

# Imagined Geographies, Interstitial Futures, *Guatemex*

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### Abstract

This paper examines *Guatemex* (2006), an intervention at the borer of Mexico and Guatemala by three Mexican artists, Rene Hayashi, Eder Castillo, and Antonio O'Connel. I discuss the project's significance in relation to its conception as a concrete response to local needs, as it was designed to provide internet access and information to undocumented migrants crossing the interstitial space of Usumacinta River, the fluid border between Mexico and Guatemala. In this light, I also consider how *Guatemex* builds on, speaks to, and expand on notions about architecture, "border art", "imagined geography", utopian community, and "securitization". The focus of discussion is on the project's negotiation of these terms, and on its relevance as an intervention that suggests connecting and thinking with the margins as one of today's most ur-gent projects.

### Keywords

Architecture, Art, Border, Media Art, Utopia, Intervention, Mexico, Guatemala, Immigration, South.

### Introduction

"If they are not meant for children, they are not meant for citizens either. If they are not meant for citizens – ourselves, they are not cities."- Aldo van Eyck, 1962.

*Guatemex* (2006) [figures 1, 2], a collaborative project by three Mexican practitioners, two artists, Rene Hayashi and Eder Castillo and the architect Antonio O'Connel was conceived as a water-worthy structure designed to function as an internet access point between Mexico and Guatemala. Initially, the construction was assembled on the waters of the Suchiate river at Ciudad Hidalgo, sited at the southern-most point of Mexico in the state of Chiapas, at the main crossing of the international border with Guatemala. As part of a two-year curatorial project realized in the town of Frontera Corozal, entitled *Frontera: Un esbozo para la creación de una sociedad del futuro/Frontier: A Sketch for The Creation of a Society for the Future, Guatemex* was subsequently re-assembled at the Usumacinta

river between Frontera Corazal, a Ch'ol community in Chiapas, Mexico, and Bethel, Guatemala, two border settlements separated by the river and surrounded by the Lacandon jungle. Built with locally found materials, the construction can be seen as a combination of site-specific installation, and environment that is outwardly evocative of vernacular buildings and structures found throughout Latin America, as well as traces to native American constructions like the chinampas (the floating gardens of the Aztecs), and European notions of structuralist architecture.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. *Guatemex*, Usumacinta River, 2006. Courtesy of Antonio O'Connel

<sup>1</sup> The project's website references *Guatemex* as a chinampa, but in effect, these gardens used for intensive agricultural purposes in the Aztec period in the valley of Mexico, were artificially raised beds, which surrounded by water, created the impression of floating



Figure 2. *Guatemex*, Usumacinta River, 2006. Courtesy of Antonio O'Connel

According to O'Connel, *Guatemex* was designed to be an extension of his ongoing practice that focuses on vernacular architecture in Mexico and Latin America in response to the narrative of “creativity” and “progress” driving Mexico City’s building boom of skyscrapers and museums by famous architects, or “starchitects,” as they have come to be called. Like his structures usually built within the privileged urban environment of Mexico City, O'Connel’s understands.

*Guatemex* as an architectural form both meant to prompt reflection about Mexican society’s stark social inequalities, and the role of architecture in their propagation.<sup>2</sup> Working with similar interests, Castillo creates and deploys inflatable structures, which he calls “museums,” in public spaces. Intended to be playfully interacted with by residents of marginalized areas in Mexico City, satellite, and remote towns that he has called “invisible cities,” these constructions are reminiscent of the inflatable playgrounds common in poorer neighborhoods like the one that he grew up in. Castillo’s humorous nomadic museums speak to his experiences growing up with limited access to cultural institutions, as they are typically built and located in more affluent and central parts of the city<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Hayashi focuses on playful architectural

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>3</sup> Julio Urizar, “Habitat Processor Esteticos Colectivos, Eder Castillo”, in *Gimnasia: Ejercicios Contemporaneos*, November 7, 2014, accessed August 1, 2016, <https://revistagimnasia.com/2014/11/07/habitat-procesos-esticos-colectivos-eder-castillo/>.

interventions in urban spaces, which include collaboratively-created playgrounds for street children in various cities internationally, such as Jakarta, Indonesia, and Rosario, Argentina. These projects constitute appropriations of abandoned and neglected spaces in cities and are developed after observing how children play in these sites, an approach that is reminiscent of the Structuralist architecture by Aldo van Eyck, the mentor and collaborator of the one-time Situationist Constant Nieuwenhuys. Indeed, van Eyck’s quote, cited above, frames the online documentation of Hayashi’s collaboration with Ruangrupa, a group of Jakarta-based artists, with whom he created a temporary playground in a derelict area of the city.

O'Connel’s, Hayashi’s, and Castillo’s architectural interventions share a critique of the monolithic forms of today’s famous international architects and the latter’s complicity as the handmaids of globalization based on a totalizing economization of culture. Their projects point jointly to the prominent role of architecture and architects in buttressing the ongoing economic exploitation of creativity as the world’s cities scramble to transition from a dying manufacturing economy to a culture-based economy (the so-called “Bilbao effect”).<sup>4</sup> Under this guise, the spectacle of “art”, and in particular so called relational performances, and brand-name, globalized architecture lends itself as participant, and by extension effacer of the enormity of economic, social, and cultural inequalities and injustices integral to global capitalism. The choice of marginal spaces, and ephemeral and adaptive forms typical of O'Connel’s, Hayashi’s, and Castillo’s constructions works in contrast to the global architecture of starchitects. Their projects’ roots in vernacular building, at its core an architecture characterized by a focus on interstitial spaces, non-hierarchical construction, and participative planning, reflects their politicized vision of architecture itself. In their hands, architecture and designed public spaces are foremost conceived to connect, make visible, and amplifications of marginalized people, indeed, populations that are either dislocated by, excluded, or otherwise ignored by the starchitects of globalization. This focus is similarly reflected in their conception of *Guatemex* as a project that aims at both linking undocumented migrants and communities in the Southern border of Mexico, as

<sup>4</sup> The Bilbao effect or Guggenheim effect refers in popular press to the culture-driven revitalization of post-industrial cities following on Bilbao, a decaying industrial city in Northern Spain, which

well as disrupting the “imagined geographies” of the border, which are currently shaping political discourse in Mexico and the United States along the lines of security and control.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, emerged as a cultural hub of sorts by means of the city’s investment in the building of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by Frank Gehry in 1997.

*Guatemex* represents yet another articulation of the utopian vision of architecture as a medium to empower communities’ struggles for social change, all the more poignant for its location, on the outmost southern, rural, “invisible” border of Mexico.

### Interstitial Futures

As one of twenty-one works selected for *Frontera: Un esbozo para la creación de una sociedad del futuro/ Frontier: A Sketch for The Creation of a Society for the Future, Guatemex* reflects the conception and goals set out by the organizers of the event, the collective curatorial group, Mexico City-based Laboratorio 060.<sup>6</sup> Conceived as a relational event, *Frontera* was structured as a collaborative network of curators, Human Rights consultants from Mexico and South Africa, invited artists from Mexico, the United States, and other countries in Latin America and Europe, as well as Frontera Corazal’s residents, including a local artist and members of the town council. After a year of research, *Frontera* transformed Frontera Corazal into a “creative city” for its duration, as the actual exhibition used the town’s public spaces by way of a multitude of public and collaborative projects. Altogether *Frontera* was intended to highlight the lived condition of Mexico’s southern border, a space that in comparison to the northern border, is largely absent in discourses about immigration in Mexico and the United States. Though resembling relational aesthetics, the project stands in contrast to the uncritical tone of much of relational art, instead using this handle to tap into the current enthu-

siasm for this type of art on the part of institutions, and corresponding funding of it. Similarly, a long tradition of border art addresses the dynamics and realities of the northern border, but largely bypasses the southern border. Against this background, the projects of *Frontera, including Guatemex*, show that today, the Southern border is much like the country’s Northern border, both an area of dynamic cultural exchange and a heavily militarized zone.

Alongside the curation of artistic projects and the production of a film about the event, Laboratorio 060 (the curators) also published a catalogue that provides insight into the historical dynamics that shape the current militarization of the Southern border. Gisele Lisa Bonnici, one of the Human Rights consultants involved in the project, writes that the region’s present framing in the language of national security is historically rooted in the Mexican government’s response to various and distinctively different events, including Central American armed conflicts from the 1980s to mid-1990s, which eventually subsided with the collapse of Eastern bloc in Europe; the 1994 Zapatista uprising, which prompted a move toward a strategic isolation of the southern region and a restructuring of Mexico’s military into an internal counterinsurgency force; and international drug trafficking, as U.S. Intelligence reported on smuggling routes through the Caribbean and Southeastern Mexico. As Bonnici explains, together these histories contributed to the perception of the region in Mexico (and the United States) as sites of “vulnerability,” “threat,” and “risk to national security,” which ultimately set the stage for the current militarized approach to immigration in the Southern border.

This course of “securitization” is likely to continue and even intensify, since in the context of the so-called war on terror the area has been deemed a regional security zone under bilateral accords between Mexico and the United States (the “smart borders” agreement of 2003). Because this politicized climate further encourages and consolidates the perception of migrants as potential threats to national integrity, the Mexican government’s silence about its actions to control the flow of transit migration along its Southern border is even more disquieting. Human Rights organizations in Mexico have reported on the regular violation of migrants’ rights in the region, including

<sup>5</sup> The notion of “imagined” or “imaginative geography” is Edward Said’s concept for the ideological impulses driving representations of particular spaces and places for purposes of control. Edward Said, “Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental”, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Laboratorio 060 consists of the art historian Lourdes Morales, landscape architect Daniela Wolf, and artist Javier Toscano. *Frontier: A Sketch for The Creation of a Society for the Future* was awarded an international prize in 2008 (Best Art Practices, Bolzano Province, Italy).

detention of undocumented migrants without due process, their exposure to corrupt and unaccountable state officials, racial profiling, and the harassment of temporary migrant workers unable to obtain required documentation.<sup>7</sup>

As an extension of *Frontera*, *Guatemex* foregrounds the dynamics of a space in which cultural interstitiality rubs against the rigidity of control, thereby highlighting the unforeseen impact of the current international obsession with security on migrant and local populations. As its title indicates, the project playfully resonates with the ambiguous identity of Mexican-Guatemalan border residents (the name of the project melds the names of both countries), while also providing a practical response to their specific communication needs. Historically, the region's migration patterns follow a South-North trajectory, from Guatemala to Mexico. The community of Frontera Corozal has itself both a long history as a source of migration and as a point of transition for several groups. It has been a source of migrants to the North, a passageway, and a final destination to temporary migrant workers. As such, Frontera Corozal is a quintessential interstitial space. Much like its river's ebbs and flows, its population is in constant flux. In addition to more sedentary residents, many of whom make a living as transporters of tourists and visitors, the community's size and makeup reflects the nomadic patterns of temporary workers from Guatemala working in Mexico's coffee and sugar cane industries, as well as construction and domestic work; visitors from Bethel, for whom making a living necessitates frequent river crossing from Guatemala; refugees who settled in the town after the Central American wars; and most recently, migrants and refugees fleeing the escalating violence and poverty of their post-conflict societies who are on their way to the United States, including Central Americans, South Americans, Caribbean islanders, Africans and Asians.

*Guatemex* was in particular designed with this latest influx of migrants in mind. Inside the vessel, migrants crossing to Mexico on their journey to the Northern border, were able to access the internet and a custom designed Web page with addresses of hospitals and

consulates, advice on road access, details on regional flora, and information on human rights [figure 3]. Additionally, a chat service was created with the intent to connect transitory migrants with the residents of the town of Frontera Corozal. For this purpose, a local guide, Ezequiel Lopez Velasco, was hired and instructed in its management. For the two months of the project, Lopez acted as a facilitator, welcoming migrants, trading experiences and information about the area, as well as providing instruction on accessing the internet. Online chat was not only novel for many of the migrants at the time (2006), but also for the residents of Frontera Corozal, an indigenous town characteristic of many marginalized communities existing without adequate communication infrastructure.



Figure 3. *Guatemex*, Usumacinta River, 2006. Courtesy of Antonio O'Connell

The conception of *Guatemex* as a node of a vast global network (the internet) parallels and supports the interstitiality of Frontera Corozal's geography and community, in practice it also highlights the alienating effects of militarization. During an interview with the author, O'Connell recounted that the creation of the structure was a relatively congenial endeavor, with locals donating and helping procure materials (a trunk from a jungle tree was donated by a farmer and the rubber buoys holding up the structure belonged to the hired guide, Lopez). Yet, with the structure completed, the artists realized that migrants were reluctant to approach it. Not until the artists began providing magazines and other amenities on the vessel did people

<sup>7</sup> Gisele Lisa Bonnici, "Cartography North of Corozal (-1, 1)", in *Frontera: Un esbozo para la creación de una sociedad del futuro/Fronter: A Sketch for The Creation of a Society for the Future*, eds. Laboratorio 060 (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2015), 257.

began to congregate. More disquietingly, during the first week, the group was approached by a Mara member, who left the vessel after meeting in private with the guide, Lopez (the Mara Salvatrucha, whose members are recognizable through extensive tattooing, is a feared youth gang with origins in Los Angeles and now operating throughout Central America).<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, O'Connel's observations drive home the vulnerability experienced by Frontera Corazal's residents and migrants alike in face of transnational networks of organized crime operating in the region (it is well-known that the Mara Salvatrucha is involved in human smuggling and drug trafficking, arms smuggling, kidnapping, and extortion). The incident with a Mara member in particular testifies to the impacts of a strategy of "securitization," which according to Bonnici, does not end violence and vulnerability, but simply displaces it, creating "a situation of vulnerability for someone else," in this case, the Frontera Corazal's sedentary community and its migrants. In all, *Guatemex* shows in practice how the labeling of non-Mexicans, (including transit migrants, local economic migrants, and others), becomes a threat under new policies of national security. These policies offer no recourse to establish options for regular entry and have created a situation in which migrants and refugees are completely vulnerable to the violence of both criminal elements and corrupt immigration officials.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The Mara Salvatrucha's spread to Central American countries is due to the deportation of Mara members from the United States, where the group originated among U.S. born youth of Central American descent in Los Angeles. This policy created a feedback loop, as it displaced gang activity and led the group to recreate itself into a transnational network spanning the United States, Canada, and Central America. Many of the migrants, in particular children and adolescents, passing through Frontera Corazal are leaving Guatemala because of forcible recruitment by the group.

<sup>9</sup> "Cartography North of Corozal (-1, 1)", 259, 265. As Bonnici points out, the focus on security as the goal of immigration policies leads to the "security dilemma," or spiral model, a term in international relations that refers to actions undertaken by a state, intended to heighten its security, such as increasing its military strength or making alliances, which leads other states to respond in kind, thus creating a feedback loop of tensions and conflicts even if no side desires them. To date, the focus on punitive methods has meant that Mexico has taken part in binational and regional securitization processes, including security training of Mexican officials by U.S. agencies. Legislative and policy changes, including an integral migration policy for the Southern border region, while promised, have yet to appear.

## Pirate Utopias

In contrast to the rhetoric of public safety and national security, *Guatemex*'s, and *Frontera*'s relational approach suggests an alternative model that is based on engaging the community and migrants and building on their interdependence and shared histories of migration. In this sense, *Guatemex* reflects the proposal by *Frontera*'s curators to leverage creative exchange toward imagining a heterotopia, literally an "other" space, here invested in the creation of "a possible intercultural community... in a future yet to come."<sup>10</sup> O'Connel's reflections on *Guatemex* resonate with this sentiment, as he describes the project as "an act of faith," a utopic gesture, which as he explained, is inspired by the (Modernist) belief in the possibilities of architecture as a tool of social change. Conceived as such, *Guatemex*'s ephemeral construction and inclusion of networked technology simultaneously reflect and adapt to Frontera Corazal's fluid geography and mobile populations.

In practice, migrants mostly used the vessel as a shelter, a refuge from the hot sun during the day, and at night, a safe place to sleep. Then in the second week, a young migrant woman from Guatemala who was separated from her brother in Frontera Corazal, came to the vessel looking for information about him. A web search yielded his picture in a Los Angeles's McDonalds, where he was depicted as the employee of the month. As word spread about this, and with the event coming to a close, residents asked the artists to make the structure permanent. The Suchiate River's everchanging flood patterns, lately exacerbated by global climate change, however, made the permanence of *Guatemex* impractical. In face of the devastation caused by a season of unprecedented strong hurricanes, its pieces were instead returned to their owners or scavenged by migrants to build their own shelters. *Guatemex* came thus full circle, from a construction inspired on the non-hierarchical principles of vernacular architecture, to a source of materials for the community. Similarly, the chat page along with the record of conversations is now an archive, part of the communal global memory, which is the World Wide Web.<sup>11</sup>

Like *Frontera*, the curatorial event in which the project is encased, *Guatemex* points to the possibilities

<sup>10</sup> Laboratorio 060, *Frontera: Un esbozo para la creación de una sociedad del futuro/Frontera: A Sketch for The Creation of a Society for the Future* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.pixelkraft.com.mx/guatemex/>.

that arise when people attempt to reimagine a space, in this case a border that is itself both imaginary and all too real. Among the many projects included in *Frontera, Guatemala*, most poignantly calls to mind Michel Foucault's image of heterotopia.

*par excellence*, the boat. Foucault's notion of heterotopia as an interstitial space, resonates with *Guatemala's* shape. It is a vessel located in the space of a frontier community, a moving border, a river, the virtual—in which, the rub of freedom and control is felt most viscerally, and daily.

Finally, *Guatemala's* conception as an intervention into the charged politics of the border, likewise resonates with Foucault's conception of heterotopia as a space fecund with the possibilities of resistance: "In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police takes the place of the pirates."<sup>12</sup> In this sense, *Frontera* and its projects, including *Guatemala*, leverage the desire on the part of the Mexican state to project a progressive image, a desire that is itself encased in a broader profiling of Mexico as a space of "creativity."<sup>13</sup> In the last decade, this focus has seen an unprecedented funding of numerous art and creative projects in the country by state, private, and international patrons. Similarly sponsored by governmental and private institutions, *Frontera* situates itself in the interstitial spaces between art, and technology, politics, the institutional, and the commercial, to energize the hopes and dreams of individuals and groups, which, located on geographical margins, in rural areas, are neglected or otherwise outside of the scope of cultural representation and political discourse of the centers.

Thought, at time of writing, *Guatemala* is already an eleven years old project, its subject, and in particular, its focus on questioning the politics of architecture has taken renewed urgency in today's political context.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault cited in Laboratorio 060, *Frontera: Un esbozo para la creación de una sociedad del futuro/Frontier: A Sketch for The Creation of a Society for the Future*, 33

<sup>13</sup> *Frontera* was funded by FONCA, CONACULTA, two governmental funding agencies, and Fundación Bancomer, and Fundación Jumex, two private foundations connected with banking and commerce, as well as by international funding sources, including the Prins Claus Foundation for Culture and Development in the Netherlands. This type of hybrid funding of the arts in Mexico is relatively new, as prior to the neo-liberal turn of the country in the 1990s, the Mexican arts were funded and controlled by the government in legacy of the Mexican revolution.

Since 2006, when the project was realized, the flows of refugees have swelled globally. Given the continuation of standing wars "on terror", it is likely that this situation will remain unchanged, or intensify in the future. Meanwhile, in face of this, political forces increasingly veer to side of isolationist policies. Thus, the building of a "bigger", "better" border wall on the northern border of the United States is front and center on the discourse of the recently elected U.S. president. Even if the funds for this wall have not yet been identified, nonetheless, the U.S.'s Department of Homeland Security recently opened the competition for proposals. On this background, both the presidents of the U.S. and Mexico harness the controversial project to further their respective political positions, through similar appeals on nationalist sentiment within their respective countries. To this end, it is worth to note that the scenarios sketched by the current U.S. president, are in the image of the fraught experiences with criminal elements preying on the residents, immigrants, and refugees of *Frontera Corozal*. In this light, the focus of *Guatemala*, on the southern border of Mexico, takes on an even more acute relevance, as its erasure from political discourse indicates the complicity of both governments in using immigration as a means of furthering control. By extension, the underlying question to architects, which underscores *Guatemala*, redoubles its creators' prescience: will your architecture endorse walls, or take to the interstices?

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### **Author Biography**

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