SPECULATIVE FUTURES OF THE BORDERED PRESENT;

Post-Border Perspectives on National Security

Jessica Vanam

STS 4301: Social Studies of Space, Technologies, and Borders

14 December 2018

I. Borders as a Response to National Security Needs

Borders give rise to humanitarian crises, and as such, their role of regulating the movement of people is a divisive topic. There are two pervasive perspectives at odds. One, rooted in a conservative desire for stability and safety, favors "hard" or less permeable borders; and the other, rooted in the liberal ideals of globalism, favors "soft" or more permeable borders. The border is a response to the need for national security, but from this response has sprung countless tragedies in many forms including refugee crises and the rise of militant policing. The transformation of border functions through globalization and the technological revolution has made the question of the border's role much more complex.

Solutions to these humanitarian and environmental crises are often presented as ways to reconcile these two opposing perspectives. Measuring and weighing the trade-offs between how hard or soft a border is, or different methods of effectively policing a population, is a common approach when developing solutions. This often culminates in a circumstantial calculation of whether it is more beneficial to answer to the need of "security" or "cooperation"—usually measured with economic metrics.

However, the above outlined perspective on the current state of borders and state security is one rooted in a neoliberal logic that ultimately perpetuates the same cycles of violence. The focus on the seemingly incompatible and unresolvable tension between security and cooperation is a neoliberal device to sublimate the root causes and structures that allow systemic violence for the sake of the nation-state to continue existing in the same form.

Resistance to violent nationalist forces cannot effectively be addressed with neoliberal logic. Nationalist violence is making a comeback even as our post-Cold War, globally connected

world has been established. This paper will attempt to delineate some of the limits of neoliberal logic, using them as starting points for reflection and speculation regarding an adequate response to the security needs of nation-states.

This top-down approach of deconstructing a flawed view of systemic issues to examine the underlying forces is useful, but it is equally if not more important to connect these underlying forces to manifestations and observable phenomena. Many of the manifestations of violence, resulting from efforts to enforce state security, are directly addressed in the work of artist-activists and community organizing groups. The intention of this essay is to illuminate the value of their work. This essay will first describe neoliberal logic and outline how the previous framing of border issues is a conclusion of this logic. The essay will then introduce different artist-activist/organizing entities and their work. One such group is the Institute for Applied Autonomy, a collective of artists and engineers whose work aims to subvert technologies of power. Another is the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), who were active at the US/Mexico Border from 1984-1989.

II.   Neoliberalism as an Obfuscating Systemic Force

Neoliberalism is a popular contemporary mutation of liberalism that favors free-market capitalism and globalism. Neoliberalism elevates individual freedom and empowerment, as well as individual responsibility. This individualist focus has been highly effective in preventing meaningful social organization against systemic issues. In Byung Chul-Han's book *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, he states that "people who fail in

the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system."[1]

By defining a society as one in which the battle of freedom has already been won —and sublimating the ways in which people are not free — neoliberalism erroneously suggests everyone to be fully participating in the system's creation and thus fully responsible for its flaws. Nation-states and economic entities use this to their advantage by persuading individuals to identify with the needs, fears, responsibilities, and mistakes of the state. This turns into a systemic regime of auto-exploitation in which individuals no longer identify with each others' shared experiences and value their individualized experiences as the most lucid and valid. In reality, the individual perception of experience is much easier to manipulate. Regimes of power use complicated economic and social forces to channel the individual's sense of responsibility into ultimately inefficient and meaningless actions that do nothing to actually challenge these regimes. Self-exploitation is at the heart of the neoliberal society, fueled by the illusion of the paradox of individual needs vs. collective needs.

Ecoterrorism and the "Green Movement"

A concrete example of the redirection of meaningful social organization under neoliberalism is the United States' mobilization against environmental organizing. On the political front, attacks on environmentally destructive institutions[2] [3] were defined as

---

[1] Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Translated by Erik Butler. London: Verso, 2017, p. 6.

[2] Leader, Stefan H., and Peter Probst. "The Earth Liberation Front And Environmental Terrorism." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 4 (2003): 37-58. doi:10.1080/09546550390449872.

[3] "Crime in the Name of Animal Rights." Animal Welfare - National Animal Interest Alliance. Accessed December 15, 2018. http://www.naiaonline.org/articles/article/crime-in-the-name-of-animal-rights#sthash.CjBpIT2k.dpbs.

"ecoterrorism" and these institutions became protected by federal law[4][5][6]; on the economic and social fronts, there was a huge boom in "green" branding and an emphasis on consumer waste—overwhelming the consumer with their contribution to (undeniably large amounts of) waste, effectively placing the responsibility for climate change on individuals' economic choices.

However, this disingenuously downplays the fact that the majority of climate change and waste production occurs during the pre-consumer manufacturing process. It would be much more effective for institutions who have control over which products are being manufactured (and how) to immediately change their processes and change the options afforded to consumers. However, the green movement's focus on eradicating climate change "one straw at a time" allows the individual to feel they have more meaningfully contributed to environmental causes than they actually have, and removes the much-needed sense of urgency to organize around any effective method of slowing down climate change and species extinction.

III.   Recontextualizing Borders within a Radical Framework

In relation to national security and borders, neoliberalism has also displaced the state's security needs to the individual's sense of security and safety, encouraging individuals to become complicit in internal and external policing. This is exemplified by individuals projecting the

---

[4]"Secret Grand Jury Investigations Have Led to Indictments of 12." Independent Media Center. January 24, 2006. Accessed December 15, 2018. https://indymedia.org/en/2006/01/831928.shtml.
[5]U.S. Congress. Committee on the Judiciary. *Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 4239, May 23, 2006.* Cong. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2006.
[6]"Web Archive: ECO-TERROR INDICTMENTS 'Operation Backfire' Nets 11." The Federal Bureau of Investigation. January 20, 2006. Accessed December 15, 2018.
https://web.archive.org/web/20100817222138/https://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan06/elf012006.htm.

needs and fears of the state onto themselves--for example, racism and xenophobia being affirmed as both a national and personal security threat.

A more liberal approach that favors soft borders is also informed by a degree of identification with the state. These arguments often contain a detailed attentiveness towards empirical studies regarding which features of borders (for example, permeability) are correlated with more success—metrics of which can include the quality of life for people living in border regions, environmental impact, and economic benefit.[7]

However, soft borders are usually only successful in cases in which the nations on both sides of the border are of a similar economic power or the same ethnic group (for example, the US/Canada border as opposed to the US/Mexico border, or the internal borders of the EU and the external ones). Arguments addressing this disparity usually conclude on the truisms that the disparity is racialized and/or linked to economic incentives, and make ultimately ineffective humanitarian appeals to the nation-state.

It is of course invaluable to study how different kinds of borders empirically affect international relations, which populations are most affected by borders, and how, but to isolate the issues studied and the solutions to borders limits the scope of solutions that can be created.

Violence as a result of bordering mechanisms and other national security mechanisms (including surveillance and policing) can be effectively addressed as a symptom of a larger system of nation-states manipulating individuals' perceived needs. In L. Winner's highly influential 1985 essay "Do Artifacts have Politics", he states "at issue is the claim that the machines, structures, and systems of modern material culture can be accurately judged not only

---

[7] Sterling, Brent L. *Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?: What History Teaches Us about Strategic Barriers and International Security*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009.

for their contributions to efficiency and productivity and their positive and negative environmental side effects, but also for the ways in which they can embody specific forms of power and authority." [8]

IV.   The Institute for Applied Autonomy

Formed in 1988, the Institute for Applied Autonomy (IAA) is an anonymous collective of activists, artists, and engineers who work towards subverting technology to make the public more aware of its inherent biases. Many of their projects address technology involved in brodering mechanisms and state security efforts. Their stated mission is to conduct "technological research and development dedicated to the cause of individual and collective self-determination."[9] Their work focuses on what Winner drew attention to—how technology functions as tools of power.

iSee

In October 2001, IAA created iSee—a decentralized CCTV map that allows users to input two locations and find a path that avoids surveillance. It was initially a website but a mobile app was also developed in later iterations of the project. These interactive maps first began in New York City, and grew to include cities such as Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Ljubljana, Slovenia—iSee has produced well over 1 million maps.[10]

V.   The Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF)

[8] Winner, L. (1985) "Do Artifacts have Politics", in D. MacKenzie and Wajcman J. (eds.) *Social Shaping of Technology*, pp. 26-38.
[9] "FEATURED PARTICIPANT: Institute for Applied Autonomy." Conflux Festival. August 21, 2013. Accessed December 15, 2018. http://confluxfestival.org/featured-participant-institute-for-applied-autonomy/.
[10] "ISee - The Institute for Applied Autonomy." Vimeo. December 06, 2018. Accessed December 15, 2018. https://vimeo.com/6163268.

The Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo BAW/TAF was founded in 1984 at the western end of the US-Mexico Border (where San Diego and Tijuana meet). They have worked in migrant communities and schools on a variety of multimedia projects that seek to describe the lives of the bi-national people who inhabit border cities. Their projects range from community outreach and collaboration, to video, performance art, and print media.

End of the Line (1986)

One of BAW/TAF's performances is titles *End of the Line*. It was intended to challenge the media's representation of the border as an embodied site of the binary opposition between safety and violence. BAW/TAF members deconstruct this opposition by performing a ritual: sharing food right on the border in border field state park.[11] It occurred on October 12, 1986. Around 200 people showed up from Mexico and the US, including tourists, journalists, artists, undocumented workers, vendors, surfers, photographers, park rangers, and more. There were six mirrors lined up on the border fence, on either side. For five minutes, six performers, embodying border symbols/costumes, stood motionless in front of the mirror.

A person began to break each mirror with a hammer. The ritual continues with a huge table in the shape of a freeway that crosses the border, corn on the cob which is shared with people on either side of the table, and the disassembling of the symbols and costumes representing the border, becoming toys for the children at the event to play with.

Encinitas Gardens

Another work by the group was a print called *Encinitas Gardens*. It was a page with text in two sizes: the larger one, a "help wanted" advertisement for a job as a flower gatherer in North

---

[11] Kelley, Jeff. *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989: A Documentation of 5 Years of Interdisciplinary Art Projects Dealing with U.S.-Mexico Border Issues (a Binational Perspective)*. San Diego, CA: Border Art Workshop/Taller De Arte Fronterizo, 1988, p. 14.

San Diego County. The text of the advertisement reads: "Help wanted / Employment available: come work in exquisite San Diego County. Gather the most beautiful flowers from endless fields of magnificent colors. Have it all-an open airy workplace, stunning white water views, warm fabulous sunsets, the surroundings of a rich contemporary life-style - golf, lagoon, and ocean. An absolute delight."[12]

Interspersed between the lines of the advertisement's text is smaller text reading: "Needed: Laborers with documents (authentic or forged). We don't care how you come, by foot, through tunnels, stacked in vans or trucks, just get here quick before our multi-million dollar flower industry dies in the dirt. We ask that you hide from our agents and spies, leave your luggage at home, speak only our language, live underground, absorb all the pesticides and chemicals that keep our crops so healthy and bright, stay away from our children, and schools, be sure to pay taxes, buy things from our stores, stay away from the unions, voice no complaint, or we must call in La Migra, require more cards, pass tougher laws, build stronger fences, above all serve us while we look the other way, ignore all your problems, keep your numbers consistent with quotas desired, we need you to help raise our quality of life. If you die helping us, few will stop to ask why. Needed: laborer with documents (authentic or forged)..." and repeats.[13]

The form of the print implies a take on "reading between the lines", and powerfully demonstrates how a seemingly-innocuous help-wanted ad is read by people who have experienced the dehumanization that undocumented workers are subjected to by their employers and the United States government.

---

[12] Kelley, Jeff. *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF)*, p. 81.
[13] Kelley, Jeff. *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF)*, p. 81.

VI.   Analysis

Institute for Applied Autonomy

While iSee was functional and not purely speculative, the project opens up possibilities (and perhaps realities, if they have already been created) of mapping systems that allow people greater mobility under state surveillance—particularly in border regions. For example, many people have been mobilizing around the recent activity of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers by creating Facebook groups, text message chains, and other kinds of instant messaging groups on a county/regional as well as city/town level to alert people whenever ICE officers were spotted, so undocumented people know which areas to avoid. iSee's mapping concept could easily be transformed into a real-time ICE officer counter-surveillance application.

BAW/TAF

The work of BAW/TAF is more multifaceted than simply work that seeks to better understand, define and improve borders. An important factor was who they were—people who had experienced the border firsthand, and were working towards building a collectively-defined vocabulary to understand that experience, and a self-determined way of responding to it. As outsiders, their body of work challenges us to reframe how we see borders. It is humbling to witness the depth of experience and knowledge of the people for whom borders affect most directly. As outsiders to that region and those experiences, we can never fully internalize and

understand the needs of that border region or the best course of action in the way that people whose lives are situated there do.

In a 1987 essay on BAW/TAF's installation *911* entitled "Toward a Visual Ideology", Ronaldo J. Onorato (curator of La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art) remarked that "the real question these artists raise is not how these border realities can be told (since the visual impact of their work speaks for itself) but rather how can they be read? That is, how can we, as their audience, respond with similar commitment and compassion to what they mean."[14]

End of the Line enabled people in the region to overcome the oppressiveness of the symbols used in bordering, which are ubiquitous in their everyday lives. Through a shared ritual, a symbol can become just a symbol or a children's toy for a moment, allowing a brief reprise from the violence they may have cause in the community. A symbolic gesture is not effective in the same way that legislative lobbying or riots are, but events like *End of the Line* are still incredibly empowering as they allow space for disenfranchised groups to deconstruct the symbols of their oppression. Community-wide ceremonies create a sense of unity and shared understanding on both sides of the border, and usually engender further acts of organization. Relevant to combating the hazy obfuscation of truth under neoliberalism, gatherings like this give communities room to share and discuss experiences with one another and decide for themselves which values they choose to organize around as a collective. As Onorato asks, how do we respond? Hopefully, by supporting them in their quest for self-determination.

VII.   Conclusion

---

[14] Kelley, Jeff. *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF)*, p. 37.

The common thread between the approaches of IAA and BAW/TAF are the deconstruction and recontextualization of instruments of power—for IAA, infrastructure and technology; for BAW/TAF, the semiotics of oppression. Security and cooperation are not mutually exclusive, and in fact realistically work best in conjunction; it is an economic farce and counterproductive to put forth time and effort into elaborating on compromises between the two. This is important to recognize because real change will only begin when those who are the most marginalized (and who have the deepest experiences with state violence) are restored a significant degree of self-determination regarding their own governance. To look elsewhere for these truths, rather than assist them in their self-articulation and self-realization, is to contribute to their suffering.

Works Consulted

Kwon, Miwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. MIT Press,

2002.

Lacy, Suzanne. Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art. Bay Press, 1996.