

TIJUANA / SAN DIEGO: ORGANIC BORDER

Isabella Cruz-Chong
isbellacruzchong.wordpress.com

April 2015
Major Studio II - Anezka Sebek

ABSTRACT

I grew up constantly crossing the international border between Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, California, and felt connected to both the Mexican and American cultures. The more time I spend between these two cities, the more I have become intimately aware of the friction created by their division. The Mexico/US border is a contentious boundary due to harsh stereotypes, closed mindsets, and an unhealthy environment that overlooks existing pain and the possibilities of a constructive relationship. The project is an interactive art installation that examines the malleability of the dynamics and perceptions of the border. This would prove that the border is flexible and a living point of connection that could have potential for growth in the countries' relationship. The piece is designed to help participants understand how their social perception is flexible and how the necessity of a border creates its own downfall. The installation consists of a condensed line of soil dividing a platform situated on top of aligned speakers. The participants blur the condensed line of dirt by triggering radio broadcasts from either Tijuana or San Diego, depending on which of the two sides they stand.



1. INTRODUCTION

The history of political borders starts with the history of humankind. It is embedded in human nature to create visible and invisible boundaries to implement power and security. However, the border as a political artifact is changing. As Newman says, “The study of borders have moved beyond the limited confines of the political geography discourse, crossing its own disciplinary boundaries, to include sociologists, political scientists, historians, international lawyers, and scholars of international relations.”¹ A reason for the change in dynamics and perceptions is due to the evolution of transportation, media and the Internet. Shields asserts, “Borders, which are dependent on transnational ICT networks, are permitting state actors to re-scale border controls in a way that transcends the territorial framework of the nation-state system.”² In modern times, it is easier for people to transcend political borders. Therefore, the border as a political artifact is becoming less effective.

The Tijuana/San Diego border is one of the most contentious political borders in the world. The border fence includes several barriers, most of them designed to prevent illegal immigration to the United States. The two countries' different socioeconomic status, the history of drug wars, and racism establish this chaotic border; which creates closed mindsets, harsh stereotypes, and an unhealthy environment that overlooks existing pain and possibilities of a constructive relationship. People’s mindsets and behavior when approaching the “other side” reveals that people have not transcended the border, and as such people maintain the current tension and actively build not only a physical but also a mental border. I believe people’s views should change in order to transform the border dynamic into a beneficial exchange. As Newman explains, “Borders should be seen for

¹ David Newman, “The lines that continue to separate us: borders in our ‘borderless’ world,”

² Peter Shields, “Borders as information flows and transnational networks,” *Global Media and Communication* (2014): 3, accessed April 20, 2015, doi: 10.1177/1742766513513195

their potential to constitute bridges and points of contact, as much as they traditionally constituted barriers to movement and communication.”³

The audience living in or around the Tijuana/San Diego Border will benefit from the installation by consciously understanding the correlation between their behaviors and the creation of personal borders between themselves and people on the other side of the physical border. Newman suggests, “Borders should be studied not only from top-down perspective, but also from the bottom-up, with a focus on the individual border narratives and experiences.”⁴

The proposed art project examines the malleability of dynamics and perceptions of the Tijuana/San Diego border through the creation of an interactive installation. The piece is designed to help participants understand how the social perception of the border is flexible and how forcibly building a border eventually creates its own downfall. The interactive installation consists of a condensed line of soil dividing a platform situated atop four small and aligned speakers. The condensed line represents how the border is usually seen as a rigid and permanent division. The participants blur the condensed line by triggering radio broadcasts from either Tijuana or San Diego depending on which of the two sides of the platform they are standing on. The radio broadcasts are news and stories about the fence and immigrants from both perspectives.

The project is interactive so as to emphasize the interdependence between both countries and to destroy the illusion that each side exists in isolation from the other. It is essential to have a lively, organic, and fluid element such as soil to symbolize the border since the focus is on showing how the psychological aspect of the border is subjective and can be remade. The disintegration of the condensed soil line helps to visualize how this border is not as rigid as it might seem. The use of radio broadcasts helps to produce strong emotional reactions and allows participants to perceive the distinct perspectives. They

³ Newman, 143.

⁴ Newman, 143.

will be able to see how these two perspectives coming together so strongly creates only confusion instead of a path for growth and understanding.

2. CONTEXTUALIZING ART CONCEPT

The knowledge fields related to the project are mainly themes pertaining to connection and separation, the implications from both, and the senses triggered during the experience. Some fields include racism, immigration, international borders, biculturalism, tension, communication, and sound (*Figure 1*). All these interconnect with each other through a concept map helping shape the purpose for the project (*Figure 2*).

bilingual	questions	cymatics	contact	border patrol
bicultural	foreigners	node	sensors	officers
TJ/SD Border	prejudices	vibrations	game	immigrants
Awareness	augmenting	feeling touched	doubt	refugees
Self-Awareness	racism	active listening	experiences	crossing
Touch	separation	open communication	intuition	designed
Breathing	unity	fearless communication	instinct	technology
Senses	different abilities	inside/outside	puzzle	video
Non-Visual	wired to connect	innocent	raw	images
Body	sound	unknown fear	human	
Skin			friction	
			programmed	

Figure 1. Knowledge fields

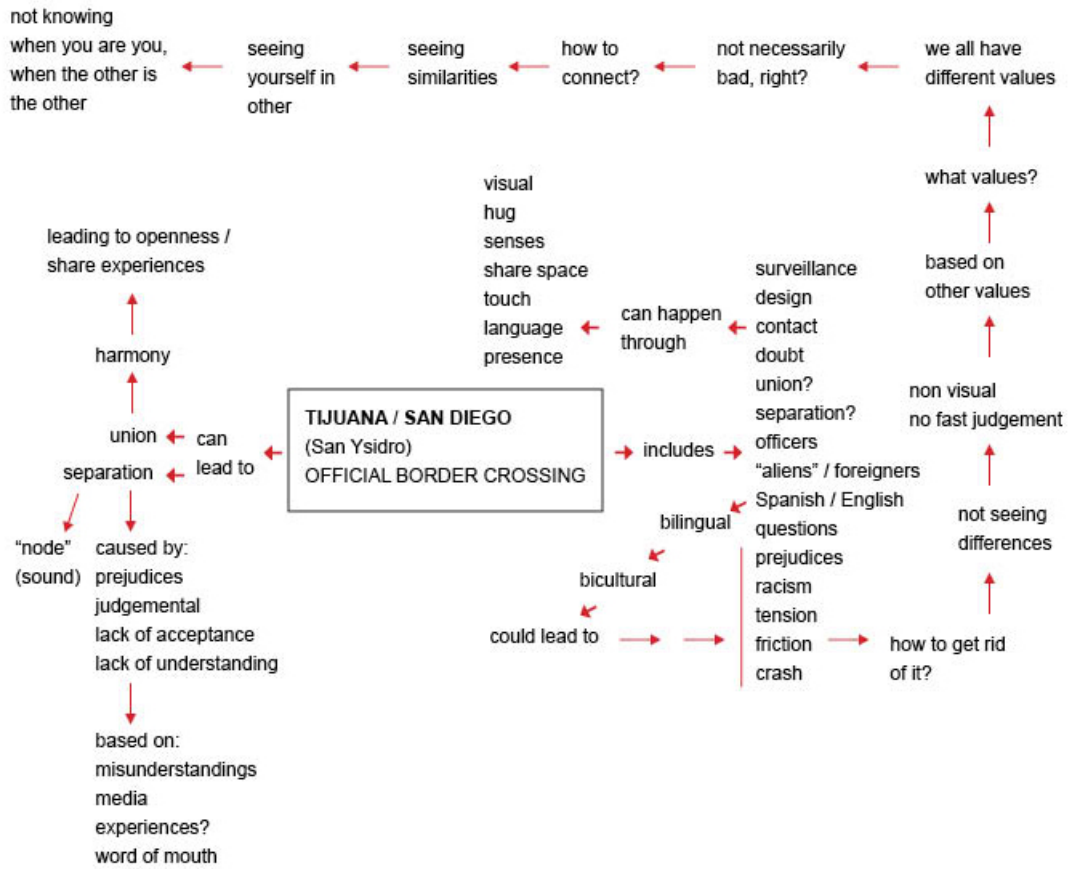


Figure 2. Concept map

In the past, artists and designers have addressed visible and invisible borders through various different projects. The interactive experiences *Delicate Boundaries* by Chris Sugrue (Figure 3) and *Boundary Functions* by Scott Sona Snibbe (Figure 4) use technology to highlight each person’s invisible personal space and how it operates depending on its surroundings. In *Delicate Boundaries*, small bugs made of light crawl out of a computer screen onto the human bodies that make contact with them. *Boundary Functions* is a set of lines projected from overhead onto the floor, dividing people in the gallery from one another.



Figure 3. *Delicate Boundaries*
by Chris Sugrue



Figure 4. *Boundary Functions*
by Scott Sona Snibbe

The sound installations, *Dream House* by the Mela Foundation (Figure 5) and *The Forty Part Mortet* by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller (Figure 6), transmit through sound the idea that borders can cause separation or shift depending on the participant's behavior. *Dream House* is a room where the person feels different sound frequencies based on their location in the room. *The Forty Part Mortet* is forty separately recorded voices played back through forty speakers strategically placed throughout the space. The visitor is encouraged to listen from far away at all forty speakers as one collective sound as well as to get closer to each speaker to notice each unique voice.



Figure 5. *Dream House*
by Mela Foundation

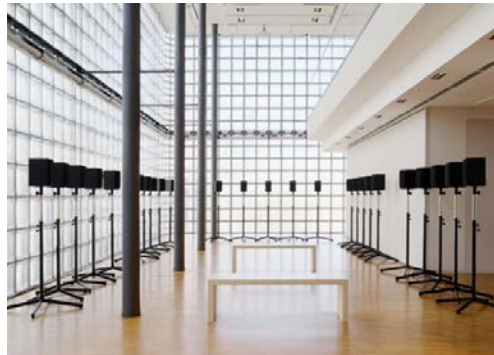


Figure 6. *The Forty Part Mortet*
by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller

The artists' projects addressing the US/Mexico border portray the controversy of illegal immigration and the complexity of entering the US. In *The Texas Border* by Jana Virgin (Figure 7), she showcases the surveillance footage of the border and border crossing instructions for people watching the videos. Also, the artist Erika Harrsch suggests an American continent absent of geopolitical borders and creates a game show where the

prize is a passport with an original seal that combines symbols of the United States, Canada, and Mexico (Figure 8). *Papers, Please* by Lucas Pope (Figure 9) is a puzzle video game that focuses on the emotional toll of deciding whom to allow and whom to deny border access by taking on the role of an immigration officer.



Figure 7. *The Texas Border* by Jana Virgin



Figure 8. *Passport*
by Erika Harrsch



Figure 9. *Papers, Please*
by Lucas Pope

These art and design precedents clearly show personal space through technology, sound boundaries, and the complexity of entering the US. There are several reasons for myself to iterate a new interactive sound installation. The project proposes to use a more tactile and organic material to show how political borders are not as straight or rigid as how projections show them to be in the prior work mentioned. The project iteration includes sound to create a strong emotional reaction and to emphasize how sound and vibrations

can transcend any political border.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A. How does one exhibit the malleability of the dynamics and perceptions of the Tijuana/San Diego border?

B. What materials and sound would be the most effective in conveying the true flexibility of the border and surrounding social perceptions?

Given its organic uses and connotations, I chose soil as a material so as to emphasize the organic aspect of the border, the border's ultimately man-made and inorganic nature, and the ever-shifting perceptions held by populations of people on either side. Technology aids the interaction by augmenting the interactivity of installation and allowing users to trigger the sounds themselves. This conveys a clear message that stories, ideas, and perceptions, like those included in the radio broadcasts, can pass through or effectively blur views on a rigid, physical border.

4. TARGET AUDIENCE

Who

The interactive installation is designed for teenagers, young adults and middle-aged adults who live or have lived on the Tijuana/San Diego border and often cross between both cities. I believe that these demographic groups would be ideal, as they would have an emerging or already established interest in border dynamics. In addition, the secondary population lives along the remaining US/Mexico border. The participants are aware of the politically contentious US/Mexico border and are knowledgeable of their past and current relationship. Also, they are familiar with fine art and the role it plays in society. The piece potentially resonates to people from other countries that are aware of this and other international borders. People will naturally have a different take on the subject given that each international border is laden with its own dynamics and issues.

User Personas

A. Marisa



Age: 25

Residency: San Diego, US

Citizenship: US

Occupation: Waitress

Income: Middle class

Marital Status: Single

Background: Marisa is from Santa Fe, New Mexico and has been living in San Diego for 5 years since studying English at the University of San Diego. She enjoys sports like hiking, rock climbing, and surfing. She knows basic Spanish but rarely practices. She is eager to visit Tijuana, Mexico but she is scared of the city because of all the rumors of danger she has heard.

B. Marco



Age: 18

Residency: Tijuana, Mexico

Citizenship: US

Occupation: Student

Income: Middle to Upper class

Marital Status: Single

Background: Marco was born and raised in Tijuana, Mexico. He attends high school at the largest public school in Tijuana. He and his family cross to San Diego two times a month to buy clothes and go to the movies. Marco does not know what career to choose and he is unsure on whether he should try to study in the US or stay in Mexico.

C. Ricardo



Age: 50

Residency: Tijuana, Mexico

Citizenship: US

Occupation: Researcher

Income: Middle class

Marital Status: Married

Background: Ricardo works at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana. He does academic research on immigration. He loves Mexico and enjoys crossing to San Diego every week to eat at restaurants and to visit electronic goods stores.

D. Joanne



Age: 42

Residency: San Diego, US

Citizenship: US

Occupation: Professor

Income: Middle class

Marital Status: Divorced

Background: Joanne is a math professor at San Diego State University. She has a couple of friends in Tijuana, Mexico and visits Tijuana once every couple of months for doctor visits due to cheaper costs. She does not enjoy driving in Tijuana because the roads are not smooth but she thinks it is worth the effort once in a while.

Where

The locations for the project include conferences, festivals, galleries and museums that focus primarily on border relations and the border's sociopolitical issues. Ideally, such events are in and around Tijuana and San Diego where both American and Mexican individuals congregate. For example, the events that take place at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Cecut, Insite and The Transborder Insitute. Such experiences encourage conversations on current border problems; by exhibiting an abstract installation piece, the border is shown in a different light so as to inspire new ways of thinking and innovative solutions. The installation sits in its own room or surrounded by other work with similar concepts. The audience at international museums and galleries are likely international individuals such as tourists or scholars. In this scenario, the installation works as a connection between foreigners and the US/Mexico border. This connection creates an awareness of the current border situation and incites reflection on personal borders that one might experience, both physical and in other forms.

Experience

A condensed line of soil divides a platform in two. The platform is 40" x 50" and is elevated 3" from the floor with 4 small speakers aligned underneath. As a person stands on either side of the line, she or he triggers sound. The vibrations from the speakers move the soil from the central, condensed 40" line and causes the soil to spread across the plastic platform. With continued interaction with the installation, the dirt eventually begins to fall off the platform and the represented border becomes increasingly blurred. A person standing on the left side triggers a San Diego radio broadcast and a person

standing on the right side triggers a Tijuana radio broadcast. Both are political news stories involving the border from either country's perspective. When two or more people stand on both sides, the radio broadcasts become harder to understand. The sound and the blurriness of the line emphasize how organic the border is and how each side of the line does not exist in isolation from the other.

5. PROTOTYPING PROCESS

“What is the project saying?” was the question guiding the making process. The process began exploring different mediums and approaches to decipher the crucial questions and statement of the project. In the middle of the process, it was decided to work with the sound of radio broadcasts and its effect on soil to emphasize how organic the border is.

Prototype I



Figure 10. Prototype I

The first prototype (*Figure 10*) consisted of a sound installation where participants would hear the questions that American officers ask people crossing to the US juxtaposed with the answers that these people might give to officers. The project emphasized the different perspectives held by those on each side. I decided that the focus for the current project was not going to address the individuals themselves but the multiplicity of perspectives in the community as a whole in order to emphasize the implications of different perspectives on a community level rather than on a personal level.

Prototype II



Figure 11. Prototype II

The second prototype consisted of “covering” a speaker playing an NPR radio news story from the US/Mexico border in February 6, 2014 (*Figure 11*). Through this prototype, the US perspective remained present but not the Mexican perspective. Technically, the sound was very hard to “hide” and it was hard to understand the exact words. I decided to use sound in an alternate way to include both countries’ perspectives to show them as equals.

Prototype III



Figure 12. Prototype III

The third prototype consisted of three speakers playing radio broadcasts from both Mexico and the US (*Figure 12*). An intense and interesting sound came out due to what was being said and how the words got lost when all the speakers were playing at the same time. The sound helped to address the strong ideals and the chaos that these can cause. I decided to keep creating work using radio broadcasts and to look for a way to visually show the dynamics of the border.

Prototype IV



Figure 13. Prototype IV

The next prototype helped me decide how to visualize the border and what kind of material to use to do so (*Figure 13*). The prototype consisted of dirt on a table and two people represented each side of the border by moving the soil with fans. The fans were not powerful enough to move the soil or to control the direction of the soil's movement. I decided to keep exploring an organic material like soil and to choose a different way to manipulate it.

Prototype V



Figure 14. Prototype V

In the fifth prototype, I combined news broadcasts about creating fences with the soil (*Figure 14*). The prototype consisted of a line of soil dividing a small platform on top of small speakers underneath. As I triggered the sound, the soil started moving apart. The sound of radio broadcasts themselves blurring the “border” became a simple and powerful way to emphasize how malleable the border is and how the idea of having a border creates its own downfall. Since this prototype, I kept the combination of sound and soil as mediums while continuing to consider new materials and hardware.

Prototype VI



Figure 15. Prototype VI

In the sixth prototype, I explored cymatics (*Figure 15*). The prototype consisted of sand on a plexiglas on top of a speaker. I triggered the sound of radio broadcasts and the soil started moving apart. Afterwards, I triggered a generated tone at 450Hz and the sound started creating patterns with the soil. Through this prototype I started to consider how to remake the line after it was being blurred. It was compelling to see the patterns being made by the tone but the patterns were so complex and distinctive that the focus of the border was lost. For the time being, I decided to try other ways to remake the line. The one thing I kept on considering from this prototype was the use of light. It was interesting to see the installation set up in a darker space and have artificial light underneath the platform to emphasize the speakers and the negative and positive space that the disintegration of the border creates.

Prototype VII



Figure 16. Prototype VII

In the seventh prototype, I projected a video with a sound piece alongside the installation (*Figure 16*). The video showed the Mexico/USA political division being drawn while the visitors could simultaneously hear an interview of Julio, a Mexican man that was deported back to Mexico. This addition allowed visitors to not only experience the overall perspectives of both countries when it comes to the border but also an emotional personal story about what the border signifies to one person. By showing it alongside the video and the installation, people could see how the border has many facets for various people. Sometimes this border cannot be any more straightforward and rigid, and for others who can cross it, this border could signify a door. The prototype was successful in that people were intrigued with Julio's story but the connection between his story and the installation was not there. People did not completely understand what it was that I was trying to convey. For future iterations the video could be projected onto the installation itself.

6. CONCLUSION

The installation helps to visualize how organic and malleable the border and related perceptions of it are. The participants understand that they can blur the border, which can create connection. The work emphasizes an abstract and powerful way to view the current border situation and does not focus on each individual experience.

During the installation's first presentation, roughly half of the viewers immediately understood that the line of dirt represented the Tijuana/San Diego border. It seemed as though this group of viewers either lived near a border at some point in the past or were better informed regarding the sociopolitical dynamics of the US/Mexico border. The other half of the viewers, though they did not understand that the dirt represented the border, did notice the inclusion of two different languages. I have concluded that, depending on where the piece is installed, I will give more or less information so as to ensure that perspectives from either side of the border are clearly expressed. For example, if I installed the piece for an audience that is not familiar with border environments I would provide the title, *Tijuana/San Diego: Organic Border*, as well as a description of the piece to the audience so that they can better understand the experience. If I installed

the piece close to the Tijuana/San Diego border I would create subtle signs, saying “Please Step Up” for the US side or “Por Favor Subase a la Plataforma” for the Mexico side.

Future steps involve considering ways to integrate individual experiences as well as not only creating awareness of the situation but also offering practical methods so as to build a more fluid point of connection.

GLOSSARY

Cymatics – The study of wave phenomena, esp sound, and their visual presentations (Collins Dictionary).

ICT – (information and communications technology – or technologies) is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing: radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems and so on, as well as the various services and applications associated with them, such as a videoconferencing and distance learning (Tech Target).

Interdependence – A mutual dependence between things. If you study biology, you'll discover that there is a great deal of interdependence between plants and animals. Inter- means "between," so interdependence is dependence between things.

Neuroscience – A branch of the life sciences that deals with the anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, or molecular biology of nerves and nervous tissue and especially with their relation to behavior and learning (Merriam Webster).

Socioeconomic status – Socioeconomic status is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation. Examinations of socioeconomic status often reveal inequities in access to resources, plus issues related to privilege, power and control (American Psychological Association).

REFERENCES

1. “Borders as information flows and transnational networks,” Peter Shields, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://gmc.sagepub.com/content/10/1/3.abstract>
2. “Boundary Functions, 1998,” Scott Sona Snibbe, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://www.snibbe.com/projects/interactive/boundaryfunctions>

3. “Delicate Boundaries, 2007,” Chris Sugrue, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://csugrue.com/delicateboundaries/>
4. “The Dream House,” Menla Foundation, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://observer.com/2011/09/the-dream-house-reopens-saturday-in-tribeca/>
5. “The Forty Part Motet,” Janet Cardiff, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/motet.html>
6. “The lines that continue to separate us: borders in our ‘borderless’ world,” David Newman, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://phg.sagepub.com/content/30/2/143.abstract>
7. “Papers, Please,” Lucas Pope, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://papersplea.se/>
8. “Que se abran las fronteras,” Juan Carlos Velasco, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.madrimasd.org/blogs/migraciones/2015/03/09/132443>
9. “The Texas Border,” Jana Virgin, accessed May 17, 2015, http://www.janavirgin.com/the_texas_border/index.html
10. “United States of America Passport,” Erika Harrsh, accessed May 17, 2015, http://www.erikaharrsch.com/html/p_passport.php