

MIGRATIONS, POLITICAL BORDERS AND THE DIGITAL REALM. FORMS OF (IN)VISIBILITY AND DISRUPTIVE STRATEGIES IN LITERARY AND ARTISTIC ACTIVISM

MIGRAÇÕES, FRONTEIRAS POLÍTICAS E MUNDO DIGITAL. FORMAS DE (IN)VISIBILIDADE E ESTRATÉGIAS DISRUPTIVAS NO ATIVISMO LITERÁRIO E ARTÍSTICO

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Many studies have addressed the issue of migration and displacement, one of the main geopolitical challenges of our time, but far fewer have analysed it using an interdisciplinary framework and selecting literary and artistic practices from a transnational context. The purpose of this paper is to describe the way in which the artists use the specificity of *medium* and mechanism in their projects to reflect on the current migratory crisis and forced migration, to critique the securitization or the politics of immigration in recent years and to explore a tactical use of technologies in order to expand public consciousness and political debate. It is directly focused on the migratory processes involving Mexicans who go to the United States and its connection to the complex political imaginary of these regions, and on the relationship between identity and marginalization, particularly the influence of the conceptualization of migrants as the Other in contemporary European society. Based on the analysis of a series of case studies both from a theoretical and from an artistic point of view –, this research intends to understand how these projects explore forms of critical intervention, dissent or disruption of a dominant semiotic regime by stimulating critical thinking about consolidated narratives and sign systems of identity and difference.

Keywords: migration, marginalization, activism, artistic practices, digital poetry.

Muitos estudos têm abordado a questão da migração e do desenraizamento, um dos principais desafios geopolíticos do nosso tempo, mas são em menor número os que levaram a cabo essa análise com base num quadro interdisciplinar e seleccionando práticas literárias e artísticas de contexto transnacional. O objetivo deste artigo é

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descrever o modo como os artistas usam a especificidade do meio e do mecanismo nos seus projetos para refletir sobre a atual crise migratória e a migração forçada, criticar as estratégias securitárias ou a política de imigração nos últimos anos, ou explorar um uso tático de tecnologias para alargar a consciência pública e o debate político. Foca em especial os processos migratórios mexicanos com destino aos Estados Unidos e sua conexão com o imaginário político complexo dessas regiões e a relação entre identidade e marginalização, particularmente a influência da conceptualização dos migrantes como o Outro na sociedade europeia contemporânea. Partindo de vários estudos de caso – tanto do ponto de vista teórico, quanto artístico –, esta pesquisa pretende compreender como esses projetos exploram formas de intervenção crítica, dissensão ou ruptura de um regime semiótico dominante ao estimular o pensamento crítico sobre narrativas consolidadas e sistemas sógnicos de identidade e diferença.

Palavras-chave: migração, marginalização, ativismo, práticas artísticas, poesia digital.



1. The past decades have witnessed what might be described as an artistic orientation towards the social. Regardless of geographical location, this ‘social turn’ had a profound impact on the conventional modes of artistic production and consumption, transforming (in some cases, dramatically) the relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience. Claire Bishop, who has made important contributions to the theory of contemporary practices concerning the aesthetics of social participation or socially engaged art, coined this label by using it for the first time, in 2006, in the essay “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” (Bishop 2012, pp. 11-40) to refer to the thread of artistic practices that operate in a social context, especially outside the space of museums or galleries, and the greater involvement of artists with social issues, through participation and collaboration. More recently, in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, she advocated that this phenomenon should be more accurately analyzed as “a return to the social, part of an ongoing history of attempts to rethink art collectively” (Bishop 2012, p. 3), having in mind previous moments, in the Western context, as the avant-garde movements of the beginning of 20th century and the 1960s. This growing field of artistic practices goes under a variety of names: ‘activist’, ‘interventionist’,

‘community-based’, ‘cooperative’ or ‘participatory’ art, but theoretically a confusion persists about – and some resistance to – what we might refer to as ‘socially engaged’ art. Projects of participatory and collaborative art expose the limitations of dominant theories of art and open up new possibilities for meaningful interactions between creativity, literary practices, the arts, and the other domains of human action and life. Thanks to their collective and participatory nature, many projects “reintegrate art into society as cultural expression rather than as strictly personal gesture” (Finkelppearl 2013, p. 98).

The concept of *relational aesthetics*, introduced by the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, was an early and productive attempt to theorize what might be described as a ‘social turn’ in artistic practices and to explore some artworks from the 1990s that sought to stimulate various modes of social engagement. The opposition between relational and private sets the stage for a discussion of a new kind of work based on a context of interaction rather than isolation. As a matter of fact, Bourriaud offers an expanded vision of the artwork, rejecting the object-centered ontology of art that continued to dominate until then. The idea of a relational art, “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space, points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural, and political goals introduced by modern art” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 14).

As a consequence of the dynamic of reintegrating art into society, the contemporary work challenges artistic autonomy, imbuing its exemplars with a multiplicity of nonaesthetic values. As pointed out by Bourriaud, it is no longer possible to view the artwork as “a space to be walked through”, but as “a period of time to be lived through, like the opening of an unlimited discussion” (Bourriaud 2002), due to a radical change in the way it encounters other formations.¹ On the other hand, the fulfillment of socially

1 Alejandro G. Iñárritu and Emmanuel Lubezki’s virtual installation *Carne y Arena* (*Virtually present, Physically invisible*), which encourages debate about the human condition of immigrants and refugees, stands as a fine example of how an artwork can operate under these conditions. This VR project, distinguished with a Special Achievement Oscar Award, seeks to capture a fragment of the migrants’ personal journeys crossing the desert along the U.S. – Mexico border, creating an immersive experience for the public. Talking about *Carne y Arena*, Iñárritu recently noted: “my intention was to experiment with VR technology to explore the human condition in an attempt to break the dictatorship of the frame, within which things are just observed, and claim the space to allow the visitor to go through a direct experience walking in the immigrants’ feet, under their skin, and into their hearts” (retrieved from: <<http://www.lacma.org/carne-y-arena#about-the-exhibition>>). Having premiered at the 70th Cannes Film Festival, the first exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2017

engaged art implies rethinking the individualistic conception of the role of the creator.

The case studies considered here have in common forms of intervention, dissent or disruption of a dominant semiotic regime by stimulating critical thinking about consolidated narratives and sign systems of identity and difference. With a variety of connections, not only with other artistic movements but also with political and social organizations, they make the reader/viewer aware of what seemed non-existing because it was too 'normal', too self-evident, and in fact too many times non-visible. Mobilizing different forms of display, they put in motion a tactical use of technologies in order to expand public consciousness and political debate.² What we are unable to perceive because it does not fit any of our frameworks must be made to become potentially visible, available for perception, and creative practices are designed to open up the visibility of situations.

According to Jacques Rancière, one of the most influential philosophers of our time, whose work on consensus and dissensus in politics is relevant in understanding the essential role of voice and contestation within a community, "politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part. This institution is the whole of politics as a specific form of connection. It defines the common of the community as a political community [...]" (Rancière 1999, p. 11-12).

and the project is currently presented in its extensive full version at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, but the amount of information publicly available is still very limited, because it is a site-specific installation and the visitors are not allowed to take pictures and videos of anything contained within. Notwithstanding, I will try to discuss, in the following section, some of the issues that this kind of experience presents, based on the promotional material.

- 2 To define or understand the concept of 'Tactical Media' in a strict way still remains a difficult task, since it is constituted through and as practice rather than by any formal characterization. However, most commentators who have written about this phenomenon would agree that it clearly derives from the movement that combined art, experimental media and political activism in Amsterdam in the last decade of the 20th century, centered on figures such as David Garcia and Geert Lovink. From a theoretical point of view, the most decisive influence came from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, originally published in France in 1980. In this work, Certeau clearly distinguishes tactics, i.e. short-term actions, from strategy, which deals with more future-oriented work. At the beginning of a book entirely dedicated to this subject, Rita Raley provided a very productive definition of the major attributes at stake: "Generally taken to refer to practices such as reverse engineering, hacktivism, denial-of-service attacks, the digital hijack, contestational robotics, collaborative software, and open-access technology labs, 'tactical media' is a mutable category that is not meant to be either fixed or exclusive. If there were one function or critical rationale that would produce a sense of categorical unity, it would be disturbance. In its most expansive articulation, [it] signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible" (Raley 2009, p. 6).

In other words, the disagreement with and the challenging of consensus by those, no matter their condition, who are not part of the normal order plays a key role. It should be stressed that he also sees aesthetics as political and politics in aesthetic terms, emphasizing how it influences the *partage du sensible* (variously translated in English as “partition” or “distribution” of the sensible). The notion refers simultaneously to the conditions for sharing that establish the organization of a collectivity (‘partager’ as sharing) and to the sources of disruption or dissensus of that same order (‘partager’ as separating). The *police order* is as a set of implicit rules and conventions which determine the distribution of roles within a community (what the author refers to as the “order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their ‘nature’”³) and the forms of exclusion which operate within it, founded on what he calls “the distribution of the sensible”.⁴ It is obviously a place of political struggle made manifest when those groups or individuals whose modes of perception are regarded as illegitimate (mere noise, or insensible) by a governing distribution of the sensible demand to be taken into account. This operation of partitioning the sensible, namely via the definition of who can say and hear what, where, and when, has a relevant value when we discuss forms of visibility, ways of doing and making, from those typically excluded. As we shall see later, this conceptual framework is particularly useful for understanding the discursive practices on migration and the conceptualization of artistic production, in a broader sense, as a complex ground of negotiation between aesthetics and politics.

Following Rancière’s thought, the art historian and critic T. J. Demos argues, in *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (2013), that “aesthetics constructs the scene of politics as much as it defines and legitimates or delegitimates the discourses and

3 Rancière defines his understanding of this notion in the following way: “Democracy is not a regime or a social way of life. It is the institution of politics itself, the system of forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their ‘nature’ and places corresponding to their functions is undermined, thrown back on its contingency.” (Rancière 1999, p. 101).

4 A more detailed description of this core concept in Rancière’s work, can be found in *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution” (Rancière 2004, p.7).

competences within it” (Demos 2013, p. 28) and throughout his analysis of different case studies he clearly looks upon artistic practice as a space for negotiation between art and politics.⁵ The ways in which images circulate within contemporary society, especially after the shift to a rhizomatic communication system, has a direct influence on public perceptions of migration and on the definition of a politics of migration. In the introductory text (“Charting a course. Exile, Diaspora, Nomads, Refugees: A Genealogy of Art and Migration”), Demos discusses the terminological aspects of contemporary mobility, taking into account notions such as migration, exile, statelessness and nomadism, in relation to specific artistic works.

In order to explore these issues, I will address one of the most extensively studied migratory processes, that of Mexicans who go to the United States and its connection to the complex political imaginary of these regions, and the relationship between identity and marginalization, particularly the influence of the conceptualization of migrants as the Other in contemporary European society. The figure of the *migrant* has emerged as a pivotal element to rethink the *border* as a process and not just simply as an abstracted line separating territories. On the other hand, there is a persistent and very disturbing ambivalence in the public debate about immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers: they are increasingly defined through the fear of the Other and portrayed as a threat to national belonging and security, but in the context of liberal and humanitarian discourses of citizenship they appear as ‘human beings’ who need care. In this perspective, particular attention is paid to new forms of domination in contemporary life that are often hidden in benign humanitarian claims. The “double blackmail” Slavoj Žižek (2017) refers to in the title of his recent book *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors* and that which he vehemently urges we reject as presented by xenophobic, anti-immigrant right-wing populists and the politically correct liberal Left.

Many studies have addressed the issue of migration and displacement, one of the major geopolitical challenges of our time, but far fewer have analyzed it using an interdisciplinary framework and selecting literary and

5 The main purpose of the book is to examine how contemporary artists have investigated mobile lives, selecting artistic models in Europe, North America, the Middle East and North Africa. The author gives special attention to the works of Steve McQueen, Yto Barrada, Emily Jacir, the Otolith Group, Hito Steyerl, Walid Raad, Lamia Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Bernard Khoury, Ursula Biemann, Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri. Although from different perspectives, all of them “have blurred the divisions between fact and fiction, in order to propose a new politics of truth, one founded in contingency and self-transformation, and attached to critical doubt and political deliberation” (Demos 2013, p. 245).

artistic practices from a transnational context. What I will work to demonstrate is the way in which these artists and creators use the specificity of medium and mechanism in their projects to reflect on the current migratory crisis and forced migration, to critique securitization or the politics of immigration in recent years and to explore a tactical use of technologies in order to expand public consciousness and political debate. Instead of discussing the borderlands (in a literal and figurative sense) as a space of exchange, negotiation or hybridity, the aim is to explore the persistence of the binaries of native and alien, friend and enemy, emphasizing that these literary and artistic practices criticize them and as such provide an alternative vision.⁶

2. The *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (TBT) by Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT)/b.a.n.g. lab, which currently exists in prototype form as a GPS-enabled cell phone application, is an activist work that combines poetry with a tool to help migrants crossing the Mexico/US border in the desert of Southern California by giving them information about water caches and safety sites. The project's collaborators include activist and *virtual sit-ins* pioneer Ricardo Dominguez, performance artists Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand, programmer Brett Stalbaum, and poet Amy Sara Carroll. EDT arose from the experience of working with the Critical Art Ensemble, a group combining activism and technology, and *thing.net*, a portal dedicated to the dissemination of projects of art, activism and cultural criticism. The genealogy of EDT's work has a strong connection with the 'Civil Disobedience' (or the 'Resistance to Civil Government') of Henry David Thoreau and the Zapatista movement uprising in Chiapas. As a matter of fact, these two main references are present in some texts of the artistic collective, but it is important to quote the mid-nineteenth century message of Thoreau: "Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine", meaning by this the well-oiled machinery of the State and capitalism, by the time of the U.S. reterritorialization of Texas.⁷

6 Rita Raley discusses some of these issues and critical practices especially in the chapter "Border Hacks: Electronic Civil Disobedience and the Politics of Immigration" (Raley, 2009).

7 In "Resistance to Civil Government", Henry David Thoreau wrote: "If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth, – certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. *Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.* What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn."

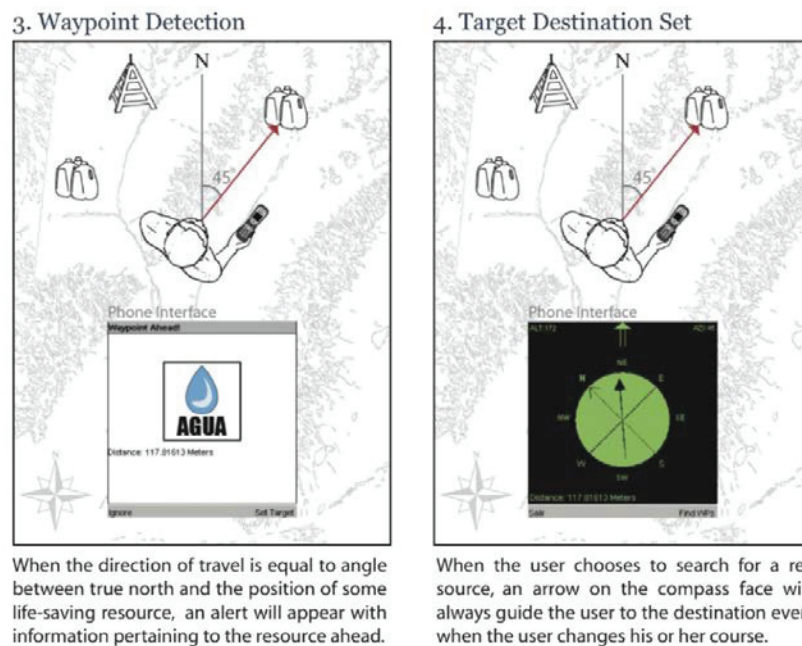


Fig. 1 - *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab

Driven by a radical philosophy of *electronic civil disobedience*, the piece can be seen as “a techno-disformalist gesture that interrupts the mass consensual hallucination of techné with the dance of daemonic codeswitching.”⁸ The TBT’s code was also freely available on-line to download at walking-tools.net as a mode to increase the accessibility of the prototype with far-reaching effects eventually. By offering multi-lingual poetry-in-motion, the

(Thoreau 1849, p.18; my emphasis). It is worth noting in this respect that the work known as “Civil Disobedience” did not appear under this title during the author’s lifetime. Initially delivered as a lecture in 1848, it was titled “On the Relation of the Individual to the State” and in another publication, the following year, it appeared with the title “Resistance to Civil Government”. In fact, only four years after Thoreau’s death, in 1866, the work appeared effectively as “Civil Disobedience”.

8 A more detailed analysis of this problem, can be found in the following paper co-authored by EDT 2.0 members: “In much new media art, code and its related armatures serve as *techné*, as a pyrotechnic that impresses the audience into a stupor of belief. While many consider the functioning of the technology in a new media project to be a measure of its quality or importance, EDT 2.0 would call such systems of evaluation *techno-formalist*. [...] TBT is a techno-disformalist gesture that interrupts the mass consensual hallucination of techné with the dance of *daemonic codeswitching*.” (Cárdenas *et al.* 2015, pp. 35-36).

project intended to highlight a utopian dimension of universal fellowship and of a world not circumscribed by reinforced national borders.

On the other hand, we cannot separate the project from the ongoing discussion about walking practices in contemporary art, often coupled with performance-based formats, site-specific and landscape art or exploring lived environments.⁹ In line with a long and fruitful history that we can trace back to the artistic experiments of Dadaists and Situationists, the mobile device's poetic intervention can be seen as a "durational walking art piece" (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2009) which can provide an aesthetic experience to the users. They should not only be able to move safely through the desert, but also to encounter the landscape in the same way that American painters like Thomas Cole in the mid-nineteenth did: as "a sublime object".¹⁰ The aim is not to romanticize a migrant's trek across the desert and the limits it places on human endurance, but to discuss the ideological basis of the North-American political and cultural discourses about this territory in different periods of time: connecting it to the national imagination as it occurred in the 19th century or viewing it as a more and more prominent (and problematic) marker of American identity in the present. Nevertheless, Dominguez refuses the integration of the piece in the field of locative media, preferring

⁹ Walking (especially in the urban context) as an aesthetic practice and a critical tool has a long-standing tradition, beginning with Charles Baudelaire's and Walter Benjamin's cultural concept of *flâneur* and the Surrealists and Dadaists experiments during the 1920's. Other avant-garde groups such as the Situationist International made the act of walking more radical by introducing the aesthetic-performative action of *dérive* and the theoretical concept of *psycho-geography* as a form of alternative construction of the engaged relation with the world. During the decades of 1960s and 1970s, artists from the Fluxus movement or the Land Art (D. Oppenheim, V. Acconci, R. Long) used walking in urban or rural environments to expose the sensory, poetic and performative attributes of the landscape. More recently, a new generation of artists and DIY technologists has been paying increasing attention to the creative power of this approach bringing together aspects from different cultural traditions and combining technologies in the field of locative art, i.e. the art of mobile and wireless systems. According to Drew Hemment, artists "are responding to the technical possibilities of electronic mapping and positioning technologies and location-aware, networked media by asking what can be experienced now that could not be experienced before" (2006, p. 349). In this sense, we live in a world of complex cross-fertilization between the art of communications and networking and the arts of landscape, walking and the environment. A new sense of socio-political consciousness is growing among the members of the artistic community and the increasingly politicized nature of space and location (*e.g.* the blurring of the boundaries between public and private; the exercise of control of locations and bodies through surveillance and the digital panopticon...) is a major topic of discussion within locative art practice and theory.

¹⁰ According to R. Dominguez, "immigrants should not only be able to move safely, find water, and hear poetry [...] but they should also be able to encounter the landscape in a way that American painters have approached the landscape: as a sublime object" (Goldstein, 2010).

instead the idea of putting in motion “dislocative media”, since it produces a poetics that challenges borders and connects with often overlooked bodies. The starting point of the research was precisely the question: “What would/ does it mean to strip locative media of its implicit urbanity?” (Cárdenas *et al.* 2014, p. 4).

When first released the TBT attracted attention from a wide range of social actors across the political spectrum, who contested its provocative poetry and functionality, its alleged violation of immigration laws and the misuse of taxpayers’ dollars to fund this kind of project. Although the project was conceived having in mind a target audience of men and women risking their lives to cross a potentially deadly border, the most relevant feature was certainly the debate and the unveiling of the logics with which borders are dealt with. By combining technology, poetry and art, it was able to question a series of discourses concerning the border and the controversy generated clearly demonstrates the competing visions of America (or, more generally speaking, of modes of being in the world) offered by poets/ artists, journalists, opinion makers and politicians. As Dominguez puts it: “The performative matrix of TBT allows viral reportage, hate-mail, GPS, poetry, the Mexico/U.S. border, immigrants, to encounter one another in a state of frisson – a frisson that seeks to ask what is sustenance under the sign of globalization-is-borderization” (as cited in Bird, 2011). Since its first conceptualization, the tool has remained provisional (insistently presented as a “work-in-progress”), facing some technical challenges (the encryption of map data to prevent malicious actions; power usage and battery life issues; etc.) and legal questions (e.g. federal investigations), but the main point was the performance of all the actors in this agonistic dispute. The amount of attention paid to the project by scholars, artistic communities, galleries and other institutional spaces also proves that it has an ongoing life beyond the desert.

According to this artistic collective, these interventions could provide “a bit of poetic sustenance, to enact a space of hospitality and to welcome the traveler into a new space” (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2010). Speaking about TBT as a poetic gesture and having in mind Audre Lordé’s pronouncement that “poetry is not a luxury”, Amy Sara Carroll admitted that it attempted “to address those vicissitudes [disorientation, sun exposure and lack of water], but also to remember that the aesthetic – freighted with the unbearable weight of “love” – too, sustains” (Dominguez 2017, p. 4). Let us take an example, the poem *Transition (song of my cells)*:

Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing *la migración de los pueblos mexicanos*, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán” (1999 [1987], p.33). The historical? The mythological? Aztlán? It’s difficult to follow the soundings of that song. Today’s borders and circuits speak at “lower frequencies,” are “shot through with chips of Messianic time.” Might (O chondria!): imagine the chips’ transliteration and you have “arrived” at the engines of a global positioning system – the transitivity of the Transborder Immigrant Tool. Too: when you outgrow that definition, look for the “trans-” of transcendental -isms, imperfect as overwound pocketwatches, “off”-beat as subliminalities (alternate forms of energy which exceed Reason’s predetermined star maps). Pointedly past Walden-pondering, el otro lado de flâneur-floundering – draw a circle, now “irse por la tangente” — neither gray nor grey (nor black-and-white). Arco-iris: flight, a fight. Of fancy. This Bridge Called my Back, my heart, my head, my cock, my cunt, my tunnel. Vision: You. Are. Crossing. Into. Me.¹¹

This text has been under special attention by the mainstream media and the public opinion since Glenn Beck, an American television host and conservative political commentator at Fox News Channel, on September, 2010, considered it as threat to national security and condemned the provocative and sexually explicit content of its final lines. The text has a strong cross-cultural dimension, combining American, Mexican and Chicano elements, helping to reinforce transnational cultural identities on the territory of the Mexico/US border and (re)building the migrants’ culture through one of its most important myths, Aztlán.¹² Since Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/*

11 For the video exhibited in “Space is the Place” at the Gallery of the National College of Art & Design in Dublin, as part of the program of ISEA 2009, see: <<https://vimeo.com/6109723>>. Text of poems: Amy Sara Carroll. Video poems design: Ricardo Dominguez, Micha Cárdenas, and Elle Mehrmand. Voices included in the poems: Micha Cárdenas, Amy Sara Carroll, Césaire Carroll-Dominguez, Patrick Carroll, and Ricardo Dominguez. Collaborative inspiration: Brett Stalbaum.

12 Aztlán is the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, the ancient Mesoamerican civilization also known as the Mexica. It is worth noting that Gloria Anzaldúa, in the first chapter of her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* entitled “The Homeland, Aztlán. El otro Mexico”, gives more information about the broader context of the migrations across large parts of the continent with cultural and ideological consequences in the contemporary debates: “During the original peopling of the Americas, the first inhabitants migrated across the Bering Straits and walked south across the continent. The oldest evidence of humankind in the U.S. – the Chicanos’ ancient Indian ancestors – was found in Texas and has been dated to 35000 B.C. In the Southwest United States archeologists have found 20,000-year-old campsites of the Indians who migrated through, or permanently occupied, the Southwest, Aztlán – land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place of origin of the Azteca.” (1999, p. 26). For a more detailed discussion of the multiple roles that Aztlán has played at various moments in time, see Miner (2014).

La Frontera: The New Mestiza (first published in 1987), border culture is understood as *una herida abierta*, with a rich and complex history of identity negotiation.¹³ The definition of national borders was carried out by subsuming and dividing indigenous peoples, which means that a vast territory could be seen as a single and wounded body that bleeds. On the other hand, it also contains allusions to Thoreau, the *flâneurs* of the 19th century and feminist texts of Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, elements that are interwoven with references to TBT. In this fragment, the technological context, the Chicano Movement, feminism, literature and the act of walking form a hybrid text for the migrant who intended to cross the border illegally, violating the vision of a certain cultural construct endorsed by people as Beck. Likewise, the cell phone is a hybrid, a bastard, a modified artifact to help moving from one country to another.

There is no consensus about the exact numbers of people dying while attempting to cross the border, but all the estimates (official and unofficial) are, by any ethical and moral standards that we could evoke here, shocking. While the project may be seen in the light of new media art practices, one can also see this appropriation of widely available technology to provide aid as similar to the mission of other local humanitarian organizations.¹⁴ EDT2.0/b.a.n.g. lab members are more interested in the potential opened up by technologies to improve people's lives directly and, in this context, it could be seen as part of a larger shift from Tactical Media to Tactical Biopolitics in contemporary media art.¹⁵ Apart from the clear intention to provide a functional dimension to the piece, we must also recognize its con-

13 G. Anzaldúa had a vital role in discussing the borderlands as a space of a particular "border culture". See, for instance, this excerpt of *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "The U.S. – Mexican border es *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition." (1999, p.25).

14 Such as *No Más Muertes /No More Deaths* <<http://forms.nomoredeaths.org/en/>>, the *Border Angels /Angeles de la Frontera* <<http://www.borderangels.org/>>, or *Humane Borders/ Fronteras Compasivas* <<https://humaneborders.org/>>.

15 This transformation is clearly outlined in *Activist Media and Biopolitics: Critical Media in the Age of Biopower*: "Biopower suspends the traditional boundaries of the 'human', isolating a sphere of what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life' as the leverage of the political, a sphere that is both within and outside the law, at the cost of a lived life, a political life. [...] While tactical media declined as a result of the normalisation of the Internet, biopolitical activism challenges the sphere of bare life where law is not fully in force and political agencies cannot be held accountable." (Sützl & Hug 2012, p. 5).

dition as a cultural product aimed at bringing into light the inequality, the racial and political boundaries that can lead to misunderstandings on both sides of the border. Prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination can make people reluctant or even opposed to accept others whom they perceive as *different* and the effort to counter, through digital media art, the many negative portrayals of migrants is a tactical operation. A wide range of perceived negative changes in many Western societies have strengthened the voice of those who only see in migrants (despite of the specific geographical origin) and their different traditions a threat to public order, national identity and security. This situation, often exacerbated by social and political actors who use migrants as scapegoats, is related to the prevalent model of racialized bodies and to the asymmetric nature of the border's permeability for US citizens going to Mexico or migrants trying to move to the North.¹⁶

An inspired aesthetic experience responsive to such developments is Alejandro G. Iñárritu and Emmanuel Lubezki's virtual installation *Carne y Arena* (*Virtually present, Physically invisible*). When the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, on November 2017, honored it with a Special Award, the artwork was described as "a visionary and powerful experience in storytelling" and "a deeply emotional and physically immersive venture into the world of migrants", connecting us "viscerally [...] to the hot-button political and social realities of the U.S. – Mexico border".¹⁷ Based on accounts from migrants whose stories inspired and informed the entire project, *Carne y Arena* deliberately challenges the notions of subject and observer, allowing individuals to walk through a sophisticated simulation of a real-life performance with tactile elements like sand and other characteristics of the desert's landscape. It is a six and half minute solo experience, providing a fully immersive environment of a journey with a group of migrants. As reported by some visitors (and the technical information about the

16 More recently, Mexico initiated its Southern Border Plan under pressure from the U.S. and the active detention efforts by the guards have become a serious problem. In her essay "Three emergent migrations: an epochal change", Saskia Sassen brings up the question quoting Ruben Figueroa, from the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement, who considers that "this strong persecution by federal authorities has resulted in accidents where migrant minors have died and been injured in clashes between human smugglers and police. It has also led to imprisonment, to deaths, and to these unaccompanied children disappearing – some wind up in reasonable places such as church shelters or are taken in by generous households. Others are languishing as street kids. Yet others have disappeared without a trace. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has recently expressed its "concern over stepped-up actions reportedly being taken against migrant persons" (Sassen 2016, p. 33).

17 Cf. <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0327944/news>>. See also note 1.

project corroborates), the experience of crossing the desert and the problems faced by migrants, especially when they are detained and questioned by U.S. Border Patrol, are vividly represented.¹⁸ In fact, the project allows the participant (outfitted with a backpack, a head-mounted display and headphones) to experience a sense of presence in an immersive, computer-generated, three-dimensional, interactive environment. The multiple sensory modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and olfactory) create an evocative exposure to dramatic events, enabling complete focus on content without distractions and, thus, providing an entirely new perspective on migration and integration issues. It is therefore of great importance to understand in detail how the participants have responded to and negotiated the impact of these extreme conditions, establishing an empathic connection with subjects from 'elsewhere' (I'm thinking here in the dichotomy U.S. *versus* T.H.E.M. inscribed in Fig. 2).

Another most vivid vision of what occurs during this migratory process, in the Mexico/U.S. border, is presented by *Border Memorial: Frontera de los Muertos*, an Augmented Reality (AR) piece created by John Craig Freeman and Mark Skwarek, public artists with a large experience in using emergent technologies to produce large-scale public work and founding

18 The project employs state-of-the-art immersive technology and the "Waiver and release of liability" that a person who participates in this activity (at least in the case of the Fondazione Prada) must sign to acknowledge the risks involved is quite impressive, as we can see by this fragment: "[it] includes various virtual reality and related activities which may feature a variety of experiences and images, including but not limited to experiences and images that are frightening and/or disturbing. I understand that virtual reality experiences like the Experience [the VR experience named *Carne y Arena*] are highly immersive and can feel extremely realistic at times. I also understand and acknowledge that the Experience may be designed to incorporate features unique to virtual reality experiences that are intended to enhance the realism of the Experience" (retrieved from: <<http://www.fondazioneprada.org/wp-content/uploads/here.pdf>>). A short description of the first part of the VR installation can be found in a text signed by Alex Jen: "Upon arrival, viewers are led into a dim, stark holding room and instructed, as apprehended migrants would be, to take off their shoes. This first part of CARNE y ARENA re-creates las *hieleras*, or the freezers: short-term holding cells where migrants are held anywhere from twelve to seventy-two hours. Discarded shoes litter the room, contorted and encrusted in dirt, deformed from weeks of walking. An alarm blares, and participants walk into the next room, where coarse desert sand digs into bare feet. A backpack, a virtual-reality headset, and headphones send them off to the border. Without warning, a *coyote* (or smuggler) yells for the group to get down. But there's nowhere to hide; a helicopter above floods the group of participants with white light. Border agents surround the immigrants, and one points an AR-15 rifle at a young boy." (Jen 2017, p. 7). The installation ends with a series of video-portraits of migrants describing their stories and experiences.

members of *Manifest.AR*.¹⁹ The piece uses this technology to celebrate and remember the migrant workers who have died along the border trying to cross the desert. Designed for smart phone mobile devices, it allows a clear perception of the large extension of the loss of life by showing where human remains have been found through virtual objects consisting of life sized, three dimensional models of a skeleton effigy. These objects have a strong visual connection with the *calaca*, a traditional form of wood-carving from Oaxaca used during the Mexican Day of the Dead (or 'Día de los Muertos') to honor deceased loved ones. These celebrations developed from ancient traditions among its pre-Columbian cultures reinforcing the idea that death, despite the pain and sorrow, should always be celebrated. In this sense, *Border Memorial* is a gesture of remembrance and celebration of those who have died, but ultimately it brings this issue into focus hoping that it would provoke change in political and public debate. According to John Craig Freeman, the project "is intended to provide a kind of lasting iconic presence in an otherwise ephemeral physical environment and cultural discourse" (Ulmer & Freeman 2014, p. 64).

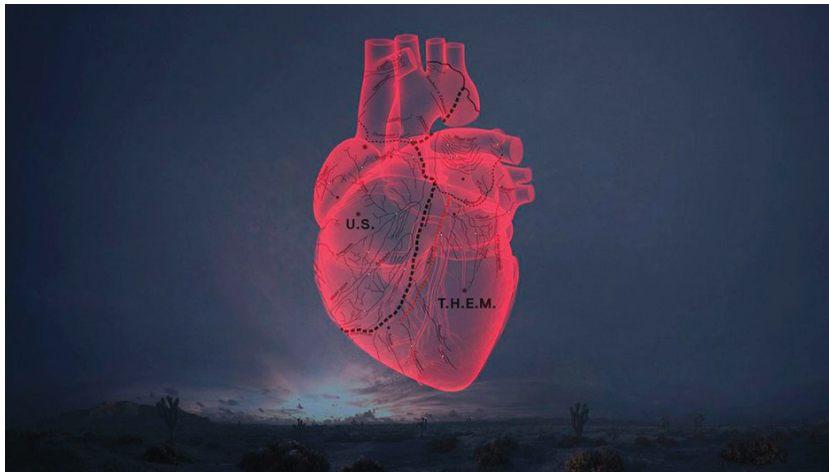


Fig. 2 – *Carne y Arena* (*Virtually present, Physically invisible*), Alejandro G. Iñárritu and E. Lubezki

¹⁹ For a vivid illustration of the quality of the project, see the video "Border Memorial Data in Google Earth" <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwXQUTxST74>>.



Fig. 3 – *Border Memorial/Frontera de los Muertos*, John Craig Freeman / Mark Skwarek

Despite the technical specificities and affordances of the projects, they can be read in terms of a broader debate about how visibility operates in the establishment of national borders and its political consequences. Intuitively we consider borders as a fixed location or a dividing line between territories, but it should be analyzed as a construct evolving under different circumstances and under different doctrines. Our perception of borders largely depends on the multiple and sometimes contradictory ways in which it is represented through visual, performative and linguistic frameworks. If we try to understand *Border Memorial* or *Carne y Arena*, for instance, as part of a vast countercultural set of artistic practices that are showing the dramatic consequences of the increased fortification of physical borders, we could say that the massive production of landscapes of control and surveillance is counterbalanced by the migrant's journey or the spectral presence of people who died during migration. It develops an interesting account of how people are becoming invisible within contemporary securitization and militarization processes that are taking place in borderlands.

3. Poets, artists, and activists from the last decades are repeating questions about the possibilities of social engagement, but there is a growing feeling that artistic communities might do more to articulate the politics of differ-

entiation and establish forms of opposition to the exclusion of immigrants/refugees/asylum seekers, granting this population the possibility of agency.

Particular attention is paid to cultural displacement, marginalization and the social invisibility of migrants, with a special focus on the condition of African immigrant women, in *aimisola.net/hymiwo.po: a poemtrack for a yet-to-be-written dance piece* (2015), an online and interactive collaborative work written and developed by Álvaro Seiça and Sindre Sørensen. The bringing into light of a gender perspective in the discussion around the theme of immigration in *aimisola.net/hymiwo.po* is most relevant, since for many decades (or centuries) women have found themselves and their interests marginalized or overlooked due to the hegemonic position of the stereotype of male immigrant.²⁰

The starting point of the creative process was the material produced in the context of the project AIMISOLA (an acronym that stands for: *Atención Integral para las Mujeres Inmigrantes: Itinerarios formativos para la inserción Social y Laboral*) based in Spain which sought to discuss and put in practice cultural and artistic activities to reinforce cultural diversity. One of the most salient features of the project was the creation of a *wiki* with capacity to support hypermedia poems and a digital archive of multimedia content (basically testimonies recorded as sound files, images and videos).²¹ This operation can be seen as an act of *(re)distribution of the sensible*, as described by Rancière: a device through which immigrant women claimed a voice beyond the constraints of their destiny and gained a different condition for themselves, allowing them to communicate (from both a direct and a mediated perspective) their stories to a wider audience. The digital poems based on the experience of these women and grouped under the rubric of “voices of immigrant women” reflect on various issues: women’s rights, rootlessness, social, gender and sexual inequality and aggression.

The material produced by AIMISOLA and the research conducted by Seiça and Sørensen on immigration policies and on the cultural (in a broader sense) context of Spain were key elements of *hymiwo.po* (an acro-

20 Álvaro Seiça highlights this fact in a recent essay about *aimisola.net/hymiwo.po*: “The work directly explores the condition of African immigrant women living in Spain” and the challenges or obstacles they face: “male dominance, unemployment, social exclusion, cultural integration, lack of education, sole responsibilities for household chores and child rearing” (Seiça 2017, p. 44). One of the most striking elements of Seiça and Sørensen’s poem is, in fact, the repetition or the refrain-like pattern “#immigrants all #immigrants we are/ we the #african mothers of the new europeans”.

21 <<http://aimisola.net>>

nym that stands for: *Hymn to imMigrant WOmEn, a POem*). Although it is directly connected with this specific geographical context, revealing the impact of a growing mass of immigrants on many levels of the Spanish society and of the political system, it also presents an opportunity to further discuss the major questions that affect migrations in Europe and across the world.

Since the initial idea of composing a *poemtrack* for the whole duration of *Masurca Fogo* (1998), a dance-theater piece by the German choreographer Pina Bausch (and Tanztheater Wuppertal) proved impossible, as Seiça himself admits in a recently published text about the conceptual and technical framework for the piece, he hit on another strategy: to write a *poemtrack* “not to an existing dance piece, but rather to a future one, one that had yet-to-be devised and choreographed” (Seiça 2017, p. 46), as an invitation for artistic collaboration. When reading the work it is important to keep in mind the dramatic (and fatal for so many) journey of thousands of migrants who wish to move permanently to another country and the soundscape has an intensifying effect over the verbal and cinematic content.

Leaving aside for the moment the introductory part of the poem, due to its mainly operational and technical nature, in the opening scene the keywords and expressions used to write the text are presented in a cinematic mode. Some of this linguistic content is marked with hash signs and messages are pulled from Twitter in real-time and presented on-screen, making use of information that corresponds to a certain number of hashtags relevant to the ideological background of the work. The resulting effect of this strategy is a combination of multilayered information amplifying the polyphonic nature of the heated debate on migration and its consequences. It is critical to note that there is a permanent balance between textual and visual elements that stay unchanged in the database, and thus act as the core of the poetic work, and the volatile scenario created by the flow of information posted on Twitter. Virtually everything on this social networking site related to the aforementioned topics, with their evanescence and multiplicity, can appear in front of the eyes of the reader-user. This aesthetic option of reinforcing the unstable condition of the work, because there is always a new and different textscape, and of avoiding a neat interface, as one of the authors tells us, “combines, repurposes, and subverts the screen’s media culture, and the visual and graphical display that characterizes current digital environments, since it addresses error and multiple textual fluxes” (Seiça 2017, p. 52).



Fig. 4 - *aimisola.net/hymiwo.po*: a poemtrack for a yet-to-be-written dance piece, Á. Seiça/ S. Sørensen

Addressing the question of social significance of media practices and of social media in particular is of vital importance today, especially when there is a techno-celebratory discourse on the emancipatory power of communication technologies and a growing appropriation of corporate social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter by contemporary activists. Dick Costolo, former CEO of Twitter, once said that this social media site would be the world's first "global town square", a new *agora*, a place where people go to participate and add their insights into the wider, global conversation. When social media are turned into a 'fetish' of collective action and appear to offer new hope for a participatory kind of democracy, we could ask how much of it is just background noise, a never-ending conversation and mere scenery? Given the strong emotions that immigration-related issues normally stir, to fulfill this hope we need to find the right balance in a 'noisy' environment such as contemporary social media (e.g. the appearance and political advance of anti-immigrant groups, movements and parties). On the other hand, whenever the poem is live performed, the audience can participate by inputting tweets and this is a model of interaction that has an enormous potential.

The contrast between *silence* and *noise* is a major item in the conceptualization of Seiça and Sørensen's piece. From the beginning, the word "silence" operates as an avatar that is connected to the visual representation of duration (the progression of each scene is controlled by the arrow keys)

and to the reader/player. In a more advanced part of the piece, the *poem-screen*, a soundless *poemgame* with a blue background that could replicate ocean traversals of migrants or refugees, the presence of the avatar “silence” is even more solid. ‘Silence’ carries positive connotations, since it is linked to the silence to which immigrants are pushed into and to more sophisticated historical notions of poetic silence, and ‘noise’ represents here, using the words of Seiça, “sound that is not articulated, being a metaphor for obstacles” (Seiça 2017, p. 53). If hitting ‘noise’, during the traversal to reach the other side of the coast and, symbolically, the rest of the poem, ‘silence’ will collide and sink. Although it is possible to consider such an interpretative model, the piece could benefit even more from a different perspective on the contrast silence/noise.

These texts and images (from AIMISOLA) have been used to tell what it means to be an immigrant, what it means not to have citizen rights, and to have to find a poorly paid work. Migration implies a radical experience of uncertainty, and the passage from one way of naming and speaking to another. This discontinuity is greater if, when moving from one country to another, the language changes, as we can see in the striking words of the piece: “the unreachable market of languages is not a flashy airport / it is meat carcass moored to each bay of #fear”. In this respect, the migrant is always a translator, someone who constantly lives between his original homeland and a new culture, the experience of what can or cannot be said in a different language. It is necessary to pay attention to what is lost and gained in these symbolic transfers, abandonments and recreations of meaning.

In fact, the piece opens up a space of possibilities for speech and dialogue, reminding us that there is a deeper level of invisibility, in which people and events are seen but not acknowledged as meaningful subjects. Facilitating the conditions of speech, encouraging oral exchange to take place where more often than not silence is the public discourse and allowing a space of self-presentation (directly, via the recorded testimonies, and artistically mediated through the poetic piece) can be a decisive step forward toward solving problems. Giving immigrant women a voice, recognizing their true value and building their sense of belonging to receiving societies, is a form of empowering them. The sense of belonging appears to be a decisive step in the process of formation and identity reconstruction and due to gender or ethnic hierarchies they are often limited by their migration status.

Within the discourse of citizenship, the non-citizen 'Other' is characterized by the absence of political agency and the voice reduced to a pathetic cry versus the articulated speech of the citizen. It is this one who is endowed with the ability to act and so to engage in politics. Jacques Rancière, in his seminal essay "Ten Theses on Politics" admits that the difficulty here is in "knowing which sign is required to recognize the sign" and asks:

how one can be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually voicing an utterance rather than merely expressing a state of being? If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths. (Rancière 2001, p. 10)

What is so compelling about this interpretation is the progression from *noise* to *speech*: "it has consisted in making what was unseen visible; *in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech*" (Rancière 2001, p. 10; my emphasis). Not to hear what comes out of the mouth of a significant number of human beings as language and, instead, to hear only cries of hunger or hysteria is a powerful way to deny them the quality of being political subjects.

4. The problem of the migrant's voice is a deeply political problem and one that reveals the characteristics of who really counts as a relevant political subject. For Krzysztof Wodiczko, a Polish artist living and working mainly in the US and one of the most significant practitioners of socially committed public art today, the emphasis on voice and the importance of making the margins audible to the mainstream are crucial. By giving visibility to hidden micro-communities and by constantly addressing social issues, his politically charged work indicates a certain link to the genealogy of tactical media. Significantly, he is cited by David Garcia and Geert Lovink, in *ABC of Tactical Media*, as a crucial precursor to this paradigm.²²

²² The following example illustrates this strong connection: "Tactical media's mobility connects it to a wider movement of migrant culture. Espoused by the proponents of what Nie Ascherson described as the stimulating pseudoscience of Nomadism. 'The human race say its exponents are entering a new epoch of movement and migration. The subjects of history once the settled farmers and citizens, have become the migrants, the refugees, the gastarbeiters, the asylum seekers, the urban homeless.' An excellent example of the tactical can be seen in the work of the Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko who 'perceives how the hordes of the displaced that now occupy the public space of cities squares, parks or railway station concourses which were once designed by a triumphant middle class to celebrate the conquest of its new political rights and

Since the late eighties, he has developed a series of nomadic instruments for both homeless and immigrant operators that function as implements for survival, communication, empowerment, and healing. He began to open doors to participatory practice by constructing the *Homeless Vehicle* (1987/88) as an instrument of survival for urban nomads with a group of the New York homeless (or “evicts”, his preferred term).²³ In the nineties, influenced by a stay in Paris, his artistic practice was more focused on the experiences of migration, dealing specifically with non-EU immigrants. In privileging the creation of electronic instruments to help people tell their stories and to increase the degree of visibility of their migrant experience, he calls for a taking into account the dissonant voices of ‘unauthorized speakers’ capable of exposing fractures and unstable arguments on the dominant narrative that sets the contexts and frameworks of border politics. In the context of his large project *Xenology: Immigrant Instruments* (1992-95), Wodiczko created a series of devices. One of them was *Alien Staff*, an instrument with the characteristic shape of a staff giving the immigrant the chance of telling his own story and addressing people. In fact, this project pushes us to rethink the disruptive power of subaltern migrant narratives. The basic composition of this multimedia device consists of a well-designed staff equipped with a small monitor and a loudspeaker at the upper end. In the central section of the piece, a transparent cylinder called “Xenolog Section” can be filled with personal objects, fragments of the life journey of the person carrying the staff (letters, family photographs, immigration papers). The artist designed it so the immigrant could hold the device in a public space, with the video monitor at the level of the head. On the screen we see the face of the operator and through the loudspeaker we hear the testimony of his journey. Attracting the attention of passers-by who approach the immigrant, it can be a fruitful and productive strategy to diminish the distance between individuals and to stimulate a situation of dialogue usually difficult due to cultural prejudices.

economic liberties. Wodiczko thinks that these occupied spaces form new agoras, which should be used for statements. ‘The artist’, he says, ‘needs to learn how to operate as a nomadic sophist in a migrant polis.’ (Garcia & Lovink, 2008; retrieved from: <<http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/articles/3160>>

23 For a brief description (and video presentation) of the project, see: <<http://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/wodiczko-krzysztof-homeless-vehicle-project>>



Fig. 5 - *Alien Staff*, Krzysztof Wodiczko

As Wodiczko asserts, “it is an instrument that gives the singular operator-immigrant a chance to ‘address’ directly anyone in the city who may be attracted by the symbolic form of the equipment, by the character of the ‘broadcast’ program, or by the live presence and performance of the operator” (Wodiczko 1999, p. 104). The artist himself considers the small monitor, its eye-level location, and its proximity to the operator’s face as key factors for the success of the project, because they draw the observer closer and thus closer to the operator, breaking the distance (literally and metaphorically) between the stranger and the observer. On the other hand, the double presence of the image of the face on the screen and the actual face of the person holding the staff should incite the observer to perceive the stranger as simultaneously ‘imagined’ (a character on the screen) and ‘experienced’ (a real-life person). In this sense, *Alien Staff* demonstrates that

changes in perception can produce more respectful attitudes towards others and encourage dialogue among individuals.²⁴

Despite Wodiczko's manipulation of abstract notions of the 'immigrant', part of his work is nevertheless inscribed within specific social contexts. In the case of the installation *Guests*, initially conceived as a response to the global migratory crisis and that has been touring since 2009 (the first version was presented in the Polish Pavilion of the Venice Biennale), we must recognize that little has changed, since then, in the fundamental questions facing migrants, specifically those who are involuntarily displaced. The project creates the illusion of windows, through which the viewer overhears conversations between migrants, exchanging remarks about their situation and problems, seemingly outside the gallery space.²⁵



Fig. 6 – *Guests*, Krzysztof Wodiczko

24 A similar logic informs the *Mouthpiece (Porte-Parole)* (1994), described by the artist as a “cyborgian bandage”: a video monitor, hanging from the neck of the users, showing of a mouth talking which is placed in front of the user’s mouth thereby opposing the epistemological myth of “direct address” as unmediated communication. For more details about Wodiczko’s transformative avant-garde and the ways of repurposing public art, see the conversation with M. J. Léger (Léger 2014).

25 For further documentation on the exhibition presented at the Polish Pavilion during the 53rd Venice Biennale, see <<http://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/wodiczko-krzysztof-goscie>>

Immigrants and refugees are agents who challenge the practices of democracy insofar as they call into question the validity of exclusionary political and cultural practices centered on the citizen. In an attempt to depict and interrogate the traditional concept of citizenship and the understanding of political agency, Wodiczko's works on xenology, i.e. the art and science of the stranger, allows viewers to consider identity from the viewpoint of the Other. As defined by the artist, it is an "art of refusal to be fused, an art of delimitization, deidentification and disintegration" (Wodiczko 1999, p. 131) and the core of a multimedia research performance design project. Highlighting the processes by which people are constituted, he opens up new possibilities for asking why and understanding how some attributes (namely, the political agency managed and controlled, creating a segregation between the citizen and the non-citizen) are so deeply rooted within the structure of the nation-state system.

His long-term interest in exploring social and political marginalization through the invention of mechanisms and solutions for alienated and excluded communities reminds us the importance of bringing such sensitive issues to public attention. What it may enable is a deeper understanding of people whose position in culture may appear to some as ghostly, living in the realm of non-citizenship. A focus on the counter-narratives of xenology disrupts the ordered uniformity of the discursive practices of representation in ways that are meaningful for a politics of agency. We could understand agency, in this context of vulnerable and marginalized populations, as the capacity to decide, and to exercise control over the conditions and spaces of being in which we live, being able to contest and demand participation through discourses and practices.²⁶

5. Unconventional artistic practices that have been flourishing outside the boundaries (at least, during a certain period of time) of mainstream circuits of museums, biennales or galleries are relatively common, but in the case of the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera we could say that one of the most striking characteristics of her work is the permanent escape from the format of contemporary artwork and from expectations. She has been working on a number of social projects for several years and started a center called *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI) in the multi-ethnic district of Corona in Queens, thanks to the support of the Queens Museum of Art in New York and Creative Time, a non-profit organization, to raise pub-

26 For a more detailed discussion of some of these issues, see for instance Balibar (2003; 2009).

lic awareness about the situation of immigrants (Fig. 7). This long-term project involves a large group of people and offers educational programming, health and legal services, or a series of workshops and events in collaboration with social services and local authorities. The IMI also aims to increase the visibility of social and political questions related to migrations (in a broader sense, since everyone at a certain point of life could become a migrant, regardless of the specific reasons) in the media and in cultural institutions through association with museums and other public organizations. It operates as a socio-political movement and as an art project, establishing affiliations with similar groups from other countries, taking in mind that immigrant issues can be better understood and worked on at a local and at an international level. Bruguera also began, in 2006, the process of forming a political party, the *Partido del Pueblo Migrante*, whose main purpose was to represent migrants.



Fig. 7 – Tania Bruguera/ Immigrant Movement International (IMI)

The new art-historical concept of *Arte Útil*, roughly translated into English as ‘Useful Art’, plays a decisive role in the articulation of the different levels of action: discussion, research, artistic practices, implementation of possible solutions to social problems and political activism. Although

the notion of 'Useful Art' is strong enough to emphasize the idea of an art which wants to define itself as useful, in the original it involves a more complex operation, suggesting art as a tool or device of empowerment, to give greater agency to people²⁷. Conceived in this way, art is meant to intervene in social reality and to help implementing long-term changes whenever necessary, instead of a more contemplative or merely representational perspective. According to Bruguera, one might identify early examples of *Arte Útil* in performances by the Dada artists, in the Russian Constructivists' objects and architecture or in artworks organized under the rubric of institutional critique, but her intention is to intensify art's role in making decisive social changes. It is beyond doubt that a sharp division between the conception of art as an autonomous field, in the sense of being differentiated from other social practices or from the corrupting market-driven cultural industry, and socio-politically engaged art is problematic, since artworks produced within the first context can also carry a strong political potential. Nevertheless, looking for new uses for art in society also brings new challenges for art criticism by destabilizing stable meanings and assumptions.

For more than twenty years, Bruguera has remained faithful to the useful component in her artistic practices, with a firm belief that art considered only as a proposal (i.e. without pragmatic results) is not enough in our contemporary world. The purpose of offering people something produced in the artistic realm but with a beneficial impact on the community, functioning as a mode of education for instance, is clearly present in *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*, an experiment in pedagogy involving the creation of a multifaceted, interactive, participatory school, but which she considered as a work of art in itself. In this project, which functioned as a postgraduate course for artists, she used as artistic material the participant's behavior ('conducta', in Spanish) in order to rethink the boundaries of performance. Another fine example is *The Francis Effect* (2014), a work informed by the tradition of Conceptualism and performance art, which also calls into

27 The artist and curators at the Queens Museum (NY), Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven) and Grizedale Arts (Coniston) have established a set of criteria to better understand what constitutes *Arte Útil*: "propose new uses for art within society; challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc.); be 'timing specific', responding to current urgencies; be implemented and function in real situations; replace authors with initiators and spectators with users; have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users; pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions; re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation." <<http://museumarteutil.net/about/>>. In 2013, the Van Abbemuseum hosted Tania Bruguera's exhibition and became the Museum of *Arte Útil*. The objects and situations were conceived as a way to stimulate new approaches that can change the way we act in society.

question the precarious situation of thousands of immigrants, displaced people and refugees across the world. The project involved petitioning Pope Francis to grant Vatican citizenship to all undocumented immigrants and during several weeks Bruguera collected signatures from passers-by near the Guggenheim Museum and in other places as well.²⁸

Symptomatically, the Manifesto published in November 2011 by the members of the Immigrant Movement International ends with a call for dignity – “Dignity has no nationality” – which could be considered as the driving force of this work and an attempt to change perceptions on the migrant’s rights.²⁹ The document was created by people from different fields of expertise (immigration academics, activists, politicians) and other community members. To achieve such a degree of cooperation has positive outcomes at different levels and certainly in terms of social significance of shared artistic vision. In particular, the dialogue (or the partnership) between Tania Bruguera and Saskia Sassen, a renowned sociologist that has been working on globalization and migration flows, deserves some attention.³⁰ Last year, they participated in a debate, in the South London Gallery, about “Art and Immigration”, addressing some of the issues and questions on the IMI’s agenda and giving a clear picture of the challenges lying ahead of us. In several occasions, but in a more articulated and thought-provocative way in her recent book *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Saskia Sassen has been reflecting on the causes (from new types of war and violence to destruction of land and water) and consequences of this emerging paradigm based on expulsion. “Today’s ‘migrants’ are increasing expelled. Today is an Era of Expulsions”, as stated in a brief document *The Palimpsest of Immigration*, signed by Bruguera, Sassen, Koo Jeong A and Richard Sennett.³¹ The book tries to explain the mechanisms behind the banishing of populations and biospheres across different regions of the globe, combining interdependent ecological, economic and political factors. One of the most compelling aspects of this new approach and one that should be at the center of any discussion in the coming years is the

28 <<https://www.guggenheim.org/video/tania-bruguera-on-the-francis-effect>>

29 At the beginning of the Manifesto, we find a special call to warn about the role played by certain concepts within the discursive practices on migration: “We have been called many names. Illegals. Aliens. Guest Workers. Border crossers. Undesirables. Exiles. Criminals. Non-citizens. Terrorists. Thieves. Foreigners. Invaders. Undocumented” <<http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/migrant-manifesto/>>.

30 For more details, see Sassen (2014; 2016).

31 <https://www.instagram.com/p/BI_Dzo1A5vP/>

evaluation of our current modes of conceptualizing and thinking inequalities and brutalities, because what exists today (and which is the result of a long critical tradition) is insufficient. It shows a lack of full understanding of the complexity of the systemic edges of society, especially during this brutal period we are living in, and whatever crosses these edges becomes *invisible*, expelled from the system completely.

6. International migration reached unprecedented levels, with more than one billion people on the move today, and there are strong reasons to think that the increase in the mobility of populations that had previously been sedentary will continue in the near future, due to economic and political inequality, military conflicts or climate change. Often unsuspecting people all of a sudden find themselves thrown out, dispossessed of professional occupations, home, assets and, more distressing than anything else, of their dignity.

The fight against xenophobia and intolerance involves thinking more about (and necessarily exposing) the structures of power, revealing contradictory political and ideological assumptions, and the discourses that constitute the figure of the migrant as the symbolic incarnation of *fearism*, i.e. “the systematic (often unconscious) production and perpetration of fear on others” (Fisher 2006, p. 51). In the postcolonial globalized world, mediated images of large-scale migrations have been crucial to reinforce the conception of ‘border’ as a site of danger, uncertainty or potential chaos.

It is crucial to conceive literary and artistic practices not as a way out of these politically and socially volatile times, but as an opportunity to take seriously the work of denouncing the paradoxical coexistence of patterns of mobility and the increasing desire of fortification of national boundaries. Across the world, societies are still trying to deal with the most visible challenges brought on by globalization: migrations on a large scale, transnational movements of capital, terrorism and expansion of the digital realm. It is completely fair to think about forms of regulation to facilitate more dignified, orderly and safe migration flows, but the political answer (with considerable support from large social groups, we must admit) has been almost the same in many regions: a system of total exclusion of immigrant labor. On the other hand, one may argue that borderlines are often naturalized, apparently unquestionable in their own nature, but it would be more appropriate to consider them as representational constructs, open to political changes and negotiation.

It is critical to catalyze powerful transformations in the consciousness of the viewer/reader and the questions raised by the projects considered

here can have a broader cultural and political impact, as Wodiczko claims in the following statement:

Media art, performance art, performative design: they must interfere with these everyday aesthetics if they wish to contribute ethically to a democratic process. They must interrupt the continuity of existing social relations and perceptions well entrenched in the theatre of the city. Such arts, using the words of Simon Critchley in *Ethics of Deconstruction*, should “interrupt the *polis* in the name of what it excludes and marginalizes”. To preserve democracy one must challenge it; one must challenge its symmetry with an asymmetry of ethical responsibility. (Wodiczko 2000, p. 87-88)

Socially engaged literary and artistic practices with a special focus on cultural criticism, political activism and collaboration like those presented in this paper are worthy of attention as potential means of achieving some form of re-balancing in the debate around migration and citizenship. Working with or through conflicts is necessary, not to eradicate them at the cost of plurality, but to turn enemies (the product of sharp us/them distinctions that cast the ‘them’ into the role of an enemy) into adversaries, and to transform lethal struggle into vivid antagonism and negotiable critical tension. Not only newly arrived people but the entire society live in what I could call a productive tension and these creative works can help make this transformation in a more viable way, promoting the debate and identifying possibilities.³²

32 For T. J. Demos, what is at stake in the “experimental art of migration” is a politically-oriented artistic practice which holds tremendous transformative potential within contemporary society: “the migrant names the potentiality of becoming other, of opacity as a politics of imperceptibility, and defines an increasingly occupied site of resistance, autonomy, and politicization. In this regard, the artists who give ethico-political expression to such ideas connect to a growing discourse and widening social movement that situate migration as bearing positive transformative potential in the current neoliberal world of control, repression, and inequality. As such, the experimental art of migration never really reaches any destination; it remains always on the move in one way or another” (Demos 201, p. 246).

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