the relations between mediums such as photography and cinema are rendered “perpetually uncertain” (73).

Although in his introduction Traub insists on the necessity of “human intervention for structure” (5), the far-reaching discussion often puts that into question, whether it is Paglen’s concern with how drone technology, spy surveillance, and such “machine-seeing apparatuses have political structures built into them, quite literally,” that “sculpt society” (197); Barry Salzman’s exploration of how social media proliferation impacts photography; Charlie White’s “On <img>,” on the use of authored and authorless online images; or Lisa Kereszi’s searching questioning of authorship in work taken from Google Street View. Despite its breadth of investigation, View seems to be questioning of authorship in work taken from Google Street View. Despite its breadth of investigation, View seems to be

**Border Cantos**  
Photographs and text by Richard Misrach  
Instruments, sound installations, scores, and text by Guillermo Galindo  
Introduction and epilogue by Josh Kun  
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I was born in Guatemala. My mother, who’d gone to work in the US, was deported back home. Later she returned to the US, and sent for me and sister Gaby. We were twelve and ten years old. My uncle sent us off with a group crossing the border at Nuevo Laredo. I had my Bible with me, and I thought, "I have faith. They took us to a part of the desert, and at night we all began to walk."

We were going to see my mom, so we packed our favorite clothes. You’re supposed to have dark clothes that aren’t visible, but Gaby wore her best bright white pants. The group huddled around to hide her. There was a sense that they had to protect the kids. After walking we had to cross the river, and took off our clothes to wade through the water. One of my shoes was swept away, and a lady gave me hers. Then we had to run, and at the end her feet were all cut up. But we were so glad we made it.

—Lucia Pedroza

I came to the US with a coyote. It cost me two thousand dollars to cross the line. I took a bus to Naco, Sonora. We spent three days in an empty house, sleeping on the floor, men and women together. I was worried by all the stories I’d heard about women getting raped. Then one afternoon the coyote took us down into a ravine. We climbed into a pipe, crawling on hands and knees, one person behind the next.

The pipe was only about four feet around, with sewage running at the bottom. It was very dark, and the coyote warned us not to go off to the side or we’d get lost. I was very scared, but I needed to make it across. I prayed to the saints. I arrived in Lumberton, North Carolina, on a Saturday, went to mass and gave thanks to God on Sunday, and went to work in the fields on Monday. With the first money I made I bought a saint and gave him to the church there.

—Guadalupe Marroquin

These women, two of the millions who’ve crossed the border between the United States and Mexico over the past two decades, describe this perilous journey as they lived it. For them, the border is not just geography, or a wall or a river. It is a passage of fire, an ordeal that must be survived in order to send money from work in the US back to a hungry family, to find children and relatives from whom they have been separated by earlier journeys, or to flee an environment that has become too dangerous to bear.

Some do not survive, dying as they try to cross the desert or swim the Rio Bravo, or murdered by gangs in northern Mexico. To them the border region has become a land of death.

But the border is also a land of the living. Over the past half-century the once-small towns of Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana have become cities of millions. A huge part of the industrial workforce of southern California, South Texas, and New Mexico lives and works, not on the US side of the border, but on the Mexican side. These workers are a key part of the production and supply chain that delivers products to US consumers. In Mexico, people build homes out of cardboard and shipping pallets cast off by the factories—the maquiladoras. The dirt streets of their barrios often end at the border wall itself. Many neighborhoods have no sewers and flood when it rains. Electricity is stolen by hooking up to power lines, while drinking water comes in a truck, and people must pay to fill the tank in front of their homes.
BOOK REVIEW

The border is the scene of some of Mexico’s sharpest social struggles. In Maclovio Rojas, outside Tijuana, land occupiers fight the police in sight of the border wall for the right to build homes. Workers in Juárez’s factories organize independent unions, and when they’re fired they set up tent encampments, like the Occupy Movement, at the gates. This upsurge is not new—it’s been going on for more than a hundred years. In 1906, Colonel William Greene, owner of the huge copper mine in Cananea, just a few miles south of Arizona in Sonora, brought the Arizona Rangers across the border to put down a strike considered the first conflict of the Mexican Revolution. Mexican unions sent organizers north across the border to help Texas farmworkers organize their first unions in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1930s.

The border is a vast area with a vibrant social history. Over the past three decades it has also become a powerful social symbol, especially the wall that’s been built in fits and starts, underlining the separation of our two countries. The border played a big part in electing Trump president—a man whose campaign rallies featured chants of “Build the Wall!” and who promises to deport millions of people. Mexicans angry at the wall’s symbolism—Keep out!—and at their own President Enrique Peña Nieto for not challenging Trump’s campaign insults of Mexicans, may well dump Peña’s political party in the next election.

So people in the US need to understand what goes on at the border. This country needs a reality check about the wall, as one element of coming to terms with the sources of migration and protecting the human rights of migrants and working people generally. Richard Misrach is one of a number of photographers who have sought to present that reality. Over several trips to the border between 2009 and 2015, he took photographs of the wall and its environs. In the course of that work, he developed a collaboration with musician Guillermo Galindo. Together they created a book of photographs, Border Cantos, and a website where people can hear Galindo’s music, bordercantos.com.

Both the book and the website are the products of a great deal of work. Border Cantos is a very large book (approximately 13 x 11 inches). Some 185 of its 274 pages are given to Misrach’s photographs taken along the border. The last part consists of photographs of instruments Galindo has created from objects found in the area near the border wall. The website features twenty-two of his works created on these instruments, from twenty seconds to over four minutes in length.

One of Galindo’s instruments is the Ropófono. “This loom,” he says, “a powerful symbol of home and tradition in Latin America, rotates a loop of discarded clothing. Contact microphones mounted on three arms amplify the sound of the clothing as it rotates” (200). Here Galindo is seeking to connect with the culture of the migrants who are crossing, and to create a sound—that of clothing—they might have heard as they were walking through the desert. It is a way, he believes, to create a voice for people who passed that way—who might have survived the experience, but who might also have perished in the crossing.

This is not the same, however, as listening to the actual voices of migrants themselves, at least those who survived, like Pedroza and Marroquin. It is important to hear those voices also, and to understand the concrete experience of a bordercrosser. But it is perfectly legitimate for Galindo, as an artist, to use physical pieces of that experience to create what is both a work of art and a tribute to the human beings involved. When one listens to the different instruments on the website, one after another, they create a broad texture, making the listener consider the ways the sounds connect to the experience.

Misrach’s photographs (other than the ones of the instruments) are mostly full-page color plates, with occasional collages of multiple smaller images. They are divided into eight chapters, or “cants.” The first and largest shows the border wall as it crosses the desert and other remote locations. Two focus on the Border Patrol’s mechanisms of enforcement—the detritus left on shooting ranges and the tires dragged across the sand to reveal the tracks of migrants who later walk through the area. Two sections are images of the remnants of passing migrants—strange sculptural figures in the vague shapes of people and cast-off and lost articles from backpacks to tennis shoes. One section shows the water containers left by activists who put them in the desert in hopes that migrants suffering thirst and heat prostration will find them. Another “canto” contains photographs of the wall as it passes through urban areas. The last, “The Other Side / El otro lado” has images of Mexico shot through the bars or mesh of the wall itself.

The first section contains the best-known images—the iron bars of the wall as it snakes through the desert, up and down hillsides. They are carefully framed compositions requiring substantial investments of time, repeatedly using perspective to dramatize the relation between the wall and the land. Misrach creates stark landscapes, devoid of people (as are most of his images). In many, the wall seems overwhelmed by its surroundings, a line of bars or obstacles made small in a much larger environment. As it presently exists, the wall is only a few decades old, in its oldest sections. Already even the newer wall of twenty-foot iron bars is rusting. This is not the Great Wall of China—it’s clear this wall is not a work for the ages. Nor is it a great accomplishment of human labor or engineering. Building it clearly didn’t produce many jobs. Skilled construction workers—electricians, pipefitters, and bridge builders—were not needed here.

The images reinforce an understanding that the wall’s main importance is its symbolism—it’s ability to win higher budgets for the Department of Homeland Security and votes for Donald Trump. Given that about 4.5 million Mexican migrants lived in...
the US in 1990, and 12.7 million by 2008, the wall had almost no impact on stopping migration across the border, despite its catastrophic human cost.

Some of Misrach’s images, especially the wide panoramas, are reminiscent of those shot by other photographers. Images by Mark Klett, Victoria Sambunaris, and Alec Soth, included in a 2012 San Francisco Museum of Art show titled Photography in Mexico: Selected Works from the Collections of SFMOMA and Daniel Greenberg and Susan Steinhauser, all consider the border as landscape [Ed. note: See David Bacon’s discussion of this exhibition in Afterimage 40, no. 6]. In others, Misrach shows the wall’s absurdity and irrationality. Wall, Near Brownsville, Texas (2013) is one of several that show a fragment of wall in the middle of nowhere. Clearly someone could just walk around one end or the other. In another photograph, the wall runs through a Texas golf course, but with openings and missing sections so golfers can play through. Missing from the book, though, are images of those sections of the wall, like those in San Ysidro or El Paso, where the border is like a military installation, with high-intensity lights, multiple barriers, and lots of Border Patrol agents in SUVs.

The photographs of Border Patrol detritus—spent shells and perforated targets on a shooting range, or chained tires—don’t really convey the reasons why migrants fear the “migra.” In another section, one photograph does show a street in Nogales, Arizona, from which a Border Patrol agent fatally shot José Antonio Elena Rodríguez (who was standing on a street in Nogales, Sonora) from between the bars of the wall. Misrach’s two images of this section of the wall show small posters of Rodríguez pasted onto the bars on the US side, but for some reason neither photograph was taken at the place where the shooting actually occurred, where Mexicans have erected a memorial on the street below.

Nevertheless, Misrach shows, with both target range and Nogales images, that militarization has a terrible human cost. Further, Misrach shows his support for the efforts made by US activists to save migrants, with a section of images of the water containers left in the desert. Some show the hatred motivating those who’ve shot holes into the containers, draining out their precious water.

The section that ties the photographer to the musician contains images documenting the items discarded by migrants. “The stories behind these artifacts—who left each one behind and why—will forever remain a mystery,” Misrach says (145). Some were used by Galindo to make the instruments pictured in the book’s last section. It is an exercise in forensics, trying to see the people in what they leave behind, without seeing the people themselves, hearing their voices only in the instruments made from their discarded possessions. “There are many reasons why I refuse to consider my pieces recycled art objects,” Galindo says. “The instruments for the Cantos project are meant to enable the invisible victims of immigration to speak through their personal belongings” (193). Presumably Misrach takes these photographs for the same reasons. But the people are invisible in this book by the choice of the photographer. He has deliberately decided to take photographs of the land and objects, revealing human presence in most cases only by implication.

The last section of photographs, “The Other Side / El otro lado,” consists of images of Mexico and Mexicans, taken through the bars of the wall. It highlights the two main limitations in Misrach’s approach to the border. This is the only section of the book, with a few exceptions, that contains images of people. And the images are almost all taken (as are almost all the images in the book) on the US side of the border. In this last section we see people through the bars as though they were prisoners in Mexico. They have no personality. Why not go across and talk with them?

Border Cantos does not pretend to be a sociological study of the border, or to document the reasons why people migrate, their living conditions, or social struggles in the border area on the Mexican side. But the reader does come away wondering why Misrach had so few images taken from that side. What does the wall look like to the people living south of it? Even the phrase “el otro lado” is very common in Mexico, but refers to the US side, not, as Misrach uses it, to refer to Mexico. Mexican photographer Leopoldo Peña, who photographs migrant indigenous Mexican communities in Los Angeles, asks, “What separation is the photographer [Misrach] suggesting when he does not allow the other side of the border to emerge?”

There is a long history of artists interpreting the border-crossing experience. In San Francisco, Pearl Ubungen developed a public dance performance, Refugee (1995), as a political challenge to the denial of immigrant rights. At one point she dances among wet concrete blocks along a rope pulling her from one place (or one country) to another. In another scenario, a section of the border wall on wheels chases, and is chased by, both migrants and Border Patrol agents.

The wall itself has been used for some years for art protesting the death of migrants, or highlighting the migrant experience. In the first years of the mass deaths of Operation Gatekeeper, at the end of the 1990s, Tijuana artists made sculptures of the plastic water bottles left in the desert to rescue migrants. They placed them on the wall itself with crosses and the names of people found dead in the wilderness. Other artists, myself included, have used the wall for public exhibitions, mounting large photographic prints on the bars showing the lives of migrants on the US side. This has been done only on the Mexican side, since the US Border Patrol prohibits such displays, and often even simple access, on their side of the barrier.

Misrach has had several museum exhibitions of the Border Cantos images. The photographs deserve broader venues, however, with diverse audiences, if they are to have a strong social impact. And if, as Galindo desires, his music is to “enable the invisible victims of immigration to speak,” (193) where can they find an audience of listeners willing to act to change social reality? A gallery or museum interested in the commodification of art is not a place where a large audience will be found that is committed to an active fight to stop the abuse and death of migrants at the border.

Border Cantos can be a powerful tool to inspire that action if it reaches those people prepared to act. The need for this is undebatable. The US has a new president who says he is building an even bigger wall on the border, and who threatens to imprison and deport millions of people who have crossed it. It is more important than ever to understand what that wall means to the people who’ve encountered it.

DAVID BACON is a California writer and photographer and author of Communities Without Borders (2006) and the forthcoming In the Fields of the North/En los campos del norte.