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An aesthetic regime of hope: reading Richard Misrach's and Guillermo Galindo's *Border Cantos*

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Abstract

In 2016 Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo published their magisterial book *Border Cantos*. Misrach, landscape photographer and activist, presents his photographs of the wall along the American/Mexican border with images of Galindo's musical instruments made from personal objects left in the vicinity of the wall. Galindo's instruments, which can also be heard by playing the associated YouTube clips, make the abandoned belongings of migrants perform the sounds associated with hopeful, traumatic and challenging journeys. Misrach's photographs, which include views of wide sweeping vistas, as well as communities affected by the wall, captures both the dispiriting aspects of the wall and its folly. The wall, it seems, is both highly permeable and significantly disruptive to human and non-human ecologies.

Galindo's musical sounds and instruments, relating to experimental and avant-garde music, provide an interesting counterpoint to Misrach's photographs. Galindo makes musical instruments, made from debris, although the instruments, which are evocative of string instruments and percussion, are somewhat reminiscent of classical music. The instruments, played beautifully with reference to rhythm and to atmosphere, evokes the movements of people through the land but with a sense of wariness, fatigue, drama and the resistance of landscape. Misrach's photographs, however, foreground the aesthetic experience of the border and the wall. In some of the images the wall becomes a graceful sweep across the landscape, creating a lie of the wall's intent to stop free passage across the land. In other photographs, whilst the structure is dominant, the beauty of the place, or the absurdity of the wall's existence, foregrounds a different kind of response: the wall as a folly or a joke. In short, the wall's place in the landscape seems secure and the aesthetics of the images reign supreme.

How are we to understand images of a wall when they are so beautiful? They can be read for the signs of how they disrupt living conditions, for their sites of resistance and as sites of tragedy: the captions ensure that the attentive reader is informed about why the sites were photographed and included in the publication. What is less certain is how effective such communication can be considered to be, especially in the light of the President-elect's declaration in June 2016 to extend the wall, indeed, to make a high, long beautiful wall. Despite Trump's lack of awareness of the systematic failure of the wall, and of the effective types of resistance and socio-economic practices that ensure that the border is traversed, the wall is set to be a feature of the political landscape of American politics for some time to come.

Whilst the logic of expecting ugly images to be made of a highly troubled and troubling social and political landscape is flawed, aesthetic images provide interesting experiences. The landscape is beautiful but what the wall signifies is not. In this presentation I will argue, using Jacques Ranciere's theory of politics and aesthetics, that Misrach's and Galindo's book enables the performance of ambiguity as a form of rupture: the wall is permeated by practicalities and everyday activities of those crossing and living the border and that such a work reinforces the folly of Trump's desire to create a non-permeable border in a highly mobile and global world.

An aesthetic regime of hope: reading Richard Misrach's and Guillermo Galindo's *Border Cantos*

[Play PowerPoint, which contains a range of imagery that illustrates the points below.]

Border Cantos is a book and touring exhibition by the photographer Richard Misrach, and the musician, Guillermo Galindo. The subject of the book is the Mexican/American border, a site of struggle and dispute. The book includes photographs of the wall that already exists in parts of the landscape, but some photographs allude to the journeys that people make and the social disruption wrought by the wall. There is also evidence of people-tracking, informal and violent policing and resistance to border authorities, especially in the form of humanitarian aid for those travelling through the unoccupied areas. There is also reference to people and businesses living peaceably with the wall, although some communities and businesses are clearly disrupted. Published in mid 2016, the book was a timely statement about the wall in the context of Trump's presidential campaign.

Donald Trump, as I am sure everyone in this room is already well aware, pledged to create a "big, beautiful wall," (Osborne, 2017) and he also claimed that he would make Mexico pay for its construction (Bixby, 2016). Despite such a wall being practicably impossible (not to mention damaging and pretty useless), the book by Misrach and Galindo did not deter the electorate from voting for Trump. Indeed, the wall continues to be a point of discussion in Trump's Presidency as a recent unveiling of plans for the wall showed (Wainwright, 2017). The wall continues to haunt the American imagination even though it is disputed in its efficacy and is questioned for its environmental impact (Bolstad, 2017).

Whilst it is unlikely that a book containing photographs of landscapes, musical instruments, and links to videos and audio files of Galindo's music, could change the course of a Presidential election, it does seem timely to question the role of such books and their audiences. This book is primarily aimed at liberal elite audiences, the kinds of audiences that were so disparaged in Trump's election campaign (Decker, 2017). Whilst I have not been fortunate enough to see one of the exhibition installations, as a photographer and writer, it seems clear to me that Misrach and Galindo's project speaks to the power of art to raise awareness about the challenges of migration, the impact of the wall, and the strong feelings and subsequent reactions that the wall provokes. Implicit in the book is respect for those who undertake the dangerous journey to a land of opportunity, but also a land of social and economic inequality.

Consciousness-raising, though, feels like a pretty inadequate response to our times. We know that repeated messages do not automatically encourage audiences to consume less, vote differently or be more compassionate. Indeed, communication studies shows that messages that are too bleak or intensive can be counter productive. With this project, whilst there are essays outlining the injustice of the wall, the critique of the wall and its underlying inequality is mainly implicit and requires cultural capital to decode it. But this does not deter me from asking what such an art project can achieve. Indeed, one can ask whether the project produces a sense of rupture, an aesthetic experience that facilitates dissensus and ambiguity: the conditions for the imagining and imaging of a better world. The landscape itself is both ruptured and contested, through both image and sound. This argument is a bit

counter-intuitive – there is much about Misrach’s imagery that is conventional and reproduces a traditional gaze of mastery and ownership of the land. But read closely, it is clear that the photographer and the viewer are not in control. The project conveys the border land as a site of resistance and fear. The humanitarian challenge of the border land, and its devastating effects on those who make but do not survive the journey, are hinted at, but power is still left to play for. Importantly, the book intervenes in our cultural spaces and imaginations to remind us that there are differing voices to listen to when it comes to recounting journeys and reasons for travelling.

Asking whether the project has some kind of purpose is important, but I am deliberately, for the moment, avoiding the question of a quantified audience impact study. As Claire Bishop has so eloquently argued, “artistic practice has an element of critical negation and an ability to sustain contradiction that cannot be reconciled with the quantitative imperatives of positivist economics” (2012, p. 16). Indeed, in an age where art has been made an extension of government policy, there is some comfort to be taken in the idea that art does not have to be instrumentalised. There is no denying, though, that aesthetics can be a dirty word: aesthetics can be associated with “inequalities, oppressions and exclusions” (ibid, p. 17). Indeed, aesthetics is sometimes associated with the “art market [read global capital] and cultural hierarchy” (ibid, p. 18). However, Bishop, following Jacques Ranciere, argues for aesthetics as *aisthesis*: “an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality” (ibid, p. 18).

Unlike much of the art practices that Bishop discusses, which focus on social relations, participatory projects and artists’ interactions with communities, Misrach and Galindo are known names within their respective creative worlds. Misrach has an established pedigree as a gallery photographer and activist and he is also represented by major private galleries in the States. Galindo describes himself as a “post-Mexican composer, sonic architect and performance artist” who “redefines the boundaries of music and the practice of music composition” (Galindo, 2014). The project, made for major institutional exhibition and realised through publication, is safely in the territory of elite practice for both photography and music. Indeed, the project is a collaboration between two noted artists rather than a direct engagement with communities and their subjectivities. However, the project could safely fit within the broader “ethical turn” in art where there is a privileging of the social and political in art’s practices. It has been noted by many writers (Bishop, Ranciere, Beshty) that art practices have increasingly become preoccupied with the fault lines of our times and there is less appetite to see art limited to the sphere of a gallery-going elite, and to aesthetic appreciation alone. The ways in which art is political, or addresses politics, is contested terrain.

We live in neoliberalised times where some art and artists benefit from and caters to the art market and the art’s political potential may be minimised or turned into a commodity. Some art has been instrumentalised in terms of helping communities adjust to our changing times. Yet we also live in a time of the refusal of the expert and the critique of metropolitan elite cultures and preoccupations. There are dissenting voices from below, many of whom do not necessarily need metropolitan elites to “find” and “shape” their voices for them. Elite art, entering into this terrain, risks being patronising, misinformed or simply preaching to the

converted. Whether the project achieves a political impact in some form is a question that both Ranciere and Claire Bishop can help to unpack.

Ranciere's theory of *aisthesis* draws attention to the "autonomy of our *experience* in relation to art" and away from the question of whether the work of art is autonomous. In Ranciere's argument art potentially suspends reason and instead opens an arena for undecidability. This undecidability "of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is organised and therefore of changing or redistributing that same world" (ibid, p. 27). All aesthetic judgements become political judgements because it becomes a "comment on the distribution of the places and of the capacities of incapacities attached to those places" (ibid, p. 27). However, as noted by Bishop, this does mean that reactionary or conservative art is just as political as any other kind of art - there is no automatic way of deciding upon good or bad aesthetics, or good or bad politics.

Key to understanding what might be helpful about Ranciere's theory is a sense of productive contradiction. Returning to the question of art's autonomy, Ranciere puts the difficulty in letting go of the idea that art can be autonomous to productive ends. Ranciere notes that art partly exists because it is able to imagine, or propose, a better world to come. If we combine the idea that art can be autonomous (not necessarily of this world), with the idea that art can propose a better world, what we have is a productive contradiction. In this sense, rupture and ambiguity become crucial because they provide opportunities for *dissensus*.

The extent to which rupture, ambiguity and dissensus is created in Misrach and Galindo's project, though, is an important question. Misrach's work is highly descriptive and uses captions to anchor the meaning of the photographs. They are lyrical, and use the aesthetics of landscape photography to heighten our awareness of space, light and the beauty of the landscape, but they also inform and instruct viewers about travelling conditions, the experience of very significant hazards, including border patrols, the risks of dehydration, being lost, and starvation. In this sense, the photographs and the text have a pedagogic function. Importantly, the photographs belong to a tradition that, as Geo Takach has argued, demonstrates mastery over space and place. This is not landscape as rupture but as space surveyed, contained and controlled. Misrach does manage to achieve a sense of what it would be like to traverse spaces without a guide and few resources, but as *viewers* we are safe in gazing at the open land. A few images do at least demonstrate the folly of the wall [fig. 8] and also others demonstrate the very real sense of pervasive violence of crossing [figs. 12, 13 and 15]. A palpable sense of unease is introduced with reference to the effigies [figs. 16 and 17] as it is unknown who erects the effigies and what their purpose is (so there is no way of knowing whether they indicate safe passage, or as seems more likely, signify a deterrent to the traveller). Although the effigies do exist, and can be photographed, there remains something undefinable about them, and they successfully demonstrate a contested territory and the kinds of deep ambiguities that this gives rise to.

Galindo's musical instruments, in contrast, point the way to something more haunting and evocative. Whilst they still lack the resonance of the subjectivities of the people who live by the border and who cross the border, the objects act as traces of journeys and people. Galindo makes these objects 'speak' through their use of musical instrumentation and

recycling [play video: <http://bordercantos.com/>]. Galindo undeniably uses the language of experimental music and the professionalism of performance, and to that extent the aesthetics of his practice are as elitist as Misrach's work, but Galindo's practice is fundamentally different in that it is not as descriptive and controlling as Misrach's gaze. There are significant humanist qualities that are conveyed through some of Galindo's instruments and performances, in that we are encouraged to connect to and imagine human stories of migration, and the oddness and repurposing of the objects speaks of lives disrupted or transformed.

Border Cantos, then, is in some respects a deeply conservative project. The photographs by Misrach, beautiful though they are, are a product of the context of contemporary elite art practices and indebted to some highly conservative traditions. Whilst there is a laudable effort to inform audiences through evocative imagery there is indebtedness to a visual tradition that rationalises and visually owns land. The potential for dissensus, in the disruption and ambiguity of the imagery, is limited to the effigy images which whilst descriptive are also uncanny. The effigies, it could be said, represent tears in the social fabric and uncertainties about points of view. Galindo's music, on the other hand, performs a more deeply troubling and productive aspect to the project. The objects convey the human fragility of journeys and the pointlessness of wall-making, but they also, in making objects speak differently to their purpose, propose different modes of being. The objects and sounds both humanise the journeys made across the border whilst speaking to subversive acts. The combination of the descriptive space as real and palpable, together with the rupture of uncertainty in the sound of the scape, makes for a project that is very powerful. In this sense, I argue that *Border Cantos*, whilst reaching an elite audience performs a disruptive ambiguity for its audiences that has the power to be transformative in the hope of living in, and imagining, a better world.

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