

REVIEW

Cultural Context of the U.S./Mexico Border

Yoonjeong Chang

Research Associate, Academy of DMZ Sciences, Korea

Bonansinga, Kate (2014). *Curating at the edge: Artists respond to the U.S./Mexico border*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Anzaldúa, Gloria (2007). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new Mestiza* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Borders divide political or geographical areas, especially countries. Nations clarify border lines in order to protect their territories and to prevent disputes, and the ways in which borders are controlled determine the cultural possibilities. The long history of the U.S./Mexico border has cultivated a unique cultural landscape arising from a multitude of challenges, ranging from political strategies to bilingual adaptation. Spanning four U.S. states and six Mexican states, this border region is home to a multitude of communities that are now rebuilding and expanding through economic and cultural synergy.

The U.S./Mexico border produces a form of cultural practice which has been derived from complexity and diversity. Circumstances of the border neighborhood, including drug-use, illegal migration, violence, and linguistic collision, bring about the question of identifying borderlands. In regard to border identification, *Curating at the Edge* and *Borderlands/La Frontera* share the concept of cross-border cultural exchange in visual terms. Kate Bonansinga from *Curating at the Edge* illustrates how art attributes to personal, social, and physical context on the borderland. She stated, "One of the unique opportunities provided by Rubin's border location is the potential for cross-border programming." The exhibitions during her term consistently challenged the critical points compounded in politi-

cal strategy and cross-cultural identification. *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa approaches more fundamental ideas of borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico including an invisible border which naturally created two different cultures.

These two publications meet common ground in defining the U.S./Mexico border as a frontier nation of multi-cultural practice. The border is a microcosm of the asymmetry in life quality between the U.S. and Mexico. It is an outgrowth of various conflicts from two different environments. On the other hand, the combination of independent national policies and binational identities represents potential opportunities for transformation through the embrace of cultural background. *Curating at the Edge* artistically speaks for the cultural context of the borderlands examining all levels of cross-border problems: land use, feminism, identity, natural resources, destruction, and political power. It shows how a visualized statement in multiform impacts ideas and the border community. *Borderlands/La Frontera* challenges a precarious solution for both individuals and communities in border regions, exclusively in the U.S./Mexico border. The author, a Chicano native of Texas, implants perspectives of history, race, homeland, and language to compromise living in the borderland.

Border in Visual Terms

Currently existing borders address a transitional space of harmony in political, ethnic, or cultural differences. Among them, the U.S./Mexico border has strived to coordinate binational links in intense social contexts. It seeks for a quality of life that will operate effectively with sustainable challenges. In the publication of *Curating at the Edge*, the author, Kate Bonansinga, shows how art as human activity can be visually powerful in understanding the past and present border. Interpretation of border complexity in visual terms suggests a platform to promote malleable formation of border regions and corresponds to essential components in border management.

Kate Bonansinga is the founding director of the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at the University of Texas, El Paso. The Texas section of the U.S./Mexico border is longer than that of any other U.S. state, and accounts for four Mexican states: Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Chihuahua, and the Rubin Center is located in the Chihuahuan desert on the U.S./Mexico border. In *Curating at the Edge*, Bonansinga introduces new and broad approaches to border identification through the lens of her collaboration with artists who specialize in "border art." Each of the twelve artists brings to the table a different perspective

on the interplay of social dynamics and border art. Each artist features his/her self-contained work chronologically in twelve chapters.

Under the paradigm shift for the University of Texas, El Paso, Bonansinga agrees on re-identifying the museum as a globalized communication center. The meaning of center fulfills a wide range of multi-purposes art practices with visual and historical exhibitions. Her curatorial decision for the twelve artists proves her understanding and support addressing the world's ongoing transitional borderland: the U.S./Mexico border. Each of the artists covers various stages of the U.S./Mexico border conflicts. Some of the artists live in Mexico, and some live in the U.S. The connection between the artists is the nationality and mutual interests of issues concerned with the border situation. Their works include installation, performance, photography, sculpture, and video.

Gradually, the Rubin's program presents and delivers controversial subjects and images reflecting the tensions of border communities. In chapter 8, Tania Candiani, the artist from the Rubin exhibition of *Battleground* in 2009, focuses on the interaction performance which was conducted in El Paso-Juárez. This borderland, also known as Juárez-El Paso, is the second largest binational region (after San Diego-Tijuana) on the U.S./Mexico border. Candiani's interest created interactive participation over the physical divide. She interviewed victims of violence and shared fact-finding moments exposing political tension regarding the placement of homes. Candiani's exhibition at Rubin proposed the human body as an instrument for social action and a symbol of dissent. "Tania Candiani's concern with women's work is applied to political tensions on the U.S./Mexico border in her 2009 exhibition *Battleground*."

In the 2011 exhibition *Lines of Division*, Enrique Ježik from chapter 11 worked as a performer and destroyer at the same time. He defined conflict and tension with two types of works: videos and the carved tabletops. He conveyed consequent messages of violence and destruction and abuse of political power. His videos consisted of five screens, which he appropriated and edited the footage from the Internet, primarily YouTube. The images included the Afghanistan/Pakistan footage, video surveillance images of U.S./Mexico, Colombia/Venezuela, and Israel/Palestine border conflict, and documentation of North Korea and South Korea. For the Koreas, the part of North Korea was from a propaganda footage showing a marching military parade, and the part of South Korea was about political persuasion in a time frame including the Korean War. Ježik's intention was to add broader meaning by changing the context or narrative for this type of information. He regarded YouTube as a highly democratic tool in which any person has the potential to disperse political persuasion or ideology intentionally in a context of visual language. His second work was the U.S./Mexico border map carved

on a wooden table. He performed the action of drawing a line with a chainsaw. What he did was quick and not repairable once executed. His videos made audiences learn that severe violence occurs in different border areas. Meanwhile, he demonstrated the quick response to destruction by cracking the tabletops at the exhibition. Visualizing violence on the screen and experiencing destruction in action help people imagine both the consequences of violence and destruction and the abuse of political power. Bonansinga goes on to say the artist's intention seamlessly connected to his portrayal of national borders, such as that between the U.S. and Mexico, and the tensions that surrounded their creation still surrounded their patrol. Ježik challenges the questions as to why borders stand for aggressive and political power dealing with death and destruction. "In this action, Ježik was both a graceful performer and unforgiving destroyer."

Light Line in the last chapter, a work by Atherton Keener, countered Ježik's work in chapter 11. Atherton Keener offered relieving gestures of the current harsh border reality. This group of an artist and architect proposed the overview of how architects and artists have manipulated light throughout history. They believe light is eligible to connect environmental conditions with interior space without physical interruption, expanding the idea of cohesion by joining landscape to room to self. According to their plan, the gallery was to be reshaped with walkways made from a yet-to-be-determined material suspended from the ceiling. Light reflected from mirrors, which were installed in the landscape surrounding the building, would be directed through the windows of the gallery. They designated that one mirror should be installed in Juárez in order to embrace and involve our cross-border community. The quality of light lines varies depending on weather conditions or various atmospheres. Lines are used in three ways: one for cutting, one for folding, and one for hanging. "The concept of rupture also linked to the border as an artificial and political divide, one currently in need of healing." The whole concept of *Light Lines* from Rubin to Juárez is to represent borderlessness. Light lines reflected from each mirror installed in different sites peacefully unite art and institution, gallery and landscape, air and light crossing over borderlands. The author suggests the Ruben is not the place of museum-as-escape; most of the exhibitions advocate pressing issues in society and politics. *Light Lines* minimizes the risk of activism, and instead it requires people to pay attention to the light as it shifts. Following its subtleties and various points of connected lines, this new form of art fulfills the mission of responding to the desert environment on the edge of two nations. The size and scale of lined landscape bring one unified form of borderlands.

The U.S. and Mexico have confronted an inevitable dark side in their relationship in terms of their border areas. Through contemporary art at the multi-

disciplinary site, Bonansinga accelerates pending cross-border issues. Through the combination of art and activism, contemporary art practice possibly alleviates the long-standing tension and flourishes distinctive cross-border culture in the U.S./Mexico border.

Multi-disciplinary Border: The U.S./Mexico Border

Borders exist to perform two sides of good and bad, safety and danger, by building up cultural flexibility. People at the U.S./Mexico border have long-lived within the tension and conflict conditions of races, regional division, and political influence. Gloria Anzaldúa, who is the writer of *Borderlands/La Frontera* and one of the descendants from the borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico, explores the borderlands to the point where it extends senses of geographical, cultural, spiritual, and linguistic zone. “In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”

“Border” is not simply divided in places. It cultivates distinction which serves social position, cultural mix, ethnic unification, and linguistic change. *Borderlands/La Frontera* redirects the fundamental understanding of “border.” The U.S./Mexico border as fatalistic culture production has carried out current reality and future potential measurement. It responds to geographical and psychological fluxes.

Anzaldúa undergoes oppression and seeks a new identity as a member of the multi-cultural generation in the border region. She is very stubborn in preserving her own culture, yet she is very patient in agreeing with the interaction and diversity on the border area. The first chapter describes the homeland of Anzaldúa, which was changeable in history. Providing brief history gives an idea of how Mexico started, how Spaniards invaded Mexico, and who migrated to her homeland. Anzaldúa describes the details of the Mexican-American war, which explains the process of the takeover and how natives became foreigners. The war showed the relationship between Mexico and the U.S. It was the beginning of the migration of many illegal migrants into the U.S. They had to make a choice to pursue better lives. However, illegal migration brought about more dangerous circumstances through the unprotected law system and linguistic barriers. Specifically, women were exposed to very unsafe conditions: abuse and rape. Illegal migrants were inadequately treated in the U.S., and also had to suffer through the language barrier to live there. “Border” urges people to make the “choice” entailing unavoidable suffering beyond geographical separation.

The U.S./Mexico border implicates the “choice” functioning as the multi-disciplinary site. Anzaldúa struggled against her culture. In her culture, the male population held the authoritative role within households while the women maintained submissive positions. She decided to leave home for the U.S. as the first migrant in her family of six generations. She explains how difficult it was to adhere to her “home” culture and follow the rules that were required of her. She was raised Catholic, but she came to terms with her lesbian identity. She was questioned the issue of “choice.” She realized that some things were genetically inherited and were not put in an absolute position of making the “choice.” For some, groups will conform to social norms to be accepted and wanted in a culture. Those who go against these norms have a much harder time being a part of the group. Borders, where alienated culture struggles to blend with a dominating culture, are not about making the “choice.” The “choice” identifies the land and culture.

Placed in two different nations, borders tackle the ineluctable situation of linguistic barriers. Languages are frequently used as a tool in the culture in which people belong to. Recalling her childhood memories in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she recalls being punished at school for speaking Spanish while she was not allowed to speak English with a Mexican accent in her own home. Getting rid of her wild tongue, she attempted to assimilate into American culture. Because language is used to show a person’s identity and make them capable of communication, she repeatedly repressed her wild tongue, and she decided to be a broader woman by identifying herself as Chicano. Language is a key to identify culture from the homeland. Chicanos created several forms of language, through “Spanglish.” She listed Chicano languages: standard English, working class and slang English, standard Spanish, standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, and Pachuco. As stated in this chapter, speaking the Spanish language locates women in a dispersed level. Sometimes Chicanos are ashamed of speaking Chicano Spanish. They do not want to accept legitimacy of the language such as if they do not approve the legitimacy of their culture and themselves. Anzaldúa further argues that repeatedly attacking our native tongue diminishes our sense of self. “We used words borrowed from English.” She continuously embraces her language to identify her distinct culture. Linguistic conflicts among the border are necessary in implementing a border culture as an individual sector. Being a part of the culture in the borderlands should bring the harmony of various forms of one’s home culture without finding faults or betrayal in their culture.

Finally, *Borderlands/La Frontera* deals with race, ethnicity, and culture through “cosmic race,” one that comes from all races, or intermixed species that have similarities with the ones inhabiting in border region. The border provides an extraordinarily difficult mixture of various cultures, races, ethnicities, and languages. It is

hard to find harmony within the specific-conditional zone. People tend to believe in what they have believed. Indicating different directions challenges people's static ideology originating from where they come from. It is not a question of right or wrong. All different ideas should coexist in the same stage simply alongside each other in harmony. Strengthening equity on borderlands might cause intense and competitive actions. In building an efficient border, people can learn tolerance and acceptance without opposing race, ethnicity, and language. Borders by all meanings are connected with identical notion.

Cultural Compatibility in the U.S./ Mexico Border

The U.S./Mexico border is an exceptional terrain in sharing ethics and cultural bonds. It is no longer valid in applying a traditional standard of border management. Bonansinga in *Curating at the Edge* thoroughly studied the artists who participated in the exhibition at the Rubin center. She communicated with the artists to create the best solution in approaching the attentive stage in border conflict issues. "Although each chapter is meant to be self-contained and meaningful on its own, each also connects to the others and creates a crescendo of the body of exhibitions that came together to form a curatorial program during the institution's first seven years."

Borderlands/La Frontera is written in a multi-lingual form through the writer's intention. Speaking a multi-lingual deals with race, ethnicity, and culture. Border provokes constant frustration and struggle in identifying multiform of cultural environment. She claims that no one is safe from oppression, regardless of location. The U.S./Mexico border is a great challenge in indicating future trends of the best method in creating comprehensive land for "cosmic race." This potential border presents the quality of life from private public actions, which serves education, economy, safety, and equity. Maintaining a sense of unity provides not only the creation of mutual culture but also a new scheme of borderlands.