

*Suturando la frontera:  
Postcommodity and the Repellent Fence[s] of the U.S. / Mexico Border*

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Figure 1. Postcommodity, *Repellent Fence*, October 2015. Photograph by Michael Lundgren.  
Credit: Madalen Claire Benson.<sup>1</sup>

For four days in October of 2015, a new border fence appeared between the cities of Agua Prieta, Sonora and Douglas, Arizona [Figure 1]. However, unlike the horizontal border that separates the nation-states of Mexico and the United States, this fence ran north to south, bisecting the line of the wall. Instead of metal welded together, this two-mile fence was comprised of twenty-six yellow, red, blue, and black balloons that soared 100 feet above the ground. There are no barriers in the intervals between these balloons, leaving this fence both open and permeable. The project was initially conceptualized back in 2007 by interdisciplinary art collective Postcommodity, made up of Navajo artist Raven Chacon, Chicano artist Cristóbal

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<sup>1</sup> Madalen Claire Benson, "Stitching the Wound: Land-Based Gestures of Healing and Resistance in the Work of Postcommodity and Maureen Gruben," *Environment, Space, Place* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 1–24, 5.

Martínez, and Cherokee artist Kade L. Twist. The goal of their project was to create a linking fence of these balloons as a means of showing the historic connection/exchange between the two communities that has long predicated any division of territory into modern nation-states or the construction of any wall. Research, planning, and installation were a collaborative effort between Postcommodity and the local communities and cultural institutions of Douglas and Agua Prieta; Casa de la Cultura in Sonora, the Mexican Consulate, and Presbyterian border ministry Frontera de Cristo all helped realize this imagination.<sup>2</sup> Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence* is a vital entry into the broader canon of border art between Mexico and the U.S; through their material innovations, Postcommodity's work manages to index border art's critical functions of negation, community, and humor, all while establishing a new mode of interaction with bordered separation.

While the land surrounding what is now Douglas and Agua Prieta was inhabited as one unseparated continuity for hundreds of years by indigenous communities and early settlers, the 19th century saw the now independent states of Mexico and the United States vivisect the land into two. After years of fighting and contested borders, the Treaty of Guadelupe established a mutually recognized line between the two countries, marking the separation with a sparse, disconnected concrete pillars.<sup>3</sup> After the 1910 Mexican Revolution, the U.S. began to tighten its border control, restricting immigration further in 1924 with the first quota on Mexican workers (capped at 89,000).<sup>4</sup> The border wall, as it is imagined today, was only first inaugurated in 1949 in Monument Park to keep out hoof and mouth-infected Mexican livestock; however, it was quickly reconfigured towards a new aim of keeping out Mexican people.<sup>5</sup> Under the George W.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Irwin, "Suturing the Borderlands: Postcommodity and Indigenous Presence on the U.S.-Mexico Border," *InVisible Culture*, no. 26 (Spring 2017), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Élisa Ganivet, *Border Wall Aesthetics: Artworks in Border Spaces* (Bielefeld, DE: Transcript Verlag, 2019), 155-56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>5</sup> Miriam Ticktin, "Borders: A Story of Political Imagination," *Borderlands Journal* 21, no. 1 (2022): 138–70, 147.

Bush administration, the Immigration Act of 1990 reinforced border patrols and erected over 100 km of barriers between Mexico and California. Bush's Secure Fence Act (H.R. 6061) of 2006 funded another 1.2 billion dollars into the further development of surveillance and policing technology.<sup>6</sup> Donald Trump's Executive Order 13767 of 2017 (Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements) officially authorized the complete construction of the border wall, allocating 25 billion dollars in funding for the project.<sup>7</sup> Today, the border wall remains an incomplete, hodge-podge barrier that brutally divides the territory it sits upon. While sections made of aestheticized metal slats are designed to blend into urban environments, large sections of the wall are welded together out of scrap M8A1 steel plank landing mats from the U.S. military campaign in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Anthropologist of migration and mobility Miriam Ticktin describes the aesthetic imprint of the border wall on the landscape as

a keloid scar of the first order: raised, lumpy and itchy. The thing about keloids is that they never really heal; they continue to irritate long past the time of injury. As with all scars, there is an allure to the line. They demand attention. What happened here? How was the mark made? Was it painful? Will it fade?<sup>9</sup>

This *scar* remembers the pain and brutality of this surgical division of a land and people that used to be one. The border wall is a site of both memory and projection for both sides; it is the fantasies and narratives materially embodied in its metallic structure that make the border a potent site in multinational imaginations.

Walls offer a fantasy of protection and national security, and while this fantasy may be factually inconsistent or totally baseless, it has succeeded in inspiring efforts to wall thousands of kilometers of international borders. Élisa Ganivet, art historian and author of *Border Wall Aesthetics*, writes that borders walls are “the new opium of the people, offer[ing] reassurance and

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<sup>6</sup> Ganivet, *Border Wall Aesthetics: Artworks in Border Spaces*, 157-158.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Hattam, “Imperial Designs: Remembering Vietnam at the US–Mexico Border Wall,” *Memory Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 27–47, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Miriam Ticktin et al., “Images Unwalled,” *Anthropology Now* 9, no. 3 (September 2, 2017): 24–37, 30.

repris[ing] its initial function of providing shelter.”<sup>10</sup> Ticktin furthers this by emphasizing that this *reassurance* of security can only function with an imagination of a demonized other:

Not only do the ramparts need to be built, by facilitating the mobility of certain technologies which stop the mobility of certain people; the idea of immigrants as invasive must also be generated — other forms of imagination are required. This has been accomplished through a process of dehumanization that is at once about animality and racialization. That is, the ‘human’ as a conceptual category is not something natural or biologically fixed, but rather, it is the work of a constantly changing project of taxonomy.<sup>11</sup>

The image of an invasine hoard — translated over from the wall’s cattle-stopping roots — strengthens the wall’s potency as a symbol of national imagination. The land around the border is reimagined as an empty frontier to facilitate its disruptive architecture, creating an arbitrary marcation of difference between the communities that used to inhabit the border’s space as indistinguishable wholes. The American imagination uses the physical landscape and infrastructure of the borderlands to narrate this vision; monuments like “Geronimo Surrenders” in Douglas, Arizona, narrate the history of the region in terms of glorious U.S. expansion with no recognition of indigenous dispossession.<sup>12</sup>

This dramatic fragmentation of both environmental and cultural ecosystems has made the wall a potent site for artworks attempting to contest the normalization of militarized borders and/or reasserting indigenous sovereignty. Border art functions as an interdisciplinary, multimedia genre of work that addresses both the border and the global imagination that naturalizes these divisions. Art historian Ila Nicole Sheren categorizes border art as being “constituted by art from the margins, and [it] privileges the gaps, disjunctions, and interstitial spaces within a given piece, it changes the terms of the conversation.”<sup>13</sup> Through a toolkit of negation, fostering connection, and mocking humor, border art opens a possibility to change the

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<sup>10</sup> Ganivet, *Border Wall Aesthetics: Artworks in Border Spaces*, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Ticktin, “Borders: A Story of Political Imagination,” 146.

<sup>12</sup> Ila Nicole Sheren, “Border Art for a Border Ecology,” essay, in *Liquid Borders*, ed. Mabel Moraña, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2021), 120–30, 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

conversation surrounding national division. Border art opens a new *imaginación global* as theorized by Eleder Piñeiro Aguiar and Miguel Alfonso Bouhaben in their interrogation of performance artworks that use the U.S./Mexico border wall as an artistic site.<sup>14</sup> Through these artistic interventions and interactions with the wall, a new logic of the border is imagined, seeking to bridge and unite rather than divide. By interrogating the imaginations and *logic* articulated by the *Repellent Fence* as a piece of performative, material work of border art, we can more fully understand Postcommodity's vision.

What is most striking and unique about *Repellent Fence* is its lack of material engagement with the actual border wall. The twenty-six balloons that make up the fence are evenly split across the border, with thirteen on each side [Figure 2]. Though they mimic the same monumental scale, they make no actual contact with the wall and, instead, offer a completely contrasting materiality: buoyant, permeable, and *flexible*. While the border wall is narrativized to be rigid, durable, and permanent, the *Repellent Fence* is a non-restrictive, fluid barrier that is ultimately ephemeral. This is the project's most notable divergence from the majority of the most famous works of border art engaged with the U.S./Mexico wall, such as Ana Tereza Fernández's multiple staging of her performance piece *Borrando la frontera* [Figures 3 - 4]. The performance was staged first in Playas de Tijuana in 2011, then subsequently in Nogales, Sonora, in 2015 in collaboration with Border Community Alliance and in Ciudad Juárez in 2016 with cultural collective Border/Arte.<sup>15</sup> Her performance leaves a material trace on the border by painting the very structure to match the landscape and sky it interrupts. Alfonso Bouhaben and Piñeiro Aguiar read her negation of the border's physical barrier as a metaphorically-laden use of her

<sup>14</sup> Miguel Alfonso Bouhaben and Eleder Piñeiro Aguiar, "Transfronterización, Sobrefronterización y Desfronterización. El Arte de La Performance En La Frontera Entre Estados Unidos y México," *Revista Colombiana de Sociología* 44, no. 1 (2021): 217–35, 222.

<sup>15</sup> María Jesús Castro Dopacio, "Humanizing the Wall: Cosmopolitan Artistic Interventions on the US–Mexico Border," essay, in *Cosmopolitan Strangers in US Latinx Literature and Culture: Building Bridges, Not Walls*, ed. Esther Álvarez-López and Andrea Fernández-García, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 150–70, 163–164.



Figure 2. *Repellent Fence* balloon locations. Credit: [Postcommodity](#).

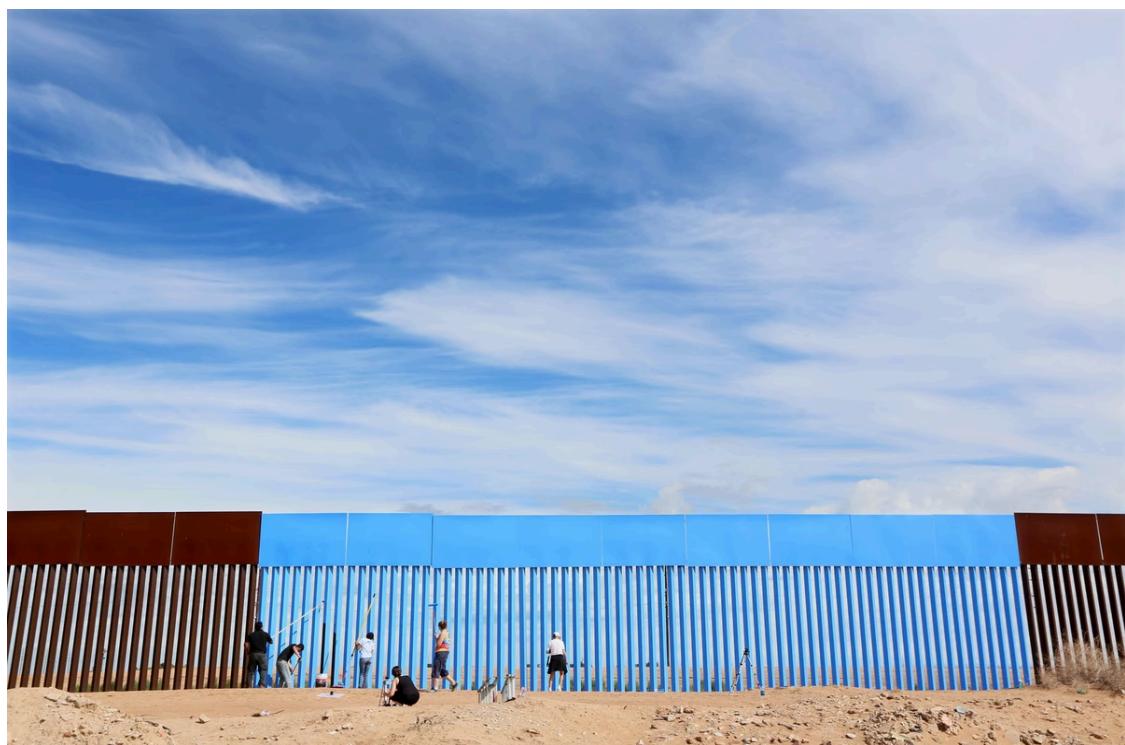


Figure 3. Ana Teresa Fernández, *Borrando la Frontera*, with Border/Arte, Mexicali, April 9, 2016. Photograph by Sandy Huffaker. Credit: [The Atlantic](#).

paint *gun* to turn the act of painting into a radical, system-shattering vision:

Desde su propio título: un gerundio que invoca a la acción por cuanto el proceso de construcción fronterizo es un acto creativo nunca concluido, de la misma manera que lo es la apertura a otro mundo. Pero además todo umbral es defendido por algún agente, por algún guardián, lo que nos permite pensar la frontera desde su construcción bélica. En este sentido, la vindicación de Ana Teresa Fernández apunta una praxis desfronterizadora, a un mundo sin fronteras más allá del diseño por el capitalismo neoliberal.<sup>16</sup>

Teresa Fernández uses her artistic intervention to imaginatively *break through* the border wall, turning her artistic practice into one of revolutionary thinking.

Postcommodity's work, though it totally rejects the border wall as its operative canvas, similarly emphasizes this negation of the border and its dividing logic. The *Repellent Fence* is not meant to permanently divide and *fix* populations on either side like the border wall. The fluctuating and ephemeral balloon “wall” points to an alternative understanding of land ownership and mutuality practiced by the original Apache, Tohono O’odham, and Yaqui inhabitants of what is today Douglas and Agua Prieta.<sup>17</sup> Scholar of visual culture and indigenous studies Matthew Irwin, who accompanied Postcommodity during their efforts on the *Repellent Fence*’s launch day, writes about how this complete rejection of replicating the visuality/materiality of the border is in tandem with the project’s larger rejection of the understandings of sovereignty and land ownership underwritten into the modern neoliberal state: “Indigenous nations cannot be classified as simply inside or outside the nation because they ‘straddle the temporal and spatial boundaries of American politics,’ their politics refusing to be contained by the limits of the boundaries of the settler-state and the nation.”<sup>18</sup> The *Repellent*

<sup>16</sup> Miguel Alfonso Bouhaben and Eleder Piñeiro Aguiar, “Desfronterización Performativa: Pintar, Lijar y Espejar El Borde,” *Arte e Investigación*, no. 22 (2022): 1–17, 5:

“From its very title: a gerund that invokes action in which the process of border construction is a creative act that is never concluded, in the same way that opening up to another world is. But in addition, every threshold is defended by some agent, by some guardian, which allows us to think about the border since its military construction. In this sense, Ana Teresa Fernández’s vindication points to a debordering praxis, toward a world without borders beyond those designed by neoliberal capitalism.”

<sup>17</sup> Irwin, “Suturing the Borderlands,” 18.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 23.



Figure 4. Ana Teresa Fernández, *Borrando la Frontera*, Playas de Tijuana, June 27, 2011. Credit: [Ana Teresa Fernández](#).

*Fence* is not only a visual negation of the border's materiality, akin to Teresa Fernández's project, but it is also (likewise) an ideological negation of the dividing logic that informs the very structure of the modern border wall.

In the words of Postcommodity, the project was meant to act "as a suture that stitches the peoples of the Americas together," with Martínez adding that the site of Agua Prieta/Douglas was specifically chosen because "the two communities share a strong memory of a time before the border wall."<sup>19</sup> Seeking to shatter the illusion of the borderland as an empty space of vacancy, the project seeks to affirm the centuries of economic (from the booming copper industry) and cultural exchange that have taken place on this very land. In Agua Prieta, the launch of the 13 balloons on the Mexico side became a "reimagined Indigenous ceremony," with a circle of prayers and stories from volunteers; Martínez then recognized the balloons held a "sacred value."<sup>20</sup> The *Repellent Fence* invokes the popular function of community building in the practices of border art in order to offer a *suturing* healing to the divided communities. Other works of border art, such as Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello's *Teeter-Totter Wall* [Figure 5], similarly foreground local community collaboration and participation in their materiality. With the collaboration of Colectivo Chopeke, the two artists transformed the border wall between Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and Sunland Park, New Mexico for twenty minutes into a teeter-totter playground. The bright pink teeter-totter both emphasizes the historically essential, interconnected, and ongoing balance/exchange between the two divided lands, and recasts the border as a site of connection, whimsy, and joy.<sup>21</sup> The wall is bisected with a competing line (similarly to the *Repellent Fence*) in order to turn a site of cold rejection into warm hospitality, albeit at least temporarily.

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<sup>19</sup> Benson, "Stitching the Wound," 3-5.

<sup>20</sup> Irwin, "Suturing the Borderlands," 13.

<sup>21</sup> Castro Dopacio, "Humanizing the Wall," 162.



Figure 5. Ronald Rael And Virginia San Fratello, *Teeter-Totter Wall*, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and Sunland Park, New Mexico. July 2019. Credit: Rael Son Fratello.

Rael and San Fratello's *Teeter-Totter Wall* and Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence* both similarly serve to transform the practice of artmaking into a practice of connectivity and exchange. The exclusionary violence of the wall is countered with an *emotional* form of inclusivity, gluing the fractured communities back together piece by piece. The foundational logic of the border *can* be subverted, even if just temporarily, by these performative works of art that negotiate the terms of and possibilities for human connection on this land. As the launch of Postcommodity's ascending balloons becomes a site for ritualistic bonding and commemoration, Rael and San Fratello's pink seesaws parallel this vertical mobility in offering play and encouraged interaction between the two divided communities.

Finally, Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence* also invokes the critical border art tool of humorous mocking to destabilize the border as a normalized and institutionalized structure in our world. The specific design and choice of the balloons as a medium work to enact this mockery, enlarging the form of "scare eye" balloons commonly used in the local area to fend off birds from gardens and fields. The balloons typically feature a central black eye ringed in black and yellow that replicates a watchful eye, offering a countering surveillance to the technology of the border. Ticktin refers to this artistic process as enacting a "disobedient gaze" against the settler state, repurposing surveillance towards tracking and unveiling not migration but the violence of the border and nation-state.<sup>22</sup> The balloons can even be read as an attempt to *ward off* the restrictions of the settler-colonial state. However, Postcommodity introduces blue into the balloon's color palette [Figure 6] in order to reference the primacy of these four colors throughout often disparate Indigenous cultures across the Americas:

For Chacon, the colors are distinctly Navajo, representing four worlds of emergence into the current world: red, blue, yellow, and white, in that order. The colors also correspond with sacred minerals, as well as sacred mountains and their directions. White (or white shell) represents

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<sup>22</sup> Miriam Ticktin, "Borders: A Story of Political Imagination," 146.

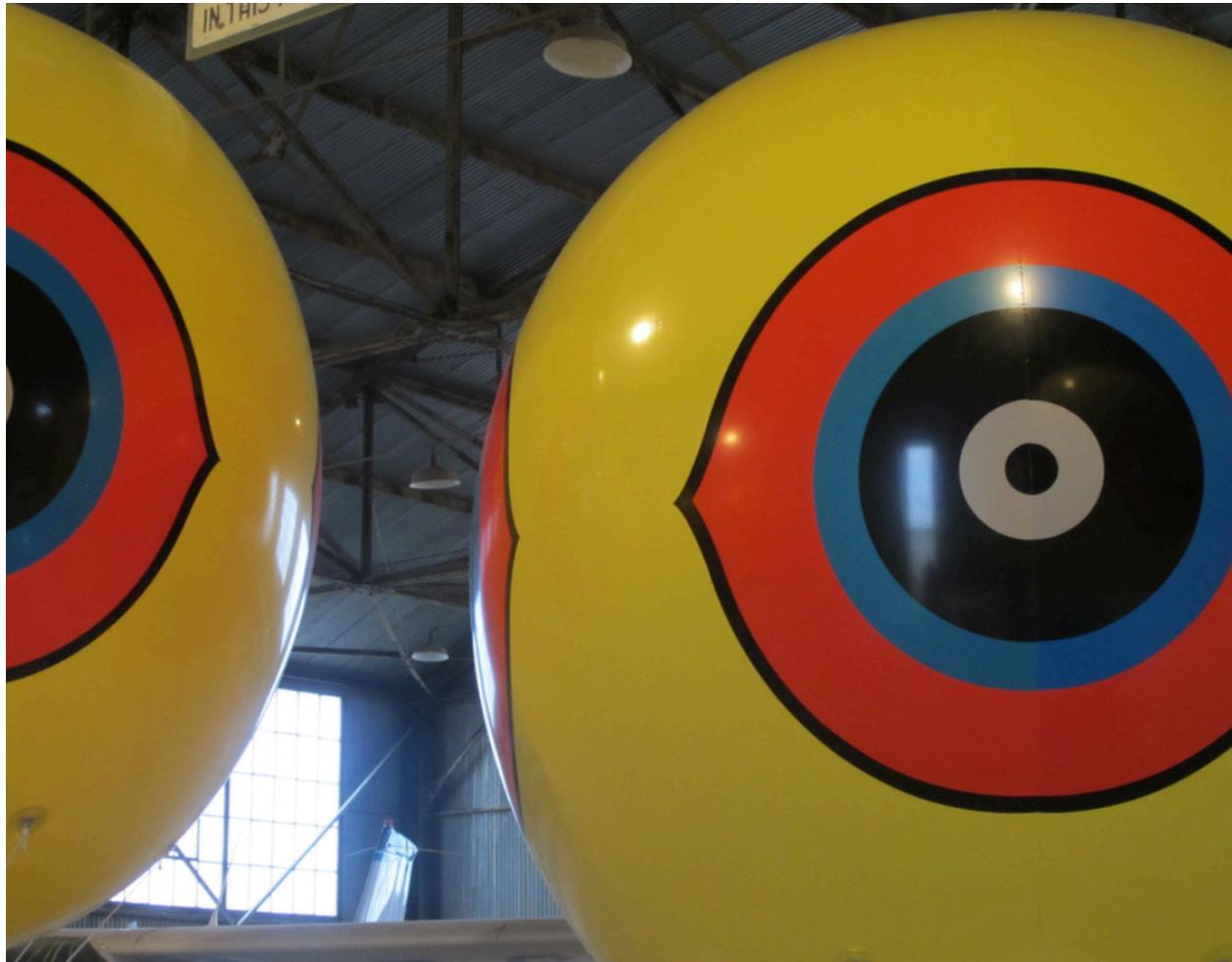


Figure 6. *Repellent Fence* Balloons. Credit: Matthew Irwin.<sup>23</sup>

Colorado's Blanca Peak in the east. Blue (or turquoise) is Mount Taylor, near Grants, New Mexico in the south. Yellow (or abalone) is San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, Arizona in the west.

Finally, black (or obsidian) represents Hesperus Mountain, north in Colorado. For Twist, the colors also refer to four directions, but specifically as medicine colors used in various ceremonies. For Martínez, the colors contain meaning about essential, quotidian details, such as seasons, animals, and the stages of life.<sup>24</sup>

While the use of the repellent scare-eye balloon holds potency and meaning in the larger project of foregrounding indigenous sovereignty, the balloon was ultimately chosen as a medium because of its ineffectiveness. Postcommodity was inspired after one of their members purchased one for their personal garden, only to see the same birds return a few days later.<sup>25</sup> The *Repellent*

<sup>23</sup> Irwin, "Suturing the Borderlands," 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Sheren, "Border Art for a Border Ecology,"

*Fence* emphasizes the fence-as-structure's own material vulnerability and failure, akin to the failure of the actual border wall to both fix the root issues driving migration and stop illegal crossings.

This humorous invocation of the border's ineffectiveness is shared and emphasized by Mexican performance artist Rocío Bolíver's 2012 performance of *To The Rhythm Of The Swing* at Low Lives: Occupy! Festival at Playas de Tijuana [Figures 7 - 8]. During the fifteen-minute performance, the artist was suspended from a crane directly above the border wall, swaying back and forth between the two territorial airspaces with a fluttering trail of white chiffon. At the end of the performance, she pulls her pants down to reveal her butt to immigration officers and defecates on the U.S. side before swaying away and being lowered down back on the Mexican side. Since her body had never actually touched U.S. soil, she was unable to be detained or

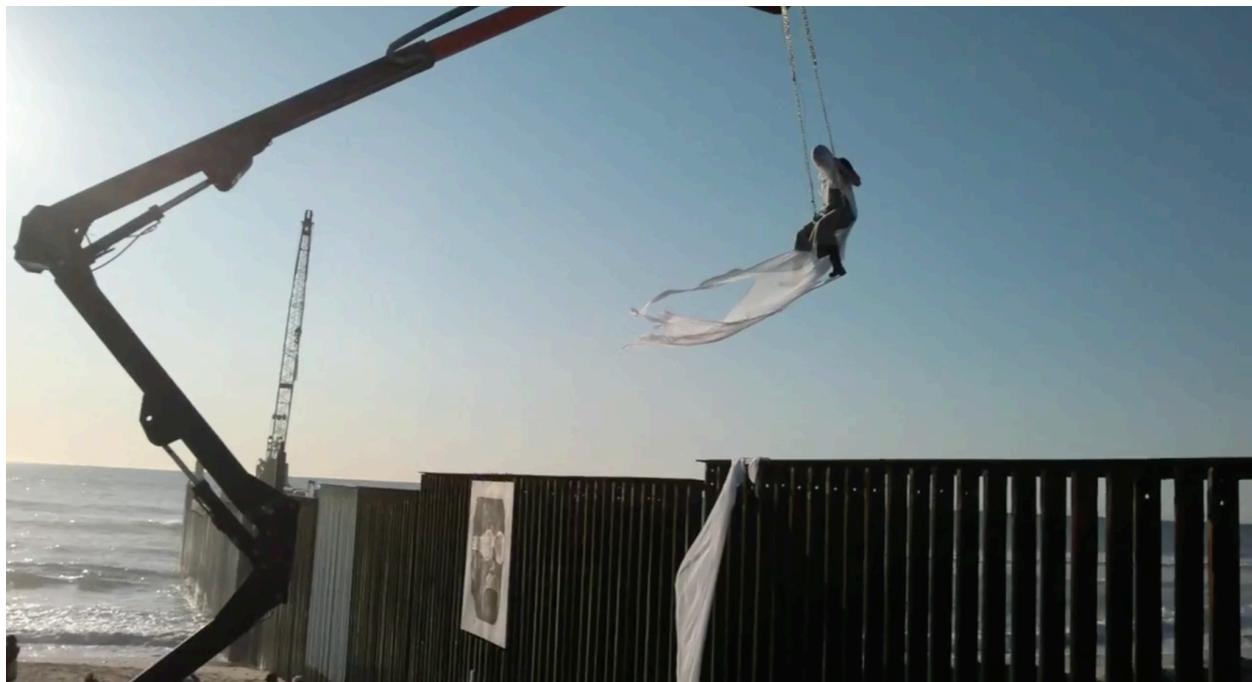


Figure 7. Rocío Bolíver, *To the Rhythm of Swing*, 2012. Playas de Tijuana. Credit: [Rocío Bolíver](#).

questioned by Immigration officers.<sup>26</sup> Her performance works to “supone una inversión y en cierto modo una venganza de los procesos de control: se trata de usar el cuerpo como signo político que visibilice el horror de las fronteras, a través de transgresiones que denotan transfronterizaciones del cuerpo.”<sup>27</sup> Her artistic performance becomes a site of *transfronterización* and *transterritorialización* as she whimsically swings back and forth above the artificial line drawn by the States.<sup>28</sup>

Boliver’s performance serves to mock the U.S./Mexico border wall’s impotence in parallel with Postcommodity’s project, using her own corporeal form to embody this clandestine migration still enacted across the wall. As her performance makes literal the horrific *digestion* of people into waste, cattle, and *invading hordes* at the border, it shows that a horizontal movement across is possible in her flight. She, too, rejects any physical contact with the border or the militarized land on either side. As the scare-eye balloons of the *Repellent Fence* sway in parallel with Boliver’s body, they both mock the border as a fallacy of self-assured security and *repellence*. Bolivar takes to the extreme this same toolkit of absurdity, insult, and whimsical fantasy that vitally informs Postcommodity’s project, albeit in more subtle — and less fecal — forms. Through humor, the border can be revealed to be an ineffective solution for the states in supposed “crisis.” The border does little to stop illegal transgression and migration into the United States, and even its tactical infrastructure did not stop a 92% success rate for illegal border crossings from 2005 to 2009.<sup>29</sup> Border art’s capacity to address and unveil this failure — through a multiplicatively serious, playful, informative, and humorous grammar — acts as a

<sup>26</sup> Alfonso Bouhaben and Piñeiro Aguiar, “Transfronterización, Sobrefronterización y Desfronterización,” 224.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>28</sup> “Represent an inversion, and in a way, a revenge, of the processes of control: it involves using the body as a political sign that makes visible the horror of borders, through transgressions that denote the crossing of borders of the body and that can be interpreted from various angles: as a playful act, as an expression of difference, and as abjection.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ganivet, *Border Wall Aesthetics: Artworks in Border Spaces*, 173.



Figure 8. Rocio Boliver, *To the Rhythm of Swing*, Playas de Tijuana, 2012. Credit: [Rocio Boliver](#).

potent means of unsettling the normalcy of border walls as a political tool and reality in the global world order.

Postcommodity's fence of twenty-six balloons stretching from Agua Prieta to Douglas ultimately serves to not only counter and negate the U.S.'s border wall, but also functions as a means of awakening a new conceptualization and understanding of a world without borders. Like Ana Teresa Fernández's *Borrando la frontera*, the *Repellent Fence* serves to parody and negate the dividing properties of the border wall. As Teresa Fernández paints imaginary gaps into the border's structural narrative of unflinching integrity, the *Repellent Fence* offers a vision of a border fence with these gaps preconfigured in, allowing a constant, free movement. Postcommodity's project attempts to bridge the gaps and *suture* together the once-connected communities divided by the historically recent imposition of the border wall. By emphasizing the essential, ongoing, and *balanced* connection across the two sides of the wall, the *Repellent Fence* acts like Rael and San Fratello's *Teeter-Totter Wall* to turn artistic performance/installation into an action of community participation and enjoyment. Border art's capacity to invoke joy, playfulness, and whimsy in its subversive critique allows space for mocking humour to emerge as a tool for works like the *Repellent Fence* and Rocío Bolíver's *To the Rhythm of the Swing*. Swinging back and forth, both the scare-eye balloons and Bolíver's body reveal a flaw in the border's supposed infallibility as they contactlessly cross its threshold. *Repellent Fence* is an unprecedented entry into the canon of border art that simultaneously combines artistic practices of material production, performance, and landscaping. Through its material opposition and rhetoric, the *Repellent Fence* offers a compelling view into Postcommodity's monumental vision for a land with open, swaying borders.

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