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ACROSS BORDERS: QUESTIONS, PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCES

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*Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and
sometimes doing something political can become poetic*

Francis Aljys¹

The relationship between architecture and border studies is, rightly, at the forefront of many architectural scholars' minds, and has seen the inception of other publications, most notably Angeliki Sioli, Nishat Awan and Kristopher Palagi's edited collection *Architecture of Resistance: Negotiating Borders through Spatial Practices* (KU Leuven, forthcoming) and a special issue of *Architecture and Culture*, 'Border Fictions' edited by Mohamad Hafeda, Samuel Vardy and Paula McCloskey (again forthcoming). We started putting together this issue of *field*, 'Across Borders: Questions, Practices and Performances' — the first full collection on architecture and borders to be published — by defining what we specifically meant by the notion of border. The conventional meaning, as the delineation of territory, has shaped our individual lives: the three of us have moved across borders, territories, communities and languages several times; we have crisscrossed our identities from the colonised Global South, the so-called commonwealth colonised antipodes, the settler colonial North America, the (post)

communist East of Europe. We have experienced borders not as neutral separation lines, as Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr suggest, but as the creation of distinction between centre and periphery, normal and exceptional, belonging and not belonging.² Borders enact biopolitics: demarcating (and othering) identity, creating zones of exception, and marking jurisdictions in which bodies (racialised, gendered) can be disciplined and made to conform or cohere. We realised, as we continued our attempt to define, that any understanding of the border is always entangled with other political concepts. The border is the logical consequence of the notion of the utopia that underlies the nation state. An ideal place can only be created if it is set against the other, or its dystopia; the creation of boundaries, physical or artificial, makes sure that the conditions for the ideal place are maintained.³ Borders, whether material or metaphorical, are always at once utopian, colonial, patriarchal, capitalist and hegemonic.

As we take stock of the timeline leading to the publication of this special issue we realise that the idea of borders was already particularly charged with meaning in the summer of 2022 when we had our first conversations that would lead to our call for papers. Borders have been a recurrent topic, especially in right-wing discourses which insist it is impossible to have nations without enacting territorial demarcations. In recent years, understandings of borders have become ever more specific and material, political and laden with distress. Alongside the crude traditional strategies which, at best, control, and at worst, maim bodies, new technologies have been developed which are meant to make borders (ironically) more human. The

so-called 'humanisation' of the border comes hand in hand with a dispersal of bordering principles and the framing of demarcation lines as design challenges to create more secure environments. It also comes with a more pervasive understanding of borders, articulated by new technologies tracking our everyday life, to continuously create and reinforce categories of belonging and exclusion.⁴ If anything, the notion of borders, as both natural and necessary, has become ever more present and pernicious — it has again been placed at the centre of the debate in elections across the world, with right-wing politics intensifying focus on national boundaries, otherness, and who can be tougher on immigration with the closure or reinforcement of borders. Borders continue to define the occupation and war in Palestine, the contested sovereignties in Eastern Europe, the (off)shore of Australia and more generally, the refugee crises across the globe.

When we launched the call, we proposed 'Across Borders: Questions, Practices and Performances' partly as metaphor and partly as method: in order to ask critical questions we wanted to suggest borders can be crossed in the mind, or thought of as porous (as Haraway would have it). Porous borders are modes of thinking (practicing and performing). We ask then: how are borders not static, how can they be challenged, how do 'poetic/politic' performances draw attention to and dismantle their hegemonies?⁵ Our work as editors is influenced by practices of translation (from one language to another, from practice to writing, from place to place) which here we interpret as a practice of talking across disciplines, transcending, threading and embedding specificities.

1 Text to Francis Alÿs, *The Green Line*, 2004. Jerusalem, Israel. Film 17:41 min. In collaboration with Philippe Bellaïche, Rachel Leah Jones, and Julien Devaux. At <https://francisalys.com/the-green-line/> (accessed 15 May 2024).

2 Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (eds.), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

3 Here we are thinking of the work of Elisabeth Grosz in defining utopia and her genealogy of the term connecting contemporary notions to the original formulation in Thomas Moore's novel imagining an island whose geographical features enable an insulated, self-contained community. See Elisabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

4 Chiara Brambilla, 'Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept', *Geopolitics* 20, no. 1 (2 January 2015): pp. 14–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.884561>.

5 Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' [1985], in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 190–233 (p. 198).

Gloria Anzaldúa's semi-autobiographical 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* speaks of the importance of translation as a form of practice that embraces the multiplicities and contradictions of borders.⁶ Writing prose and poetry in both Spanish and English, Anzaldúa untangles the spaces of internalised sexual and gendered identities, and questions the misogyny, homophobia and racism created by her Chicano community and its Mexican roots. She examines the geo-material spaces of Aztlán, now southern Texas, where she grew up. Now fixed and scarred by settler colonialism, she unpicks their histories as shifting indigenous spaces. Anzaldúa's prose is as much a methodology as an acknowledgement of the impossibility to explain boundaries, to describe Aztlán, a land that is as much a mystical as it is a historically contested territory. Her writing is not only a challenge to the physical border that divides communities, but a conceptual exploration of borders that categorise and create normative sexualities.

The work of Anzaldúa also suggests the importance of the personal in accounting for the affectivity of borders, inviting us to look outside the traditional methodologies of spatial enquiry to find narratives of borders in literature, film and oral histories. In her video essay 'Performing the Border', Ursula Biemann explores the Mexican/US border town of Ciudad Juárez as the site of the *maquiladoras*, subcontracted factories for major US digital and electronic assembly lines.⁷ Biemann follows the lives of young, adolescent, even, Mexican women working in the companies. The border town here suggests a series of complex and ambiguous spaces: the geopolitical

space between the harshness of the northern Mexican desert and the fixity of the border wall itself, with the unattainable Texan town of El Paso visible to the north in the US; the socio-political space mapped by the extremes of a better material life falsely promised by both the labour in and the products of the high tech companies the women work in; and the physical slum space they inhabit where inequities abound and the realities and dangers of prostitution and rape are rife. Although Biemann's border is undeniably pictured as spatially divisive and exploitative, materially and metaphorically controlled and dangerous, it also has moments of joy and resistance.

This issue of *field* aims to bridge different definitions, constructions and expressions of the border as a space between cultures and of cross-cultures, haunted by ideologies and their afterlives; as a skin or membrane, a ground, a construction, a line, a place, an accident, an embodiment, an encounter, a metaphor, a brutal reality and an atmosphere. It asks how the border might be crossed, dissolved, or contested, or how its existence is simply negotiated or experienced. It seeks to evaluate the transnational, the geopolitical, the biopolitical, and the social as well as the poetic and conceptual. To speak of the questions, practices and performances of borders is an invitation to delineate the continuities between historical and contemporary forms of colonialism; to observe the dangers of the conceptual tools that enable us to classify, claim and colonise, as well as the ambiguity and nuance they engender.

6 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza* [1987] (San Francisco: Lute Books, 1999).

7 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999. Film 43 minutes. At <https://vimeo.com/74185298> (accessed 7 May 2024).

The borderlands have been traditionally spaces of contestation, places at the margins where radical imagination is possible. This number of *field* is published in wider dialogue with research on border studies, architecture and other design and artistic disciplines.⁸ The articles published here illuminate and problematise the continuities and problematic histories of borders while suggesting ways to imagine them in a radically different way, or even a world beyond and without border practices. We draw inspiration from Sam Durant's 2015 etching *Proposal for a Map of the World* — referencing the 1955 Asian-African Conference of Bandung, Indonesia that aspired towards a collective imagining of a postcolonial future — proposing an alternate geography that opens up new perspectives to reassess historical hierarchies and geopolitics.⁹ These fragmented, yet relational new geographies that the artist reimagines can be seen as a way of articulating another moment, one of rupture, after Bandung, in which the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the end of the Cold War have generated new geographical and epistemological alignments and misalignments. An inquiry into the legacies of the latter, as Durant's work provokes, is ever more relevant in the present time in which imaginings of borders still speak to contested sovereignties and irredentisms, and reanimate ghosts of ideologies in the very territories that dissolved them.

The articles featured in this issue approach the concept and practice of borders from a rich and diverse array of interdisciplinary perspectives. By embracing speculation and experimentation, these pieces

create a fertile ground for exploring the possibilities and challenges inherent in border issues. Spanning various time periods and geographic contexts, the entries use a wide range of scales, methods, bodies and concepts to probe the evolving significance and experience of borders. One key theme unites all the contributions: the concrete embeddedness, the architectures, of these practices. From North to South and further to the East, borders and knowledges deeply rooted in specific locations, policies and histories, are addressed and reevaluated. The concept of the border intrinsically involves the human body, which constantly engages in contesting, transgressing, or complying with these dividing lines. This issue brings to light how borders shape and are shaped by the lived experiences of people within these geographically, historically and politically charged spaces.

The issue explores these themes through two types of contributions: one set invites engagement with the concept of borders with seven creative essays, while the other presents six scholarly peer reviewed papers that delve into extended narratives.

creative essays

Adrian Cătu's documentary photo essay, which extends from the cover image, explores the pressing border struggles of our time, illustrating the direct impact of the war in Ukraine and its profound repercussions on the daily lives of ordinary people. With detailed, rich documentary photographs of unfamiliar

8 For example, Nishat Awan, *Diasporic Agencies: Mapping the City Otherwise* (Ashgate, 2016); Cordelia E. Barrera, 'Utopic Dreaming on the Borderlands: An Anzaldúan Reading of Yuri Herrera's Signs Preceding the End of the World', *Utopian Studies*, 31.3 (2020), pp. 475–93 <<https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.31.3.0475>>; Iain Biggs, *Between Carterhaugh and Tamsheil Rig: A Borderline Episode* (Bristol: Wild Conversation Press, 2004); Border Environments, Goldsmiths University (CRA Press 2023) <https://research-architecture.org/Border-Environments-1> (Accessed 7 May 2024); Felipe Hernández, Mark Millington, and Iain Borden, *Transculturation: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America* (Rodopi, 2005); Henk van Houtum and Mark Eker, 'Redesigning Borderlands. Using the Janus Face of Borders as a Resource', in *Borderscaping: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making*, (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 41–52; Norma Iglesias-Prieto, 'Nuevos Agentes Sociales, Nuevos Espacios Urbanos y Las Posibilidades De Cambio. Las Artes Visuales En Tijuana', *Berkeley Planning Journal*, 21.1 (2008) <<https://doi.org/10.5070/BP321112728>>; Wendy

Pullan and Britt Baillie (eds.), *Locating Urban Conflicts: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Everyday* (Berlin: Springer, 2013); Ronald Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Pepe Rojo and others, *Amor Forense: Birds in Shorts City: Anthology of Bodies Writing in San Diego* (San Diego, CA: Observatorio Editorial Tijuana, 2015); Tamara Vukov and Mimi Sheller, 'Border Work: Surveillance Assemblages, Virtual Fences, and Tactical Counter-Media', *Social Semiotics*, 23.2 (2013), pp. 225–41 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2013.777592>>; Thomas M Wilson, Hastings Donnan, 'Borders and border studies', in *A Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Thomas M Wilson, Hastings Donnan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), pp. 1–25.

9 See image at MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/222355> (accessed 7 May 2024).

and familiar landscapes and interiors, the essay testifies to the ongoing geopolitical shifts and the lasting echoes of Cold War legacies in this postsocialist region. It simultaneously directly speaks to the human scale through the everyday objects displaced along with their owners from their original contexts, bringing focus to the personal and emotional experiences of those displaced by the conflict. Cith Skelcher's examination of borders within an insular, postcolonial context draws from the teachings of an MArch design studio 'Invisible Cities' taught at the Sheffield school of Architecture. It explores pedagogical strategies for deconstructing established boundaries and seeks innovative modes of intervention. With Cyprus serving as a central case study, Skelcher investigates architecture's role in contentious spaces, confronting the geopolitical tensions and legacies of colonialism that continue to shape the political landscape. Hanna Baumann engages in a conversation with Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar to explore the impact of borders on individuals' lives, focussing on Jarrar's artistic practice in relation to occupied Palestine. Written before the most recent, terrible (and as we write, ongoing) atrocities in Gaza, Jarrar's work is a blend of symbolic resistance and active engagement with the realities of occupation, showing how art can challenge oppressive systems and inspire a sense of future possibility.

Shifting regions, but similarly engaging with creative practices, Tom Keeley explores the concept of boundaries through his unique artistic 'topographic-practice',

situated on the island of Eire. Keeley's work blurs the lines between interior and territory, using on-site installations to examine the political implications of boundary-making. These installations serve as allegories, offering new ways to understand and question the construction of borders. By challenging conventional narratives, Keeley's practice suggests alternative perspectives on how boundaries are created and experienced, encouraging deeper reflection on their impact in a broader socio-political context. Using poetry, Eloise Maltby Maland offers a compelling critique of the UK's border policies. She focuses on Lunar House, the Home Office Visa and Immigration hub in South London, where the realities of border control manifest as everyday life. By incorporating key concepts from various authors, Maland brings to light the tangible reality of Lunar House, where abstract notions of borders and exclusion take on a stark, physical form. Her poetic exploration prompts readers to consider the human impact of border policies and the spaces where these effects are most acutely felt. Paula McCloskey and Sam Vardy, who constitute the art/architecture practice, A Place of Their Own, make an analysis of 'Eile {Border Fictioning}' exhibited at Bloc Projects in Sheffield, UK in 2022. They reflect on emergent ideas of how their historical, experiential and speculative work uses multiple fiction ecologies as an anti-colonial practice. Liam Healy presents a photo essay displaying a series of photographs of the Jungle camp, Calais' largest improvised refugee camp, taken in 2019, three years

after it had been cleared and re-landscaped into an eco-park. The article makes a critique of this as a 'new topographic' to radicalise the neutralised view offered of Calais as the UK border in France and critique the romanticised origins of landscape photography.

academic papers

The research articles in this issue share commonalities in their approaches, revealing the border as a multifaceted concept — at times spatialised, at times symbolic — consistently situated and enmeshed in the geopolitics of contested sovereignties. Whether explored through literary analysis or ethnographic inquiry, borders emerge as mechanisms of subordination, with echoes of (post)colonial legacies. Implicit within all contributions is the theme of 'home', highlighting the ongoing negotiation of border transgressions and the inherent sense of unsettlement and violence. Marwa Al Khalidi and Gunnar Sandin explore the contrasting geographies of categories such as Global North and Global South through a comparative analysis of bordering practices in the cities of Lund in Sweden and Irbid in North Jordan. Their study, which focuses on the treatment of newcomers, especially refugees from the Syrian conflict, adopts a 'parallel walking' methodology to highlight differences in how these cities integrate new populations. This dialogical approach sheds light on how governmental policies position newcomers within the context of each city's unique history and heritage, offering insights into the broader dynamics of migration and integration. Working with Nishat Awan's concept of 'border topologies' — highlighting the ambiguous nature of modern borders — simultaneously open and closed, structured by an array of geopolitical, social, and environmental factors — Stefano Mastromarino and Camillo Boano bring to sight the territories of transit within Europe discussing the French-Italian border. The question of environment, with its peculiar rural nature — encompassing an alpine topography that intensifies the violent nature of trespassing — is explored against the fluidity of the border itself, reflecting broader European

dynamics, as the border remains subject to political redefinition and enforcement, illustrating the complex and evolving nature of modern European borders.

Taking as a starting point three Science Fiction (SF) novels, Amy Brookes speculates on the notion of border through the lens of literature, architecture and art. Her article explores the boundary as a fertile space of transformation, both physically and metaphorically, while pregnancy — as a visceral act — is likened to an intimate dissolution of individuality. For Brookes, SF explores borderlands as transformative, suggesting that crossing them requires embracing hybridity and letting go of former selves. The paper reflects on how reading SF can be a transformative act, fostering critical thinking about real-world borders, exclusion, and the possibility of creating more inclusive, empathetic spaces. The literary enquiry extends also with Angela Kyriacou Petrou's examination of the notion of borders within the domestic sphere in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. By focusing on spatiality within the domestic novel, the paper uncovers subtle mechanisms of erasure that normalise specific practices of domesticity and underpin colonial power. Approaching a gendered lens, the female body is questioned in relation to such narratives, with women acting as public bodies and landscapes transformed into idealised backdrops. Luis Hernan's article problematises our understanding of the border through an exploration of the 'tech bros' who shape both the narratives of Silicon Valley and influence new 'invisible' technologies of bordering. Through a 'transmigration of stories', inspired by Magical Realism, Hernan unearths Western and Native understandings of the land to co-exist to make visible the project of colonisation and violence. Reminding us that borders are also enacted on bodies, Joshua McVeigh and Anastasia Karandinou write about the queer spaces of Soho in London. Reflecting on their own positionality, McVeigh and Karandinou engage in close dialogue with Peter Ackroyd's 'Queer City'

to explore the historical spaces of experimentation in Soho and what they tell us of queerness as a form of crossing and blurring of borders in urban spaces.

In all, this rich array understands and politicises both the strategies and lived experiences of the border through porous interdisciplinary thinking that draws from literature, creative practice, argument, history. It captures the border's affective dimensions, how it is lived, yet also questions its pasts and futures. As Nerea Calvillo suggests in *Aeropolis*, the air that we breathe is borderless, multiple and layered yet still socially bound.¹⁰ Timothy Choy states: 'Air disrespects borders, yet at the same is constituted through difference. Neighbourhoods have different atmospheres; nations generate and apply different pollution standards [...] Gradients, whose foundations are the contact and bleeding of difference, move air through the spaces we live and through our bodies.'¹¹ Through the concept of airscape, we might return to Sam Durant's reimagining of a postcolonial world and national borders. And once we accept the ambiguity of the airscape, the border becomes a futile material construction, instead potentially speculative, open, performed and located, crossed, translated and disrespected.

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¹⁰ Nerea Calvillo, *Aeropolis, Queering Air in Toxicpolluted Worlds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

¹¹ Timothy K. Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 165.

