

# Transborder Art Activism and the U.S.-Mexico Border: Analyzing “Artscapes” as Forms of Resistance and Cultural Production in the Frame of Globalization

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*Abstract: This research attempts to adjudicate practices of contemporary artists in relation to the pervasive border politics and discourses which have emerged both before the 1990s and post-NAFTA. By looking at the ways in which contemporary art practices have intersected with an activist aesthetic over the last 40 years, one may begin to see how the physical landscape of the U.S. -Mexico border region and the border wall itself are engendered with dichotomous representations of people living within close proximity to it. Within the scope of this project, various artworks are analyzed and critiqued for their ability to enable new spaces for public discourse and to function as modes of resistance to hegemonic narratives about the border. By analyzing instances of transborder art activism through the flows of “artscape”, this research looks closely at the work of artists like Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, and Ricardo Dominguez. Additionally, by utilizing the notions of artscape and hybridity, this discussion will navigate the flows of transborder art activism by looking at how four specific art collectives have, since the Chicano art movement, critiqued global cultural flows in relation to the U.S. -Mexico border that have transformed the political and sociocultural arena of public discourse. Though prior research has been conducted on how players like the mass media have been responsible for shaping public opinion pertaining to the border, this research suggests that artists and other cultural activists play a crucial role in critiquing deeply embedded narratives about nationality, gender, and class as they relate to the U.S. -Mexico border and the encompassing border region.*

Keywords: Hybridity, Activism, Immigration, Transborder, Globalization, Flows, Framing, Imperialism, Xenophobia

## Introduction

**P**ERHAPS ONE OF the most seductive and pervasive myths that has arisen out of some 21st-century theories on globalization is that the world has become highly de-territorialized and seemingly borderless. Born in the wake of such notions is the idea that a transcendental, global society shares information and social trends with little regard for physical barriers or national boundaries. While this cosmopolitan theory does speak to the ways in which physical terrain has become a less important factor in mediating or inhibiting flows of culture, it cannot account for the disjunctures and inequalities experienced by those elements of the globalization equation that are subject to a stricter set of rules and regulations: the individuals and groups which often lack the freedom of movement and other less-tangible mobilities afforded to other entities.

In thinking about the racialized and often xenophobic rhetoric that has pervaded political and social discourses in the past couple decades since immigration flows began to increase during the 1980s, it would seem that globalization is not merely responsible for erecting physical structures that benevolently prohibit flows of transnational bodies; it is a phenomenon

capable of shaping how people perceive national borders and border crossers. While social science researchers, media outlets, and political actors have been responsible for shaping and constructing these kinds of rhetoric and discussions about globalization and border politics, alternate social actors have been just as important in adjudicating the issues of inequality and disempowerment present in the politically-charged landscape of this border region. This discussion seeks to analyze how unorthodox, alternative practices of narrative-construction and resistance to dominant discourses about border politics are created and maintained by a group of social actors whose work functions through both clandestine and elicited avenues: contemporary, visual artists. By analyzing how the U.S.-Mexico border region shapes the production of culture, this discussion looks to new forms of art and new approaches to artistic collaboration that are produced in relation to border diaspora. Looking closely at the vectors of movement of transborder art activists and their works across this region, this discussion illustrates the ways in which contemporary artists, through their artworks, give voice to the issues of injustice and disempowerment faced by marginalized communities of migrant families and bicultural groups living in border neighborhoods. Moreover, this research considers the particular ways in which local and global cultural processes converge to shape a transborder art culture that is both tuned in to the specific concerns of the local region and also connected to global narratives of artistic resistance. In order to examine the ways in which transborder art activism has dually reshaped and recontextualized the political landscape of Southern California's border region and the international struggle for social justice, this discussion utilizes a theoretical framework for analyzing transnational, cross-cultural artworks and how they critique the effects of global cultural flows. However, before one can begin navigating between the flows of transborder art within the frame of globalization, it is important to look at the different theoretical approaches that have both shaped border politics and formed the foundation on which transborder art activists' works are grounded.

While some proponents of globalization assert that the world has become increasingly deterritorialized and that the power of the nation-state to prohibit certain types of flows has decreased, it is important to look beyond these somewhat false impressions in order to notice sites at which global cultural flows, including the movement of bodies, is restricted and policed (Appadurai 1990; Canclini 2001). No place seems to engender these dichotomous notions of globalization as profoundly as the U.S.-Mexico border and the identity politics that frame representations and discourses about those living within its shadow, so to speak. With the inception of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which "opened up" the U.S.-Mexico border for the purposes of free market capitalism, the often overlooked sociocultural disjunctures and ruptures that have been at work within globalizing forces in this border region sprang to the foreground post-NAFTA.

In looking at the manifestations of global cultural flows across the world, the construction of physical borders and walls are not the only indicators of changing national or cultural attitudes and sentiments, specifically when concerns about migration abound. In the case of the U.S.-Mexico border and the issues engendered in the conflicts surrounding its existence, xenophobic discourses and fears of Otherness, which theorist Edward Said explored in his texts on the exoticism of oriental cultures, become important markers for illustrating how attitudes toward migration and labor within the border region of the United States and Mexico shift, becoming part of a larger collective consciousness about border issues (MacKenzie 1995). As cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai expresses in his work about global cultural flows, cultural transactions "between social groups in the past have generally been

restricted, sometimes by the facts of geography and ecology, and at other times by active resistance to interactions with the Other” (Appadurai 1). This idea seems to characterize the cross-cultural tensions that exist in this region, embedded in both the political narratives constructed by media actors and in the political decisions carried out by local and federal agencies to stave off unwanted flows of migrants by increasing the number of border patrol agents at junctures along the national border fence. Legislative processes that seek to criminalize transnational bodies, going so far as to use rhetoric which dehumanizes undocumented border crossers, shed light on the underlying fears of Otherness that pervade social discourses about immigration.

Looming border walls, from the concrete barriers erected in the contested zones of the West Bank in the Palestinian territories to the U.S.-Mexico national border, are often recognized for their corporeal, tangible traits. However, it will become important for this discussion to remember that a “border need not be lines drawn in the dirt – the psyche will do” (Kelley 18). The idea that physical walls and borders can impact the minds and perceptions of groups of people illustrates that they function beyond their intended purpose as mere markers of territory or as deterrents to external flows and is an important feature of this discussion regarding border politics. This suggests that borders are capable of shaping how hegemonic groups perceive the imagined threats that subaltern groups, such as undocumented migrants and the alternative social actors that make visible the forms of disempowerment experienced by these groups, pose to the perceived natural order of things.

In terms of how some scholars have attempted to understand how global cultural flows move in relation to the physical landscape and the collective consciousness of a community, one may find that the cultural imperialist model tends to dominate these types of discussions. This model has argued that culture and ideology flow from central communities to peripheral communities. The most common example of this can be found in the relationship between the British Empire and the communities worldwide that were adopted under its influence as a global world power during the period between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many authors of globalization attempting to illustrate how trends move globally have favored this model. However, in looking at how contemporary global flows move, the “new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (Appadurai 6). In opposition to the hierarchical nature of cultural imperialism, Appadurai proposes a different framework for understanding how ideologies and information are disseminated across cultures.

By studying different dimensions of culture, such as the financial or ideological characteristics of a community, Appadurai suggests that a theoretical model based on various “scapes” is more effective for understanding how global cultural flows can be understood in relation to each other and to the greater phenomenon of globalization. While Appadurai notes that these flows can be understood through the movement of people, technology, financial capital, information and ideas, the possibilities are open as to the various flows one could explore to measure different cultural productions across borders and the communities that exist around them. Appadurai’s frame for analyzing globalization, though seemingly inclusive, cannot account for the other actors engaged in restructuring representations inherent in border politics and is lacking in its ability to engage with artistic gestures.

## **Theoretical Framework: Artscapes, Hybridity, and Globalization**

While common actors, such as scholars or politicians, have been active players in defining the border and its inhabitants, another group of actors has been actively engaged in critiquing the effects of global cultural flows and how globalizing forces have shaped the U.S.-Mexico border. Contemporary artists working within this border region, from painters to elusive performance artists, have become powerful actors, performing significant roles as agents and advocates of social justice. More specifically, this discussion looks at the social and political roles that art activists have performed within the frame of resistance to hegemonic discourses of both globalization and the institution of contemporary art.

This conceptual framework re-appropriates the notion of “scapes,” which Appadurai uses in measuring global cultural flows. Due to its flexibility as a model for studying dimensions of culture and how they flow, this discussion asserts that transnational art practices and contemporary flows of art activism can be understood through the analysis of another scape created for the sole purpose of this research: artscares. Artscares, which can be understood as the transnational flows of contemporary art works, explore the processes of artistic, cultural production within Southern California’s border region and examines the trajectories of transborder artists’ works in relation to border discourses and diaspora. More specifically, this discussion maps out how transborder art works have flowed, moved, and transformed during the last four decades in the border region shared between the United States and Mexico, beginning with the Chicano Art Movement and moving into more contemporary examples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By analyzing instances of transborder art activism through the flows of artscares, one can study how these scapes engender and foster new hybrid identities for subaltern individuals and communities in relation to stereotypes and constructions of fear in relation to the U.S.-Mexico border, both as a physical wall and as an ideological construction within the minds of those who are affected by the consequences of its existence.

Many San Diego and Los Angeles-based artists working as transborder art activists have actively engaged in creating works that critique the encompassing border politics of the region and the expansion of the U.S.-Mexico border fence, signifying its existence as a part of a highly-militarized landscape and a central figure in a transborder conflict of stereotypes, social inequality, and political dissidence. In order to examine how hegemonic forces have framed this conflict, the findings in this discussion will illustrate how contemporary visual artists, herein referred to as transborder art activists in order to signify how their works both interface with border politics while simultaneously transcending them, are capable of critiquing the physical and cultural landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border, which often concerns itself with issues of immigration, race, and national identity. For many artists mentioned in this research, the border is “not a physical boundary line separating two sovereign nations, but rather a place of its own, defined by a confluence of cultures that is not geographically bounded either to the north or to the south. The border is the specific nexus of an authentic zone of hybridized cultural experience” (Chávez and Grynsztejn xviii). In addition to the use of artscares, this discussion will also look at issues of hybridity and hybridization which author Néstor García Canclini explores in his texts about globalization and the construction of cross-cultural identities. In regards to the converging landscapes of the border region, this discussion will identify the significance of identity and place across the cultural landscapes of the U.S.-Mexico border region.

By utilizing this particular landscape as a point of departure, this analysis examines how transborder art practices create new hybrid identities for those who have been marginalized by the construction of the border. Canclini illustrates this point when speaking about hybridization:

It is possible to understand the various subject positions implicated in cross-cultural relations.

Thus, one can work on processes of hybridization in relation to cultural inequality, to the possibilities for appropriating several cultures at once in different group or classes, and therefore in relation to asymmetries of power and prestige. (Canclini xxx)

In this way, some art activists critique issues of power, including questions of who possesses the authority to create cultural productions or to cross ideological barriers. Additionally, by analyzing a wide array of activist practices, one can see how artists exhibit forms of resistance to a postcolonial, cultural imperialist way of thinking about the border. In this way, transborder art activists construct a new vernacular and open up new channels for thinking about how global cultural flows move in relation to the border that do not rely on center-periphery models. The examples of transborder art activism which will be explored illustrate how this “movement from the center (dominant culture) to the margins (so-called minority cultures) eliminates the use of the language of margins and centers” (Chávez 11). The artworks that will be explored in further detail actively work against hegemonic notions of cultural imperialism.

In looking at how transborder art activism functions, this analysis will also study how the phenomena of local sites of culture interact with the phenomena of global narratives of resistance, specifically in terms of how local artworks co-opt these narrative structures by utilizing a set of aesthetic or conceptual symbols that are codified and recognized on a global scale. It is also important to look at how artists working within this border region “have connections to multiple places and binational identities. They also have a rootedness in the border region, creating artwork that... engages elements of both the hard and soft city...and the mental constructs we erect to make sense of those surroundings” (Leclerc and Dear 14). By utilizing the notions of artscares and hybridity, this discussion navigates the flows of transborder art activism by looking at four specific art collectives and artworks that have critiqued global cultural flows in relation the U.S.-Mexico border: the Chicano Art Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo in the 1980s and 1990s, and the art works of Rubén Ortiz-Torres and Ricardo Dominguez in the 2000s.

### **Art Activism in the 1960s and 1970s: Brief History of the Chicano Art Movement**

Historically speaking, the notion of art as a vehicle for social change and as a form of resistance to and re-contextualization of global cultural flows is a relatively new idea, born out of necessity during social upheavals or changes in political climate. This theoretical social and political environment characterized the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which political and ethnic minority groups were pushed to the margins of mainstream,

heteronormative American culture. These particular individuals and groups attempted to find their own voices through various modalities.

One avenue that was utilized as a tool for social and political mobility was contemporary art, which included a multitude of mediums, from performance to installation art. One movement in particular pushed back against America's history of cultural imperialism -the Chicano Art Movement. By examining some of the work of artists within this movement, one can see how the "ideas developed by the different...thinkers discussed here have been influenced and have influenced strategies of struggle within the Chicano and Border art communities" (Malagamba-Ansótegui 28). Within these communities, Chicano artists created new hybrid identities for borderlanders and those who lived in relation to the border fence. The notion of a hybrid community was brought to the foreground by artists involved in the Chicano Art Movement, who were attempting to make visible the individuals who had been marginalized and stereotyped as outside of American society through their artworks.

By using the border as a fertile site for installations and performance art, artists affiliated with the Chicano Art Movement made marginalized individuals who lived by the border symbolically visible. In the case of Chicano artist Malaquías Montoya, his works have functioned as modes of resistance against dominant discourses about the U.S.-Mexico border and those who cross it daily. Through his paintings and silkscreens, most created in the late 1970s, Montoya explored the human landscape of Mexican migration in order to give new meanings to buzz words like "alien" and "undocumented." This is vividly illustrated in his 1981 silkscreen piece *Undocumented*, in which a faceless figure is caught between rows of barbed wire. The fact that the figure lacks recognizable facial features seems to echo notions of social and political invisibility, an issue which many border artists have attempted to tackle (See Appendix, Fig. 1). However, the most salient symbol used in this piece is the barbed wire, which works on a variety of connotative levels to provide layers of complex meaning to the piece. For instance, the presence of the barbed wire seems to connote notions of forced confinement, such as in the case of the Jewish Holocaust. However, while "used in relation to the border, barbed wire suggests a contemporary, ongoing holocaust...most importantly...barbed wire in this and other pieces by Montoya, functions as a direct reference to the border as a place" (Malagamba-Ansótegui 64). By utilizing the physical barbed wire of the border as a symbol, Montoya is able to illustrate the physical conditions of location and place that are at work in grounding global cultural flows. This discourse, which Montoya attempts to create in his artwork, pushes back against the dominant ideologies and visual representations that the mass media has often employed in stereotyping Mexican migrants as lawless intruders. Newspaper articles and photographs have often illustrated that "stereotypes loom largest at the border, beyond which awaits the 'other', threatening to cross" (Kelley 18). These stereotypes are indicative of Edward Said's notion of the "Other," which many Chicano artists during this period referenced by using representations of the "Other" in their work. By looking at the modes by which art activists of the 1970s critiqued stereotypes about the border, one can see how new cultural constructions were formed and how they were created in opposition to hegemonic global cultural flows which deemed borderlanders as others. After this period in the 1970s, performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the art collective known as the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAWTAF) began to build upon the narrative structures utilized by Chicano artists and constructed new modes for engaging with political discourses of race, geography, and class through matrices of performance art during the 1980s and 1990s.

## **Art Activism in the 1980s and 1990s: The Work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo**

Due to the shifting political climate of the United States in the 1980s, the changing relationship between the United States and its southern neighbor presented the fertile inspiration by which art activists could create artworks that functioned as forms of resistance against hegemonic systems of power. No single art activist utilized stereotypes and aesthetics of indigenization in order to critique America's cultural imperialist past while speaking to the formation of hybrid identities with as much skill as Guillermo Gómez-Peña. As one author notes, somewhere "between literature, theatre, and performance, there is the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a border explorer who spread his interest to several artists and cultural activists of Tijuana" (Eraña 97). Through the trajectories of his performance art and workshops, Gómez-Peña, following in the tradition of some Chicano artists in the 1970s, utilized symbols of mysticism in order to theorize "new ways of understanding transnational identities and a future condition of decolonization. Since that time, many Chicanos have talked about this North/South relationship in terms of the 'Aztlán', the 'mythical' homeland of the Aztecs, viewing it as a heritage and identity they can claim as their own" (Leclerc and Dear 16). This idea of embodying an indigenous identity in order to critique the stereotypes engendered within the border is illustrated in *Son of Border Crisis*, a 1991 art film by Isaac Arstenstein which features Gómez-Peña dressed in a hybrid collection of indigenous garb (See Appendix, Fig. 2). This film presents short segments in which Gómez-Peña addresses issues of Otherness, migration, and the imagined threats associated with the national border.

In one segment, entitled "The Mexican Fly," Gómez-Peña reads from a fake script written for a radio program. He begins to intone that the "Mexican fly" is heading north and will begin to destroy the crops of Southern Californians, a metaphor he utilizes to address fears often associated with migration. Gómez-Peña critiques these fears by referencing the "fear of Otherness" that many inhabitants of the border region hold in relation to undocumented individuals who cross the border. He notes that "there is no insecticide for the Mexican fly, no antidote for your fear of otherness...For otherness keeps leaking into the country, into your psyche" (*Son of Border Crisis*). In this way, Gómez-Peña examines sentiments of xenophobia that are engendered at the site of the border while embodying the stereotypes that are associated with a kind of commercialized Tijuana aesthetic. He accomplishes this through his unique wardrobe choices: his black hat evokes a 1960s Pachuco fashion sense, his bandolier draws comparisons to that of Mexican revolutionaries like Emiliano Zapata, and the indigenous-styled trinkets he wears are a nod to mestizaje multiculturalism, which is still present in modern Mexican culture. In this way, it seems as though Gómez-Peña creates a hybrid identity composed of various elements of a Chicano, Mexican-American past that is highly fetishized. Additionally, in burdening himself with commercialized trinkets that evoke the stereotypes present in border discourses, Gómez-Peña simultaneously bears the full weight of these stereotypes; he becomes the willing, living mirror through which the audience's own fears and perceptions of the "Other" are reflected back.

In addition to the aforementioned work, Gómez-Peña has also been involved with the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, commonly referred to as BAW/TAF, an artist collective composed of activists, intellectuals, and artists from the San Diego region of Southern California promoting cross-cultural dialogues between artists and citizens of the border region. BAW/TAF's work points "to a new diversity of cultures evolving at the

intersection of old ones. Their work deconstructs racial stereotypes and subverts the notion of cultural and political pluralism, eliminating the concept of boundary” (Brookman 189). Between 1984 and 1989, these artists installed and displayed works such as the 1987 piece *Is the Border in your Mind, on the Ground or in the Media*, an all-encompassing visual and aural art experience which asked viewers to look at the U.S.-Mexico border through a new lens of cultural multiplicity rather than ethnocentrism. The trajectory of this piece, which incorporated iconic images of migrants and rifle-wielding drug lords, resisted the concept of “the border as a ‘war zone’” (Kelley 14). By utilizing a variety of images of stereotyped individuals, these artists created a hybrid representation of the border region and those who inhabit it.

In discussing the roles both the Border Art Workshop and, more specifically, Gómez-Peña’s work have played in re-contextualizing the U.S.-Mexico border, it is possible to see how their artworks were rooted in a Chicano aesthetic and dealt with an imperial past. In this way, one can see how the Chicano artscape of the 1970s influenced the changing artscapes of the 1980s and early 1990s. By looking at these two periods of transborder art activism in relation to each other, they both sought to recontextualize issues of decolonization and the indigenous histories that underlie the Chicano communities of the border region. Interestingly, in looking at these various works, one can notice how we “are located within the iniquitous circulation routes that connect the traces of the imperial past with the global present” (Meskimmon 57). This illustrates how the phenomenon of cultural imperialism is reframed through global cultural flows produced by art activists. While BAW/TAF was an important historical collective and Gómez-Peña’s performances set the groundwork for new vectors of art activism, more contemporary instances of transborder art activism can be explored through the work of Los Angeles-based artist Rubén Ortiz-Torres.

### **Transborder Art Activism in the Early 2000s: The Work of Rubén Ortiz-Torres**

By studying the trajectories of Rubén Ortiz-Torres’ work and how it engages local sites of culture, one can see how his work marks another transition in the artscapes that critique globalization. In looking at one specific art work he created in the early 2000s, one may also notice how the hybridization between cultures comes together and forms new ways of imagining oneself in relation to the U.S.-Mexico border. In the 2002 art installation called *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Ortiz-Torres displays a customized gold-plated lawn mower that has been refitted with a hydraulic pump system (See Appendix, Fig. 3). In a video posted on YouTube, Ortiz-Torres’ work can be seen “dancing” and spinning around in an eclectic show of excess and flashy effects. His piece *The Garden of Earthly Delights* utilizes the aesthetic of Chicano low-rider culture and marries it with the representation of migrant labor, which is a stereotype that is embedded within the use of lawn mowers by gardeners in many Southern California locales. In this way, Ortiz-Torres constructs a new hybrid identity out of two local sites of culture, which are the low-rider traditions of Southern California Chicano culture and the culture of migrant labor within this border region. Through these modalities, Ortiz-Torres “creates ultra-hybrid movable forms based on existing elements in popular culture...Building on the Chicano Low Rider tradition, he has applied the idea of customizing and hybridizing to his artwork” (Leclerc and Dear 27). This illustrates how he is able to blend trends of the “local” with forms of global contemporary art. Additionally, *The Garden*



of *Earthly Delights* blurs the line between the banality of objects and their fetishized representations, such as with the extravagant construction of the pink lawn mower in his piece.

In *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Ortiz-Torres manages to marry the stereotyped representations of migrant works with the vernacular attributed to contemporary art. In discussing his own work, Ortiz-Torres explains that underlying issues of power and property are in conversation with each other within his work, noting that “political boundaries start with private property of land protected and defined by force...Workers who have to cross these political and real estate boundaries usually tend to these gardens” (Leclerc and Dear 56). This speaks to the condition of how some migrant’s daily labor is defined in relation to the mechanical form of the lawn mower. By utilizing YouTube as a way of disseminating his work, Ortiz-Torres’ work illustrates how art is able to transcend physical territories and move into the borderless space of the Internet. By engaging with the space and specificity of the local, such as Chicano low-rider culture, Ortiz-Torres is able to bring local sites of culture into the realm of the global through websites like YouTube. Another transborder art activist who uses the digital realm as a platform for critiquing global cultural flows is Ricardo Dominguez, creator of the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*.

### **Transborder Art and Electronic Civil Disobedience: Ricardo Dominguez and the Transborder Immigrant Tool**

In the realm of art activism in the present day, it seems fitting that practices and theories of contemporary art should cross paths with the technological conventions of the year 2010. It seems that no one understands the potential of this combination better than Ricardo Dominguez, a tenured faculty member at the University of California, San Diego. Working within both the Visual Arts Department as a professor and as a researcher at the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology, known as Calit2, Dominguez utilizes his knowledge of both fields in order to create contemporary art pieces which resist dominant discourses about the U.S.-Mexico border while also questioning the role of art within the global institution of art itself. Within this discussion about transborder art activism, it will become clear that the “institution of art is seen here as the social structure which has the power to legitimize what is art and who is an artist through its control of the process of production, circulation and consumption” (Malagamba-Ansótegui 28). Through the development of his device and the mass media’s reaction to it, Dominguez illustrates that art that provokes a new kind of discourse about the border is capable of legitimizing itself as a social force.

The *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, created by Dominguez and a team of artists, is a cell phone with GPS capabilities that is able to locate water bins in the desert (See Appendix, Fig. 4). This virtual divining rod is intended to be used by undocumented migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border who are in danger of suffering from dehydration. In addition to providing the locations of water bins, the device also shows the nearest U.S. Border Patrol stations and other landmarks on both sides of the border.

In terms of the digital nature of Dominguez’s work, it is important to realize that, while the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* is a physical object, its significance can be found in the fact that videos of the tool being used and discussed dominate the digital realm and inhabit the virtual flows of the Internet; local migration phenomena makes a global impact due to its presence on YouTube and other social networking websites, such as Facebook and

Twitter. This form of resistance to hegemonic discourses on migration defines the artwork as one that “cannot be absorbed into the pleasures of a global marketing culture...One that speaks its location as more than local, yet makes no claim to universality for its viewpoint or language. One that knows the border and crosses the line” (Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg 105). Through the dissemination of this tool, Dominguez’s artwork forms a new digital signature that is hybridized with other migrant identities, bringing this local phenomenon into the sphere of the global. In many ways, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* not only helps individuals cross the U.S.-Mexico border, but the work itself crosses new ideological and cultural boundaries in the virtual realm. This project is significant within postborder attitudes due to the fact that it “examines how global and local events intersect and become manifest in the work of the individual artist” (Holo 10). Another interesting dimension that is exhibited in this example of transborder art activism is how the device becomes a part of larger discussions on academic freedom. Most notably, FOX News correspondent Glenn Beck likened Dominguez’s *Transborder Immigrant Tool* as an attempt to indoctrinate art students with fascist, rebellious attitudes toward United States’ laws. While this view is skewed, it is still interesting to consider, since it illustrates how Dominguez’s work opens up the possibility for artworks to become part of a larger global discussion.

## Conclusion

By utilizing the physical landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border as a point of departure, this discussion has examined the modes by which transborder art practices function as political strategies for re-imagining issues of xenophobia, migration, and labor through more complex frameworks. This research has attempted to illustrate the problematic nature of thinking about globalization and cultural flows too simply. This is often a difficult task when taking into account that the “fantasy that we live in a global village, a worldwide community connected across geographic distances...is an appealing one. The realities of globalization are far more problematic” (Bunting 34). To merely focus on the way physical bodies and markets move across the border is to ignore those actors of social change that are actively engaged in creating new ways of thinking about culture in regions as dynamic as those that surround national borders. By looking at instances where art and activism collide, one can see how studying transborder art activism through an analysis of artscaapes can constitute a new paradigm for thinking about artistic resistance in relation to geopolitical barriers and globalization. Works such as Gómez- Peña’s *Son of Border Crisis* performance and Dominguez’s *Transborder Immigrant Tool* are not simply thought-provoking pieces; they are works capable of reshaping border discourses.

As this research indicates, analyzing the ways in which transborder artists and artworks have, over the past four decades, adjudicated issues related to globalization reveals the complex political landscape in which artists have often formed bi-national, multicultural identities in solidarity with those who have been both marginalized and indigenized by the border wall’s existence – from migrant workers to generations of Mexican-Americans. Within this virile space, art activists have been able to negotiate their art practices as a means of resistance and cultural production. This illustrates the ways in which transborder art activists practice agency in a cross-border context. Additionally, by subverting the influence of art markets in the United States, transborder art activism, in tandem with the cultural flows present in this border region, presents new conditions for local and global communities of

artistic practice to flourish. By developing a new framework for studying geopolitical barriers and the role they play in shaping the political and social rhetoric embedded in this landscape, perhaps it is possible to think about borders not as barriers, but as catalysts for social change and structures of empowerment.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Malaquías Montoya, *Undocumented*, 1981



Figure 2: Isaac Artenstein, *Son of Border Crisis*, 1991: In this Screenshot from Artenstein's art film, Gómez-Peña can be Seen Performing as a Disc jockey, Embodying Both an Indigenous and Chicano Past through his Attire



Figure 3: Rubén Ortiz-Torres, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 2002





Figure 4: Ricardo Dominguez, *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, 2010: Ricardo Dominguez (Right) Poses with his Device known as the Transborder Immigrant Tool Alongside his Colleague and Co-creator Brett Stalbaum

## About the Author

### *Christina Aushana*

Though my undergraduate education has been shared between the visual arts and communication studies, the penultimate fusion of my passion for both contemporary art practice and communication theory marked the moment that my research interests became clear to me. As a contemporary artist myself, I have gained both academic and cultural access to the various channels by which I have been able to study transborder art activism in relation to border politics. The power dynamics at work at the site of the border region have shaped how I confront issues of migration and have also factored into my personal experiences as a child of two immigrants as well. I have also begun to explore the issues engendered in my research through a more grassroots, local channel. A colleague and I have started a non-profit organization which aims to support community development and encourage social awareness through art for teens in the City Heights community of San Diego entitled, Rethink Art: Afterschool Art Activism. When I am not pursuing my research interests, I fulfill my duties as marketing director for [iJourneyGreen.org](http://iJourneyGreen.org), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization specializing in sustainable travel initiatives and partnerships with local projects worldwide.

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