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INTRODUCTION TO *BORDER TOPOLOGIES*

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Abstract

The ‘Border Topologies’ themed section draws a series of texts that explore what design and artistic research could contribute to an understanding of border conditions in a context of rising inequalities, conflict and climate change. The common aim of the articles is to interrogate contemporary borders *through* the practices that produce them by focusing on how the border appears and reappears at different scales, in unexpected places and configurations. In doing so some of the articles collected here insist upon a planetary scale that questions the geopolitical as an organising construct.

Keywords

borders, topology, ecology, ethics, citizenship

Border Topologies

This themed section of *GeoHumanities* began life as a one day symposium entitled 'Border Topologies' at University of Sheffield, School of Architecture.[1] The aim of the symposium was to explore what design and artistic research could contribute to an understanding of border conditions in a context of rising inequalities, conflict and climate change. While borders have never functioned as simple lines in the sand, recent scholarship has sought to decouple the border from territory and from an understanding of it purely as a technology of separation. Instead focus has shifted to the processes that produce and are productive of the border through the concept of bordering (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002; Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005). This dislocation of the border has also included an acknowledgement of its dispersed nature with the attention shifting to questions of surveillance, biometrics and the use of data in policing the border, in what has recently been termed the 'iBorder' (Amoore 2006; Vaughan-Williams 2010; Pötzsch 2015). Another term 'borderscapes' complements this work, arguing for a way of thinking the border through a phenomenological perspective that includes the representations and experiences of the border

1 The 'Border Topologies' symposium took place on 26 Nov 2014 at the Showroom Cinema, Sheffield, UK. Details of speakers and videos of the talks can be found at http://www.topologicalatlas.net/bordertopologies.html

(Brambilla 2015; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). A unifying thread within these more recent engagements is an understanding of the border as a topological entity that is constituted by the techniques and apparatuses of bordering, as well as being fundamental to the production of such processes. In other words, the border is understood not as a fixed form moving across space and time, but is instead composed and recomposed in relation to bordering processes (Adkins and Lury 2012). These might include technologies of surveillance and dataveillance, the social and bureaucratic practices of officials and others charged with policing the border, or those entities that move across and are filtered by the border. A topological approach would therefore be able to represent borders as dynamic entities that are constructed *through* these different types of practices.

The term 'border topologies' seeks to bring together these diverse ways of apprehending the border with a relational approach that highlights bordering processes within an understanding of borders as spatial and ecological entities. Until recently the ecological has often been missing in border studies, for example a recent anthology on border studies included just one chapter that mentioned ecology and environmental issues (Wilson, Donnan,

and Cunningham 2012).[2] Where these do feature, it is in the context of transnational governance and the establishment and management of cross border conservation areas (Neumann 2004; Duffy 2006; Fall 2002). Another aspect of ecological borders is the intersection of species borders with human-made boundaries. A recent poignant example of this is the effect on Balkan wildlife of the newly erected fences in Europe. Whilst the barriers have been installed to stop refugee flows that are anyway subject to other conditions, they are killing local bear, wolf and lynx populations (Neslen 2016). Ecological borders are therefore most often discussed in relation to geopolitical borders and as Cunningham and others point out environmental issues are often conceptualised in terms of political priorities (Wilson, Donnan, and Cunningham 2012, 379; Walker 2005). In contrast, the notion of border topologies attempts to highlight the need for thinking the ecological in relation to borders at a planetary scale and not only in the register of the virtual, of data universes or from a purely international relations perspective. Today it is imperative to bring together an understanding of borders and bordering through surveillance, migration and cultural encounters, with borders as ecological entities, whilst keeping the topological approach that has been so successful in the literature described above. As Biemann points

2 A second anthology fairs better devoting a small section to Nature and Environment (Wastl-Walter 2011).

out in her contribution to the collection, this means questioning the temporal registers and scales at which we apprehend borders. It also means questioning the linear focus and two-dimensional approach to mapping borders (Blake 2005). It thus requires a methodological focus that is hinted at in the discussions around borderscapes, where the experiential and representational character of borders and the practices that produce them is highlighted across varied spaces and times.

The Border Topologies themed section therefore aims to interrogate contemporary borders *through* the practices that produce them by focusing on how the border appears and reappears at different scales, in unexpected places and configurations. In doing so some of the articles collected here insist upon a planetary scale that questions the geopolitical as an organising construct. They imagine earthly relations that do not always follow the contours of continents, for example Bremner proposes a renewed engagement with the archipelago in order to understand the relations between the land and the sea. She starts with a discussion of the frequent use of the archipelago as trope in architectural theory in order to speak of that which is architecturally significant and that which is deemed as leftover space. That is, the unplanned and the unregulated is the sea that surrounds

the islands, and it becomes part of the erasure of the metropolitan city. Her discussion of the Maldives archipelago challenges such thinking by following Deleuze in thinking the archipelago not as continental islands broken off from the primary land mass, but as oceanic islands that sediment over time with the ebb and flow of the waves (Deleuze 2004). Bremner's article offers a theoretical model and design approach for thinking border topologies as fluid and relational, and as a way of approaching coastal environments as dynamic entities that connect the land and the sea. How these concerns intersect with and traverse across geopolitical boundaries is where border topologies become crucial, as Bremner shows in her discussion of tourism in the Maldives. Such concerns also emerge in Biemann's article where she describes the transformation of two different landscapes by human action, but insists on the deep time of planetary processes in order to fully comprehend their effects. Her article discusses a recent video essay, *Deep Weather*, which focuses on two landscapes that have been transformed by liquids; Canadian tar sands that have resulted in the scarring of the land in pursuit of oil, and the Bangladeshi delta where local lives are ravaged by floods and rising sea levels. Biemann looks to such processes in order to rethink the border, so that border topologies are

understood not at the scale of nations but that of the planet itself, meaning that they operate horizontally *and* vertically and in longer temporal registers.

If borders no longer operate as strictly geopolitical entities, then we may need new ways of attending to such phenomena. We need new ways of seeing and unseeing and new modes of apprehending. Just as technological advances often obscure the workings of contemporary borders, so we need new technologies of seeing. Digitally mediated visuality can serve to reduce distances but brings with it its own set of ethical concerns, as I discuss in my article in this collection. Taking the Pakistani port city of Gwadar as example, I show how diverse digital narratives of places in crisis emerge, from the crowd sourced data produced through the practices of digital humanitarianism to the use of social media by locally based activists. In caring about places at a distance we rely on such narratives to allow us to transcend borders and to mediate our engagement, but how we can use these technologies to intervene ethically in such places remains an open question. The work of artist James Bridle often explores the potentials and limits of the technologically mediated gaze, something he also attends to here through discussing his recent project, Citizen Ex. Taking the form of a web browser extension, the application traces the trajectories of our online

lives and in doing so Bridle re-imagines citizenship beyond territory and birth-right to instead be defined by our virtual travels. In the wake of Edward Snowden's revelations regarding the NSA, the project is a comment and critique on the use of algorithms in decisions that affect people's right to citizenship. The use of such technologies ensures that the border is deterritorialised and dispersed, but this also means that the border emerges as a privileged site for contesting forms citizenship. De Carli & Frediani's article discusses this in the context of São Paulo, Brazil, where the occupation of strategic buildings in the city centre allows citizens usually excluded from urban decision making to claim space and a voice in the development of their city. Their article discusses the differential inclusions that many of the marginalised inhabitants of the city have to negotiate and they propose a model of insurgent regeneration to support their efforts based on Holston's concept of insurgent citizenship (Holston 2008). Their article also points to the importance of such spaces as important nodes that nurture and promote forms of social diversity.

These two articles by Bridle and De Carli & Frediani invite us to think beyond normative modes of understanding citizenship by parcelling the world along geopolitical lines, we could instead look to the virtual or to the micro-scale of

the city. Or we could look towards environmental geographies that allow a mode of thinking citizenship locally whilst still based in planetary concerns. Pritchard and Gabrys write of how the practice of environmental sensing in the context of hydraulic fracking in Pennsylvania, USA, produces particular kinds of entities and environments. They describe the process of creating environmental data through DIY sensing as a negotiation between the individual and the collective that creates forms of community. At the same time, they question some of the more hyperbolic statements around citizen sensing through revealing the problems associated with producing data that can support scientific claims. Instead they insist upon the need for environmental sensing to be combined with community engagement and citizen activism. In this sense, the technological always needs to be socialised and to become materialised. A concern with how materials can hold within them forms of agency is the topic of the photo essay by artist, Cressida Kocienski. Extracts from her recent film on the Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in eastern Turkey describe the crucial role that geology plays in the city, where a cultural attachment to basalt has created an identity for a contested city. Juxtaposing stills from the film with quotes from the various interviews that inform the work, the visual essay shows us the ways in which basalt and concrete embody two different visions of the city. Geology and

the extraction of basalt sit in stark contrast to the construction of concrete residential towers and the demolition of informal neighbourhoods.

The articles presented here all provide a way of exploring border topologies in a performative mode that attends to the dispersed character of contemporary borders and to their political and material realities. The ecological is a thread that ties together most of the articles, from Bremner's discussion of the ebb and flow of the ocean that makes and remakes the atolls of the Maldives, to the intersection of environmental geographies with modes of claiming citizenship discussed by Pritchard and Gabrys and an entanglement with geology that allows for a cultural understanding of the role of basalt in Diyarbakir. How such concerns intersect with and traverse across geo-political boundaries is where border topologies become crucial, as Biemann shows through her ecological discussion of how humans have transformed two different landscapes that can only be fully comprehended through the deep time of planetary processes. The other articles in this collection reflect on how we might work ethically with border topologies by discussing the problems inherent in digitally mediated narratives, or by attending to the ways in which citizenship is being reconfigured through relational practices. In all of these articles there is an emphasis on producing

practised knowledge, whether it is artists reflecting on their own practice or academics working with design based methods often in a participative manner with communities. Since topological thinking views culture as intensive, this emphasis on a methodological approach that creates units of measure and notions of value relationally rather than as external metrics is key (Adkins and Lury 2012). It also means that the role of practice within any engagement with border topologies is crucial.

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