

## OF LINES AND OTHER TERRITORIES

This exhibition began much earlier, perhaps even with the mythical founding of Rome by the digging of a furrow or *pomerium* around the space where the city would later be located. Although there are various competing narratives about this moment, the *pomerium* is believed to have been a line plowed into the ground by Romulus, but is sometimes also referred to as a wall. It marked the periphery of Rome and identified those dwelling within the line as citizens, while those living in the wilderness, beyond Romulus' action, were suddenly set outside the limits of the area in which the law acted and therefore were beyond the ruler's protection. According to legend, Romulus and Remus fought over the exact location of this mystical border and agreed that the final site would be decided through augury. After the priest staged his rites, however, the twins had differing interpretations of the signs. Anxious to win, entrepreneurial Romulus simply dug his furrow first. Remus, very angry over his brother's trickery, jumped over the crevice and broke the line's protective spell. This was considered a very bad omen: The *pomerium* delimited a physical territory but more importantly, it also marked the boundary of an ordered political space where agreements, written laws, and unspoken social contracts operated. By crossing the line of the *pomerium* Remus broke through the limits of control and invited chaos in—he challenged the laws of citizens living in this new space and became an “other,” a foreigner in his own land. For this offense, he was put to death.

*Border Alchemies*, Fiamma Montezemolo's first solo exhibition, reminds me of this story. As the title expresses, the exhibition focuses on borders, which are the political boundaries of nation states that are imposed on geography, on people, and places, and whose origins are certainly related to the myth of Rome's origin. But the title also evokes the myth, the ritual, and the magic by which national borders acquire real political dimensions—the alchemical transmutation of territory into nation—as well as the more intangible aura of borders that is tied to their liminal condition as sites where oppositional identities come in contact attracting and repelling each other.

Montezemolo understands the power of borders well, having spent six years as a cultural anthropologist in Tijuana, Mexico, studying its cultural producers. Rife with clichés and social constructions, over-signified to the point of auto-exoticism, the Tijuana/San Diego region is also a place where one constantly becomes the other by continuously passing from one side of the border to another. This has led anthropologists and sociologists to identify a hybrid border denizen that continually negotiates between bi-national identities while belonging fully to neither. A place of passage, Tijuana allows for flexible identities and sometimes gifts this possibility to those visitors and foreigners that, like Montezemolo, make that city however briefly their home. The city's liminal character gives permission to become another by choice, electing to change and shape-shift one's identity, and to question the options and possibility offered by birth and breeding.



Born in Rome, Montezemolo arrived in Tijuana carrying the apparatus of the anthropologist and its methodologies of data gathering through interviews, surveys, and research, coupled with a critical framework stemming from Renato Rosaldo, George Marcus and James Clifford's reassessment of writing as a fundamental structure that informs the representation of research. By Montezemolo's own admission, however, the experience of living at the border was transformative and led to another kind of alchemical reaction through reevaluation of her intentions and interrogation of her position in relation to the subject, which led to a more substantive reevaluation of anthropology as a system of knowledge. *Border Alchemist* is, therefore, in many ways the outcome of Montezemolo's mutation from anthropologist to artist—her passage from the myth of objectivity to that of subjectivity—and as such constitutes a sharp critique of anthropology and its modes of representation.

The wall that separates Mexico from the United States along Tijuana's Northern edge is enmeshed in dramatic narratives of place and also of displacement through migration. It is a symbol of identity that functions as the geographic demarcation of nation and citizenship. In truth, the border is not one wall but many and unfurls over the land as three parallel fences the first of which is made from repurposed metal sheets of the temporary airplane-landing strips used by the United States in the first Gulf War. This is the face the United States turns towards Latin America: a variegated surface, rusting and dented, that represents the militarization of a territory and its transformation into a site of surveillance and an apparatus of control. The wall, or *cerca* as the fence is known in Spanish, is a real object in the world but it is also, like the Roman *pomerium*, a manifestation of will and design and the actualization of politics.

This quasi-magical transformation of the material into the symbolic, and then into the political, is made manifest in the exhibition with two light boxes that use the format of the cartographic map. Using the x-ray as a photographic format, *A Map Is Not a Territory* #1 and #2 are two light boxes, each marked with the contours of two continents drawn one over the other. #1 confronts us with the familiar outline of Africa is overlaid with the outline of Europe; while in #2 North America and South America lie over each other on an inky black background reminiscent of the colors of medical x-ray. Both allude to what is beneath the surface of the body, visible only through medical technology—shadowy profiles buried within the tissue or bone structure that reveal the hidden reality beneath the flesh. The intermingled lines are recognizable immediately but propose that the identities to which they are anchored can be exchanged, intermixed, hybridized, but nevertheless exist by contrast one in relation to the other. The image discloses that within all so-called "first worlds" there is always a "third world." The ghost of colonialism is made visible, which is the historic preamble to the migration patterns that dominate our current globalized condition.

Montezemolo's *Nation Dust*, the centerpiece of her exhibition, reflects on these ideas and further deconstructs them. Created for the entry space of Queen's Nails Projects, the sculptural installation is literally made of the dust of the border fence. The artist utilized the services of a blacksmith to pulverize a piece of the metal wall; this material is poured into test-tubes and hung from the ceiling along the middle of the gallery space physically dividing it into two spaces—here and other. Montezemolo's

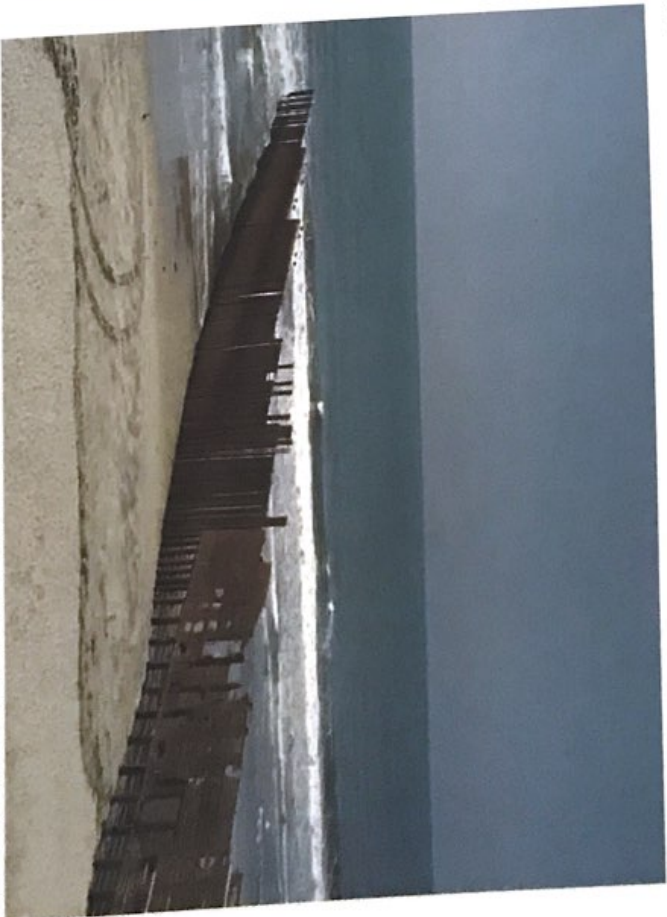


Photo on this page is Copyright © Ingrid Hernández, "Frontera Tijuana San Diego", 2003.



installation recalls the investment of a line in space with the arbitrary power to demarcate oppositional territories and allegiances. But by its permeability and fragility, the piece also reminds us of Remus' radical gesture of breaking through that limit, which turned symbolic representation into material actuality and immediately exemplified, by his death, the exclusionary nature of the nation state.

Montezemolo's "national dust" is an alchemic compound and also a strange, ironic, object of study. The chemical compound of the nation is put to the test in an absurd operation that highlights the constructedness of the concept, and the arbitrariness of identifying an identity attached to a nation in a post-globalized world. Yet, Montezemolo also examines the limits of objectivity in the social sciences by pointing to the obvious fact that the concept of nation and all its many signs and symbols are not the physical material in those test-tubes. That lies elsewhere: it is neither essential nor explicitly identifiable with a single territory or material, but rather emerges from agreement and from the form of its representation. As with the marking of Rome's *pomerium*, border and nation are the expression of collective magical thinking, but also in a very real sense embody the revenge of our imagination.

A sound piece completes *National Dust* and further interprets for us Montezemolo's critique of the border as a symbol of national and individual identity, as well as her unease with the social sciences' systems of investigation. The voice of the artist fills the gallery, addressing someone who is simply referred to as "you." The letter reads like a melancholic message to a former lover, asking not for reconciliation but for liberation from the codependent identities that made the relationship possible. The narrative unfolds in stages, first describing the other's character, and later the artist's failures at emotional dead-end by accepting the schizophrenic continuum between objective description and subjective interpretation, between detached observation and imaginative projection.

Montezemolo's letter to the border wall is a confession that implies a breaking through the limits of her own self-control and of her familiar way of making sense of the world. As such, *Border Alchemies* represents a remarkable and brave achievement: that of being born, again, in the possibility of new and multiple identities—perhaps belonging to nowhere but willing always to lay claim to the powerful act of marking a point in space as the beginning of a line that inscribes a territory as one's own.

Lucía Sanromán

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIO CESAR MORALES

*How has your work as an anthropologist informed your artistic practice?*

After a long-term commitment to an Anthropology of Art and to an Ethnography of the border zone between Mexico and USA, my relation with the 'writing on' the 'Other' and to the representational method characteristic of anthropological practice found a limit. The ethnographic essay, even in its most experimental forms, couldn't fulfill the sense of the 'unseizable' and 'uncertain' we always face in a given ethnographic process. Out of my fieldwork in Tijuana grew a sense of inadequacy toward ethnographic writing. I migrated then from an Anthropology of Art toward a composite practice of Anthropology AND Art. The expressive possibilities I found in this intersection (including explorations through the essay film and sound possibilities) resulted in less secure but more rewarding experimental work. Installations and the video work have indeed the capacity of pushing ethnography in uncertain directions, via an investment in the endless dialogue between self and other unmoored from fixed modes of representation. In my art practice, ethnography is still very present but it becomes a trans-media practice that reflects on the border as an unstable and mobile category of experience, of sensory and conceptual mediations, disciplinary negotiations, and geopolitical articulations, a polyvalent set of mediations of volatile affects. These conceptual and evocative interventions are therefore less about documenting or 'transcribing' the Other, and more about 'installing' turbulent desires and affects in tense disciplinary and geo-political border zones.

*Can you describe the benefit of not being from Tijuana in regards to observing social situation and space?*

Spatial movement in Anthropology has a long tradition: to go far away from your homeland and study the 'Other' in order to go back and representing him/her at home has been almost a 'must' especially for an earlier generation of anthropologists. It was given for granted an ethnographer would have a better perspective speaking on any social group exactly because of his/her not being from that same group. That socio-cultural distance was a guarantee of 'objectivity'. But after the '60s, this guarantee lost its force and with Clifford Geertz and the so-called New Anthropology that belief has been completely deconstructed. We now know not to be from 'there' is not enough to represent and interact in better ways with any social space or group. Not even with an 'inside' perspective do you have a guarantee of objectivity anymore, not even when you move from an hetero-representation to a self-repre-



sentation you can be sure to get all the complexity implied in any social space and group dynamic. Stuart Hall said it very clearly "It is not because you are Black you can speak for all the Blacks." Having said that, of course you know that the years at the border have enriched me enormously in both a professional and experiential sense but not so much because I was not 'from there'. The enrichment came from many incredible collaborations with different cultural producers that happened to be between San Diego and Tijuana at the same time. Herberto Yépez, René Peralta, Lucía Samraon, and Teddy Cruz among others, but also from the incorporation of certain ethnographic practices of the everyday that demanded growth, exhaustion, emotions and a great deal of productivity. All of this would have probably been more difficult for me to accomplish if I had remained in my land of "belonging" because I wouldn't have had the possibility of coinciding with those specific people and situations. A certain sense of "non-belonging", I would rather call "uncanny", that you are implying in your question was present in me also in Italy. What the border specifically taught me it is to be resilient everywhere and not just in relation to certain demands present in any ethnographic situation but also in academic-intellectual feuds associated with any discipline. I learnt from the border to reject certain simplistic and essentializing polarizations: "We-They," "Western-Non Western," "Third World-First World," "Insider-Outsider," "Anthropologist-Native." I believe I learnt to do it anywhere 'far away' and at home:

*In one of your previous works (<http://vimeo.com/23179541>), dealing with your fate as an artist, you documented several sessions with fortune tellers in Mexico, United States and Italy. Can you describe the readings and how your new body of work plays off the decoding of time and space?*

Constellation was a video-installation composed of a three screens/planets in which three tarot readings - conducted in Tijuana, San Francisco, and Rome over the course of a month - were projected. The question posed to each tarot reader (always a woman) by me was the same: My work is in between Art and Anthropology: what is going to happen with this paradigm which is for me a life project? The ethnographic circumstances of the readings were displayed in the videos: two readers allowed filming, the first from behind her and the cards; the second allowed it from behind and in front with the main focus being on the hands; the last one did not authorize the filming, and so instead the prevalent color red in the room was used as the sole screen color. My questions were: how did these three different fortunetellers read my future? What, if any, were the common threads between them? What differences were there in the cards, and how were their interpretations colored by different national cultures as the readers were from different places? Untranslatability was the main characteristic of the piece, as the three languages of the readings—Spanish, Italian and English—were not translated,

creating a sort of Babel's effect on the viewer. The title of the piece comes from Walter Benjamin's opposition to the idea of linear time and progression, from his desire to create a different model of history that links certain past and present events in significant ways even when those events look unrelated and are not sequentially ordered. *Constellation* also meant to signify a transcultural future, whose shape will unfold in uncanny ways. I believe my latest body of work, presented in this solo show, keeps exploring questions of borders (geopolitical, linguistic, disciplinary) and my fascination with the planetary and a non-linear time. Think of the video work *New Moon* where I re-appropriate and manipulate the historical moon landing footage and the famous sequence that culminates in the heroic planting of the US flag on the surface of the moon. *New Moon* is another attempt to convey an alternate sense of time and space, of the planetary, by way of a substitution—that of exchanging the United States' flag with an image of a globe no longer aligned through North South geopolitical dynamics. The piece thus interrogates not only imperial cartographic representations but also the tradition of inverted maps and other ideological gestures of reversal. It suggests the possibility of a third way to be present on the planetary. I believe all my work is an incessant research toward that third possibility.

ESSAY BY CURATOR, PABLO GUARDIOLA

We are born somewhere provisionally, so to speak; only little by little do we compose within ourselves our place of origin, so that we may be born there later and each day more definitively.

Rainer Maria Rilke

...

Working on various media (video, light boxes, installation and sound), Flamma Montezemolo is presenting *Border Alchemies* as one large-scale installation. Her artistic practice is informed by an interdisciplinary and cross-gene approach, with an acute focus on cross-cultural referents. The inter-disciplinary aspects of Montezemolo's work are better understood if we take into account her academic background in anthropology and ethnography. Still working with the same theoretical and methodological models, her art practice never feels academic. Through the language of post-minimalism her work is a reflection on borderlands and border zones, both on specific geopolitical levels, as well as in more introspective and experiential ones.

...

Time and space are real categories; nations: just a projection of desire. This desire transforms itself into power under the idea of consensus. Our positioning in time and space will require strong conceptual and practical self-anchoring if we want to be immune to the shadow casted by the theatre of power. Uniformity is a common ideal of imperialism; only the unity of the multiple will work as resistance. As we move we constantly face walls, the challenge is finding the strategies to cross them, to dissect them. Time and space are concrete, but we should never forget that they are also rendered as an image. Only the possibility of the image will prevent things to be infinite. The idea is that everything can be contained within our gaze. Knowledge is the result of exercises on meditation and trans-mission.

...

Some of the most iconic sections of the Tijuana - San Diego border fence were constructed with metal plates used as runways during the first Iraq War. Imperial Dust was made by grinding rusted pieces of metal from the Tijuana border fence to a thin powder. The powder / dust is presented inside test tubes hanging from the ceiling, crossing the room in half. The display is itself a barrier in the room, an obstacle for the audience that wishes to cross the room in order to continue viewing the installation. The piece works multiple allegorical angles. Dust, by definition, is a hybrid combination of particles

that travel through the air. Imperial Dust presents a scale model of the border fence, a miniature, if compared to its original source. It is a collapsed fence, where the wall gets pulverized by the artist's intervention. By only focusing on its material, a poetical gesture flourishes as we think of the traveling routes of the metal itself, from an unknown origin into the Persian Gulf, then to Tijuana and now, where the piece is shown. Contained within test tubes, it offers the possibility of study and examination, a proof of its fragility and capacity for transformation.

...

Maps are conceptual guidelines, figures of speech.

...

In two light boxes, *A Map is Not a Territory #1 & #2* and in the video piece *New moon*, we witness the appropriation and manipulation of iconographic images. In the light boxes we see the outlines of continents; in the video piece we encounter documentary footage of man's first landing on the moon, which includes the image of the earth from space. In all the works the hemispheres are shifted, neutrally rendering the conventional ideology that defines them. These pieces push the audience to grasp multiple takes on the act of land claim. Maps are icons, the globe a totalizing one. Both are diagrams that we need to finish constructing in our heads. We should never forget that we are the ones who determine what to do with them, not the other way around.

...

The sound component of *National Dust* sets the tone of *Border Alchemies*. It's a letter to the wall addressing its complete ambivalence, where the wall could also be a mirror, a double sided one. Depending on which side you are looking at it, multiple signifiers confront you: fortitude and safety, perhaps isolation, power, injustice, impotence, chance... The significant fact is that behind every wall there are barbarians, we all are.

On 1144, Robert of Chester, while in Toledo, Spain, finished translating from Arabic into Latin what would be known as *Liber de compositione alchimiae*. The completion of *Liber algebrae et almucabala*, that would follow on 1145. The texts, one concerning alchemy, the other algebra, cemented the bases years later on 1147 the Second Crusade started. If we were to give an allegorical treatment to historical events, it would be impossible to deny multiple cyclical patterns. Similar points and factors, referents, will repeat themselves, centuries after centuries.





*Images in this catalog are courtesy of the artist, unless noted otherwise.  
Copyright © Flamma Montezemolo, 2012*