

THE METROPOLIS
AND MODERN LIFE



Public Space / Contested Space

Imagination and Occupation



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INTERNATIONAL REVOLUTION BY DESIGN

The Art of Tanya Aguiñiga

Sheila Pepe

Few places in today's American landscape are as hotly contested as the Mexican/US border. Most Americans have never crossed it, and if they have, then they have done so in the air. It exists for many as an imagined space made emotional through political rhetoric and the depiction of salesmen's samples of enormous walls.

On the ground, however, the boundary between the two nations is very real. It runs 1,954 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. It crosses urban, rural, and desert lands. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, it's the most frequently crossed border in the world (Glenday 2009, 457). The United States–Mexico Border Health Commission reported in 2012 that 350 million legal crossings take place annually.¹ From afar, these facts might seem astounding, even frightening. At the border, on the contrary, most understand that the crossing points are filled with commuters, people going to work and coming home at night, kids going to school, folks going to see relatives.

This contested borderland is the conceptual center of the work of Tanya Aguiñiga (b. 1978), who grew up in Tijuana and knows what the borderlands and the crossing itself are like: "I crossed the border every day for years and my parents did it for 40," recalls Aguiñiga. "The best way to describe it is like waiting in the DMV for three to six hours. Every day." The border, and all it means in this political climate, is the source of her art, design, and activism. Aguiñiga's work is not only focused on this particular border, but it is this one that has made her sensitive to borders in all their forms: as physical obstacles, as easily traversed boundaries between one artistic category and another, between activism and the aesthetic.

Aguiñiga is currently based in Los Angeles. She holds a BA from San Diego State University and an MFA in furniture design from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). In her formative years, she created various collaborative installations with

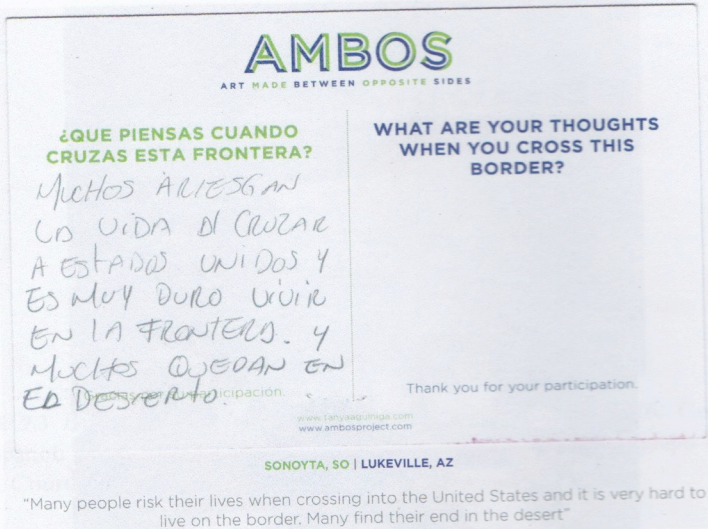


FIGURE 9.1 *Border Quipu/Quipu Fronterizo* (AMBOS Project). Commuter participant postcard. Courtesy of AMBOS Project

the Border Arts Workshop, an artists' group that engages the languages of activism and community-based public art. Her current work uses craft as a performative medium to generate dialogues about identity, culture, and gender while creating community.

Take, for example, the AMBOS Project (Art Made Between Opposite Sides), which was launched in 2016. The project was originally intended to engage car-bound commuters to help illuminate daily life between San Ysidro, California, and Tijuana, Mexico. Since its inception, the project has been expanded to chronicle the barriers and landscape across the entire border between Mexico and the US.

The interactive base of the AMBOS project involves the artist and her team handing out postcards (see Figure 9.1) printed with a bilingual question: "What are your thoughts when you cross this border?"

Yet it is something much more – and much less – than the typical border control interrogations (Figure 9.2). Attached to each card is a colorful string (Figure 9.3). As cards are collected, strings are knotted into the *quipu*, the Inkan knotted cord system of accounting. Thus, the volume and cultural origins of the responses are made visible. I say *origins* because the Inka predate any English-speaking immigrants to the Americas, and given that the US border states were part of Mexico first, one assumes, as Aguiñiga does, the primacy of the quipu as a mathematical tool.



FIGURE 9.2 *Border Quipu/Quipu Fronterizo* (AMBOS Project), 2016. Commuter participation documentation at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. Photograph by Gina Clyne. Courtesy of AMBOS Project

Aguñiga herself describes the mission and significance of AMBOS as an expression of the emotion connected to the border:

AMBOS seeks to express and document border emotion through art made on opposite sides by providing a platform to binational artists along the border.

This project was born out of the need to use [Aguñiga's] skills to address the ongoing issues that her family and community face where she grew up. Aguñiga was raised in Tijuana, México, where the border fence cuts into the ocean. She crossed the border every day for 14 years to get an education in the US. Additionally, her formative years as an artist were spent as part of the Border Arts Workshop, a community of artists that addressed border



FIGURE 9.3 *Border Quipu/Quipu Fronterizo* (AMBOS Project), 2016. Commuter participation documentation at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. Photograph by Gina Clyne. Courtesy of AMBOS Project

issues. There she helped found a community center in an autonomous land-squat run by indigenous women in the outskirts of Tijuana.

After leaving the Border Arts workshop, Tanya connected with communities in need that were different from her own. She worked with indigenous communities in Chiapas and Oaxaca, native peoples in Alaska and underserved urban communities in Los Angeles. Yet, the experience of growing up as a binational citizen kept coming back to her work. This experience is not unique to her, and she wanted to give a voice to the community that continues to cross daily despite stigma and discrimination. Thus, AMBOS was born.²

This description of the AMBOS project, however, hints at only one layer of art that Aguiñiga's work makes visible to viewers. This is not only art but is also a site for mentoring: the project was labor intensive and required her to bring in many Mexican and Mexican-American women to work with her on, for example, handing out and collecting the cards. It served as a way to bring a core team of arts and social justice workers together, and draw a small army of volunteers together, exposing them to an alternative way of looking at things and paying them; some of the women lent their voices to a panel held in conjunction with her 2018 exhibition, *Care & Craft*, at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City.³

The AMBOS project is also political. As Aguiñiga stresses, the work is an act of *rehumanizing* the borderlands and those who live there, those who have been *dehumanized*: "It is part documentation of the border, part collaboration with artists, part community activism, part exploration of identities influenced by the liminal zone of the borderlands."

And finally, this collaborative border-centered work has had an effect on museums and nonprofits in the United States and Mexico; these institutions have

diversified their audiences by connecting marginalized communities through collaboration.

One of the most interesting elements of Aguiñiga's work is the way it explores the borders and tensions between art and craft. When the AMBOS project was exhibited as part of the *Care & Craft* exhibition, it was shown alongside some of the innovative, craft-bending furniture she also designed: before her foray into socially engaged public art, Aguiñiga had been known for furniture, drawing on her early training at RISD. Artists and craftspeople/designers tend to approach the creative process from very different assumptions: to simplify the difference, designers are given a problem or address a standing problem (a ubiquitous utilitarian object) and solve it, while artists come up with their own problems, and then solve them. There's a level of utility in design, and often in craft, that art doesn't have to address. And some might argue that the work has to lose utility to become art. Aguiñiga is sensitive to the places where those differences occur, using each location as necessary. However, she crosses boundaries with little concern. She locates each work through seamless execution of an idea, expanding on each work physically. And in doing so, she continues to expand the kinds of work she makes.

There is, of course, great prestige and market value associated with Art, and Aguiñiga has been successful at making work that sits well within this territory. Despite her additions to her training roots at RISD, her early craft and design practice and the attendant organizational skills made the AMBOS Project not just a critical art success,⁴ but also a model enterprise for nothing less than local/international revolution – something that has a vibrant life both in and out of the white box of a gallery.

As Gloria Anzaldúa has described it, the US/Mexico border is an open wound:

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 in a constant state of transition ... The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderland like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.

(Anzaldúa 1987, 25–26)

We could think of it as a festering, suppurating slash across a land that was once whole, registering the insult of US border policies as infection and pain. Aguiñiga's work invites us to acknowledge the pain of the wound, and to repopulate the borderland that the US sees as empty with real people who try to carry on their

work and lives there every day – people who recognize that there are multiple connections of all kinds that reach across the walls and customs posts. Those connections make the border itself recognizable as a temporary but violent superimposition on a human landscape that by itself would nurture relationship rather than foreignness.

That image of the festering wound is picked up in Julia Bryan-Wilson's description of Aguiñiga's work as a process of *suturing*: "Aguiñiga's practice argues that while dividing populations and landscapes, this seam [the border] also irrevocably sutures the two countries together." Her work, that is, refuses to accept the border as a permanent reality, refuses the meanings that US policy attaches to it.

Bryan-Wilson also points out the other ways that Aguiñiga connects, joins, and sutures in all her work – in this case, rendering the distinctions between all the different kinds of work she does "porous," and eradicating disciplinary differences between art/craft/performance/community:

For the artist, furniture is not only tied to familial domesticity, but can suggest or even actively create alternative social relations; she often converts typically hard industrial chairs and tables made of wood or metal into softer, more accommodating fabric structures. A small selection of such work is featured in the show; for instance, in *Felted/Woven Low Rod Chair* (2015), Aguiñiga adds texture, warmth, and a touch of gendered perversion in the form of crotch-shaped woolen embellishments to an iconic Eames mid-century modernist design. In *Support* (2014), a low-lying modular configuration of sewn denim and leather brick-like units filled with rice and salt can be infinitely rearranged to produce seating, bedding, or, in emergencies, can be split open and eaten.

(Bryan-Wilson 2018)

As this suggests, what at first seem to be disparate, unconnected modes of art-making are in fact connected aspects of Aguiñiga's complex yet internally unified vision.

Lorissa Rinehart also draws attention to this significance of Aguiñiga's work, pointing out that "she has become like a loom's shuttle, weaving together either side of a rent land [see Figure 9.4]. The Museum of Arts and Design [exhibit] features the work that results from a lifetime of creating a tapestry from broken threads" (Rinehart 2018).

And so, two sides of the same experience: the fundamental oneness of the land, the pain produced by the unnatural and violent division. The interrogation of those who wish to cross: "Has anyone in your family been convicted of a crime?" and "Have you ever been part of a political or social group?" As Rinehart puts it, the AMBOS Project "is an effort to document and express the emotions and trauma elicited from the repeated act of having one's person searched and identity questioned while crossing national borders."



FIGURE 9.4 *Border Quipu/Quipu Fronterizo* (AMBOS Project), 2016. Installation of quipu on billboard at the San Ysidro Port of Entry market. Photograph by Gina Clyne. Courtesy of AMBOS Project

The rupture and woundedness of the borderland are reproduced in the physical human body in one of Aguiñiga's performance pieces:

The pain of rupture is also explored in Aguiñiga's performance piece *Grapple*, (2018) documented on video. Wearing a raw linen shirt, Aguiñiga wraps her body around the iron pillars of the border that emerge from the sand at the ocean's edge and stretch beyond the frame of the camera, signaling that even the sky is divided. The tide rolls in and out, the sun sets. Aguiñiga shivers as she continues to cling to the boundary. Displayed alongside the video, the shirt she wears throughout the performance is split in two by a dull orange rust stain, a mark that implies the body that wore it is divided as well.

(Rinehart 2018)

Aguiñiga's work on the borderlands – her exploration of the human attempts to redress the artificial dividedness of the border and the pain that effort produces – could not have emerged in a more timely political moment. As we are besieged by images of children in cages, migrants dying in rivers and deserts, ICE arrests – a litany of dehumanization – Aguiñiga's work recalls us to the underlying connectedness that she strives to make visible.

Now, in the time of the pandemic, Aguiñiga's home town of Tijuana is a Covid-19 epicenter: her response has been to make care packages for kids with



FIGURE 9.5 *Tensión* (AMBOS Project), 2017. Performed by Tanya Aguiniga and Jackie Amezcuita at the Douglas, Arizona/Agua Prieta, Sonora in constant view of the US Border Patrol. Photograph by Gina Clyne. Courtesy of AMBOS Project

paper and paints and crayons so that they can draw what they experience. Artist, activist, organizer – she operates on many platforms at once.

Borders are a form of policing public space: the US/Mexican border, for example, defines who can use the space in which way, who can be “legal” in it, and who is marked as unwelcome and without rights. Yet these borderlands have a history: they were a space that has been used very differently in various past periods. A border is presented to us as a thin line, but Aguiniga pushes us to expand it, to see it not just as a slender tracing on a map but as a fully dimensional place. With the AMBOS Project, she makes visible the traces of the peoples who lived there before. She politicizes our view of the space and fills it with people who are rendered invisible in the current discourse (Figure 9.5). The politics of her work is urgent; in the wake of it she leaves us with the categorical differences (of art, design, and craft) as she pushes us to consider what is at stake in the policing of those boundaries. Her work invites us to consider the occupation of space in all its possible meanings.

Notes

- 1 US Border Health Commission, www.hhs.gov/about/agencies/oga/about-oga/what-we-do/international-relations-division/americas/border-health-commission/index.html.
- 2 Aguiñiga, www.tanyaaguiniga.com.
- 3 "In Conversation: Tanya Aguiñiga and Art Made Between Opposite Sides," Museum of Arts and Design, New York, May 12, 2018. Participating AMBOS members include Jackie Amezcuita, Cecilia Brawley, Gina Clyne, Natalie Godinez, Diana Ryoo.
- 4 See: www.architecturaldigest.com/story/tanya-aguiniga-us-mexico-border-museum-art-and-design and www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/aug/07/artists-speaking-out-on-us-mexico-border-relations-immigration.

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"This volume provides an up-to-date critical reflection of a range of initiatives and interventions, across diverse experiences and perspectives, with a strong inter-disciplinary approach to the spatial implications of the profound socio-economic changes impacting contemporary urbanism."

—Frank Gaffikin, Emeritus Professor and former Director of Research from Queens University, Belfast

It is not possible to be alive today in the United States without feeling the influence of the political climate on the spaces where people live, work, and form communities. *Public Space/Contested Space* illustrates the ways in which creative interventions in public space have constituted a significant dimension of contemporary political action, and how this space can both reflect and spur economic and cultural change.

Drawing insight from a range of disciplines and fields, the essays in this volume assess the effectiveness of protest movements that deploy bodies in urban space, and social projects that build communities while also exposing inequalities and presenting new political narratives. With sections exploring the built environment, artists, and activists and public space, the book brings together the diverse voices to reveal the complexities and politicization of public space within the United States.

Public Space/Contested Space provides a significant contribution to an understudied dimension of contemporary political action and will be a resource to students of urban studies and planning, architecture, sociology, art history, and human geography.

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