

# An Embodiment, a Bridge and a Tribute: Conceptualisations from Beyond the Border

Written by Isabella Morgan Vera

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## An Embodiment, a Bridge and a Tribute: Conceptualisations from Beyond the Border

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The concept of borders is not new; borders have always existed in different forms with different functions and different meanings. However, for many years, the concept of the border remained relatively unexamined within the field of politics and international relations, and their naturalness and permanence were often assumed. It was not until the end of the Cold War when the world witnessed the collapse of former boundaries and the creation of new territorial limits that the concept of these ontologically natural borders came into question. Today, the optimistic cosmopolitan sentiment of the 90s is fast fading away; instead, we are witnessing refreshed fears surrounding national identity, territory and sovereignty (Brambilla, 2015). Consequently, we are observing a steady increase in the securitisation and militarisation of boundaries, walls, and borders globally (van Houtum, 2021; Jones, 2016). In light of this changing context, there is a renewed importance to reflect upon the evolution of the border concept and investigate its changing form, function, and meaning (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels, 2022; van Houtum, 2021; Brambilla, 2015).

This research project deals with the concept of a border with the aim of examining the political potential of border art in its ability to bring to light contending conceptualisations of borders. This is an important area of research because although there has been a broadening and deepening of the field of Border Studies, existing border research often overlooks bottom-up narratives and their role in shaping the border concept. Increasingly, there have been calls within the field of Border Studies to uncover localised and diversified narratives and experiences from the border and investigate their influence on the border concept (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels, 2022; Rumford, 2012). Existing research has utilised many cultural fields, such as music, literature, poetry, and art, as fields of analysis to investigate such narratives (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021). Nevertheless, there is a limited exploration of specific cases of border art and their revelations. It is important to investigate these unseen conceptualisations in order to keep in good stead with the changing face of the border (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels, 2022). Therefore, this research project seeks to answer the question, *'How can art at the US-Mexico border reimagine the concept of the border?'*. The research project aims to attest to border art's political potential in bringing to light reimaginings of the border through the application of Rancière's notion of 'the distribution of the sensible' to border artworks. The research project will focus on three border artworks, namely Lorenzo-Hemmer's 'Border Tuner' (2019), Aguiñiga's 'Metabolizing the Border' (2020) and Jaar's 'The Cloud/La Nube'(2000). This line of investigation will bring an opportunity to reveal hidden narratives that exist concerning the concept of the border. This research project hopes ultimately to contribute to a more diversified, localised, contested, and complex understanding of the border.

### Methodological Approach, Scope, and Limitations

The aim of the research project is to examine how border art along the US-Mexico border can reconceptualise the border concept. To complete the research aim, the research employs a case study research design with a desk-based approach, using academic literature as a source of data. Firstly, to test the hypothesis, the research project will use Rancière's distribution of the sensible as a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework is then applied to three contemporary case studies to examine the extent to which art can help us reconceptualise the concept of border. The case study selection was based on a specific time period, between the turn of the century and the present day to present contemporary case studies. The research aimed to select case studies that were diversified

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but with a somewhat 'stable' presence to ensure the case studies were researchable whilst using a desk-based approach. However, the employment of a case study research design perhaps limits the generalisability of the research and its conclusions as the research is situated within a specific context, and moreover, the case studies are limited in number (Clark, Foster and Bryman, 2019). Nonetheless, this methodology was most appropriate to answer the research question, considering the aim of the research was to test a theoretical approach within a localised context.

Secondly, this research project undertakes a desk-based research approach to answer the research question. As part of this approach, the research project will primarily make use of academic articles as a source of data. Academic articles will be sourced through online academic journals and the university library resources. A literature-based approach to research can be limited as it is susceptible to bias in literature selection (Clark, Foster and Bryman, 2019). To account for this bias, the selection of literature will be based on its currency and relevance to the research question and literature that counters the research hypothesis will not be disregarded. While this approach may be limited in its ability to remove bias, this research approach reading is the most suitable way to answer the research question as it allows for an in-depth exploration of a wide range of accessible, stable, and valid literature (Clark, Foster and Bryman, 2019).

## *Plan of Development*

The principal purpose of this investigation is to make visible hidden notions of the border concept. Through the investigation, the research project aims to demonstrate the political potential of art at the border, especially within a localised context of the US-Mexico border. As a way of answering the research question, the research project will approach the research question as follows. Firstly, there will be a review of the current literature with regard to the concept of borders. The exploration of the current Border Studies scholarship will reveal an opportunity to examine the extent of border art's political potential within a more localised context. The literature review begins with the territorial and ontological concept of borders. The review will then discuss the processual turn in Critical Border Studies before turning to the cultural turn in border studies. Finally, the review will arrive at the concept of border aesthetics, from which the theoretical discussion will begin. Consequently, there will be a presentation and application of Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible to establish a theoretical understanding of how border art has a political capacity. Subsequently, this theoretical framework will be applied to three diverse case studies of border art across the US-Mexico border. Through this application, each case study reveals different conceptualisations of borders. Firstly, Lorenzo-Hemmer's 'The Border Tuner' (2019) illustrates the way in which the border can be reimagined from a space of exclusion into a bridge of communication, active participation and self-representation. Secondly, Aguiñiga's embodiment of the border in 'Metabolizing the Border' (2020) infuses the objective and sterile borderscapes with emotion, transforming it into a place of intimacy. Thirdly, Jaar's piece, 'The Cloud/La Nube' (2000), transforms the border space into a site of memorialisation of 'ungrievable' lives. Upon completion, the research project reiterates the need for more research in the field of cultural border aesthetics, particularly research which undertakes primary data collection on the impact of border art on opinions, experiences, and policy concerning the border.

## **Literature Review**

To begin this, the research project will present and examine the theoretical evolution of the border concept as a way of situating the research's theoretical groundings and identifying ways to contribute to the existing field of Border Studies. The discussion will begin with an exploration of the theorisation of borders as natural and static (Waltz, 1990). Secondly, there will be a presentation of the processual turn in border studies, which presents a re-conceptualisation of borders as a product of processes and performances (Amoore and Hall, 2010; De Genova, 2013; Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012). Thirdly, there will be a discussion of the cultural turn in Border Studies, which offers an understanding of borders as 'borderscapes' which are constructed at multiple levels by a plethora of actors (Brambilla, 2015; Rumford, 2012; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007). The cultural turn in border studies leads finally to the conceptualisation of borders as aesthetic entities, through which borders are understood as a concept riddled with "pathological in/visibilities" (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021, p. 243). The exploration and evaluation of differing concepts and theories demonstrate that while the literature makes clear the prominence of the state in

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constructing and negotiating the conceptualisation of borders, there is a need to explore alternative narratives of borders. Therefore, this research aims to unveil alternative narratives by employing Rancière's distribution of the sensible as a theoretical framework for three contemporary artworks.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, International Relations and Politics were dominated by realist and idealist philosophy, which, for ontological reasons, somewhat discarded borders as a field of analysis (Agnew, 1994). This was due to the underlying positivist epistemology of both realism and idealism, which was founded upon three interlinked ontological assumptions about politics and international relations (Agnew, 1994). Firstly, the assumption is that territory is fixed and lies within a sovereign space. Secondly, there is a separation between the internal sovereign space and the external anarchical world. Finally, the internal state is *a priori*. This ontological assumption resulted in two consequences. Firstly, the assumption is that we live within a closed system, meaning the territory is demarcated and enclosed (Agnew, 1994). Secondly, the conceptual and political merger between the state and the nation to produce the nation-state (Agnew, 1994). As a result, there was the creation of a binary identification of those that reside inside the territory and the external 'Other' that exists beyond the sovereign space (Newman and Paasi, 1998; Walker, 1993). It was assumed that only far from the anarchical world was a 'territorial utopia' where securitisation of rights, democracy, freedom, and justice is possible for the homogenous collective within (Wilson, 2020; Neocleous, 2008; Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007). Therefore, out of epistemological necessity, the border was conceived as a static and natural demarcation of the internal homogenous community which resides within an *a priori* sovereign space from the external anarchical world (Agnew, 1994; Van Houtum, 2005; Wilson, 2020). As a result of these assumptions, the border remained relatively unexamined in the field of Politics and International Relations. However, the definition of the borders as a static and fixed entity came into question in recent decades as arguably sovereignty, identity and territory could no longer be contained nor understood within a closed binary system (Agnew, 1994). In an ever-increasingly globalised world with increasingly de-territorialised borders, this separation seemed redundant, problematic, and unable to capture the complexity of the 'border' (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012). There was a call for a more 'historically conscious' border concept which does not rely on territorial epistemology and a-historicism (Agnew, 1994).

To capture the changing frontiers of the state, there was a theoretical shift in the concept of borders spearheaded by 'Critical Border Studies' (CBS), which was established by Parker and Vaughn-Williams (2012) in their seminal work 'Critical Border Studies: Broadening and Deepening the 'Lines in the Sand' Agenda'. Principally, CBS problematised the natural and static line conception of borders, positing a border is not a line in the sand but a constructed concept built on performances and processes which are everchanging (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012). As such, borders were no longer conceived as nouns but as verbs; 'borders' became 'bordering' practices (Van Houtum, 2021; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). This processual shift brought to light how the construction of borders is heavily reliant on violent and exclusionary practices and procedures (Jones, 2016). These exclusionary practices are 'necessary', as concepts such as identity, sovereignty, and territory collective homogeneity are revealed not to be *a priori*, natural, or static, contrary to realist and idealist conceptions (Anderson, 2006). CBS reveals how these grand narratives must be constantly produced, performed, and perpetuated through exclusionary practices. At the edge of the state, these fallible narratives of sovereignty, territory, and identity become salient, as the concept of the static and natural border is constantly undermined by the people and things that traverse them (Salter, 2012). The concept of 'b/ordering' put forward by Van Houtum and Van Naerssen (2002) illustrates the constant performance of the exclusionary logic of inside and outside. B/ordering highlights how practices and performances at the border become an important tool to reinforce the narrative of utopic unity within and justify violent exclusionary practices in the name of the 'imagined community' (Salter, 2012; Anderson, 2006). CBS highlights how borders are much more than simple walls but are the physical manifestation of order through the performance of belonging and non-belonging (Van Houtum, 2021; Salter, 2012; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007). The performance of b/ordering has been analysed in many ways in the literature. For example, Amoore and Hall (2010) discuss the ways in which rituals in border security practices are performed to perpetuate and naturalise the narrative of difference while making concepts and practices of border unquestionable. Furthermore, other scholars have explored the spectacular enactment of exclusion, which creates a legitimate illegal and threatening figure of the 'Other' (Danewid, 2022; De Genova, 2013). Conversely, others have argued that some borders have become increasingly 'unspectacular', as often the most powerful border is not a wall but a passport as it discreetly decides who may move freely and who must apply for a visa, for example (Van Houtum, 2021). Moreover, CBS scholars have demonstrated that b/ordering practices do not only occur as the

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frontier of the state but, in fact, these practices have been de-territorialised, moving inside and outside of the state so much so that the threat of exclusion has become omnipresent (El-Enany, 2020; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2018; Mezzadra and Nielson, 2014; Salter, 2012; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007; Balibar, 2002).

Overall, CBS scholarship brings to light the violent undercurrent of bordering practices whilst emphasising the constructed and fluid quality of borders (Van Houtum, 2021). However, whilst it is important to recognise the persistence of state power and the hegemonic discourse in defining the border, scholars have put forward that we cannot fully comprehend borders through the lens of inclusion and exclusion alone (Mezzadra and Nielson, 2014). As the primary focus of the b/ordering concept is the state and its various apparatus, it eliminates other narratives and actors in the construction of border and is therefore limited in the capacity to recognise contention (Brambilla, 2015; Rumford, 2012; Schimanski, 2019). Consequently, the b/ordering concept relies on a consensus of the border as something trapped within politics of fear and violence, which is orchestrated by the state (Brambilla, 2019; Rumford, 2012). Whilst we need to be aware of these mechanisms and their persistence, there is a necessity to open the space for other narratives from different actors to be able to free ourselves from the hegemonic narrative of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, it is also imperative to look beyond the state's prescription and acknowledge that there are competing narratives that exist and give the border meaning (Rumford, 2012).

The 'borderscapes' concept is another concept born out of the CBS scholarship, which accounts for contestation and resistance that the b/ordering concept cannot (Appadurai, 1996). The borderscapes concept represents a cultural turn in Border Studies and posits that the border is a "symbolic and material construction resulting from an interweaving of a multiplicity of discourse, practices and human relations" (Appadurai 1996, p. 33). The borderscapes concept thus highlights the co-constitutive relationship between individuals, communities, and bordering practices. This opening up of the border concepts meant that cultural artefacts such as discourse, imagination and symbolism are also mediators in how people related, constructed, and conceived the border. The borderscapes concept provides a 'kaleidoscope lens,' which has an emancipatory quality as it gives room to counterclaims and resistance to hegemonic borderscapes (Brambilla, 2015; Rumford, 2012). The borderscapes concept "shifts the focus and re-appropriates border narratives from the perspective of migrants, travellers, commuters, rendering them visible" (Heide, 2016, p. 192). Subsequently, the borderscapes concept means that the border becomes a site of struggle and dissensus rather than an exclusive site of exclusion (dell'Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015; Mezzadra and Nielson, 2014).

Newman (2003) posits that there is a need to explore and study the different perceptions of the border and explore how these perceptions can work to strengthen notions of the border or disassemble them. Within the borderscapes concept, there have been several methods to identify and analyse contending border narratives through more "interpretative, qualitative and ethnographic" means (Newman and Paasi, 1998, p. 198). The processual and performative conception of border opened up different fields of analysis as a way to explore these contending border narratives, such as poetry, art, film, and literature, which has come to be known under the umbrella of Border Aesthetics (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels, 2022; Schimanski and Nyman, 2021). What the aesthetic approach to borders is able to capture is the intrinsic visibility and invisibility of borders and bordering practices and what narratives and perspectives are hidden or brought to the fore (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels, 2022). Through this lens, aesthetics becomes an essential aspect of the political mediation of border-making, as it contributes to the negotiation of the concept of the border in the public sphere (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021; Brambilla, 2015; Szary, 2012). Border art has been a particularly fruitful area of analysis for uncovering these alternative narratives. However, there have been calls within the scholarship to investigate these different narratives through more "locally situated and diversified" forms of border research while also investigating the extent to which these artworks have political potential (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels, 2022). Therefore, this research project seeks to investigate three contemporary, unique and diverse artworks located at the US-Mexico border and apply Rancière's theoretical framework to uncover the artworks' politicality. This exploration may help us to move towards a politics of hope which is not trapped within the politics of fear and violence (Brambilla, 2021a).

Overall, the exploration of the current literature on the border concept has brought to light that there is a need to explore alternative narratives of the border which are not reliant on consensus or a pre-conscripted conception of the border (Newman, 2006). In order to unveil these different conceptions of the border, this research project will depart

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from an aesthetic understanding of the border, employing Rancière's work on the 'distribution of the sensible' as a theoretical framework as a way to investigate contesting conceptions of the border through the medium of art.

Exploring the evolution of the border concept in the border literature brought us from a static and natural entity to a concept of b/ordering and finally to the multi-level and multi-perspective borderscapes concept. The theoretical evolution has allowed for a broader and deeper understanding of borders, which in turn expanded the field of research to include topics of analysis such as art, music, literature, poetry, and film to capture the complexity and dynamism of borders and their contestations. This research project aims to contribute to the literature by providing a more diversified and localised account of border art while simultaneously theoretically exploring the extent to which art has political potential.

## **Art and Politics**

In this section, my aim is to theorise the relationship between art, politics, and the border by applying the work of a prominent figure in the field of aesthetics and politics, Jacques Rancière. A central concept within Rancière's work is the 'distribution of the sensible' and will serve as a theoretical framework for synthesising the relationship between art, politics, and the border. Firstly, I will begin by laying out Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible and its related concepts such as the police and dissensus. Secondly, I will explore the ways in which Rancière postulates that art has potential for a reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible. Lastly, I will apply Rancière's theoretical discussions of aesthetics to the broader context of border aesthetics and border art, arguing that art can help unveil contestations to the border concept.

### *Jacques Rancière's Distribution of the Sensible*

To begin, this research project will lay out Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible which ultimately speaks to how we perceive the world around us and the politics of this perception. Principally, Rancière postulates that our comprehension of the world is inherently governed by sense and perception; for Rancière this is the essence of aesthetics. Sense and perception, however, are governed by an order which dictates what knowledge, elements, and bodies are within the realms of intelligibility. Rancière names this system of allocation the 'police' order. In this instance, the 'police' does not refer to a state institution nor a form of law enforcement as we understand it in lay terms. The police refers to a system which regulates the political community by allocating all bodies within a community to certain roles, as well as determining which bodies are excluded from the political community. The police order is a totalising system as no one within the political community is left without an assigned role; as such everyone is accounted for. The distribution of roles dictates what is intelligible within the community, as some modes of being, doing, and saying would only be intelligible from certain bodies with certain roles. For Rancière, this police count represents a 'wrong' because the allocation of particular bodies to certain roles in society rests on the supposition that there exists a hierarchy of intelligences. The hierarchy of intelligences is the notion that certain bodies are fitter for particular roles than another, and notably their suitability for that role is a quality embedded in the foundation of their being in an *a priori* way. This assumption disrespects the axiom of equality, which is the practical presupposition that all individuals have equality of intelligence, based on their equal capacity to for aesthetic judgement, reason, and agency. By imposing any hierarchy on bodies, the axiom of equality is violated, representing what Rancière terms a 'wrong' (Dikeç, 2015). Rancière posits that systems of domination throughout history have always lent on the notion of the existence of a sensorial hierarchy within a community. This division meant that certain bodies, ways of being, or thinking were excluded from certain political spaces as they were deemed incapable or incoherent to occupy the space.

Nevertheless, the police order is operated through and justified by a system that Rancière names the distribution of the sensible or '*partage du sensible*' in French. '*Partage*' has a double entendre in French which is somewhat lost in its English translation. Firstly, '*partage*' can be defined as a 'partition' which refers to an epistemological frontier governing what is intelligible, visible, audible, and included within the community (Panagia, 2010). Through this epistemological limit, the distribution of the sensible produces shared pre-constituted facts of sense perception which circumscribes what can be sensed and perceived. The pre-constituted facts which define a community relates to the second meaning of '*partage*' which refers to the verb 'to share' in French. The second meaning of 'to share' speaks to

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the notion that there is a shared acceptance of these previously mentioned pre-constituted facts of sense perception within the political community which “simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Panagia, 2010, p. 99). Plainly, the distribution of the sensible is a system of shared self-evident facts of perception which determines the modes and the boundaries of intelligibility within the community itself. Through the distribution of the sensible the given police count becomes totalising, prohibiting disputability as everyone appears to be accounted for. However, the partition cannot be epistemologically sealed because the exclusiveness of a partition holds the possibility of dissensual partaking by those deemed as unintelligible within the political community. Therefore, contestation is built into the fabric of the distribution of the sensible, as the system of shared facts cannot have any meaning or sense without rendering someone or something insensible or unintelligible (Panagia, 2010). The act of contesting this partition is what Rancière defines as ‘politics’. In Rancière’s view, politics occurs when the miscounted elements of society deemed unintelligible recognise their own equality and act as such. Through the recognition of their own equality, the prevailing distribution of the sensible is challenged as its pre-established facts of sense perception suddenly become redundant. More specifically, the agreed system of intelligibility ruptures as those that were deemed unintelligible acted as though they were intelligible. A rupturing of the system of shared facts of sense perception opens the possibility of reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible and therefore the hegemonic configuration of sense perception.

However, it is important to note that not any disagreement with the police order is dissensual, as dissensus has to be founded on the equality of intelligences. Disagreement will only result in a reformulation of police logic, which allocates bodies and modes of being, saying, and doing across a different partition. Nonetheless, in the instance where there is a meeting of the police and true egalitarian logic, there is an opportunity for the reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible which gives rise to the formation of a new subjectification claiming political agency, which was not previously counted by police order. Importantly, dissensus is not a teleological process, meaning that with a certain number of contestations we will not arrive at a utopic community where equality is constant; instead police orders will always reappear, and the best we can do is reconfigure the distribution of the sensible with the axiom of equality in mind.

In sum, what the distribution of the sensible demonstrates is that our perception of the world—what is sayable, doable, comprehensible—is ultimately governed by the politics of aesthetics. However, Rancière believes that a reconfiguration of this perceivable world is possible through the same principles that govern the distribution of the sensible. The possibility of reconfiguration gives theoretical scope to the possibility of reimagining concepts such as borders beyond what is prescribed to them by the prevailing distribution of the sensible. It is then an imperative to explore different methods of engendering moments of cession to the distribution of the sensible. Rancière posits that one means of breaking the conditions of sense perception is through the aesthetic experience conjured up by spectating art.

## *Art as Dissensus*

While the way we sense and perceive the world maybe strictly governed by rules of sense perception, Rancière (2009) proposes that the aesthetic experience engendered by art is capable of inspiring dissensual partaking. Governed by partitions, allocations, and fragmentation, our understanding of the world is limited, but moments of dissensus from this ‘distribution of the sensible’ allow reconfigurations of the conditions of sense perception allow us to see the world anew. However, dissensus requires an opportunity for the ‘miscounted’ to experience a moment of cession from the prevailing *partition du sensible* to realise their own equality. Rancière posits that art can offer this opportunity through which an escape from these shared facts of sense perception is possible. The secessionist quality of art can be explained through what Rancière names the ‘aesthetic regime’. A regime can be defined as a mode of discerning an object as art which depends on the ‘arts’ relationship between its articulation, its visibility and how sits within modes of intelligibility as art. Very broadly, the aesthetical regime posits that what constitutes art as art is based on what art *is* rather than what art *does*. Therefore, the aesthetic regime draws the characteristics of being an artwork not from the artists’ technical ability to make an impression of life out of passive material, nor from its pedagogical function, but from its adherence “to a specific form of sensorium apprehension” (Rancière, 2009, p. 29). What art does is it gives the spectator a moment of ‘negative presentation’ which is an experience which

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suspends the normal rules of sense perception. Beyond these rules, the ordinary allocations, connections, categories of and between roles and bodies dissolve (Rancière, 2009). In the absence of these rules, the given distribution of the sensible and the police order that governs it can be contested, which ushers in the possibility of a reconfiguration of the sensible and the constitution of a new subjectification. Thus, art belonging to this specific sensorium of apprehension is how dissensus is inherently part of the qualities that constitute art as art (Rancière, 2009).

Rancière (2009) demonstrates art's autonomy from the distribution of the sensible, and therefore its politics, through Schiller's concept of 'free appearance' and 'free play'. Firstly, 'free appearance' speaks to art's heterogeneous and autonomous quality as art is self-contained and inaccessible to the thoughts and desires that its spectator may hold and free from a desire to dominate or desire. Art's self-containment liberates art from the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience that rely on domination and desire to allocate and dictate difference based on a hierarchical system. Secondly, when someone stands in front of an art piece, they enter into a corresponding aesthetic state which Schiller names 'free play'. Free play defined as "an activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons" (Rancière, 2009, p. 30). Art can engender this state as it is free from the coordinates of everyday life, allowing a free play of the faculties, which means a mobilisation of imagination, understanding, and rationality. The mobilisation of the faculties allows for a suspension of cognition, a cognition which relies on a hierarchical system of difference and commonality. Consequently, the mobilisation of the faculties engenders a mirrored suspension of power of sensibility that depends on this system of domination (Rancière, 2009, p. 30). For Schiller (2016), the play of the faculties is the "very humanity of man; man is only fully human when he plays" (p. 107), because with this collapse of cognition and domination, there is a moment of freedom in which the world can be seen for its own equality and freedom as well as one's own. (Dikeç, 2015). It is this experience that art bestows that link to a common life based on equality and freedom which lies beneath the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 2009). The notion of freedom and equality conjured by 'free play' challenges the distribution of the sensible which allocates people into different spheres based on a hierarchy which disrespects the axiom of equality. This revelation invites slippages and discrepancies to the pre-constituted facts which creates linkages, associations, and partitions between elements needed for sense perception. Therefore, through aesthetic experience there is the possibility for those who were previously miscounted by the distribution to recognise their equality and to enunciate a new subjectivity not previously counted by the police order. Therefore, Rancière puts forth that art's capability for dissensual partaking lies in the way in which art constructs a sensory experience dislocated from the common sensory experience of everyday life. Thus, art has the capacity to help the spectator realise their own equality, de-naturalising the distribution of the sensible, therefore inspiring a redistribution of elements which contradict the distribution of the sensible, and creating new subjectivities which are in direct conflict with the police order.

## *Border Aesthetics and Border Art*

Following Rancière's notion of aesthetics and politics, border art could therefore be an appropriate tool to engender a cession to the prevailing perception and understanding of the notion of borders. First of all, taking the borderscapes concept which posits that the border is made up of constantly shifting enactments, discourses, processes, and symbols, it is reasonable to suggest that "every border has an aesthetic element, as without aestheticism a border could not be perceived as a border" (Larsen, 2007). By applying this conception to the wider discussion of the border concept, the distribution of the sensible brings to light how the border is made up of forms of visibility and invisibility of these enactments, discourses, practices, and symbols. If border is understood through an aesthetic lens, practices of in/visibility becomes a prevalent part of the production and negotiation of the border conception (Brambilla and Pötzsch, 2022; Moze and Spiegel, 2022; Schimanski and Nyman, 2021). More specifically, the aesthetic lens highlights what border narratives, productions, and experiences of the border are visible, and points to the ones which are hidden. Ultimately, the distribution of the sensible guides the limits of how the border is conceived, the way in which it can be talked about, who can talk about it, and how it is experienced, seen, and remembered (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021; Brambilla, 2015). Therefore, border art can act as an intervention to this distribution of the sensible which dictates how the border is perceived and create space for contestation and alternative notions of border (Giudice and Giubilaro, 2015). However, following Rancière's notion of art as a tool for dissensus, border art can engender a novel aesthetic experience of the border space. Artworks can transform the meaning of place and disrupt hegemonic discourses about identity and difference through alternative representation (Heide, 2016). In turn, the

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aesthetic experiences “allows the spectator to reframe the very notion of representation that the hegemonic borderscapes dictates, by questioning the quality of the relational links that the notion of place mediatizes” (dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015, p. 10). Interruption of the prescribed subjectivities of the border invites complexity which ultimately disturbs the distribution of the sensible. Art can therefore become an instrument to discover the limits of our conceptions of border, and unveil hidden ways of seeing, speaking, and doing that lie beyond the hegemonic pre-constituted facts of sense perception that make up the border (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021; Brambilla, 2015; Giudice and Giubilaro, 2015). As such, border art can become a way of reconfiguring, interrupting the configurations of sense perception that make up the logic of border, creating space for plurality, contestation, and potentially new subjectivities (Brambilla, 2021; Schimanski and Nyman, 2021; dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015; Giudice and Giubilaro, 2015b). Ultimately, this opens up the space for negotiating the concept of border to other border narratives and concepts.

Nevertheless, it is also pertinent to acknowledge that art itself is also trapped within frameworks of visibility and invisibility within the public space, often relying on these frameworks to become visible (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021). Therefore, there should be work done to work out whether art contributes to true egalitarian dissensus or whether it is complicit in existing structures of visibility. This research project aims to attend to this problem by applying Rancière’s distribution of the sensible to three contemporary art pieces to try and reveal whether they do represent true dissensus. While borderscapes have many competing narratives, border art can be a way to bring forward those narratives that are previously made invisible by the police established distribution of the sensible.

In this section, I initially discussed Rancière’s aesthetic theory of the distribution of the sensible which puts forward that the world is made comprehensible through a system of shared facts of sense, which partition and allocate objects and subjects within a given community. Subsequently, I studied the ways in which art has the potential to disrupt the distribution of the sensible through its ability to endow a moment of cession from normal cognition which justifies division and domination. Finally, I have applied Rancière’s thinking to the context of art at the border and discussed the way that art can alter the aesthetic experience of the border by ushering in contending narratives that were previously made invisible by the distribution of the sensible. While much scholarship has explored how art can disrupt the borderscape theoretically, there has been little practical application of this thinking to a diverse set of localised case studies to assess the extent to which art can be an instrument to reimagine the concept of border. In the words of Rancière, it is important to question whether art and artists can serve a “substitutive political function” by “reshaping political spaces or whether they should be content with parodying them” (Rancière, 2009, p. 60). With these words in mind, I will now begin to apply Rancière’s theory of the distribution of the sensible to three contemporary artworks that appear on the US-Mexico border and attempt to extract how or if they bring alternative conceptions of border to light.

## **Case Studies**

### *History and Context*

In this next section, there will be an application of Rancière’s theory of the distribution of the sensible to three contemporary artworks that appear on the US-Mexico border, to illustrate how these artworks may be an instrument to the reconfiguration of the border concept. The US-Mexico border is an historically rich site for art and resistance; before we begin, it is of importance to acknowledge the history and situate our analysis within this context. While there has been a long tradition of art in the borderland between the US and Mexico, one of the most foundational figures was Guillermo Gómez-Peña, an artist, campaigner, and performer. During the 1980s and 1990s Gómez-Peña often worked with the concept of the border, often using it as a tool and a backdrop for his performance art or a subject for his art workshops. Additionally, Gómez-Peña was involved in the creation of the notable Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizos (BAW/TAF) project, founded in 1982, which was a collective made up of artists, intellectuals, and poets from both sides of the border (Ganivet, 2021). The intention of the BAW/TAF was to endorse a relationship across the border, and it was through this workshop that the term border art first appeared (dell’Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015). Szary, (2012) defines border art as art which occurs “at the border, from the border or art against the border” (p. 1) which often has a focus on the socio-political realities that emanate from living within that borderland. Overall, the pioneering BAW/TAF laid the ground for many contemporary border art artists.



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Whilst acknowledging the history and context of border art, for the application of Rancière's political framework I have selected three contemporary artworks that reflect the contemporary face of the border. Moreover, using a range of narratives and voices, the selection of artworks explore different dimensions and notions of bordering. However, what they all share or do well to demonstrate is the way in which, through Rancièrian lens, they all offer the possibility of disrupting the hegemonic understanding of what the border is. I will begin with examining Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 'Border Tuner/Sintonizador Fronterizo' (2019) which puts forth the concept of the border as a bridge. Subsequently, I will apply Rancière's framework to Tanya Aguiñiga's piece the 'Metabolizing the Border' (2020) which reveals a conceptualisation of the border as an embodiment of complex human emotions and experiences. Finally, I will move on to present and analyse Alfredo Jaar's 'The Cloud/La Nube' (2000) which unveils the border as a monument for the remembrance of unliveable lives lost.

## *Border Tuner/Sintonizador Fronterizo (2019) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer*

The first case study that I will theorise is the interactive art installation 'Border Tuner' (2019) conceived by the artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, I will argue that this artwork offers an aesthetic experience which opens a space for the fabrication of new subjectivities and contestations to the distribution of the sensible by allowing the space for participatory action and self-representation. 'Border Tuner' was an interactive temporary art installation which comprised of six interactive searchlights which traversed both sides of the US-Mexico border. The installation used the motif of the searchlight, which is normally used for spotting 'illegal' migrants attempting to cross the border, but Lozano-Hemmer subverts their use by instead using them as a mode of communication between the two border-towns, Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua and El Paso in Texas. On each side of the border, the town's inhabitants were invited to interact with the lights which could be manually moved. Once two searchlights intersected in the shared sky, it created a visual bridge of light between the two border towns whilst simultaneously activating radio channels. The participants on either end were then able to communicate with one another through these light activated radio channels. The public art installation lasted 10 days and was used as a way to enable the inhabitants to share their stories with one another and create a line of communication between two separated communities.

As we have seen, Rancière postulates that the political and social order is maintained through the distribution of what can be seen, said, and done. This distribution establishes a certain order of things that determines who is entitled to occupy which positions in a society, and what actions and representations are deemed legitimate or illegitimate. In the context of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 'Border Tuner', Rancière's theory can be applied to analyse how the artwork challenges and disrupts the established distribution of the sensible. The distribution of the sensible often excludes certain communities because they have the "material incapacity to occupy the space-time of political things" (Rancière, 2009, p. 24). Regarding the border, many border crossers and inhabitants are thought to be unable to contribute to the conception of the border. Through the lens of the distribution of the sensible, border crossers, inhabitants and migrants rendered are 'publicly invisible', which excludes them from the political space, while simultaneously appearing 'naturally visible' as exclusively ethicised or racialised others (Brambilla and Pöttsch, 2022). The police count renders them inaudible and unable to participate actively or meaningfully within the border space. Instead, the border simply acts upon them, shaping their lives, as they do not have the capacity to shape the border themselves. Conversely, the 'Border Tuner' challenges this view by inviting border inhabitants, who are otherwise excluded from border-making practices, to enter a dialogue, giving them agency and a voice in shaping the border experience. By allowing participants to manipulate the beams of light and sounds, 'Border Tuner' creates a temporary space of shared aesthetic experience and interaction through the shared sky, that transcends the physical and symbolic barriers of the border. Inviting a sensory experience based on human equity, rather than an experience which is dictated through the hierarchical distribution of the sensible which places bodies into undisputable categories and immutable division.

The installation ensures that the two participants cannot see each other, instead they have only their voice to articulate themselves which is detached from any prior subjectification. Lozano-Hemmer transforms the border space so that the border crossers and inhabitants are made politically visible, where their words can be not only heard but understood all while being publicly invisible free from the constraints of the markers of belonging that usually define them and dictate how their enunciations are received (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021, Brambilla and Pöttsch, 2022). Counter to the bordering practices, 'Border Tuner' invites participants to engage with each other and

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the border in ways that are not predetermined by the dominant discourse. Through the border inhabitant's active participation and self-representation, individuals are able to bring about dissensus and challenge dominant forms of political subjectivity and create new forms of political expression. Free from the subjectification that the border and its bordering practices enforce, there is space for new subjectification which was previously unaccounted for by the police. This challenges the dominant discourse that defines identity and belonging based on fixed and immutable categories (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007). 'Border Tuner' illustrates a moment of true egalitarian visibility, as it allows the miscounted to speak for themselves instead of rendered visible while being spoken for (Lloyd, 2019). Through this lens it becomes hard to distinguish who is the 'self' and who is the 'other' as they are no longer fixed. Instead identities are made, remade, and negotiated in a constant state of becoming (Giudice and Giubilaro, 2015a). Principally, 'Border Tuner' invites complexity and contestation to a typically incontestable space, which for Lozano-Hemmer is the "most important role that art can play" (Art21, 2020).

Overall, in terms of Rancière's theory, the border between Mexico and the United States is a space where the distribution of the sensible is particularly strict and oppressive. The border is a site of exclusion and separation, where certain bodies, experiences, and narratives are deemed illegitimate and prohibited, while others are privileged and authorised. Through the use of technology and interactivity, 'Border Tuner' disrupts the established configuration of the border and challenges the dominant narratives that sustain it by creating a space of interaction and communication between the two sides of the border, the border becomes a space where voices and bodies that are normally excluded and silenced are given a platform to be seen and heard. The installation creates a new distribution of the sensible that allows for the expression of alternative voices and perspectives and enables a different kind of political and social engagement that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state. In this way, the application of Rancière's distribution of the sensible exemplifies that the 'Border Tuner' is a powerful example of how art can intervene in the distribution of the sensible and create new possibilities for political and social transformation.

### *Metabolizing the Border (2020) by Tanya Aguiñiga*

The subsequent artwork I will analyse is Tanya Aguiñiga's 'Metabolizing the Border' (2020). Applying the theoretical framework of the distribution of the sensible to the art piece it reveals a dissensual notion of the border as a place of intimacy and emotion which contends the objective and sterile perception of the border and bordering processes. 'Metabolizing the Border' was an art installation and performance created by the artist Tanya Aguiñiga. The artwork comprised of a wearable glass suit which was embedded with pieces of the border: a headpiece which resembled a virtual reality headset which simulated a view from within the border, a breath distiller to smell and taste the border, and ear amplifiers to hear the border. Each part of the suit worked to metabolise the border from a physical object into sensual and emotional experience. As part of the artwork, Aguiñiga wore the suit which occupied each of her five senses, as she walked along the border fence for 90 minutes (Savig, 2023). Tanya Aguiñiga stated that the objective of the project was to give a "platform to the emotional and psychological effects that a border wall has on those living on the border" (Aguiñiga, 2020).

Much of the dominant distribution of the sensible tells us that the border is an objective and natural demarcation of two binary identities. Aguiñiga's work dislocates from this prevailing border aesthetic revealing a deeply subjective, intimate and traumatising conception of the border while also leading the spectator to a liminal and transformative space where new subjectification is possible. Often a border is understood as the physical, territorial, and objective embodiment of two distinct binary identities. Bordering practices work to perpetuate and naturalise these binary subjectivities of 'us' and 'them' (Van Houtum, 2021; De Genova, 2013; Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Newman, 2003), Conversely, 'Metabolizing the Border' interrupts and brings into question these naturalised dichotomies by highlighting the violence and pain that these practices cause, which is something that the distribution of the sensible often makes invisible. Arguably 'Metabolizing the Border' references the violence and trauma created by these binary identifications, through Aguiñiga's use of glass in the creation of her border suit. As Aguiñiga's walks the length of the border fence, the suit deteriorates which causes both physical and psychological pain. It is analogous to the work of Anzaldúa (1987, p. 3) which talks to the pain felt by the imposition of binary identification:

1,950 mile-long open wound  
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,

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running down the length of my body,  
staking fence rods in my flesh,  
splits me splits me  
*me raja me raja*  
this thin edge of  
barbwire.

'Metabolising the Border' reveals the "emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3) which could be inferred as a dissensual act of resistance by introducing a more subjective and intimate concept of the border it counters the objectivity of the border logic (Giudice and Giubilaro, 2015). Furthermore, the radicalism of the artwork is further exemplified through the artist's emotional embodiment of the border itself. Borderscapes can promote certain subjectivities while concealing others (Brambilla, 2019), often promoting a dichotomous identity (Scott, 2020). Conversely, 'Metabolizing the Border' makes visible a more complex and nuanced subjectivity of neither one nor the other. Through 'Metabolizing the Border' the spectator and artist enter the border itself, entering a liminal and undetermined space. The artwork provides a visual, physical, and emotive blurring between the boundaries, allocations and categorisations, between the shared/partitions of the distribution of the sensible. Within the foreign and undetermined space of neither side of the border, there is an aesthetical suspension of the coordinates of perception which allocate bodies based on 'belonging'. Straddling the two sides of the border, binary subjectification dissolve, making way for new subjectification (Scott 2020). Through this aesthetic experience, the border becomes a transformative space for imagination as it is free from subjectivation and categorisation, rules of sense perception there is an opportunity for the imagination of new subjectification (Szary, 2012). 'Metabolizing the Border' works to transform the meaning of place at the border and disrupt hegemonic discourses about identity and difference through alternative representations (Heide, 2016 ;Szary, 2012).

On the whole, borderscapes are marred with different border narratives, however, it is often saturated with state-centric conceptualisations of the border. The hyper-visualisation of the hegemonic borderscapes of objective sterility makes invisible the more emotive and personable experiences at the border. Nonetheless, Aguiñiga's 'Metabolizing the Border' disrupts the distribution of the sensible which makes strange these smaller narratives. 'Metabolizing the Border' manages to illustrate the subjective pain caused by the objectivity of the border, and the binary identities that emanate from its bordering performances. This visual representation of Aguiñiga's experience of living on the border takes the spectator to liminal space that is not bound by the shared reconstituted facts of sense perception which make a subjectification beyond the binary identification unintelligible. As a result, Aguiñiga's artwork is a pertinent example of the way in which art can propagate new imaginations concerning the border concept and the theorisations that it is founded upon.

### *The Cloud/La Nube (2000) by Alfredo Jaar*

Alfredo Jaar's 'The Cloud/La Nube' (2000) is the final case study in which we can apply Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible to uncover alternative concepts of the border. Through the lens of the distribution of the sensible, Jaar's memorialialisation of undocumented migrants becomes a contestation to the concept of the border which constructs a dichotomy of liveable and unliveable lives. The art installation itself consisted of the suspension of one thousand balloons across the US-Mexico border, which were imprinted with the names of undocumented migrants that had died trying to cross the border. The cloud-like object was suspended from both sides of the border before being released into the sky by the families of the individuals, memorialising their lives and their loss (Sheren, 2009; inSite, no date). The ceremony was accompanied by readings by the families and friends, poetry, and a classical ensemble. 'The Cloud/La Nube' is significant from a Rancièrian perspective because the artwork contests the police count that renders some bodies impossible to imagine and therefore impossible to memorialise.

To grieve the deaths of undocumented migrants would be to question the naturalised binary oppositions that the state and the border are theoretically grounded upon. The border logic posits that the life of the 'other' is ungrievable as a condition of the existence of the border itself as the existence of the border is co-constitutive to the citizen subject that reside within it. However, as has been pointed out by Rancière that this subjectification cannot exist without being differentiated from something 'other' than itself. Therefore, concept of citizenship is tied into a

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dichotomous and co-constitutive relationship with the non-citizen. Much of what makes up the shared facts that constitute citizenship can only be understood through the existence and expulsion of the non-citizen, without the existence of the non-citizen then the concept of a citizen will cease to exist (Auchter, 2013). Therefore, bordering practices and bordering logic can be seen as part of this constitution of the two binary relationships, working to frame some bodies as legal citizens while others are constructed as 'illegal' (De Genova, 2013). Border practices illustrate and reaffirm the internal community of their legality and legitimacy through the demonstration of the existence and exclusion of the illegal 'other'. Furthermore, the state border practices make this the allocation of citizen and non-citizen appear natural and incontestable within the modes of intelligibility that the state and the bordering practices declare (Auchter, 2013; De Genova, 2013). It becomes natural, obvious, and sensible to exclude the 'other', as to include them would put into question the coordinates and conditions of citizenship. The 'citizen' is therefore understood though what it is not—the 'non-citizen'. From a Rancièrian lens the concept of the citizen is made up of shared pre-constituted facts; it is a political, legal, and social status, a certain type of relationship to the state denoting a certain type of life. Undocumented migrants lie beyond the limits of the political space and time; they are incongruous with that space. Thus, the non-citizen has to be an abjection to this status and this particular life that citizenship denotes. It is this abjection which renders undocumented migrants and their lives inconceivable, unliveable, and un-grievable because livability and therefore grievability are understood through the body's relationship to the state.

Within this context, those that exist beyond the partition of the citizenship, that are excluded from the sovereign territory, are often beyond the remits of an intelligible life. If in the first place a life is not intelligible as a life, then in death the body is rendered un-grievable as to grieve is the comprehension that a life has been lost (Auchter, 2013; Butler, 2010). The media often perpetuate the order of grievability allocating who is nameable in death versus who is just a nameless mass. Often individuals are reduced to statistics or nameless masses rather than individual lives with names (Mazzara, 2019; Lloyd, 2018). Through the process of naming and non-naming, their bodies become 'objects of evidence' rather than 'objects of life' (Jacqmin, 2020). Many illegal migrants' lives and therefore their deaths are left unnamed and uncounted. Arguably, undocumented migrants are un-grievable and un-nameable in death because their names did not mean anything in life, their lives incomprehensible within the framework of citizenship (Lloyd, 2019; Auchter, 2013). To recognise and name them would bring into question the subject-object subjectivity that the state is founded on and therefore the prevailing distribution of the sensible.

'The Cloud/La Nube' is an example of an act of dissensus from the police count or the practice of naming which adjudicates some unnameable in life and in death. Conversely, 'The Cloud/La Nube' offers a new aesthetic experience, one that is dislocated from the normal coordinates of the distribution of the sensible by memorialising and naming illegal migrants. Through memorialising and naming those that were previously beyond the remits of grievability, 'The Cloud/La Nube' disrupts the distribution of the sensible as it interrupts the pre-constituted facts of sense perception which determine what lives are grievable and un-grievable. (Mazzara, 2019; Auchter, 2013). Thus 'The Cloud/La Nube' makes strange the foundational requirement of understanding a life as a liveable through binary subjectification of self and other (Rygiel, 2016; Stierl, 2016; Auchter, 2013). Therefore, the artwork modifies our gazes as to how we see the border by questions the fixity of the border but also the self and the other dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion or citizen and non-citizen upon which the nation-state is founded upon (Auchter, 2013; De Genova, 2013). In this way, 'The Cloud/La Nube' does not only talk to past injustices and past lives but also speaks to and has an impact on those left alive, rendering them visible too, opening up space for new subjectivities.

In brief, 'The Cloud/La Nube' viewed through the lens of Rancièr's theory of the distribution of the sensible can be seen as an instrument of dissensus as the artwork dislocates itself from the police count and the distribution of the sensible which renders undocumented migrants un-grievable. Through memorialising the lives and the loss of undocumented migrants, 'The Cloud/La Nube' offers a new experience which bring into question the binary subjectification of citizen and non-citizen upon which the concept of the border leans on to make itself intelligible.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to investigate the extent to which border art can bring to light new concepts of border. The application of Rancièr's 'distribution of the sensible' to three contemporary artworks revealed three distinct,

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diverse and localised contestations to the border. On the whole, the investigation unveiled that 'border art' is capable of helping us realise different conceptions of the border and bordering practices. To reach this conclusion, this research project has overviewed different border theories moving from an idea of border as "a static line in the sand" (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012) to a conception of borders as a manifestation of performance and processes. The processual shift in border theory opened up the field to the conceptualisation of border as multifaceted, ephemeral, and relational, but at the base something that relies on perception.

Following on from Rumford's (2012) call for an exploration of competing border narratives in border making, this analysis turned to art as a field of analysis. To draw out these contestations, the analysis lent on Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible as a theoretical framework. The exploration of this aesthetical lens brought to light the way in which the world as we understand it is based upon structures of perception and sense which partitions and allocates the social world into roles and subjectivities. On the border, we can see that the border is a manifestation of 'pathological in/visibilities' (Schimanski and Nyman, 2021, p. 247) concealing and revealing certain narratives, experiences and conceptions. By applying this thinking to border art we are able to conceive the manner in which art at the border maybe an instrument through which different conceptions of border may be unearthed.

In the final section of this investigation, Rancière's theoretical framework was applied to three different border art works to trial this hypothesis. Firstly, Loranzo-Hemmers 'Border Tuner' (2019) illustrated that the border-space can be transformed into a space of communication, connection and political participation free from binary subjectification of 'us' and 'them'. Secondly, Alfredo Jaar's 'La Nube/The Cloud' (2000) interrupts the border space turning it into a place of contestation to the police count and the distribution of the sensible which allocates a certain order of grievability. Lastly, Tanya Aguiñiga's 'Metabolizing the Border' (2020) contested the objective and sterile border space by transforming the border into a liminal space of intimacy and emotion.

The application of Rancière's framework to these in-situ case studies illustrated that art is a manner through which a re-conceptualisation of the border is possible, through art's engendering of an aesthetic experience fractured from the hierarchical and hegemonic ways of perceiving the world. Beyond the exclusive binary subjectivities of 'us and them' that the border makes sensible, there is the possibility of new subjectivities and the "new germ of humanity" (Rancière, 2009, p. 32). This research has filled this research gap through doing an in-depth analysis of novel, localised, and diversified contemporary border artwork using Rancière's distribution of the sensible as a theoretical framework. The research findings lend theoretical grounding which is consistent with previously published literature on the topic of the use of visual methods for uncovering hidden border narratives. Nevertheless, the research highlights a need for more research within the field of Border Aesthetics with empirical qualitative data and real-world application (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels, 2022; Schimanski and Nyman, 2021).

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