

## Some Consideration on the Aesthetics of the Geopolitical Wall \*

Elisa Ganivet \*\*

*The wall object becomes the subject of the border. The artistic interpretation enlightens us about its evolution but also of the danger of a flattening of the perception. The walled solution of a boundary reveals only the tip of the iceberg of a complex geopolitical articulation. The danger of a fantasized hyperreality, became sensationalist, it can be captured by contemporary artists and inform us of the state of the so-called globalized world.*

The border as a wall proposes an archaic static apparatus of rejection of the other-foreigner contrasting with the image of a globalized world where only economic and technological interests seem to flow. These walls crystallize a malaise that can be elucidated through Art. By capturing the historical iconography, we understand the values that shape the current geopolitical wall.

Indeed, the artistic interpretation of the wall makes a round-trip with the notion of the border. Thus, the aesthetic of the border wall can be traced to the belief in divinities and the protection of a group. Going back to ancient Egypt for instance, the God Aton was worshiped as the creator of the border. From 1360 BCE at the site of Amarna, stelae implanted and sculpted in his effigy marked a territory measuring around 25 km x 14 km on the east of the Nile. The divinized stelae proclaim the Pharaoh's victory over a specific territory. The border thus marked and symbolized can also be found during Roman dynasties. From the establishment of Rome by Romulus (753-717 BCE) a sanctuary was originally dedicated to the God Terminus who was the protector of boundary stones. [Figure 1] Ovid praised him: "You set bounds to peoples, cities, great kingdoms: without you every field would be

disputed. You curry no favor: you aren't bribed with gold, guarding the land entrusted to you in good faith". The god embodied by the statue marks out the territory; its sacred value also forces respect.

Beyond dogma, the myths of fortress cities such as the legendary Jericho [Figure 2] or Troy, stimulate creative inspiration. The beginning of the Trojan War is narrated in Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. After being punished by Zeus, Poseidon and Apollo built a wall surrounding the city. From an iconographic point of view, the medieval illuminations unfold the story particularly insisting on the horse's entrance. Between 1340 and 1350 Benoît de Sainte-Maure recounts it in this way: "The marvelous object that Epeius had built ... was mounted with the help of machines, ropes, and cables onto four enormous and very solid wheels. Then, all together, they attempted to move it forward. Everyone participated: they pulled, they pushed, and made a great effort. They had a great deal of difficulty driving forward this machine in the shape of a horse". The Mexican contemporary artist ERRE took again this masterful maneuver in 1997 during the InSite festival located between Tijuana and San Diego. [Figure 3] Above a border stone, his sculpture of a monumental wooden Horse entitled *Toy an-Horse*

---

\* A French translation of this essay will be published in our next issue, *BIG\_Review* 1:2.

\*\* Elisa Ganivet holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy, She is an Art historian and Cultural Manager. Since 2009 she investigates border wall aesthetics.

has two heads who proudly pointed towards each border. A ladder between the pedestal and the flank of the animal suggests the possible stratagem. Myth as a tool is transposed on a delicate territory. The artist then raises questions: potential incursion, undeniable interbreeding, to keep distance from the disturbed border situation?...

In some cases, the representation of civil-military defense magnifies the architectural work (iconography of Constantinople, for example). The Great Wall of China is one of the most significant and it leads to an aesthetic production over the centuries. Therefore it enters the collective imaginary as a supreme symbol of defense. Under the Tang dynasty (618–690, 705–907), the “Borders and Frontier Fortress Poets Groups” created the figure of the soldier as a warrior fighting along the Great Wall. Western perception of this architectural work is formed through the eyes of Jesuit missionaries who mapped the territory in 1584 and in 1667. And in a 1935 poem, Mao Zedong would even have written: “He who has not climbed the Great Wall is not a true man”. Indeed this Wall has also fascinated contemporary artists. **[Figure 4]** In 1988 the performance of Marina Abramovi and Ulay defines the end of their relationship. For 90 days in a spiritual rite, they each walked 2,500 km on their own on the so-called body of the heraldic dragon. They met in the middle to create their ultimate artwork and to break up, metamorphosed by this extreme experience.

The truth is that the static wall generates a mobile aesthetic (poem, music, engraving, painting, performance, installation...). This is from the twentieth century that we observe a direct appropriation of this object by the artists. In this, the Berlin Wall is symptomatic (1961 - 1989). But here again, we must discern an ontological shift in collective perception. If at first glance the murals of the *East Side Gallery* seem obvious; It should be noted that this project came out after the fall of the wall and the dissolution of the GDR. It has never been a spontaneous initiative but provoked from December 1989 by the call of 118 artists to come invest a piece of remaining wall (1.3 km moved closer to the river Spree for the occasion). **[Figure 5] [Figure 6]**

The radical verticalities of these new borders interrogate the relation to Otherness, the right to mobility, the decision-making hegemony of some governments... At this point, the Iron Curtain of the Cold War has become an unsightly example. But its specificities were different: It was indeed initiated by an authoritarian regime officially against any western influence: liberal democracy, capitalist economy, powerful bourgeoisie, individual initiative, NATO... Whatever the intrinsic nature of these new walls, the artists always find a way to transgress the governmental will.

The artist as a sensitive sensor of his environment, is more inclined to perceive and express societal disfunction. Constancy firstly means a creative phase of foreboding/feeling and then comes a resistance/commitment phase. The latter is articulated according to different degrees of denunciation (in situ or via a diaspora) and by the spontaneous emergence of alternative creative bursts, which can then be institutionalized in museums and art galleries. Today, the expansion of walls has become a lucrative market for specialized companies. The media echo can generate an ambivalent effect where the recovery of the phenomenon (among other things by the artists) creates hyper-real confusion. Briefly, we are referring here to visionary artists who best sum up the essence of three emblematic closed borders, that of Berlin, that around the territory of Israel and that located between Mexico and the United States.

The protean work of Joseph Beuys perfectly reveals the perception of the object. Indeed, this artist surprises by exceeding the expected cliché. In 1964, he recommends heightening the wall by 5 cm. The proportions would finally then become credible and aesthetic. Thus we could go beyond the physical wall and beyond the mental one, the one who hinders freedom. The fulfillment of the human being goes through art. Art is Life, Life is Art... Indeed, the Beuysian belief remains the following: ART = CAPITAL. It refers to art that can influence society through the questions it asks. Beuys who despite himself was labeled a West German artist, will play with the subtleties that his position granted him. Later in 1986, he will radicalize his posture. He believed that the private capitalist system and the communist system both contributed to the creation of the wall. But after having been confronted with the obscene object for twenty years, he started to think of it as a sort of work of art, because the sensitive nature of the area between those two principles began to represent a sort of symbol of the possible future, a future social order. Beuys as a prophet? Within globalization, is it not clear that social order has become a continuous and rapid exchange of interests rather than a slow exchange of values? Is the increase of these separation barriers not an accomplice of this phenomenon?

Resistance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also involves artistic creation, including an epidermal effect against the concrete wall (8 meters high and 30 km long, 5% of the total 708 kilometers of barrier). In aesthetics, the intervention of graffiti artist Banksy is a perfect example in an inverted Orientalism form that summarizes the complexity of the geopolitical situation. **[Figure 7]** His first approach took place in 2005 on portions of the wall on the Palestinian side (between Jerusalem and the West Bank). The context of Palestine as the largest

open-air prison in the world and that of graffiti as a traditional medium used for denunciation, reach here the climax of a double form of illegality. The following conversation was said to have occurred as he worked:

**Old man** — You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful.

**Banksy** — Thanks.

**Old man** — We don't want it to be beautiful. We hate this wall, go home.

The messages expressed in Banksy's graffiti are developed along two priorities. One is related to evasion (dotted lines of a cut-out, window, ladder, balloons) and makes hope for an idyllic landscape on the other side (beach, mountain, forest...). However, this ideal projection of Banksy for the Palestinians was sometimes out of step with their realities, habits and customs.<sup>1</sup> The other priority is directly related to the territory. The inscription "CTRL+ALT+DELETE" suggests the Wall should be erased. Or the metaphoric illusion to Palestinians is the silhouette of a young girl flying away with a bunch of balloons, or a girl patting down an IDF soldier (photos widely available on the Internet).

Why make the wall "beautiful", give it an aura, as with any work of art, if this is exactly what bothers people, if this intrudes into their social and political environment? The wall is not democratic, but art democratizes it.

In order to close this sketch on the aesthetics of the walls, [Figure 8] let us turn to the one that is now at the heart of the Trump presidency. In fact, the dialectic and the actions taken concerning migration policy and their dramatic consequences have as a vector the border with Mexico. Currently about 1/3 of the total length (3145 km) is secure. A long mutual history between these two countries has to be pointed out there. Their official and unofficial economic, social and cultural interdependence is undeniable as well as unavoidable. [Figure 9] The Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848 which recomposed the territories, the succession of laws on immigration and labor and the colossal budget allotted to security, in no way prevent the bilateral corruption, the 400 annual deaths, nor the success of 92 to 97% of candidates for immigration to cross this "wall".

Here again, an artist with international reach is rightly concerned with this border complexity. One of her works in particular reveals her ambivalence about this border. In 1932, while Frida Kahlo was staying in the United State with Diego Rivera, she painted her *Autorretrato en la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos* (Self-portrait on the Borderline

Between Mexico and the United States).<sup>2</sup> The artist is the fulcrum of the painting, which is split in two. On the left is a Mexican landscape, and the United States is on the right recognizable by its flag, smoky chimneys of Detroit factory and high buildings. There are small electric appliances at Kahlo's feet. We can see cables shooting under the ground like roots, in contrast with the real roots of plants and flowers planted on the Mexican side. Here the middle ground on the left side shows pre-Columbian sculptures, a skull and ends under the benevolence of the moon and the sun, by an Aztec monument streaked with lightning. The mental and physical sharing of Frida Kahlo takes the viewer to witness. Her right hand holds a small Mexican flag suggesting her territorial preference. The artist presents a hybrid identity, typical of the reality of Chicano, that is to say citizens of Mexican descent living in the United States and fully defend the richness of this double culture. Moreover later, in the same vein, the artist Guillermo Gomez Peña who by his performances decolonizes any notion of body, language and spirit, by transgressing any aesthetic, ethnic and ethical taboo, considers himself to be a homo fronterizus (*I am a border Sisyphus*) : "I make art about the misunderstandings that take place at the border zone. But for me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border with me, and I find new borders wherever I go."<sup>3</sup> Of their omniscient character is it added that of their radicalization?

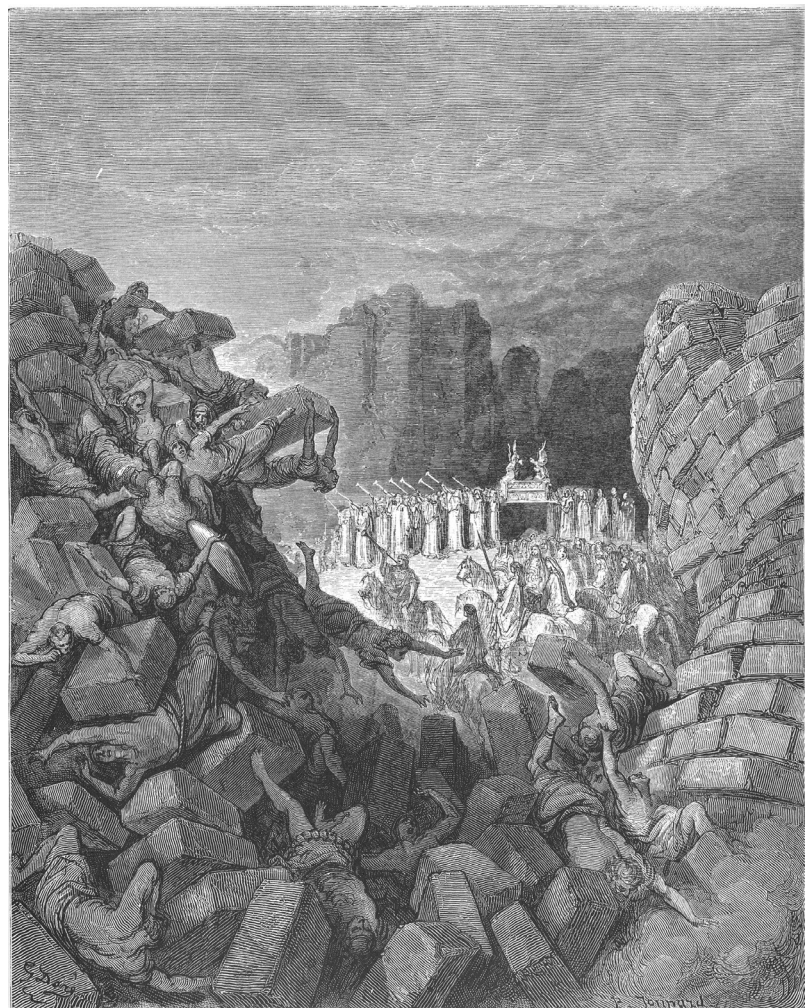
It is indisputable that the border is now read in parallel with the "so-wanted" hermetic wall. Furthermore the seventy border walls (the circumference of the planet), other ramparts are perniciously instrumentalized in this way, such as the iconic Mediterranean Sea. If some artists and activists continue to mobilize, the stakes are crucial because these kind of walls have become the unhappy display of the state of this globalized world. Thus, it seems that the public and political awareness of border tragedies can naturally go through artistic expression as long as it preserves itself from any complacency and/or gratuitous provocation. [Figure 10]

## Notes

- 1 See the new dynamic of the 2017 project: <<http://walledoffhotel.com/>>
- 2 Kahlo's painting can be viewed at Google Arts & Culture: <<https://g.co/arts/tU2YteVX2pv3MCdFA>>.
- 3 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, and Loqueras for the End of the Century*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001, p.6.



**Figure 1.** Hans Holbein, Terminus, the Device of Erasmus (painting) c. 1532 © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Sherman E. Lee in memory of Milton S. Fox 1971.



**Figure 2.** Gustave Doré, The Walls of Jericho Fall Down (etching) 1866 © Public domain



**Figure 3.** Marcos Ramírez ERRE, Toy an-Horse (installation) 1997 © Marcos Ramírez ERRE. Courtesy of the artist, InSite Archive



**Figure 4.** Zheng Lianjie, The Wall--Commemorate for the German Reunification, (performance, drawing, photography) 1990 © Zheng Lianjie. Courtesy of the artist



**Figure 5.** Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer, 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, November 9, 2014 © Photo: Elisa Ganivet

**Figure 6.** Petrov Ahner, Protest against the dismantling of the East Side Gallery, Berlin, March 1, 2013 (photography) © Petrov Ahner. Courtesy of the artist



**Figure 7.** Banksy, Palestinian Graffiti (graffiti) 2005 © www.banksy.co.uk

**Figure 8.** Larissa Sansour, Bethlehem Bandolero (performance, video) 2006 © Larissa Sansour. Courtesy of the artist





**Figure 9.** Teresa Margolles, Muro Ciudad Juárez (installation) 2010 © Teresa Margolles. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich © Photo: Elisa Ganivet, Venice Biennale, May 8, 2019



**Figure 10.** Christophe Büchel, Barca Nostra © Photo: Elisa Ganivet, Venice Biennale, May 9, 2019. On display, fishing boat that sank between the Lybian coast and Sicily, killing around 800 migrants on April 18, 2015.