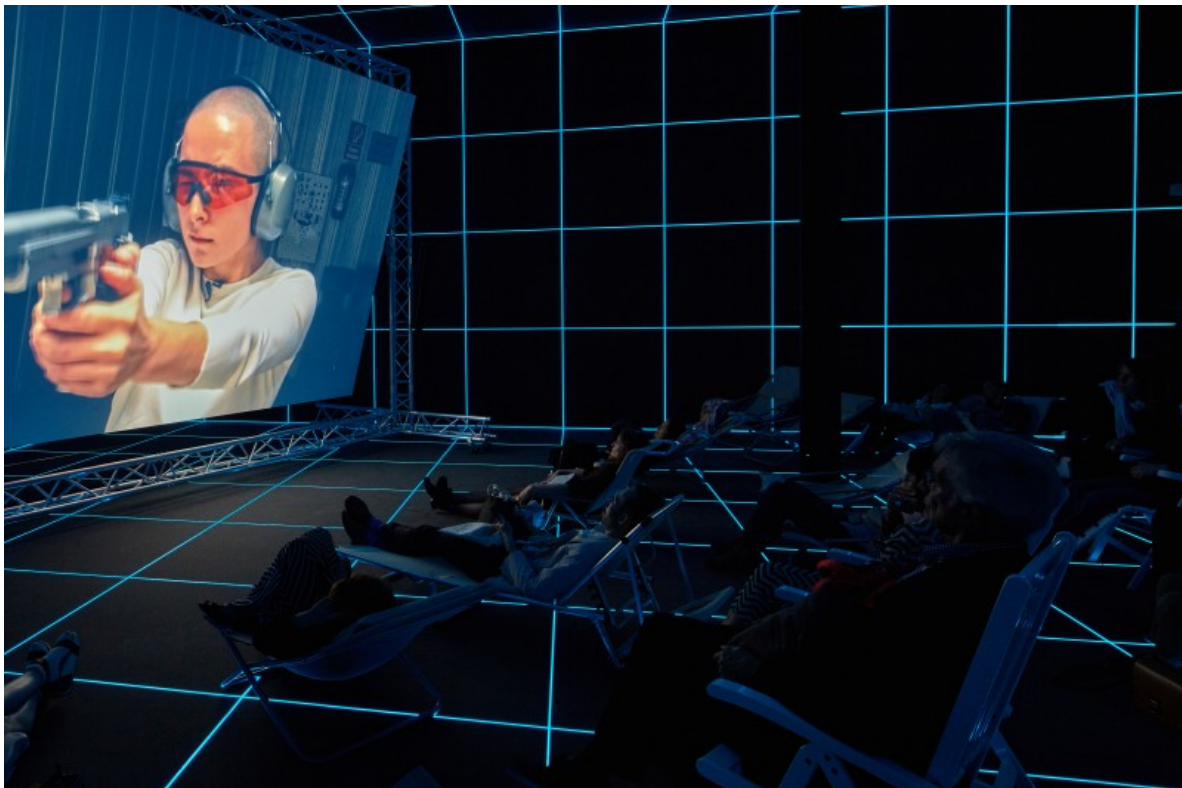


Image 1: Hito Steyerl. *Factory of the Sun*. 2015. Video installation exhibition view. One channel video, HD video pro rez.MOV file./ Motion capture studio, blue, illuminated grid in the space / Free-standing projection architecture, sunloungers and beach chairs. Duration: 23 minutes.**URL**

“I tell you whatever I want, this is an unlegislated area, free of liability, I open my mouth, I close it again, I speak, you listen to me, this is democracy—this is how it works.”

*Factory of the Sun*

A sunny February Sunday in Los Angeles, a day fit for an outing. Weekend warriors, tourists, teens, lovers, fam, behold:

- There is a two-headed turtle on Venice Beach, promo for a “freak show” on the boardwalk. Is it gruesome: you do not look at it for long. Instead of paying 5\$ you hover by the exit and scan the vibes of the people leaving. Not many people are leaving and no one is smiling.
- The Broad Museum is an ostentatious concrete sponge-like structure on a boulevard comprised of only gleaming sky towers and fancy buildings. It may evoke some foamy structural innovation. You walk the length of the line to look at the sun-kissed faces. The line goes down the hill, across a street, up the next street and fades over the hump of the lumpy Los Angeles landscape. Everyone is smiling.
- Down the street the Museum of Contemporary Art is an unassuming red slab, a one-storey subterranean skylight-lit museum. underground its wide lobby and blank reception area a wide greeting zone at the bottom of an outdoor staircase. Inside, full-kit weekend cyclists stinking of road sweat zip from each work to the next as if on a conveyor belt. It costs students ten bucks to see anything besides the lobby, onto the linear progression of white cubes, an underground square monopoly map:

Black Mountain College alumni, TURN LEFT, room of Rothkos, GO STRAIGHT, LA-alum room of post-minimalist neon, mirrors, finish fetish, TAKE SELFIE, an installation involving bashing holes out of the museum drywall and tracking dust around is cordoned off and consists of an unintended parallel performance of museum police explaining the intended function of the work as well as the new rules, ROLL AGAIN, watch Andrea Fraser rubbing the walls of the Goog and LOSE A TURN.

Looping back to the lobby, the museum path marched, a black room appears: it is not mandatory to go through it, it is off to the side. Loud techno leaks from inside, people trickle in and out. The wall says “Hito Steyerl. *Factory of the Sun.*” and “multilayered exploration of the pleasures and perils of technologies that shape contemporary life.”<sup>1</sup>

The wall says “ambiguous relationship between freedom and captivity in our technologically mediated age,”<sup>2</sup> but the beat screams *shake your booty*.

The music changes, more people leave, more arrive; a nightclub in the corner of the basement museum.

“If contemporary art is the answer, the question is, how can capitalism be made more beautiful.”

*Hito Steyerl*<sup>3</sup>

Presented in a black room with a glowing blue grid straight out of a 1980s sci-fi film and projected onto a freestanding, inclined screen [Image 1.] the immersive video installation *Factory of the Sun* blends agit-prop and post-internet aesthetics in a satirical infomercial for a video game that never materializes. Sit down in one of the comfy sun loungers and beach chairs and kick up your feet for some immersive contemporary art!

Interweaving (meta)narratives:

→ follow fictional protagonists and their real-world performers...

→ on a journey across the globe and the immaterial plane of the image...

→ in the production of a video game where dancing to generate light is presented as the weapon of resistance to the sci-fi overlords of Deutsche Bank's shoot-to-kill drones...

→ who have meanwhile doubled the speed of light to facilitate faster-than-light trading in financial markets...

... all set to meaty beats and wrapped in glitzy CGI visuals of molten gold and digitized sunlight, blending aesthetics of cable news, state propaganda, violent video games, dancing video games, faux-journalism, internet celebrity. The 23-minute video plays on endless loop, the credits are the countdown sequence to your re-spawn. You are infinitely promised an interactive experience, you are infinitely killed before you are ever handed the controller. In an epoch where even lounging in a beach chair in a museum is a quantifiable form of complicity, *Factory of the Sun* seems to ask us: *how much more interpassivity will you tolerate?*

Steyerl's previous work is film and text and performative criticism suggesting that in the global age of totally intertwined networks there does remain some possible spaces for profound political gestures of dissent. Her theory of Circulationism affirms that the circulation of images can be turned back on itself to reroute the power inherent in the system against itself to create new opportunities for opposition.<sup>4</sup> In her incendiary and unimpeachable texts, Steyerl seeks an art that does not “[facilitate] the development of a new multipolar distribution of geopolitical power whose predatory economies are often fueled by internal oppression [and] class war from above.”<sup>5</sup> For Steyerl, the ultimate goal of circulationism to effect “offline distribution, of 3D dissemination of resources, land, music and inspiration.”<sup>6</sup>

Hito Steyerl seems pretty righteous.

“Imperatives of invention and originality are reduced to mere



vagueness... In the mist, all you find is more mist. Hito is right that we're being used, but a) we know, and b) it doesn't mean we should let her use us, too."

*Matthew Collings*<sup>7</sup>

Steyerl positions the immersive video installation as a gesture towards emancipation, she opens and closes her mouth; you listen.

You write an essay about it for school and throw everything and anything at it trying to make sense of how it could be that the rebel writer with the righteous vision is also the author of the wanton spectacle that is *Factory of the Sun*. Theories of migration, circulation, installation intertwine and blur. Is an essay a battleground?

Maybe Circulationism is like global migration where "some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others, some are effectively imprisoned by it."<sup>8</sup>

Maybe *Factory of the Sun* kind of casts its audience as members of the same privileged diaspora, each of them workers of the mind mines, labourers in various factories of cognitive capital.

Maybe your paper "[reduces] [*Factory of the Sun*] to an affective immersive experience that is inadvertently emptied of the postcolonial conceits it sought to address in the first place."<sup>9</sup>

Maybe you wanted so badly to show it was righteous you didn't spend enough time figuring out if it actually was. The immersive installation wields the brand(s) of "Unite! Anti-banks! Anti-lies! Anti-exploitation!" but you did not find any way to academically demonstrate it does anything more than say "booo banks."

**Q:** "Can you be elite and postcolonial at the same time?"<sup>10</sup>

**A:** You don't know.

And you promise you'll look into it.

Though you are nearly positive most people are neither.

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1.MOCA wall text.

2.Ibid.

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## From Ghettos to Borderlands: Chantal Akerman's *De L'Autre Côté* (From the Other Side)

By Sherry Babadjanov

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Image 1: Akerman, Chantal. *De l'autre côté (From the Other Side)*. 2002. Documentary stills. Video and 16mm film.  
**URL**

Traditional ethnographic film coming from Western privilege, both of access and mobility, has documented their subjects of interest through a mobile

frame, with biased ideals of propriety, intellect, and sterility. The civilization they desired had within it a narrowmindedness which disregarded the potential for intercultural relationships and rapprochement. Chantal Akerman's experimental documentary film *From the Other Side (De l'Autre Côté)* (2002) is shot on the geo-political border of Agua Prieta, Sonora in Mexico and Douglas, Arizona in the United States. The film is comprised of interviews of those affected on both sides, as well as border shots and archival footage of US surveillance technology. The artist is also using the film's form to make us hyperaware of the camera. The frame is far and stable, and the duration of a single setting shot is long, denying the viewer an easy access around and within that which is being 'viewed.' Better yet, the distance allows for contemplation, and no bias can be made from her work. Rather, the truth is told through the interviews' narration of fear, suffering, and misguidance of living within a territorial and racial border.

The United States–Mexican territorial limit is considered “the largest known structure of inequality in the contemporary world.”<sup>1</sup> America as a global superstar has economic and political power that far surpasses Mexico. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, the increasing surveillance and deportation of Mexican migrants across nation–state borders—this one-way control of mobility—is seen as yet another form of imperialistic inequality.<sup>2</sup>

Remedying to this, Akerman's film, most unlike those regarded documentarists, achieves self-reflexivity by borrowing both in style and concept from structuralist filmmaking and philosophy of phenomenology, ideas which will be further explored later on in this text. Therefore, instead of splicing life into a coherent representation to satisfy the curious gaze of the viewer, the opposite is achieved by extending life to reveal the problematics of impatience, insatiability, and the quick draws made in social life between myself and the other.

Traditional anthropological and ethnographic documentaries serve the interest of the state—to identify, to recognize, to know, and to control. As a type of empirical evidence, ethnographic film enacts the same operations as traditional written ethnography.<sup>3</sup> Written ethnography as a colonial discourse made the Other coherent by establishing a narrative out of parts of their cultural identity and placing it as truth. The 'cut out' logic of the frame is based off fragmented experiences; ethnographic documentary provides facts based on a limited knowledge of perception. Let us be reminded that 'truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are,' as Nietzsche once said.<sup>4</sup>

Akerman is set on the margins of structural filmmaking, pushing the limits of how it was originally theorized.<sup>5</sup> Structural film was initially introduced by P. Adams Sitney, who designated the four characteristics of the style as “fixed camera position (fixed from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing and re-photography of the screen.”<sup>6</sup> In a similar way, Modern art critic Clement Greenberg yearned for 'pure' painting consisting of non-illusionistic two-dimensional works. Structural film is anti-illusionistic, it is a realist aesthetic that reminds the viewer of the gadgets used in this fabrication of meaning,<sup>7</sup> so that

the film becomes self-reflexive. Akerman, by using structuralist film theory, is experimenting with the ways we see, using form to engage with the politics of ethnography creating what Catherine Russell calls 'Experimental Ethnography.' By bringing the terms "experimental" and "ethnography" together, Akerman makes her work undergo a transformation in order to investigate the conventional methods of aesthetic and cultural representation.<sup>8</sup>

On the terrain, Akerman's goal was to experiment with the limitations of what is known as a political artefact, of a foreboding symbol of power.<sup>9</sup> Her filmic method of the fixed frame, tracking shot, extended duration, and real-time presentation subverts continuity and elliptical editing to remind us of our placement.<sup>10</sup> Her unconventionality comes from a desire to restore our humanness, by circumventing the mythmaking machine of nationalism and its restrictive identities. The interviews are used to foreground discourse, reorienting this strict militant place into an unattainable and fluid personal space.

*From the Other Side* begins with Francisco Jantillan Garcia, a 21 years old Mexican born on the border. Shot frontally in medium close-up, the camera stands still as Garcia tells of the death of his brother who attempted to cross to the other side. Garcia's strange glance towards the camera reminds the viewer of Akerman behind the camera. She lets silence and stillness linger, as this sense of present time counters the 'primeval,' or the 'primitive' time of traditional ethnography.<sup>11</sup> In the following three scenes, Akerman situates the border and the surrounding border-town. With a fixed frame, and for an extended duration, the viewer watches patiently as nothing happens, quickly realizing it is a street in the desert, with the meanderings of the day. Russell calls this style hyperreality, characterized by a fake impression of depth, the effects of which renders the Other oddly theatrical.<sup>12</sup> Akerman explains: "How much time should we take to show this street so that what's happening is something other than a mere piece of information? So that we can go from the concrete to the abstract and come back to the concrete."<sup>13</sup> In another scene we watch three children play from a distance as the camera remains fixed. The noise you would expect to hear in any ordinary town is heard in the background, but Akerman purposefully does not satisfy the voyeuristic gaze. Instead the quotidian and rather banal setting is an image without depth, reminding the spectator that there are limits to the knowable.<sup>14</sup>

For approximately the first hour of the film, the camera remains on the border's south side, alternating between interviews and an equal number of border shots. A sign posted along a road reads: "Stop the Crime Wave/ Our Property and Environment is Being Trashed by Invaders."<sup>15</sup> After this shot, the camera remains on the north side for approximately forty minutes, and records interviews with Douglas inhabitants. Akerman interviews a rancher couple whose post 9/11 fears of terror and alien invaders are explicit. As the wife says: "the Mexican people are coming in and they can do the same things, because there are so many of them. They can take over and do a lot of damage here."<sup>16</sup> Upon further investigation it is found that the situation is worsening, as Nanny Fernandez in her 2014 article "Texas Bolster Border Patrol with Its Own" tells: "On the border, Texas uses

helicopters with infrared technology. It monitors motion-detecting cameras it installed on private ranches. And rather than rely on federal high-altitude surveillance airplanes, Texas bought one of its own, for 7.4 million.”<sup>17</sup> The so-called ‘criminal aliens’ they try to prevent from entering their arena, are therefore subjugated to dehumanization and inferiority.<sup>18</sup>

In a 2011 interview with Elisabeth Lebovici titled *Losing Everything that Made You a Slave*, Akerman explains:

“My obsession with borders come from the camps. When you touch on that limit—and I touched it very closely through my mother, who was in the camps but was never able to talk through her anxiety—this border becomes the source of anxiety, it becomes an ‘anxious Subject’. In *De l’autre côté*, for instance, I show the wall to my mother and ask her what it brings to mind, and she says, ‘You Know What.’”<sup>19</sup>

Akerman’s mother was a holocaust survivor. She speaks of concentration camps, of jails and of death. Borders are a blockade of the mind which has to become tangible, materialized into a wall of concrete, barbed wire, militant bodies, and surveillance technologies. As a material dimension, the wall makes it impossible to know the other side, which stimulates the need for artists to intervene.<sup>20</sup>

From the gates of the ghetto to the politics of borderlands the need to show the intangible remains the same. *From the Other Side* represents a subversion of this violence. Akerman’s use of video counterbalances the fixed aspects of the wall by its fluidity, engaging in a socio-spatial and inclusive relationship.<sup>21</sup>

In the words of postcolonial theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “travelling is the very place of dwelling, living is returning to ones most intimate self.”<sup>22</sup> The sentimental power of cinema reveals a forgotten reality, never seen, or yet to be discovered. When watching, the viewers are tender bodies dwelling on the image. As they travel through the screen, they reach parts of themselves through the parts of others. It is connection that charges the moving image. In maintaining ties with Paul Gilroy, let us endeavor to recognize cultural hybridity, social plurality, and inclusiveness.<sup>23</sup> Coming from the other side of immobility, Akerman shows us the power of voice, the power of stillness, all in achieving the power of self-awareness.

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## Moon; Defying Borders, Building a Digital Democracy

By Helen Watts

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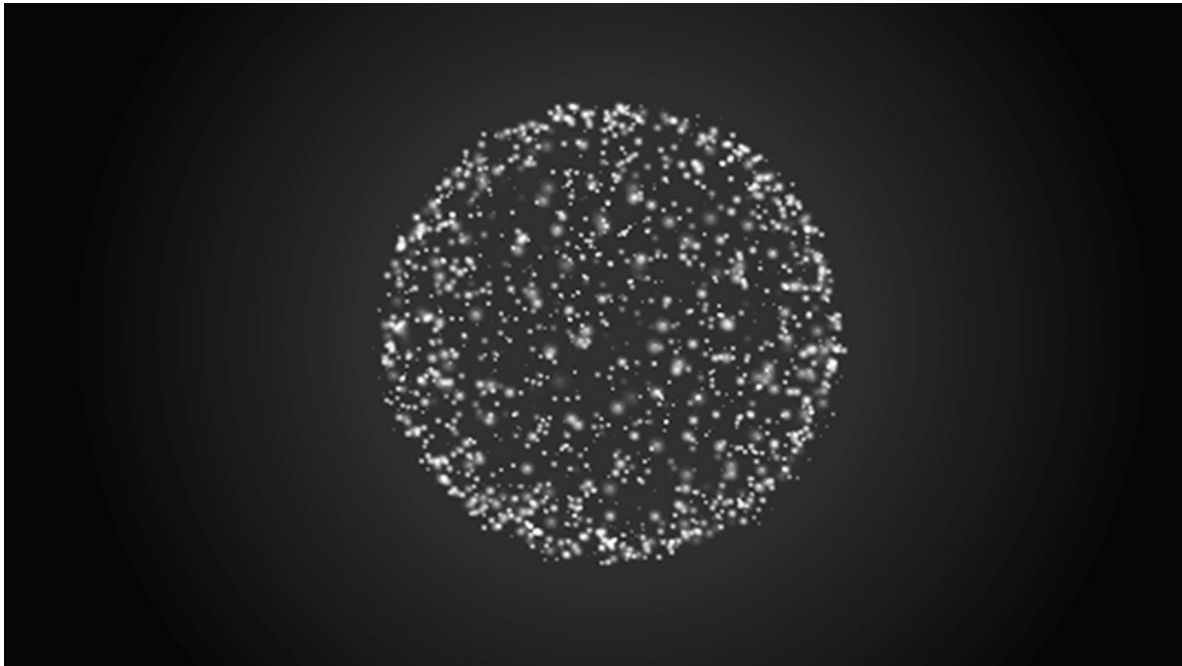


Image 1: Weiwei Ai and Olafur Eliasson. *Moon*. 2011. Interactive website. Still. [URL](#)

“The Internet is uncontrollable. And if the internet is uncontrollable, freedom will win. It’s as simple as that.” <sup>1</sup>

Weiwei Ai

Our digital world is tightly bound to the phenomenon of globalization. The democratic nature of the Internet holds the potential to share an idea and open dialogue with an international network. Recognizing the power of digital connectivity to challenge structures of censorship and control, artists Weiwei Ai and Ólafur Elíasson overcame geographic restrictions<sup>2</sup> to collaborate on an interactive Internet-based project.<sup>3</sup> Chinese Ai and Danish-Icelandic Elíasson's *Moon* (2013) encourages creativity's eclipse from borders in their collaborative and evolving work. With customizable user profiles, worldwide access, and content ranging from scribbles to poems, the "crowdsketching" project embraces this concept of a universal democracy of ideas. The user has the ability to decide their own identity and engage in a visual dialogue on their own terms.<sup>4</sup> At Berlin's 2013 Falling Walls Conference,<sup>5</sup> a three-dimensional image of a moon was released online for individuals worldwide to view and contribute drawings to its surface.<sup>6</sup> The artists' engagement with national power structures through the democratic nature of the Internet underscores *Moon*'s potential to dissolve and reshape state borders.

*Moon*'s launch at Berlin's Falling Walls is significant. The conference exists as a celebration of new technologies that transcends walls and borders to bring innovators together, inspired by the global shifts that followed the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> After World War II, tensions rose between the world's most powerful nations due to the conflicting nature of Communism and Capitalism.<sup>8</sup> The Berlin Wall, a symbol of the Cold War, was built between East and West Berlin to keep Western ideals from undermining the socialist state, until the fall of the Berlin Wall during the reunification of Germany in 1990.<sup>9</sup> Although this symbol of conflict has since crumbled, tensions persist between Capitalist and Communist states. *Moon*'s exhibition at the Falling Walls Conference<sup>10</sup> speaks to the persisting tensions between the ruling Communist Party of China – which Ai actively critiques through his artwork – and the Capitalist social structure that governs much of Western Europe and North America. *Moon* was originally intended to bridge the societies of Berlin, China and New York,<sup>11</sup> but has since extended to a global audience. Today, over 35 000 individuals worldwide have interfaced with the work, demonstrating the potential for digital technology to transcend national borders that would seek to censor or restrict global communication.<sup>12</sup> It is a forum that crumbles the walls that continue to control and obstruct global voices from connecting and creating.

The collaboration between Ai and Elíasson is significant to the message of *Moon* and how the artists examine national censorship and larger themes similar to the panopticon.<sup>13</sup> By overcoming Internet censorship in China and collaborating virtually, Ai and Elíasson challenge national barriers that restrict their ability to connect.<sup>14</sup> In order to maintain a certain social order, censorship rules in China block platforms for individual expression and global connectivity, such as Twitter

and Facebook.<sup>15</sup> *Moon* re-purposes panopticism in practice; panoptic authorities maintaining social order through the impression of constant surveillance. The work removes the fear of consequence or self-policed restriction, creating a digital space where everyone's individual and uncensored mode of expression can be simultaneously under surveillance and contributing in creating a shared digital space. Ai and Eli asson's commitment to pure and uninhibited artistic expression is conveyed through *Moon*, and by that same occasion, also addresses the government's fear of the Internet in a digital language people can connect to.<sup>16</sup>

The inspiration for *Moon* is rooted in the democratization of the artistic process, allowing for an open space where "no walls [...] can stop an idea."<sup>17</sup> Both artists being recognized for their socially engaged artworks, Ai and Eli asson had long wanted to collaborate, but had been restricted by Weiwei's confinement in China imposed by the Chinese government.<sup>18</sup> Ai is well known<sup>19</sup> for engaging with his cultural landscape and combatting the Communist Party of China's restrictions on freedom of speech and individualism.<sup>20</sup> With *Moon*, Weiwei extends his dissent against the government's authority. Being imposed travel restrictions and bans on the exhibition of his art in his country, Weiwei had to find alternative ways to communicate his ideas, namely through social media and other digital social forums as both a medium and a means for communication. In this digital collaborative work, Ai did not only break past the restrictive measures against him, but he also conveyed a powerful statement about the Chinese government's censorship practices. By overcoming censorship in collaborating with a European artist, and by promoting a forum of free speech, Ai and Eli asson have expressed their opposition to manifestations<sup>21</sup> of national and global control.<sup>22</sup>

O lafur Eli asson's artworks consistently engage with constructions of environment, time, and society. For him, the meaning of art is not constituted by its physical aspect, but rather in the conflict that comes from the idea of the artwork.<sup>23</sup> With the world's rampant social and environmental issues often being neglected or rarely invoked by major power structures, Eli asson's artwork is his expression of protest, such as with his 2012 *Little Sun Project*.<sup>24</sup> *Moon* is an online three-dimensional projection representing a utopian space that contends with social control imposed by national power structures. In order to subvert national authorities and geography itself, Ai and Eli asson extend their work beyond the artistic institution. It is an open, accessible, and democratized utopia, which Eliasson uses to protest against any other space that discourages the freedom of speech and individuality that *Moon* represents. The project embodies a critical and consistent aspect of Eli asson's artistic production: His promotion of the "potential that art has to be connected to the world."<sup>25</sup>

*Moon*'s digital nature is an opportunity for virtual global collaboration, creating new forums for political and cultural discourse, and raising new notions of agency and democracy.<sup>26</sup> On entering the website of *Moon* – which remains accessible today – a white and pocked sphere fades into view, slowly rotating. Zoomed in, the pock-marks on the surface are revealed to be the hundreds of

thousands of drawings contributed by individuals all over the world. At the top of the page, the viewer has the option to view featured, latest, and popular images that have been contributed to the moon's surface. Additionally, the viewer is invited to become a participator and contribute a drawing to the moon's surface. Contingent on viewer engagement, Moon occupies the space between purpose and chance, nature and culture, embedding artwork into the "fabric of everyday life."<sup>27</sup> This is a critical aspect of the artists' work, the idea that their role as artists is not to assert an idea through a physical representation, but instead open new avenues for ideas through discourse and engagement.<sup>28</sup> The success of *Moon* in challenging national control and censorship and encouraging individual self-expression is only measured as successful through the participation of the audience. The work of over 35,000 individuals worldwide asserts Ai Weiwei and Olafur Eliasson's declaration that "creativity defies boundaries".<sup>29</sup>

The choice of the digital moon is intended as a utopia; the moon is a virtual reality for a global community of individuals to engage with freedom of expression. A utopian promise suspended between culture and politics, *Moon*, as a digital space for creative interaction and global discourse, engages with methods and issues relevant for the metropolitan as a global, technologically-driven community.<sup>30</sup> Ai and Eliasson's virtual community is a revitalization and renewal of collectivity and participation. It effectively returns the political into the sphere of public interest.<sup>31</sup> The principle of equality is in reach for a collective community on *Moon* beyond social, national or ideological boundaries.

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13. In this context, the panopticon is referred to in relation to Foucault's theory of panopticism: "He is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication." From Thomas McMullan, "What Does the Panopticon Mean in the Age of Digital Surveillance?," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, **URL**.

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19. During his work co-designing the signature Beijing Olympic Stadium, Weiwei refused to have his name associated with the work, in protest against a regime of extreme concentration of power that marginalized and oppressed the rights of migrant workers during Beijing's physical and metaphorical reconstruction. From Charles Merewether, *Ai Weiwei: Under Construction*, ed. Laura Murray Cree (Sydney: Paddington: Campbellton: University of New South Wales, 2009), 13.

20. Merewether, *Ai Weiwei: Under Construction*, 13.

21. For more examples of dissent against national power structures, namely those of the United States, please refer to Ai's *Study of Perspective (1995-2003)* series, **URL**.

22. Merewether, 29.

23. The Creators Project, *Art That Challenges The World | Meet Olafur Eliasson*, accessed August 3, 2016, **URL**.

24. Addressing the issue that 1.2 billion people in the world do not have access to energy, Eliasson's *Little Sun Project* (Little Sun GmbH) distributes highly efficient solar-powered lamps designed by Eliasson's workshop to off-grid areas of the world. For more information, please refer to: **URL**.

25. Ibid.

26. Eliasson, *Olafur Eliasson: Surroundings Surrounded*, 205.

27. Lars Lerup, "Art Objects Are Conservative and Processes Are Radical," in *Olafur Eliasson: Your*

*Only Real Thing Is Time* (Boston; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), 67.

28. Ai Weiwei expresses this sentiment in an interview with art historian and curator Yilmaz Dziewior: "Instead of putting a personal mark on something, as an artist, you set up a structure, you make room for possibilities." From Weiwei Ai and Anthony Pins, *Ai Weiwei: Spatial Matters: Art Architecture and Activism* (MIT Press, 2014), 129.

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30. Eliasson, *Olafur Eliasson: Surroundings Surrounded*, 205.

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