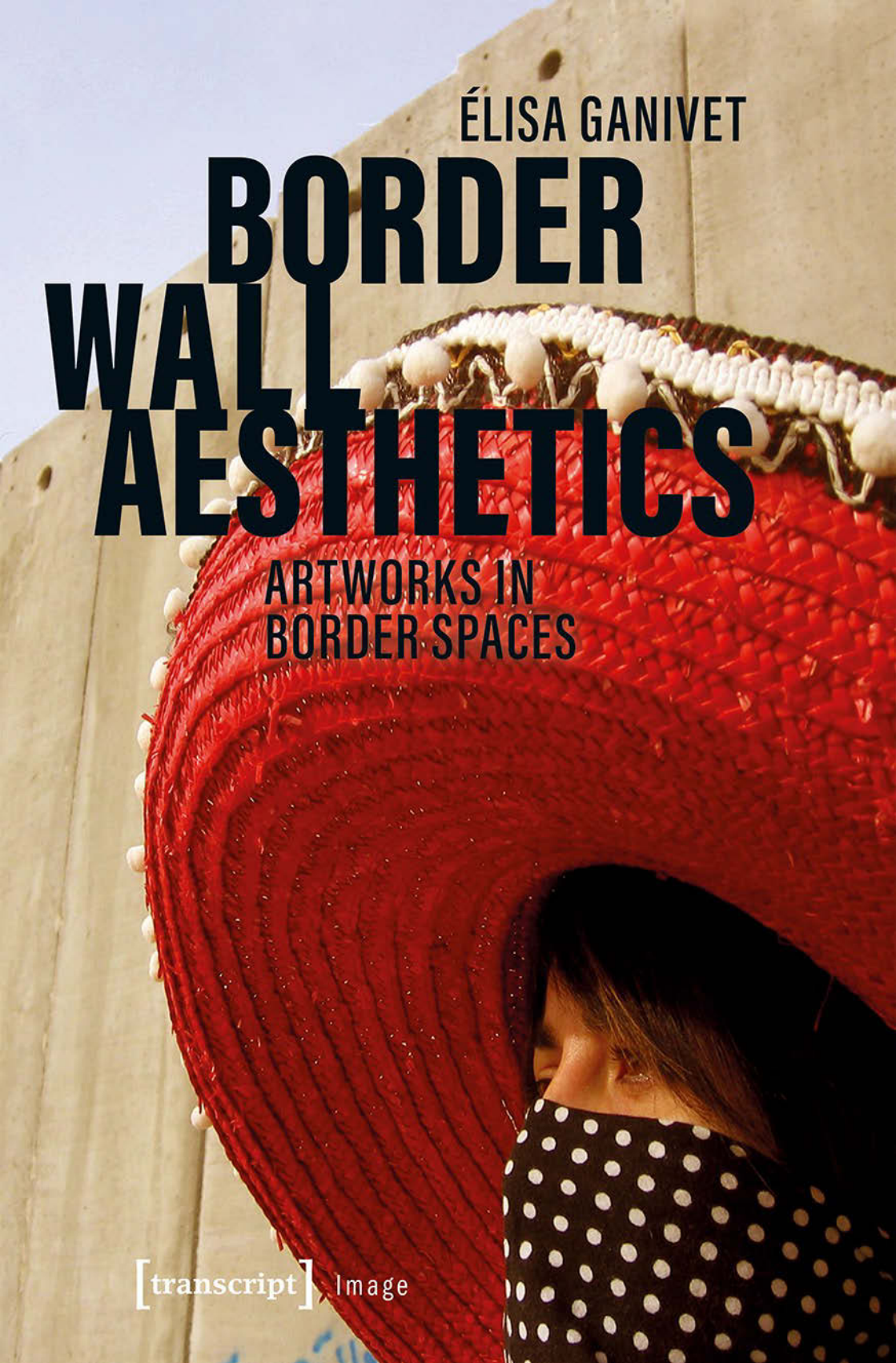


ÉLISA GANIVET

BORDER WALL AESTHETICS

ARTWORKS IN
BORDER SPACES

[transcript] Image



From:

Elisa Ganivet

Border Wall Aesthetics Artworks in Border Spaces

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30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we live in a time of globalization and free trade. Nevertheless, 70 new border walls have been built in this period – put together, they would cover the total circumference of the Earth. While governments offer manifold justifications for building these separation barriers, they invariably attract the attention of artists. Is it merely the lure of transgression, however, that attracts them – or is there a deeper significance in the artistic encounter with border walls? And which artistic strategies do these artists employ to approach them?

In order to address these questions, Élisabeth Ganivet revisits the history of border wall aesthetics and compares more recent border-related works by 100 artists, including Joseph Beuys (Berlin), Banksy (Israel-Palestine), and Frida Kahlo (Mexico-US). Through art and thus beyond art, we understand the flaws and shortcomings of supposedly well-oiled systems.

With a preface by Élisabeth Vallet.

Elisa Ganivet (Dr. phil.), born 1982, is an art historian. Her research in aesthetics explores the mechanisms of utopian practices and border concepts. Since 2003, she has organized exhibitions of modern and contemporary artists.

For further information:

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Preface

When the Berlin wall came down, it seemed like the world had changed. Jubilant crowds danced at Brandenburg Gate, Germany was going to be reunited, and the world was emerging from the bleakness of the Cold War. The 90s began with a promise of lasting peace in a global village. The international community was promoting innovative values focused around new concepts, such as the right/duty to intervene, human security, the responsibility to protect, and the dividends of peace. The redefinition of international relations was meant to open an age of globalization in which States and sovereignty were to become obsolete, and borders irrelevant in a globalized world. But the 21st century foiled those dreams. September 11 sounded the death knell of those ambitions, locking States behind increasingly impervious shrines, and turning territories into sanctuaries.

Borders are no longer meant to be flexible and porous, but hard and aggressive. They are both sealed and pixelated, extending far from the demarcation line into the border zones and airports of other sovereign nations. Borders are fortified, increasingly fenced in, equipped with sharp barbed wire, watch paths, surveillance towers sensors, infrared cameras, and lighting systems.

In this new global arrangement, the purpose of borders is no longer to channel flows of people, but to block them. As a result, walls that were once erected to establish *de facto* boundaries, to freeze frontlines (as between North and South Korea, in Cyprus between the Turkish and Greek parts of the Island, or in India and Pakistan) have become rare. The purpose of “modern” walls is to prevent real or perceived threats: migration flows, inbound terrorist groups, or drug and human trafficking. Border walls have become a way for States to act and react—almost a new form of international relations. As Éliisa Ganivet explains in this book, the wall “crystallizes an unease”, a

dyadic relationship marked by palpable anxiety. The wall has come to serve multiple purposes: in Saudi Arabia, to curtail the spread of the Islamic State; in Turkey, to prevent spillover from the Syrian rebellion; in the Baltic states and the Ukraine, to slow Russian imperialism; in Europe, to compensate for the failure of the Dublin convention.

As a result, local issues that were previously considered low-intensity now fall under the purview of national security and are clearly sliding into the military domain, with armed forces increasingly patrolling borders despite the absence of conflict. It is no coincidence that in the United States, veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars represent nearly 29% of Border Patrol agents thanks to a fastrack recruitment process. The same can be said about the deployment of troops to “guard” the US southern border in November 2018, when nothing indicated a security crisis.

What was previously defined as simple border policing is increasingly considered national security and defense, led by military and “non-reconverted” military players. This shift applies not just to humans, but to infrastructure, which is also becoming militarized: border zones are increasingly fortified and high-tech, sites of experimentation in control, detention, and surveillance. And since these borders are more high-tech, they are also more and more expensive to build and maintain. This explains the prevalence of big security and defense consortiums in the global border market worth tens of billions of dollars. There is clearly a narrative shift linked to this change, reflected in media such as Fox News, which refers to the border as a “third front” (after Iraq and Afghanistan), or the National Geographic Channel showing “border wars”.

This vision of the border is correlated with increasing violence “that the concrete wall crystallizes”, as Éliisa Ganivet words it. Accounts from the border (whether in the southern US, Morocco around Ceuta and Melilla, Greece, Hungary or Bulgaria) reveal that this violence is rooted in the creation of a space defined by arbitrary powers, derogatory law, or even lawlessness; it extends far beyond the borderline to include swaths of land of varying sizes on both sides of the wall. The violence at the border is also clearly the violence of the (walled) border, as the rapid spike in the number of deaths shows—either because migrants choose more dangerous paths (the sea, desert) or because border patrols use force. For example, the Hungarian parliament recently gave the military the right to shoot at migrants, and in 2018 the US

president suggested that military forces deployed at the southern border could shoot at rock throwers.

Although the border wall is meant to restore state sovereignty over a territory, it redefines the border's traditional meaning as an interface between two worlds. The consequence is quite striking: erecting a wall increases the insecurity of those who interact with it—whether they are crossing the line or living nearby. On the one hand, walls create bottlenecks that increase the time required for border crossings, reducing the fluidity of legal trade and often triggering the downfall of border cities due to higher unemployment rates, sluggish economies, and increased criminality.

On the other hand, since walls cannot prevent these flows, they simply divert them. Migrants resort to using smugglers, who may charge the exorbitant price of a first class ticket for the same journey. The most obvious counterproductive impact of these walls is therefore to boost the underground economy and organized crime, making border crossings even harder to control.

The spread of the “walled solution” is thus paradoxical, especially since walls are not here to stay: they always end up falling, either physically or symbolically. And fortifying the border does not guarantee its impermeability, far from it.

Why build walls, then? Because, as Wendy Brown (2014, p.73) puts it “the wall is a blank screen upon which people project their anxieties over the erosion of state sovereignty”: while globalization can't be reined in nationally, politicians find it easier to offer a ready-to-build solution. Even though it inevitably drains the country's finances, it shows the government is taking action, a vote-seeking strategy that can prove very effective in the short term. As Éliisa Ganivet rightly states, “the wall tends to attract a great deal of media attention. It is the subject of fantasies [...]” And current events bolster her claim. President Trump's dramatization of the American border during the 2018 electoral cycle, and his theatrics around the borderline during budget negotiations in early 2019 are perfect example of this.

In this work, Éliisa Ganivet delves into the aesthetics of the wall and its “archaic materiality” that contrasts sharply with the very idea of our post-modern and high-tech world. By examining the works of Joseph Beuys in Berlin, Banksy along the separation barrier between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and Frida Kahlo on the Mexican-American border, she

depicts the tension between the hypermobility of a globalized world and the immobility sought by wall builders. She shows how a border wall stimulates artistic creation and nourishes aesthetic reflection when artists play with the mobilities of this immobility by subverting it, whether they instrumentalize or immortalize the wall. She explains that “while mapping is originally a military tool, art can attempt to transcend it” and plays with the representations of space to reach beyond it.

In the long term, walls are nothing but a temporary solution masking striking economic differences that have often triggered the instability that motivated their construction. In that sense, border walls are nothing but a vain response to unruly globalization and, according to Éliisa Ganivet, “a type of outlet that pushes the schism of globalization into a zone that violates the universal values of human rights and dignity.”

Éliisa Ganivet understood the phenomenon way before the European Union started erecting walls, even before the southern border of the United States became the locus of tragic electoral and political theater. This “omniscient” and “mobile” border, which sometimes moves with us, inside us almost, is no longer located just on the demarcation line. The wall also reveals the impermeability of the border, it they is designed to address its very porosity. However, the border is not necessarily meant to be impervious. The wall, she writes, “is a symbol,” and in its founding relationship to globalization, it is the “new opium of the people”.

In that sense, the border wall shrouds the lack of international commitment to solving problems whose roots sometimes lie well beyond borders and national reach. Even worse, border walls wound, disfigure, and denature the ecosystems they scar and dramatically affect those who attempt to cross it. Yet paradoxically, it is through aesthetics that border walls can be brought back to their fundamental nature, that of an ephemeral artifact.

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Foreword

The relationship between arts and geopolitics is similar to the better-known relationship between art and politics. This relationship can be described in broad strokes. On the one hand, the connection to a people to be governed becomes aesthetic (Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, a population in a defined territory, the symbolism of national identity, civil-military parades, etc.). Walter Benjamin (2006, p. 270) even said, "Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism", referring to propaganda films that promoted the cult of personality. On the other hand, authoritarian governments tend to systematically control artistic production. After all, art has always served as the foremost communication tool and has been used to venerate divinities (statues of Venus, teachings of the life of Christ in church frescoes, etc.). In fact, art was originally directed by the elites (religious and political-imperial, royal, then seigniorial), those who had the means and every incentive to ensure their voices were heard and represented.

By examining the iconographic history of the wall, we better understand its main characteristics, primarily for religious and military uses. There were even practices of border-related worship, like the divine protection of Egyptian stelae or belief in the Roman god Terminus. The wall narrates a key episode in a civilization's history. Whether the wall was designed to develop trade (the Limes of the Roman Empire) or defend against invasion (the Great Wall of China), artistic interpretation of the wall varies considerably, from a venerated symbol to pure and simple rejection. For example, the architecture of fortress cities such as Constantinople tells the story of the Crusades, while the walls of Troy and Jericho inform myths. The wall is also depicted as a symbol to be destroyed, as during the French Revolution. The details

of these historic representations paved the path for the young discipline of geopolitics.¹

Here, the examination of three particular walls (the generic term) is significant, in the sense that we address two historical ruptures. 1989 and 1991 correspond to the fall of the Berlin wall that led to the collapse of the Soviet bloc and authoritarian regimes, the end of the Cold War, and a form of legitimacy for the Western Allies. The other rupture occurred on September 11, 2001, which resulted in the primacy of a securitarian paradigm. As we will see later, this context contributed to the emergence of the West Bank barrier and the US-Mexico border wall. Our initial analysis in 2009 identified the urgency of the situation, as the wall as border has become normalized by the democracies that build them.

These barriers exist in the more general and paradoxical context of globalization, which is defined in varying ways depending on the discipline. UNESCO's definition seems most useful here:

Globalization is a multi-dimensional process characterized by:

- The acceptance of a set of economic rules for the entire world designed to maximize profits and productivity by universalizing markets and production, and to obtain the support of the state with a view to making the national economy more productive and competitive;
- technological innovation and organizational change centered on flexibilization and adaptability;
- the expansion of a specific form of social organization based on information as the main source of productivity and power;
- the reduction of the welfare state, privatization of social services, flexibilization of labor relations and weaker trade unions;
- de facto transfer to trans-national organizations of the control of national economic policy instruments, such as monetary policy, interest rates and fiscal policy;

1 "Geopolitics is the teaching of the State as a geographical organism or as a spatial phenomenon: thus the State as country, territory, region or, at its most pronounced, as sovereign-state. As political science, it keeps constantly in view the unity of the state; while political geography studies the earth as the habitat for human existence in relation to the other characteristics of the earth" (Kjellen, 1911, p. 95)

- the dissemination of common cultural values, but also the re-emergence of nationalism, cultural conflict and social movements. (Urzua, 2000, p.421)

Though the term became more common in the second half of the 20th century², it is important to note that economic, technological, and cultural exchanges have occurred for millennia. Progress from point A to point B was simply slower before (via the silk, tea, and paper roads). The discovery of the New World marked a turning point in the history of humanity, calling old beliefs into question and gradually introducing new ones. Due to an imbalance in reciprocal interests (economic, technical, cultural), a balance of power emerged (through conquest, conflict, war) culminating in domination based on a deep divide (colonialism, slavery). Thus the concept of globalization also entails a history of violence between nation-states.³

Today, the economic, political, cultural, and human interdependence between countries is only growing via technology, thereby altering mentalities and continuously redefining the roles of individuals and decision-makers. This book is founded on the idea of a new interpretation of the modern walls being built.

In this work, the use of contemporary art as a communication tool is closely connected to geopolitics, facilitated by the expansion of closed borders, which have become increasingly common with the new populist governments. The Schengen area, whose external borders are secured by the Frontex agency, presents the image of a fortified Europe that cannot be dissociated from the collateral tragedies of illegal immigration. Yet, the wall,

2 The verb was introduced in France by Albert Thibaudet (1928, p. 682) "Here again the problem becomes Europeanized, globalized." But the concept was developed by the theoretician and philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1962) who used the notion of a global village (planetary village).

3 "The nation-state 'is one where the great majority are conscious of a common identity and share the same culture'. The nation-state is an area where the cultural boundaries match up with the political boundaries. The ideal of 'nation-state' is that the state incorporates people of a single ethnic stock and cultural traditions. However, most contemporary states are polyethnic. Thus, it can be argued that the nation-state '[...] would exist if nearly all the members of a single nation were organised in a single state, without any other national communities being present. Although the term is widely used, no such entities exist.'" www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/glossary/nation-state/. Accessed April 1, 2019.

our focus here, clearly represents a new kind of border that does not necessarily correspond to modern Westphalian principles⁴ that assign the State's authority to a defined territory in the strictest sense, with internal and external recognition of a government that has full control over its means of coercing a given population. Through these new separation barriers, recognition of and mutual respect between States is undermined. These "walls" are invested with an authority that appears to completely contradict the forces of globalization and its progressive, technical, and technological erasure of borders. Within the realm of border studies (limology), teichopolitics,⁵ a political strategy of closing borders for the protection purposes, has become a discipline in its own right. On the 248,000 kilometers of international border, there are now 70 to 75 walls extending over 40,000 km, a significant increase since 2010 (Vallet cited in *Le Monde*, February 2, 2018).

In terms of hermetic separation, apartheid in South Africa or the peace lines in Northern Ireland first come to mind. While those cases are well known, these kinds of separation barriers have undergone significant changes. The barriers are different and technology is evolving to meet the new needs created by the governments that erect them. The specific reasons behind their construction are sometimes more or less openly admitted. Here is a list of countries with anti-immigration barriers: Uzbekistan-Afghanistan; United States-Mexico; United Arab Emirates-Oman; Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan; Greece-Turkey; Saudi Arabia-Yemen; South Africa-Mozambique; Israel-Sinai; India-Bangladesh; Ceuta-Melilla; China-North Korea; China-Hong Kong; Brunei-Limbang; Botswana-Zimbabwe; the Calais wall in France; the Ceuta barrier in Spain.

Other justifications are also given to raise barriers: 1) anti-terrorism: Saudi Arabia-Iraq; Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt-Gaza; India-Burma; India-Kashmir; Israel-Palestine; United States-Mexico; Pakistan-Afghanistan 2) con-

4 The Peace of Westphalia, 1648. Text and translation (*Acta Pacis Westphalicae*. Electronic supplement, 1). "Frontières et murs frontaliers, une nouvelle ère? (In)sécurité, Symbolisme, Vulnérabilités" International colloquium organized by the Raoul-Dandurand Chair of Strategic and Diplomatic Studies, September 27–28, 2018, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Canada.

5 "In Greek, *teichos* doesn't simply mean a wall, but rather the wall of a fortified city, or a wall, or a large fortified manor. In this form, the Greek or Ionic Greek *teichos* was similar at the end of the Middle Ages to the French *bourg*, meaning a fortified place of refuge." (Pimouguet-Pedarros, 2000, p. 115)

flict zones: the Western Sahara Berm; Kuwait-Iraq; the Green Line in Cyprus; Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan; 3) demilitarized zones: North Korea-South Korea; 4) territorial control: Russia-Chechnya 5) the flow of “illicit” products (narcotics, arms, counterfeits) or even staple products (food and fuel): Egypt-Gaza; United States-Mexico; Kazakhstan- Uzbekistan; India-Burma; Iran-Pakistan.

These reasons are often intertwined, thus increasing the need for a barrier. However, their proportions can be excessive. Here are two extreme examples: the anti-migration border between India and Bangladesh that extends over 3,300 km, the largest ever erected (Vallet and Gauthé, 2014); and the anti-smuggling barrier between Egypt and the Gaza Strip made up of an underground 11-km steel wall (at the Rafah tunnels), reaching depths of up to 20 meters. There are two walls here: one visible from the outside, and one underground.

One of the major criticisms of these separation barriers is that they violate the principles of freedom of movement and the right to asylum and nationality promised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁶. Yet according to Claude Lévi-Strauss,

the strength and the weakness of the great declarations of human rights has always been that, in proclaiming an ideal, they too often forget that man grows to man's estate surrounded, not by humanity in the abstract, but by a traditional culture, where even the most revolutionary changes leave whole sectors quite unaltered. Such declarations can themselves be accounted for by the situation existing at a particular moment in time and in a particular space. (1952, p. 13)

In its desire for universality, the Declaration forgets each culture's specific characteristics. Though its intent seems generous, it cannot be divorced from the particular context of its signature following the end of World War

⁶ Article 13: 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. 2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country. Article 14:1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. 2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations. Article 15: 1. Everyone has the right to a nationality. 2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

II, when peace between nations was the priority. This decision reflects the achievement of the victors, those who write History.

Nevertheless, the wall does raise fundamental questions about a unilateralism that denies the 'other-foreigner' despite the fact that we still need the Other to exist, in a constant confrontation between Eros and Thanatos. It is precisely this complexity that we will examine in the book. In this geopolitical context, it is essential to mention Lévi-Strauss' concept of ethnocentrism, the instinctive tendency to reject the mores and customs of those of who are not from our culture. In fact, "Humanity is confined to the borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, to the village" (Lévi-Strauss, 1952, p. 21). People conceive of their own humanity within their own group. If we examine historic representations of the wall, it served to show the power of the people governed and intimidate barbarians (under the Greek and Roman empires, they were anyone who did not speak Latin or Greek; the Great Wall of China was built to push back barbarian invasions from the north). Lévi-Strauss stated that "the barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism" (1952, p. 19–20), meaning that a group loses its fundamental credibility in believing itself to be superior to another group.

The problem of the wall is precisely its archaic materiality, used ever since humans have sought to protect themselves from external aggressors. This archaism contrasts with the image of a postmodern, technological world and reinforces the denial of the climatic reality. Though decision-making governments, whether democratically elected or not, may have varying motivations, they are ultimately returning to an ancestral rejection of the other-foreigner. The wall then becomes a geopolitical object-tool.

We mentioned the use of art as a communication tool. However, this art is not the allegorical wall of Plato's Cave, but rather the rock art of prehistoric caves, such as in Sulawesi in Indonesia (40,000 BCE), and Chauvet (30,000 BCE) and Lascaux (17,000 BCE) in France, part of a demonstrative tradition. Wall painting is a natural process in which the marking of a territory is conveyed through symbols that are specific to the identity that is invested in them and the sharing of information related to its resistance. The wall is therefore a traditional element that also encourages artistic expression.

This object logically becomes a subject of and medium for aesthetic exploration through both its form and material. As early as the 15th century, in a mathematical re-appropriation of the mimesis of nature, Alberti (1992, p. 76) wrote, "First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a

rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen." The frame focuses our attention, and the artist's vision then extracts from Nature what he deems most remarkable. This flat surface with right angles, like our wall, is an appropriate tool with which to examine history.

Because of its visibility and potential to affront, the wall tends to attract a great deal of media attention. It is the subject of fantasies and provokes transgression. And yet the wall is no longer shameful. It is no longer a vile beast, because building a wall has become a worthwhile ambition, with some governments now defending this choice. This change is not just semiotic; it is also symbolically powerful. In a society of spectacle, journalistic, documentary, and artistic paths can easily become blurred. It is only on a case-by-case basis that we can determine the reasoning and ambition behind the images produced. The wall's sensationalism evokes a new kind of world; it is literally a geopolitical event on display. The construction of these walls is an event in and of itself, because if one thing is certain, it is that all walls eventually come down. Berlin is the most obvious example. Society thought this wall had been destroyed forever, yet in the 21st century, the duty of memory and tourist curiosity has rendered it omnipresent. The wall is reborn like a Phoenix, reemerging in the form of many similar infrastructures.

What is it that interests artists then, if the wall is fleeting? Is it its metamorphoses, or its spatiotemporal framework? Here again, even as globalization encourages the dissolution of borders, these same borders may also augment global artistic awareness. This book will address this question on a case-by-case basis, examining the specific choices and psychogeographic attachment to a given territory. Psychogeography is "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (Debord, 1955, p. 120).

Our comparison of three walls (in Berlin, Israel-Palestine, and Mexico-US) will allow us to uncover the commonalities and differences between them. A rigorous preliminary study of the geopolitical context, issues, and missions of each separation barrier will reveal the weaknesses and failures of ostensibly well-oiled systems. We will only examine these issues from an artistic angle, since we are not interested in controversy. We will therefore analyze the aesthetic development of each of these walls through landmark artists.

The wall is obviously first the work of an architect. More generally, it evokes the idea of the hearth, being at home and protected. But the notion of “within four walls” can also mean isolation, whether desired or not. We will refer to this carceral analysis throughout the book. Indeed, the concept of biopower is essential here, on several levels. According to Michel Foucault, we have gone from a disciplinary society (from the 18th to the beginning of the 19th century) to a control society. Knowledge, synonymous with power, is the basis for control. Any organization or institution, whether it depends directly or not on the State (family, school, hospital, factory, army, prison, etc.), uses this mechanism. Human beings and the integrity of their lives tend to become domesticated and serve as receptors of political instrumentalization. “Modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (Foucault, 1976a, p. 188). Though this model is in crisis, it still imposes its principles.

This is what is affirmed through the imposition of these separation barriers, where the prison-like aspect is no longer hidden. The incarceration of the population is turned over to the penal institution, which can be viewed as a kind of social apparatus (Foucault, 1976–1988, 1977–1978, 1993; Deleuze, 1990). Lastly, by seeking to control the flow of people and products, whether legal or not, these governments reinforce their powers and strengthen the dialectic against illegality.

The problem is power’s need to possess the illegalities, control these illegalities, and exert its power through these illegalities. Whether these illegalities are used through prisons or the ‘Gulag’, I think that in any case this is the issue: can there be power that doesn’t like illegality? (Foucault and Brodeur, 1993)

In fact, closed borders can serve as a means to establish these principles: power is justified through the control of illegality and finds its corollary in the securitarian paradigm. The wall crystallizes an unease that we aim to elucidate through art.