

Title: The making of landscape photography at the border beyond a nationalist narrative

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Until the Covid-19 crisis, Europeans had believed that one of the achievements of the European Union had been to erase borders, at least within the Schengen perimeter. The pandemic was quick to prove the contrary as national borders closed one after the other, preventing citizens from travelling across what had once been, in some instances, invisible lines. This borderless utopia of sorts has been thoroughly investigated by the French-Italian photographer Valerio Vincenzo in a book entitled *Borderline. Frontiers of Peace/Frontières de la paix* which showcases photographs of a great many border areas taken over an eight year period. A sense of fluidity and peacefulness emerges from the corpus, which contrasts starkly with the mental pictures we have of North-American borders and of the Mexican border in particular, replete with an imagery of walls, fences, border patrols and divided families. Even if the *North American Free Trade Agreement* (NAFTA) has facilitated the circulation of goods between Canada, the United States and Mexico, it remains an agreement restricted to economic exchanges, which has never aimed at political union or at easing the circulation of citizens between the three countries.

In fact, since 9/11, the border areas between the U.S. and its northerly and southerly neighbors have been consolidated, budgets have increased and the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative implemented as of 2009 has imposed stricter if differentiated controls on Canadian and Mexican nationals entering the U.S., thus breaking with a tradition of smooth cross-border travel, if only for Canadians. While the Mexican border has historically concentrated the larger share of U.S. governmental expenses in surveillance and patrolling efforts to fight drug smuggling and illegal immigration, governmental and civil reactions to the Northern border also seem to have hardened over the years. As underlined by Heather Nicol, “there has been considerable reorganisation and reorientation of borders within North America” with “a newly-fashioned post-9/11 response to the ramifications of globalised trade and terrorism” (Nicol, 2005: 768).

While examples of the reinforcing of North-American borders abound, art projects aiming at fostering cross-border community exchanges offer alternative visions of the border as borderscape. French street-artist, JR’s *Migrants, Picnic across the border, Tecate, Mexico - USA* (2017) visually organizes a picnic over a banquet table onto which are collaged the eyes of a DREAMER positioned on either side of the fence, thus creating continuity and togetherness in the face of separation and division. Another example of this is *Repellent Fence* (2015) a Postcommodity land art installation, which defines itself as a “social collaborative project among

individuals, communities, institutional organizations, publics, and sovereigns”.¹ *Repellent Fence* offers a visual suture of the border, from an Indigenous transnational perspective as Ravon Chacon, one of the Postcommodity members declares in an interview in *Indian Country Today*: “With these works that focus on the U.S./Mexico border, our hope is to offer an Indigenous perspective on how this ongoing encroachment of a line/a fence/a wall, interrupts the land and the people who are birthed from them” (Asenap, 2017).

Dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary discuss the genealogy of the term “borderscape” in a 2015 article entitled “Borderscapes: From Border Landscapes to Border Aesthetics” (Dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015). The first definition of the term lays the emphasis on the term “scape” as a form of shaping: “So, a borderscape is an area, shaped and reshaped by transnational flows, that goes beyond the modernist idea of clear-cut national territories.” (Dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015: 3). The second and third approaches to the term offer a more descriptive approach where the borderscape is understood as another term for the landscape at the border; or, in other words, the borderscape offers the context within which the State signals its sovereignty through the marking of the land, the term pointing to the “distortions” imposed by territorial sovereignties on the landscape (Dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, p. 5). If this is an important dimension of the border and notably helps understand the mechanics of the symbolic and physical violence exercised at the border, it fails to sufficiently problematize the term “landscape”. Borderscapes may be best understood not as the *landscapes at the border* but as *border as landscape* where both the “border” and the “landscape” are understood as the product of and producing social relations and cultural representations.

The borderscape can thus be diversely understood as an area marked and shaped by transnational flows and also as a performative process “through which the border is established and experienced as real” (Anke Strüver in Dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, p. 5). Strüver is often quoted for underlining the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of this performative conception of the border where cultural objects themselves create/make the border “even when their explicit purpose is to resist the dominant border regime” (Strüver in Dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, p. 5). Beyond incentives for cross-border dialogue such as those proposed by JR or Postcommodity, the risk is that the visualization of the border itself contribute to the bordering practices that it seeks to reveal. The analysis of the photographic representation of border-crossing can thus be understood as being about both de-bordering and re-bordering processes.

The articulation of border studies and visual studies which I propose to engage in explores cultural production at the border, and will focus on the relation between borderscape and

¹ Postcommodity, *Repellent Fence* http://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html, accessed

photography. Mireille Rosello and Stephen Wolfe define borders as privileged spaces for “renegotiations of nations and their narration, as well as of the border itself” (Rosello and Wolfe, 2017: 1) and border aesthetics as the “interrogation and recognition of the imaginative actions of (...) representation that are taking place within a particular discursive and generic formation” (Rosello and Wolfe, p. 1). Border aesthetics then remind us that a border must be sensed to be effective, whether visually or otherwise. Looking at the aesthetics of the border is to look at the ways in which “social and cultural performances of border subjects” (Rosello and Wolfe, p. 5) shape borders in their various defining criteria.

This paper will be looking at photographic representations of the North-American borders marking the separation between the U.S. and Canada to the North, and Mexico to the South. The corpus will focus mainly, but not only, on two photographic projects by Canadian photographers: *The Running Fence* (1997) by Geoffrey James and *Borderline* (2017) by Andreas Rutkauskas. The former is a series of 45 black and white views of the landscape alongside the 14-mile fence running from Tijuana Beach to the Otay mountain foothills and erected under the Clinton administration in 1994. The latter is a series of 90 color photographs taken along the 8,891 kilometer long U.S.-Canada land border from coast to coast. Both series were presented in exhibitions as well as in other formats: the 45 plates of *The Running Fence* were published in book form with texts by Sebastian Rotella and Dot Tuer (Armstrong, Rosella and Tuer, 1999) while the *Borderline* series is presented online and embedded in a Google map on Rutkauskas’ website². I argue that looking at these two North-American border areas produces insights into how the contested landscapes at the border define and redefine the sense of place and belonging at the border beyond the national imaginaries these borders produce.

If the border in its “scaping” activity shapes national imaginaries, then it is important to first understand how the visualization of landscape in photography and painting has been central to American and Canadian nation-building, before moving on to the ways in which contemporary photographers have contested the notion of the “national” landscape, while asking questions about identities and sense of place. Looking for connections between the border landscapes by James and Rutkauskas will then allow us to look at the borderscapes beyond the national boundaries they set to define and to look at the ways in which they denaturalize the landscape. Finally, I will be looking at the ways in which these series institute forms of geographic and historical investigations and at the narratives they develop about borders and photography.

² Andreas Rutkauskas. *Borderline*, <https://www.andreasrutkauskas.com/borderline>, accessed July 7, 2021.

Contested landscapes

The representation of landscapes in the form of drawings, engravings, paintings and photographs has been integral to the process of nation building and the construction of national identities in both Canada and the United States. Survey photography in both countries in the mid to late 1800s largely contributed to document Canadian and American expansionist endeavors, to ascertain the documentary and scientific role that photography would play in that expansion and to foster a sense of national belonging and of Anglo-Saxon supremacy which would also find its expression in landscape painting. Despite variations, T. J. Jackson Lears defends the idea that “the two countries’ cultures converged in the common mythology of westward expansion”, with, for Canada, a structuring “wildness” located in the North, rather than just in the West (Lears, in Goldfarb, 2009: 21).

Photography played an important role in the surveying expeditions that marked Western expansion. One of the first American experiments in survey photography occurred with the hiring of photographers by the 1861 California Geological Survey, following the war with Mexico and the Gold Rush. Already renowned for his photographs of the Yosemite valley in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, Carleton E. Watkins worked for the geological survey early on. Beyond fulfilling the simply descriptive needs of the survey, Watkins’ photographs celebrated what would be seen as the sublime natural environment of the valley (Brunet, 2007). According to François Brunet, “with the civil war in full swing, Yosemite became the sanctuary of an immemorial nature perceived as an outlet for the nation’s rifts and fractures and as the much sought after model of an “American landscape” (Brunet, 2007: 15). The Yosemite Valley, which had been “snatched from its native inhabitants”, would soon “be exploited by the nascent tourist industry” (Brunet, p. 15). In the catalogue for the 1963 exhibition entitled *The Photographer and the American Landscape*, John Szarkowski had already insisted on the role played by 19th century survey photographers on the – perhaps unintended - shaping of the American landscape, in particular the works of Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson: “Occasionally —and remarkably —an especially extravagant sample of spectacular landscape would be set aside, sacrosanct, for the amazement of posterity, but this was neither the first function, nor the first interest, of the Surveys” (Szarkowski, 1963: 3). Similarly, Benjamin Baltzly’s photographic work in British Columbia can be seen as contributing to the image of a nation and to a typically Canadian geographic imaginary (Paquet, 2009: 150, my translation). This American photographer joined the Geological Survey in 1871. The survey had been commissioned to find the best passage for the Canadian Pacific Railway promised to British Columbia in exchange for its joining the Confederation in 1867. The multifarious nature of Baltzly’s work reflects the exigencies of William Notman studio’s for whom he worked and those of Alfred Selwyn, head of

the governmental survey that had hired him. While Notman desired sublime landscapes that were much in demand and that could be sold out of his studio in Montreal, Selwyn, on the other hand was in search of a geographic inventory (Paquet: 149). Baltzly's views of the Rocky mountains, and later those of William McFarlane-Notman, contribute to the image of a mythical Canadian west, to a sense of nationhood, and, with the commercialization of pictures of the Banff national park created in 1885, promote the tourist industry.

The celebration of Canadian wilderness is furthered in the landscape painting of the 1920s and 1930s (Fig. 1). In 1914, when the future members of the Group of Seven³ along with Tom Thompson began painting landscapes with the conscious desire to create a unique Canadian style, the Canadian nation, founded with the 1867 *Act of Confederation*, was hardly fifty years old. The Group of Seven embraced the full breadth of their country and in the early part of the twentieth century, they explored and interpreted the land to reveal Canada to Canadians (McKay, 2011). Contrary to the European picturesque tradition of landscape painting that had dominated Canadian painting until then, one of the distinctive traits of this new school's production is the focus on landscapes devoid of human presence per se or even of traces of civilization: neither fields, nor roads, nor houses, nor paths. The imagined community of the nation emerged through the painting of wilderness landscapes, which, to a large extent, emphasized grandeur, absence and void, "what might be called", according to Jonathan Bordo "an aestheticizing or subliming of *Terra Nullius*" (Bordo, 1997: 36). The colonial enterprise of Canadian nationalism was born out of a profound process of visual erasure, which signaled Aboriginal erasure while emphasizing "the spiritual in the wilderness" (McKay, 2011: 196).

More recent pictorial traditions in the U.S. and Canada have contested the national traditions of landscape representation. The kind of scientific detachment associated with the new landscapes of the now emblematic exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (1975) was seen as threatening "to undermine generations of effort to establish photography's expressive capacity, a modernist tenet first promoted by Alfred Stieglitz, then upheld by Ansel Adams and Minor White" (Salvesen, 2009: 17). The frontal displays of tract houses by Robert Adams, Frank Gohlke's empty parking lots, the seemingly endless roads and innumerable motels, a largely inhabited and man-altered landscape "made amply clear the contradiction, between the myths of the American landscape – its expansive "emptiness" and its potential for renewal – and its present condition." (Rohrbach, 2013: 25) (Fig. 2)

³ The Group of Seven included eight English Canadian artists based in Toronto : Franklin Carmichael, lawren S. Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Franz Johnson, Arthur Lismer, J. E. H Macdonald, Frederic Varley and finally Tom Thompson who died before the group was formally constituted in McKay, Marilyn J.. *Picturing the Land. Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011, p. 169.

In her 1991 photographic series entitled *Pictures of the Self (Lake Louise)* (Fig. 3), Canadian-Korean photographer, Jin-me Yoon seeks to undermine the genre of the wilderness sublime and its nationalist undertones by filling the void, characteristic of the sublime, with her body — that of an Asian Canadian — whose presence in the wilderness transgresses the ideal of a Nordic white Canadian identity. Lake Louise is located in the Banff national park, and as such constitutes a haven for tourists attracted by the natural beauty of the land, the lake, however, named after Princess Louise, Queen Victoria's daughter, "fixes the land with a history of imperialism" (Kunard, p.). This series, which is organized into a set of postcards signals the commodification of nature as well as the sense of alienation of those who do not share the memories, myths and histories associated with the landscape. Even as *Pictures of the Self* deploys the sublime, however, it problematizes it as a mode of perception that empties the landscape, by reinserting a diasporic body. The reappropriation of the emblematic landscapes of the Group of Seven paintings claims a right to look and therefore a right to be. Yoon is unsettling the images of Canadian wilderness by exposing the relationship of power that this representation of the wild entails through the erasure of the Other. As Casteel-Philips underlines Yoon resorts to landscape intertextuality "to challenge exclusionary constructions of the relationship between land and identity and yet at the same time ensures that [her work] retain a strong connection to place." (Casteel-Philips, p. 192)

Beyond the title of the exhibition — *Canadian Landscapes/Paysages canadiens*⁴ — which seems to posit not only the possibility but also the reality of national landscapes, Lorraine Gilbert's photographs explore 19th and 20th century landscape painting and photography within but outside of Canada. The body of works included in the publication presents itself as exploring "the subtle relations between topographies, habitat, the environment and nature" (LG, p. 1), thus emphasizing a sense of place as well as the social dimension of landscape. The meandering forest tracks in the *Coyote Ridge Road* (Fig. 4) photograph are evocative of elevation curves and draw the viewer's attention to the topographies imbedded in the landscape as well as its culturally and scientifically constructed nature. Although the photographs could on first glance recall the sublime of Ansel Adams' black and white photographs of the Sierra Nevada, on closer reading, one realizes that there is nothing pristine in what is in fact a devastated landscape. Gilbert offers a rewriting of the sublime with its characteristic absence conveyed by the erasure of a forest that had once been emblematic of the "spirit of the North". The very cover of *Canadian Landscapes* with a Tim Horton's parking lot in the fore set against a backdrop of water and trees in the typical dark green and ochre colors of the Indian summer says a lot about the "new" Canadian landscape and whether there even is such a thing. Tim Horton's for example, a

⁴ The book entitled *Canadian Landscapes/Paysages canadiens* by Lorraine Gilbert was published following the eponymous exhibition "Paysages canadiens 1988-2013" in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec in 2013.

Canadian fast food chain created in 1964, is now owned by a Brazilian investment firm and the parking lot could be anywhere in North America. The paradox that Jean Kempf points out in his discussion of the *New Topographics* photographs may apply here. Indeed, despite an effort at hyperlocalization — Kempf is thinking in particular of the titles of Lewis Baltz’s photographs which indicate a precise address — one is left with a sense of absence of place. Because the places photographed, just as the parking lot, are interchangeable, the “somewhere” has become an “anywhere” (Kempf, 2009: 7), thus undermining the possibility of belonging.

Although the photographic works just discussed differ significantly in terms of aesthetics, they all contest 19th and 20th century nationalist landscapes. The reintroduction of a sense of place — or the pointing of of its absence —relies on the rejection of a celebrated and pristine landscape in favor of the return of the “real”; a landscape that has been altered by man, and speaks of our social, political and environmental relationships with the land. If these contested landscapes are an invitation to look beyond the national, the landscape at the border seems an ideal place to look.

Visualizing the border as landscape

Frontera: Views of the U.S. Mexico-Border was organized by the Canadian Photography Institute (CPI) and developed in collaboration with the FotoMexico festival in 2017 at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. It is noteworthy that the CPI, as a national institution, should organize an exhibition around the U.S.-Mexico border rather than the separation line that Canada shares with its southern neighbor. This may reflect the quasi-mythical dimension of the Mexican border in the Americas and the sustained attention it has attracted in literature, film and photography in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. The exhibition is presented as a form of discussion between photographers with diverse national origins: “Images by Mexicans Pablo López Luz and Alejandro Cartagena dialogue with works by Canadians Mark Ruwedel and Geoffrey James, Swiss Adrien Missika, American Kirsten Luce and German Daniel Schwarz”.⁵ These cross perspectives show that the fascination with the U.S.-Mexican border largely exceeds American cultural production. In contrast, photographic representations of the U.S.-Canada border are scarce. In 1968, Dennis Oppenheim offered a “direct connection between earthworks and border landscapes” in the land art installation *Annual Rings* he produced at the Fort Kent, Maine, and Clair, New-Brunswick, boundary, thus “*mark[ing]* the flowing, invisible border between two sovereign territories” (My emphasis, Rodney, 2017: 24). Where the Mexican border appears to

⁵ National Gallery, Ottawa. <https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/exhibitions-and-galleries/frontera-views-of-the-us-mexico-border>. Accessed July 7, 2021.

be hypervisible in cultural production, Oppenheim's work problematizes the physical and cultural invisibility of the Canadian boundary. The CPI's interest in the Mexican rather than the Canadian border may also reflect both this scarcity and the perceived invisibility of the Northern border.

The Geoffrey James and the Andreas Rutkauskas series that I focus on have in common that they both seek to offer an extensive if not an exhaustive view of their object of enquiry, which appears at first sight to be the landscape at the border. These landscapes, however, share little with the 19th and early 20th century spectacular views of the Yosemite or Banff national parks offered by Carlton Watkins, Benjamin Baltzly or Ansel Adams. The white skies and hazy backgrounds in the James photographs tend to flatten the image and to de-spectacularize the landscape (Fig. 5). Similarly, Rutkauskas refuses the postcard aesthetics of landscapes with spotless blue skies (Fig. 6). In fact, very often in these series, the skyline is criss-crossed with telephone wires and the landscape is scattered with telephone poles, electric pylons, billboards and surveillance cameras signalling the landscape at the border is marked by human presence (Fig. 7).

The question of human presence is treated differently in both corpuses, for one because the border area represented by James is densely populated on the Mexican side of this relatively short stretch of the border on the outskirts of Tijuana⁶. In fact, the contrast between the very poor housing situation on the Southern side of the border and the American side is made all the more striking in *The End of the Fence, Looking West* (Fig. 8), for example, by the dark vertical line drawn by the shadow of the fence at high noon that divides the landscape in two: the tightly built South and the barren landscape North. Although the area is densely populated on the Mexican side, only three photographs in the James series represent migrants. They are seen setting out to walk across the border in the distance. They remain abstract, hardly noticeable figures, sometimes appearing on the very edge of the frame as if they might fall out as in *Near the end of the fence, migrants preparing to cross*; in the background, three white crosses evoke those who have perished while seeking to cross the border. The scarcity of human figures may serve to express the inhospitality of the area. In contrast, Rutkauskas's views of the landscape lay the emphasis on the human-made borderscapes without ever picturing people: human presence is conveyed through the representation of border posts, some old and quaint, others abandoned or through larger high-technology joint customs facilities such as the Oroville-Osoyoos crossing point built in 2003 (Fig. 9). While it is true that the majority of the Canadian population lives in the strip along the American border, Rutkauskas's series shows that, apart

⁶ Tijuana had a population of over a one million in 1997, INEGI, <http://en.www.inegi.org.mx/> Accessed July 7, 2021.

from some cross-border communities here and there, the borderline itself is sparsely populated. The emphasis then is not so much on border-crossers as it is on the border as a man-made landscape.

As borderscapes, both projects share an interest in revealing how the landscape is marked by the territorial boundary itself. The fence is prominent in James's series and present in almost all of the 45 plates. This prominence conveys what was meant to become a politically and symbolically hypervisible anti illegal-migration operation, the so-called Operation Gatekeeper adopted by the United States in 1994. The hypervisibility required by the border is underscored through the presence of spotlights in four of the photographs (Fig. 10) and seems to translate into a border "craze". Indeed, the process of governmental and civilian double fencing in some of the photographs suggests a kind of border "mania" occurring at the border and implies an interiorization of the bordering process. Several photographs show the U.S. government adding a double row of fencing by way of cement blocks⁷ while others feature schools and houses gated in behind high grids (Fig. 11). By way of contrast, however, some photographs in the *Running Fence* series feature a break in the fence, thus signifying its shortcomings despite its omnipresence. In fact, James is quoted by Steven Evans as saying that the "real barrier" is not the fence but the surveillance technology implemented at the time, and reinforced since:

[The border fence] was built by the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1994, out of recycled metal landing strip - the most visible symbol of what is known as Operation Gatekeeper. Because the steel sheets are placed in the ground so that their ridges run horizontally, a man can hop over the fence with ease; and no Mexican child ever seems to be impeded from retrieving a soccer ball from US territory. The real barrier to illegal immigration from Mexico into the USA is less visible: hundreds of buried sensors linked to a central computer, nightscopes, helicopters and Border Patrol Agents in white Broncos.⁸

In fact, the omnipresence in the photographs of dirt roads and trails along the border and into the hills on either sides of the Mexican and US border confirms that this remains a land of passage, fence or no fence.

Speaking of the 1980s and 1990s, Canadian art critic Karla McManus signals that crossing over to the United States "was like crossing the street" (McManus, p. 144). This porosity - and sometimes invisibility - of the Canada-U.S. border remains a strong feature in Rutkauskas's *Borderline* series: in *East of Hannah, North Dakota* (Fig. 12), or in *Monument #120, Chilkoot Pass, Alaska* for example, a lone rusty pole or an obelisk are the only clues that a territorial boundary

⁷ Geoffrey James, *New Fence under Construction on the South Side of the Tijuana River, U. S. side, Running Fence* series, 1997.

⁸ Steven Evans is quoted on the Canadian Center for Architecture, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/search?query=running%20fence>. Accessed July 7, 2021.

passes through these locations. Even though *Borderline* features many official border crossing areas with border posts, bridges, barricades, barriers in different shapes and sizes, the border in this series seldom attains the kind of materiality it has in *Running Fence* where the fence constitutes a physical obstacle to crossing. While the emphasis in the James series is on border-crossing as a potentially physical feat, something that one experiences with one's body, it remains a visually more abstract experience in the Rutkauskas series. Just like its Southern counterpart, however, the Northern borderline – purportedly the “longest undefended border in the world” – is in fact rigged with surveillance technology – CCTV, thermal imaging, as well as ground sensors – which is often invisible to the naked eye but clearly efficient. The photographer writes in his introductory text:

While my images do not depict U.S. or Canadian border patrols, many of the photographs were taken shortly before or after the encounters with these officials. Often within a short period of my arrival at these locations, and occasionally, even prior to my arrival, a field unit would be dispatched to investigate.⁹

Nighthawk, Washington, for example features solar powered surveillance cameras in the middle of a hilly landscape thus reminding us “that even the most seemingly innocuous boundary points are places of bureaucratic power and authority” (Mc Manus) which are the expression of political and cultural tensions between the two countries.

Even if the fence on the Mexican border gives the border a materiality which never seems to be equaled in the Rutkauskas series, the opposition between a hard/visible border in the South and a soft/invisible border in the North only holds to a certain extent, as these borders are increasingly submitted, as Rutkauskas shows, to the presence of more or less visible surveillance devices. It is noteworthy that their Canadian passports grant both photographers with privilege enough to travel back and forth across the borders, presumably unhindered. The multiplication of perspectives this allows for tends to de-border the gaze and invites the viewer to envisage the landscape through a dialectics of continuity and discontinuity that problematizes nationalist readings of the landscape.

As did the *New Topographics* photographers before them, the photographic series by James and Rutkauskas make clear the contradiction between the mythical and the actual American and Canadian landscapes. The *Borderline* series does not shrink from the vernacular in the landscape nor does it develop a fascination for the urbex, it seeks rather to show the border in its multiple guises: the decrepit and the modern, the beautiful and the ugly, the visible and the invisible. The

⁹ Andreas Rutkauskas, *Borderline*, <https://www.andreasrutkauskas.com/borderline/> Accessed July 7, 2021.

barren and desolate landscapes, the unfinished housing developments and the wastelands surrounding the quarry in James's *Running Fence* may be more closely evocative of a new topographic aesthetics. The fence, the dirt road, the hazy background, the barely finished housing along the road, the telephone poles, the pick up truck passing by, these could all belong to the *Running Fence* series, but in fact describe Stephen Shore's *Alley, Presidio, Texas, February 21, 1975*; one of the photographs he included in the *New Topographics* exhibition. In this color photograph, there is no compromising with reality, in an attempt which Finis Dunaway describes as the desire "to reconcile viewers to a half-wilderness, to muster affection for everyday environments by beautifying and embracing commonplace landscapes" (Reframing NT, p. 42). In *New housing in industrial park, Mesa de Olay, Tijuana* (Fig. 13), James features an abandoned housing development area, evocative of Lewis Baltz's views of unfinished buildings at Newport Center (Fig. 2). The uncompleted housing in the *Running Fence* or the decrepit buildings (Fig. 14) in *Borderline* seem to acquire a permanent status in these photographs which could serve as a metaphor for the borderscape as a continually unfinished and perpetually changing landscape. These photographs of the landscapes at the border, however different in style, recognize that the landscape needs to be understood as situated, that they are the expression of a wide range of social, economic, political and environmental relations between man and the land, and finally that they have stories to tell.

Border photography and the stories it tells

In Mark Ruwedel's *Crossing #14* (Fig. 15), also shown in the *Frontera* exhibition discussed earlier, the close-up on the plastic bags caught in the bush and the Mexican passport abandoned or lost on the trek across the desert conveys a sense of disorientation reinforced by the absence of shapes in the form of hill tops or paths indicating where we stand. Along Rutkauskas's *Borderline*, on the contrary, one is never lost, at least on the face of it. By choosing to present his border photographs on a Google map (Fig. 16) at the precise location where they were taken, Rutkauskas lets the viewer know at all times "where s/he stands". Looking at the *Borderline* series engages the gaze in a movement back and forth, North and South of the border, and between the map and the photographs. In order to better situate the photograph (and her/himself) on the map, the viewer zooms in and out as s/he would on a Google map: viewing the border line on a continental (or even global) scale or on the contrary zooming in to better appreciate the actual intricacies of the border. Whereas the global view of the border enables us to apprehend the whole length of the border, closing in on the various locations provides insight into the local geographic, political and cultural specificities, and sometimes oddities along the border. The several occurrences of maps in the series communicate the importance that the photographer himself has given to mapping as a tool of investigation (Fig. 17). The discrepancy

between the actual line embodying the border on the Google map and the borderscapes we visualize at the same time insists on the constructedness of the map and the framing operated by the photographs. In a sense, Rutkauskas's photographs reveal what the map hides; he thus relies strongly on the map, even as he is undermining its authority by revealing its bordering mechanisms.

The boundary between Mexico and the U.S. did not require a fence to be experienced as real by the inhabitants on either side of the border, but its construction materializes territorial boundaries that had remained abstract lines on a map. If Geoffrey James does not rely on mapping as Rutkauskas does, the titles of the photographs very often include expressions as such "looking West", "looking East", "near", "alongside", encouraging viewers to position themselves, either North or South of the border, thus emphasizing the fact that beyond the literal, there are political, social, economic, and ideological sides to the border. The recurrence of the term "looking" lays the emphasis on the process of visualization of the landscape imposed by the border. The fence acts as a scar on the body of the land. Visible from afar as James's panoramic photographs demonstrate¹⁰, it literally crosses out the landscape, thus emphasizing the violence inherent in the act of boundary making. In the process of visualizing the line on the land, viewers take part in the production of the geographical order imposed by the border even as they become aware of both the power and the artificiality of these delineations.

When Ron Giblett claims that "the landscape painter (...), and later the landscape photographer (...), represented the visible surface of the land and inscribed the surface of the land without anything much being perceived behind or below it in the secret depths of the earth", he has 19th and 20th century landscape sublime painting and photography in mind (Giblett and Tolonen, 2012: 60). In contrast, Mark Ruwedel's idea of the "land as historical archive" (Ruwedel, 1996: 36-37) supports the idea that photography can explore the "deeper" landscape. He writes: "I am interested in revealing the narratives contained in the landscape, especially those places where the land reveals itself as being both an agent of change and the field of human endeavour" (p. 36-37). If the land is an archive explored through the photographic process, landscape photography in this respect can be understood as a mode in border history writing. I will argue that the works by James and Rutkauskas seek precisely to reveal the depths of the landscape by uncovering the history writing process at work in the borderscape.

Although James's landscapes seem barren and empty at first sight, far from being characterized by the void or absence of wilderness photography, they offer visions of a land onto which a

¹⁰ Geoffrey James, *Spooner's Mesa, dusk; East of the quarry, looking toward Tijuana; Crossing supplies tent, Avenida Internacional, Tijuana; Looking north across the Tijuana River to second fence, U. S. side; The view north from Tijuana toward Otay Mesa; Looking towards Mexico, Otay Mesa; Near the end of the fence, migrants preparing to cross; Running Fence series*, 1997.

border narrative has been inscribed. Dirt tracks, tire marks and trodden-on paths are omnipresent in *Running Fence* and play a role that is quite similar to that played by the forest tracks in Lorraine Gilbert's *Coyote Ridge Road* discussed earlier. The quasi-topographic traces left on the land draw attention to the historically and scientifically constructed nature of the landscape and reveal the border as a site of immemorial and permanent passage, despite the presence of the fence. The possible reference by James to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence* land art installation of 1976 moreover suggests that the photograph acts as a kind of visual palimpsest, a layering of texts and images from the past. The archival interest of the Rutkauskas series lies rather in the online presentation of the series and the viewing possibilities that this choice offers. With each location on the map is associated one photograph, which when clicked on, goes into viewing mode, and then opens up onto one or more other photographic views on the premises. This act of uncovering layers of photographs associated with a location invites the viewer to dive into the land(scape) in the manner of the historian plunging into the archives or the archeologist digging up layers of sedimented soil. Moreover, each set of photographs in the Rutkauskas series, is associated with a short text which serves to point out oddities in the border line: unusual surveillance devices, border monuments and the stories they tell, border post opening hours, filmic or literary facts, relics of past border documentation for travellers, etc. The language developed in these very short texts (usually about 50 to 100 words, sometimes longer) serves to convey information that supplements "the referential efficiency of these documentary images" (my translation, Méaux, 2019: 63) and tells the story of the tensions at the border despite the visual rhetoric of friendship at the border. In both series, the photographs themselves are replete with traces from the past: the toy lying in the dirt along the fence¹¹ or the ragged piece of what may once have been a shirt or a sac left on the ground, the 1970s and 1980s travel brochures edited by the Boundary Commission¹² or the more political lettering on a bridge indicating that "THIS IS INDIAN LAND" in capital letters (Fig. 18). These traces suggest that the site photographed is the product of a historical process rather than just the re-presentation of a place at a given moment in time. As Danièle Méaux points out in her writings about photography as a mode of enquiry, the recording of these traces draws the spectator into an imaginary reconstruction of historical facts, as an archaeologist would¹³.

¹¹ Geoffrey James. *Spooner's Mesa, Looking into Tijuana and Playa Tijuana, looking up Imperial Beach*, 1997.

¹² Andreas Rutkauskas. *Abandoned Crossing, Houlton, Maine*, 2017.

¹³ « A partir de l'enregistrement d'objets concrets et géographiquement situés, le cliché incite le spectateur à s'essayer à la reconstitution imaginaire de réalités ou de faits anciens, à la manière d'un archéologue » in Danièle Méaux. *Enquêtes. Nouvelles formes documentaires*. Filigranes éditions, 2019, p. 82.

Understanding the borderscapes proposed by James and Rutkauskas as not only representations of the real but as investigations into the geography and the history of border-scaping situates these creations within the realm of scientific enquiry. The alternating perspectives offered in both corpuses, between large panoramic views of the landscapes or close-ups of the geometric patterns in the corrugated iron of the fence or the plaques one finds on friendship monuments at the border suggest that the photographer is continually adapting his distance to his object of enquiry, just as the researcher searches for the adequate critical distance (idea developed by Méaux, p. 31). These borderscapes are critical of historically and visually constructed landscapes as the quintessence of national identities in both Canada and the U.S.. Their critique recognizes that naturalized and sublime landscapes have imposed historical narratives that erase the relations of power inherent in the land-scaping process and in particular the idea developed by W. J. T. Mitchell according to which “landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism” (Mitchell, 2002: 5).

There is much to learn from photographic investigations at the border. But if border photographs produce localized border histories, then what of the borders of photography? Despite choosing two Canadian photographers’ visual investigations at the Mexican and Canadian border, one hardly feels one can draw any conclusions about a distinctive “North-American” and much less “Canadian” perspective on the border or on landscape photography more generally. Rather, the construction of national landscapes in Canada and the U.S. has followed similar and sometimes interconnected courses. It is noteworthy, for example, that the first photographer employed by the Canadian geological survey, Benjamin Baltzly, was American, so that one of the early celebrations of the Canadian landscape occurred through “American eyes”. Moreover, even though the now emblematic exhibition *New Topographics* is generally seen as revisiting American traditions in landscape photography, no one seems to think it incongruous that three of the photographers in the exhibition should include pictures of Canadian landscapes in their corpus: Stephen Shore includes two photographs taken in Ontario and one taken in Saskatchewan, while Hilla and Bernd Becher include one taken in Windsor, Ontario. Finally, the choice of photographers – from Canada, the U.S., Switzerland, Germany and Mexico – made by the ICP for the *Frontera* exhibition seems to suggest that the border is best looked at through the crossing of perspectives, beyond national borders. But this anthology of photography at the Mexican border, if we may call it that, can also be understood as a response or a counterpoint by the CPI - a national Canadian institution - to Donald Trump’s nationalistic and xenophobic “wall rhetoric”. Beyond the study of photographic investigations themselves, a further analysis of the place of border photography in the Americas (as opposed to “borderless”

Europe?) needs to adopt a larger understanding of the circulation of border photography in order to identify local photographic histories and how they interact within the larger scope of “international trends, significant figures, and photographic rituals, which have always moved freely across oceans and borders” (Langford et al., 2016: 308).

Annex 1 - Figures



Figure 1. Lawren Harris, *Mountains and Lake*, 1929.



Figure 2. *Alton Road at Murphy Road, looking toward Newport Center*, 1974.



Figure 3. Jin-me Yoon, *Souvenirs of the Self (Lake Louise)*, 1991



Figure 4. Lorraine Gilbert. *Coyote Ridge Road, Shaping the New Forest*, 1987-1994.



Figure 5. Geoffrey James. Plate 29. *Looking East along the fence, Colonia Libertad, Running Fence series, 1997.*



Figure 6. Andreas Rutkauskas. *Pigeon River Crossing, Borderline series, 2017.*



Figure 7. Andreas Rutkauskas. *Dominion St. and Customs Rd.*, *Borderline* series, 2017.



Figure 8. Geoffrey James. Plate 44. *At the end of the fence, looking west at the San Isidro mountains*, *Running Fence* series, 1997.



Figure 9 . Andreas Rutkauskas. *Oroville-Osoyoos Crossing, Borderline series*, 2017.



Figure 10. Geoffrey James. Plate 16. *East of the quarry, night, Running Fence series*, 1997.



Figure 11. Geoffrey James. Plate 27. *Above the Soccer Field, a holding area extending into U.S. territory, Running Fence series, 1997.*



Figure 12. Andreas Rutkauskas. *East of Hannah, North Dakota, Borderline series, 2017.*



Figure 13. Geoffrey James. Plate 27. *New housing in industrial park, Mesa de Otay, Tijuana, Running Fence series, 1997.*



Figure 14. Andreas Rutkauskas. *Abandoned Crossing, Houlton, Maine, Borderline series, 2017.*



Figure 15. Mark Ruwedel. *Crossing #14*, 2005.

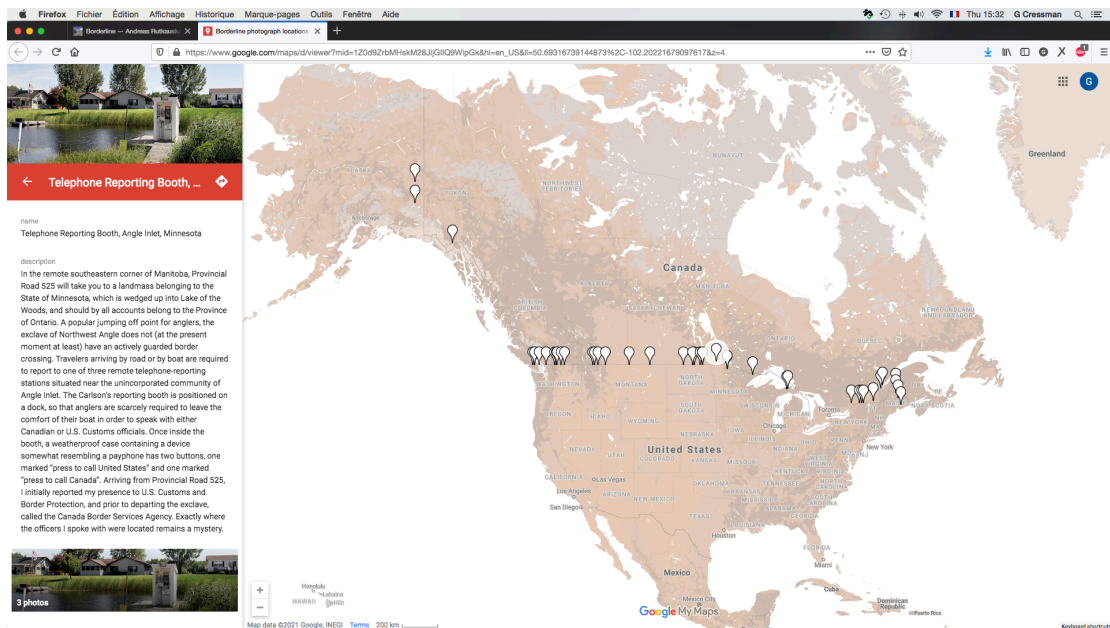


Figure 16. Andreas Rutkauskas. *Borderline*, screenshot. Accessed July 7, 2021.



Figure 17. Andreas Rutkauskas. *Pigeon River Crossing (#2)*, *Borderline* series, 2017.

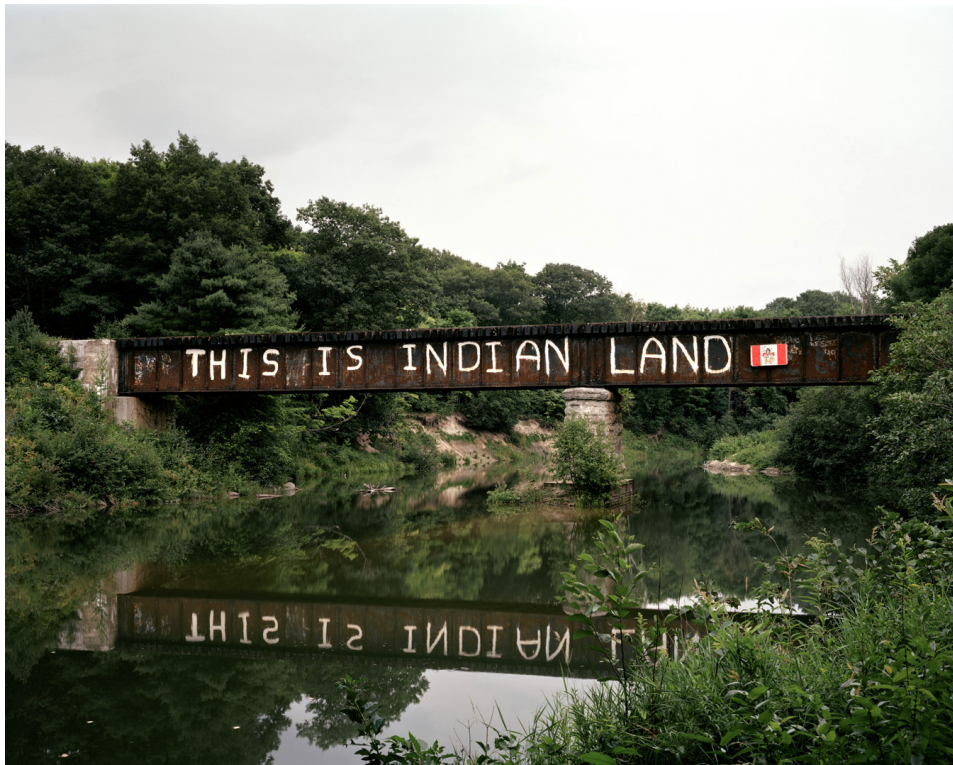


Figure 18. Andreas Rutkauskas. *Garden River First Nation*, *Borderline* series, 2017.

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