

On Border Cultures by Srimoyee Mitra



Leila Sujir and Maria Lantin, *My Two Grandmothers/
Cycling Through Leiden/ Tulipmania*, 2009–2012

Beginning this year and extending to 2015 with a series of three exhibitions, *Border Cultures* is a curatorial experiment and an exhibition-in-progress at the Art Gallery of Windsor, whose objective is to examine the complex and shifting notions of national boundaries through contemporary art practice. It is a platform to engage in a dialogue, using a range of critical perspectives, ideas, and scholarship on national boundaries in our contemporary, networked, global world. Artists are the key agents; using the exhibition as a forum to expand research and present ongoing bodies of work in various stages of completion, they position the exhibition space as a place of production and activation. In this way, the exhibition follows a multi-layered, multi-centred approach where audiences are equal participants in furthering the distribution and discussion of border regions throughout the world. By bringing together research-based, conceptual artworks, artists, and scholars from different parts of the country and across various borders, the overall goal of *Border Cultures* is to help build a discourse that expands mutual understanding and respect for diverse cultures, communities, and people subject to the violence of powerful, enduring fictions that constitute the narratives of nation-states. Following an invitation by *Scapegoat* to comment on my curatorial practice in the wake of

the first part of the exhibition, in what follows I locate the work of *Border Cultures* within the broader context of curatorship as a political practice engaging with the coercion of nation states, the brutality of colonialism, and the potential for experimental affinities and collaborative engagements to confront these forms of violence, both inside of and beyond the gallery space.

I began working on this exhibition series a few months after I arrived in the small industrial city of Windsor, Ontario, located near the southern-most point in Canada, across the river from Detroit, Michigan. As I settled in to my position as curator at the Art Gallery of Windsor, and into a Riverside Drive apartment facing Detroit's skyline, I met artists, colleagues in the arts community, and familiar strangers in coffee shops who shared anecdotes and perspectives—variously personal, political, and banal—on the border. As a newcomer to the region, I was amazed at how eagerly my new acquaintances shared their knowledge and experiences of living on the border. I began to recognize some similarities, and key differences, between these narratives of displacement, belonging, and statelessness, and those that I was more familiar with from other geographical contexts. I also found striking how the excess of information, emotions, and histories evoked my experiences of borderlands. As a curator, I wanted to explore the possibility of developing a curatorial framework that would build on the spirit of trust, discussion, and exchange I first experienced in my conversations in Windsor. Antithetical to border policies designed to discriminate and dispossess, *Border Cultures* was designed to surpass the boundaries of working in a gallery space with a limited number of artists, activists, and social workers, even when they are from different parts of the world. The goal of the exhibition series is to generate momentum and solidarity among those who are and continue to be marginalized and criminalized for crossing borders or enabling others do so.

Growing up in Mumbai in the aftermath of the Partition of India and Pakistan, which led to extreme and enduring violence, I always saw the border as a place of fear, intimidation, and terror. More than 60 years later, the recurrence of major riots in both

countries is rooted in the mistrust and violence bred by the imposition of a division that obliterated the social fabric of formerly vibrant communities. The propagation of hatred along sectarian lines, and along borderlines, has radically shaped my own worldview and informs the urgency of dismantling such violence through my curatorial practice.

Meanwhile, in Windsor and Detroit, the respective state governments pride themselves for maintaining one of the busiest border crossings in North America—both the bridge and tunnel are pivotal thoroughfares carrying roughly one-third of all Canadian and American trade in goods. Yet, the hostility and suspicion people are often subjected to while commuting between the two cities has increased. Occasionally, populist politicians threaten to build a wall between Canada and the US to further divide these adjacent communities. The scholar Wendy Brown has written extensively on the increased phenomena of wall-building and increased border security in the twenty-first century; in her estimation, during a period of growing global interconnectedness, these securitized barriers epitomize the contradictions between national sovereignty and globalization. The city of Windsor embodies these tensions: at once fluid and impervious, a national barrier and point of entry/exit, harmonious on the surface and deeply fragmented at the core.

The first exhibition in the series—*Border Cultures pt/1 (homes, land)*—began with an examination of the multiple meanings of the notion of home, moving from a physical, geographical, and architectural space toward a state of mind conveying a “sense of home.”¹ Similarly, the notion of land returns to the many histories of peoples, migrations, colonization, and war, while suggesting a sense of place in the contemporary context from which we can examine our relationships to fundamental resources such as soil, air, and water. How do ques-

tions of home and land factor into our understanding of a nation and its boundaries? Why do some societies and people have better access to the fundamental resources required by all living beings in order to survive and thrive? Who is allowed to move from one place to another in order to better their odds of not being left out? These questions demand a critical investigation of the assumptions of homogeneity, citizenship, and security, as well as the accepted notions of nationhood and the nation-state. By reconsidering and reimagining the structures of inclusion and exclusion central to nation-states, we can begin to radically transform both the conceptual and physical infrastructures of border cultures by encouraging bridges to be catalysts rather than hyper-securitized barriers and dead-ends.

The gallery is a testing ground for these experiments. In *pt/1*, the artists offered alternate models of mobility, sometimes by returning to historic flows of people and trade routes, and in other instances by considering current methods of recording and archiving border crossers. Working in collaboration with the prolific artist Dylan Miner, we launched a multi-year project to work with First Nations' youth on both sides of the river to re-map the borderlands through their hand-built mobile print labs. These mobile border labs were built from two cargo tricycles, each equipped with a screen-printer used to print over 300 pennants indicating the directions from Detroit to Windsor (and vice versa) in Anishinaabeg.² For months leading up to the exhibition, Miner worked with youth in Windsor and Detroit to collectively build one tricycle in each city and embellish them using traditional practices like beading and contemporary street art like graffiti. While the youth from Detroit were not permitted to travel to Windsor—they did not have access to the legal documents that would permit them to cross the border—Miner brought the tricycle to Windsor. As a fully functioning screen-printing studio, it was used in the gallery to print t-shirts and posters with the audience. Upon completion of the exhibition run, the tricycles were returned to the partnering community centres in Windsor and Detroit. The youth who participated in building the trikes will continue working with them to map places of personal, communal, and Indigenous

significance in their respective cities, while also collecting oral histories from their elders about important sites that have never been registered in the official accounts on either side of the border. This ongoing project has the ultimate goal of enabling the youth from both sides to cross the border to pursue these practices of collection, thereby using the tenants of social practice to navigate and subvert the restrictions of border control.

In dialogue with Miner's immersive project was Windsor-based artist Christopher McNamara's work, which explored local histories of the region by highlighting the erased legacy of Japanese-American architect Minoru Yamasaki, who won the commission to build the World Trade Centre in 1962. McNamara invited viewers to remember the racialized constructions of nationhood, as Yamasaki was consistently targeted and racialized for his ethnicity, even though he was an American citizen. With the spectacular destruction of these landmark towers, Yamasaki's contribution to the American Dream has largely been forgotten and erased from local knowledge and history. Using pop culture aesthetics while appropriating the visual grammar of the propaganda poster, McNamara used nostalgia strategically to provoke questions of collective memory and homeland.

The work of Mexican artist Marcos Ramírez Erre expanded on the agency of the individual, highlighting the networks of exchange and information sharing that have existed for generations. *Postcards from the Edge* is a series of large-scale postcards that assemble images from the built environment of Tijuana from 1996³ to the present with personal, together with notes from people in the city, family members, friends, and lovers living across the border. Meanwhile, Pakistani artists Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi cautioned viewers of the homogenizing tendencies of simplistic notions of national identity often presented in mesmerizing and attractive modes with a new series of work titled *Efflorescence*. The work was comprised of seductive neon signs in the form of flowers symbolizing national emblems from North Korea, Palestine, Sudan, and Ireland—all states that continue to reckon with the violence of separation and division.

Toronto-based artist Ed Pien created a haunting installation to explore the plight

of illegal immigrants as they traverse vast territories and work in our societies as unknown and unacknowledged peoples. In *Memento*, every audience member was invited to imagine walking in the footsteps of migrants whose lives are filled with uncertainty and turbulence as the face the threat of being caught and deported at any moment. Combining nets, intricate paper cuttings, sound, and video projections, Pien provoked a contemplation of the visibility and invisibility of migrants in affluent society while enabling audience members to develop their own understandings as they made their way through a web of knotted ropes. The project underscored the constantly shifting and changing conditions of both home and land in this context.

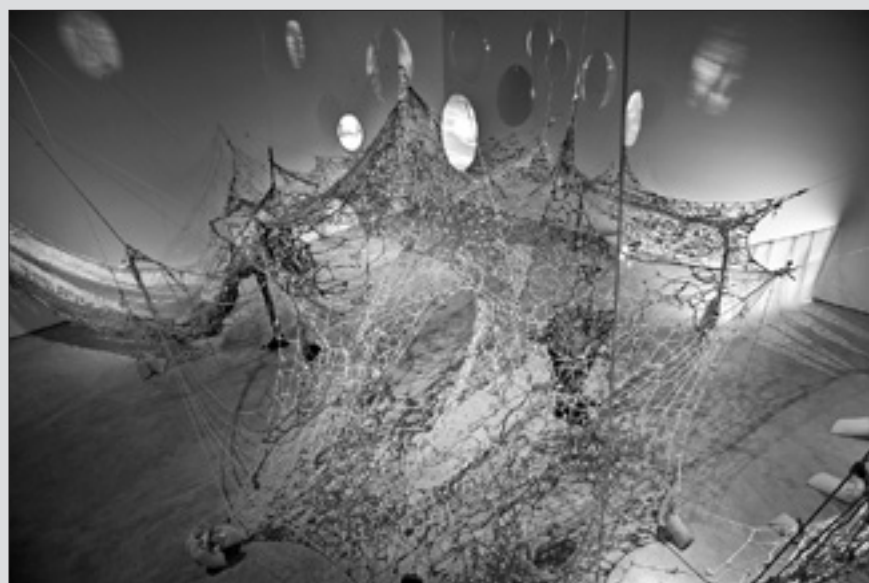
Leila Sujir and Maria Lantin also explored this permanent ephemerality with an interactive video installation that cuts across space and time through personal histories of migration along historical and colonial trade routes. Developed using gaming and surveillance software, their piece used these expensive and inaccessible technologies for democratic purposes, developing a game that has no winners and losers. Instead, the project asked participants to move freely from one part of the world to another, from one era to the next, bereft of barriers and security checks. Each viewer was able to construct and re-imagine their homeland in this context,

as well as in the different timeframes articulated through the real-time audio and video recordings in the installation. From another perspective on mobility, the artists and architects from Campus in Camps allowed for the possibility of re-imagining one's fragmented surroundings in the severe conditions of the large Shu'fat Refugee Camp in Jerusalem. Built as a temporary shelter for Palestinians in 1964, four decades later the camp continues to exist with limited supplies and an overflow population. In this context, the collective worked with residents of the camp to find ways to re-imagine their social relations, spatial distributions, and political economic conditions; the refugee was not treated as a victim, but rather as an agent with a vision of the future. As plans to build the first girls' school in a refugee camp have developed, Campus in Camps solicited viewers to engage with architectural models, provoking a re-consideration of assumptions and complicity through this participation.

Northern Irish artist Willie Doherty's black-and-white photographs use image and text to capture the tension and trauma of sectarian violence that has ravaged and divided his home town of Derry, and the country as a whole. His intriguing photographs of barbed wire fences, brick buildings, and desolate alleys bereft of human presence draw viewers in and push them



Dylan Miner, Re-mapping the Illegitimate Border, 2012



Ed Pien, *Memento*, 2010

back out to remind them of the silencing and fear of the border that has crippled his homeland for generations. Finally, the Broken City Lab and Sanaz Mazinani forcefully brought seemingly polar opposite icons from pop culture together and drew out their commonalities in witty and innovative ways. They subverted the excesses of images and documentation of extreme religious and political beliefs to form abstract and aesthetic works of art that reached out from the white walls of the gallery and reflected the viewer's image back on themselves, testing the boundaries between self and other, the personal and political, outsider and native.

To develop a series of exhibitions titled *Border Cultures* in a public art gallery meant to completely re-imagine borderlands through multifarious lenses, sensitive to and mindful of the diverse influences, desires, and needs of both the marginal and mainstream that exceed the simple goals of nation-states and economic out-

comes; our goal was to lead both the viewers and artists toward building bridges and dismantling barriers in order to interrupt the neoliberal and conservative models where borders serve as profit-making engines for powerful multinationals and government elites. The struggle to re-imagine the border as a liminal space, an interstitial organism carrying a palimpsest of histories of arrivals and departures is a decolonizing exercise. *Border Cultures* is a search to produce new forms of representing the border that move beyond the static and normative paradigms of national identity, citizenship, and progress. *Part Two (work, labor)* and *Part Three (security, surveillance)* will deepen this exploration and extend it to a broader space that functions as a catalyst to transform the binaries of us and them, centre and periphery, to embody the complex interweaving histories and diverse knowledge systems that form present-day society. ✕

Endnotes

- 1 *Border Cultures pt/1 (homes, land)*, curated by Srimoyee Mitra, Art Gallery of Windsor, 24 January–31 March 2013.
- 2 The present-day Indigenous community is located between Ontario and Michigan at the mouth of Lake Michigan and is known as Bkejwanong, "the place where the waters divide." It is also known as Walpole Island and has been occupied by Aboriginal people for thousands of years, primarily the Ojibwa, Potawatomi, and Odawa, who formed the Three Fires Confederacy, a cultural and political pact to protect the community. Walpole Island is an unceded territory and actually encompasses six islands, of which Walpole is the largest.
- 3 Since the mid-1990s, the US Border Patrol has undertaken major wall-building projects near San Diego to reduce crossings by Mexican migrant workers; see Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 35.

Bio

Srimoyee Mitra is curator and writer. She joined the Art Gallery of Windsor in July 2011 after working with the South Asian Visual Arts Centre in Toronto where she was Program Coordinator from 2008 to 2011. She has also worked as an art writer for *Time Out Mumbai*, *Art India Magazine* and the *Indian Express* daily news in Mumbai, India (2004–2006). Mitra's curatorial practice is invested in exploring the impact of globalization and migration on our society and contemporary culture. Her curatorial approach draws links between artists and art practices, curators and writers working locally and in various national and international contexts to expose audiences to diverse perspectives and promote global understanding through contemporary art practices. She has been invited to speak in many conferences including the *Cross Cultural dialogues in Curatorial and Artist Practice*, organized by the Ontario Arts Council and OAAG in Toronto, March 2013; *Reconciliation: Work(s) in Progress – An Innovation Forum*, Algoma University (Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario), Simon Fraser University and Kamloops University, 2012 as well as at the *The 'Creative Turn': A Summit Exploring the Conditions of Creativity Education*, the Centre for Media and Culture in Education (CMCE), at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and the Zurich Institute of Art Education at the University of the Arts, 2012 and was Keynote Speaker at *Connect/ Reconnect Symposium*, York University, Toronto, 2012 She graduated from York University's MA Program in Art History (2008) and currently lives and works in Windsor.