

Bordering circumstances: the wall

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Bordering circumstances

Looking at Earth from above allows us to observe a series of events, ranging from geological to anthropogenic, which have shaped its surface. Between tectonics, expressed in landscape monuments, and geopolitics, defined by man-made limits, we can identify patterns of bordering circumstances.

The **border** is an intermediate entity, which permeates a relationship between worlds, allowing them, nevertheless, to keep each its own identity. Physically speaking, it is expressed, therefore, as an *amorphous* element.

In its *immaterial* state, it enables a bodily passage, a transient crossing of matter. Its porosity is inevitably inviting to a transgression.

The **wall** is an architectural device which gives *shape* to these phenomena, of meeting between elements. In case of extreme opacity, it renders communication between parts impossible, completely erasing any hope of contact. It asserts itself, hence, as a concrete hyperbole of an idea of separation.

In its condition as *object*, it is unavoidably subject to two forces: decay, by the hand of Time, or destruction, by the hand of Man.

The following intends to reflect on these premises through a deconstruction exercise, conducted on a concrete plane, by observing a couple of examples which share a similar abstract perimeter as a fundamental compositional theme. From the exchange established between these projects, certain questions might be raised concerning the nature of borders and the role of design in unveiling the invisibilities which mediate the dialogue between environment, architecture and people.

Two study cases:

Robert SMITHSON: The Great Area of Speculation

From a natural rocky landscape, part is removed. The raw matter is displaced. A path is traced, between origin and destination (Exhibition Gallery), establishing a “bipolar rhythm”, an invisible dialogue.

In the Exhibition Gallery these rocks are set in relation to an abstract element, composed of mirrored pieces, defining a square perimeter.

A limbo is suggested, an intermediate space, between the source of organic matter – *site* – and the hypothetical place, defined by the polygon, which it comes to inhabit – *non-site*.

The spectator is transported beyond the limits which confine the moment of observation, travelling through windows of time – from geological genesis to rock extraction – as well as passing through an opening, between its position as the viewer (circumscribed by the architecture of the exhibition space) and the location of the quarryman (initial role of the artist), by the material source.

The piece works as a mirror (close object) reflecting an exterior (distant place), confronting the audience with “the physicality of here and now”¹, the present space-time. Not everything is dirt, not everything is concept. Both converge in an *in-between*, assumedly ephemeral, in which the author reveals a glimpse of “the great area of speculation”².

Solano Benítez: **A Branch of Heaven**

Between dense vegetation, crossed by little streams, a 9 meter square is drawn, at the centre of which lies the father of the architect.

Four concrete beams, suspended each by its own pillar, define the mentioned shape without, nevertheless, touching at the vertex. The external surface of these floating pieces is engraved with *amambay* leaves, a distinctive fern of the area, while the internal surface is coated with mirrors.

Entering the perimeter, its physical limits disappear, owing to the reflections which echo the surrounding greenery. In another moment, closer to the tomb, the act of reflection becomes, on the contrary, introspective.

The abstract demarcation of a border is trespassed in three distinct circumstances.

On the one hand, the effect produced by the mirror play deceives the eye towards an infinite green horizon, intensifying the atmosphere of the place through a pulsing repetition.

“(…) when one enters the square, when one enters the game of mirrors (…) it now explodes all images into universes which amplify and amplify and amplify themselves, successively.”³

On the other hand, in dialogue with the mirrored surface, *the internal quality of the “one” and the external quality of the “other” waver.*⁴ The confrontation of the self with its image allows for an uncommon experience of exteriority, generally denied by the limits of consciousness, reduced to self-validation, constrained by anatomical lines.

“(…) I live inside my body. And my body is the limit which separates myself, inhabiting its inside, from everything else. The only exception, one I embrace with almost desperation, is the mirror, for in the mirror I am outside (…). At last, in a plane of equality and simultaneity with all there is.”⁵

Finally, the emotional weight of the program allows the visitor, in an intimate chance, to travel to a place of dreams, of the imaginary and of memory, of what was once life.

“maybe in the mirror we have the machine capable of letting us live in a different way with our loved ones...

the absent loved ones, for the obscenity of death took them from our side...

the impossible loves, for we never found the space nor the time in order for them to exist...”⁶

¹ MAY, David, THOMPSON, Linda, JAGER, Nita, Earth Art Catalogue, Office of University Publications. Cornell University, 1970.

² SMITHSON, Robert, A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects, Artforum, New York, September 1968.

³ BENITEZ, Solano, Palestra Auditório FAUUSP, 30/03/2009.

⁴ BENITEZ, Solano. Gabinete de Arquitectura. ARQ (Santiago) [online]. 2002, n.51, p. 21.

⁵ BENITEZ, Solano, Palestra Auditório FAUUSP, 30/03/2009.

⁶ BENITEZ, Solano. Gabinete de Arquitectura. ARQ (Santiago) [online]. 2002, n.51, p. 21.

Thus, in a way analogous to the dialectic established by Robert Smithson between *site* and *non-site*, the architectural tomb built by Solano Benítez suggests the transcendence of the border imposed by design and the establishment of a dialogue, between the concrete reality of place and the immaterial place of dreams. This wish is made vivid, on a walk to the site with his son Solanito, when Solano states:

*"I see him here, with his feet on the ground and here [in the mirror], floating, just as he lives in my dreams."*⁷

The Wall as Non-place

The non-place proposed by Marc Augé refers to a space defined by a transient or passing character. According to the author, this concept serves as a counterpoint to the notion of "anthropological place", in which an identity empowering space arises, allowing the meeting of people and the sharing of social references. The non-place is a space not to be lived, where the individual remains anonymous and solitary.

The fluidity which presently typifies global migratory fluxes enabled the appearance of the most fitting contemporary non-place: the border.

All around the world, we can find bordering circumstances where the neologism proposed by Augé is put into question. The nature of a border is based on the imminence of its transgression and, thus, given its transient character, it could be considered a perfect example of a non-place. However, the correlation between argument and example reveals itself to be incomplete.

In a sense, the current border promotes de denigration of individual identity, subject to a human capital categorisation which imposes anonymity through numerical cataloguing. Up until this point, in accordance with the concept.

However, the supposed transience of the place does not verify and, apart from those lost in the net, after a monumental effort of conquering distance, in extreme cases, the non-place ceases indeed to be lived, this time in a literal sense.

Thus, one might state that the cementation of borders, the erection of walls as monuments to an obsolete geo-political past, should be the target of severe criticism. If the nature of the present shares with Augé's proposal a characteristic volatility, the concrete definition of limits as containers of global mobility falls victim to its own nonsense, faded to disintegrate in confrontation with the mobile forces of a liquid modernity.

The epitome of the absurd can be observed in the deadliest bordering context of the 21st century – the Mediterranean Sea – a truly liquid wall which, by means of an European neo-imperialism (translated, through a curiously classical sense, in an aversion to the "other" and in territorial hermeticity), transforms into a solid barrier, inert in its continental conservatism. The floating cemetery of the refugee, the migrant, the contemporary nomad.

Missing Migrants Project data are estimates from IOM, national authorities and media sources. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.⁸

⁷ BENITEZ, Solano, Palestra Auditório FAUUSP, 30/03/2009.

⁸ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

It is urgent to reflect on the definitive and imposing nature of design, most notably, in contexts of geographical tension, when an outdated political rigidity is faced with the fluid spirit of a modernity being written in motion. The permanence of these borders is possible thanks to a prejudiced, complacent and ultimately inhumane posture thriving in the places which, in terms of worldwide migratory fluxes, constitute ports of arrival. To the guardians of the gates of privilege who, through cumulative historical processes widening a socio-economical global abyss, based on continuous violations of human rights, today stand atop the biggest wall ever built.

Everything exists under the same premise. Every being is a descendant of Time. The wall is no exception. From the moment of its conception, it lies suspended in a gap, between the erection and the collapse of its body. From the moment it is born – be it marked by the foundation stone or the closing key-stone – it lives under the condition of a suspended fall which, subject to the devastating stream of Time, tends in a single direction, the inevitable outcome of its destruction.

To all of us, sitting atop the wall, the ultimate question is posed: who is willing to take the fall?