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INTERVIEWER: As the rhetoric surrounding President Trump's expansion of the border wall between Mexico and the United States demonizes true immigration reform, perspectives that address the inherent violence contained in borders seem all the more important.

On today's podcast, we talk with New York based artist Gregory Thielker and Watson Faculty Fellow Paja Faudree about how their most recent collaboration engages with the humanity on both sides of the border. Marrying ethnography and photography, the installation brings home the artificial nature of the boundary and its human cost.

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Thank you both for coming in today. Talk to me a little bit about how this collaboration began, because it's not obvious, I think, how an artist and an anthropologist find each other, and then actually produce a show.

GREG THIELKER: I wrote to Paja about a year ago when I knew that I was going to be doing the exhibition at Cohen Gallery over at the Granoff Center. And I was interested in connecting with someone who maybe didn't necessarily have experience working with some of the border issues that I've been doing for the past year and a half, but who shared a kind of similar approach and sympathy for blending disciplines.

I also knew that Paja had a background in writing, and I thought that there was an opportunity to go and look at some parts of the border together and see what might happen if you have someone who's primarily interested in the visuals, and then someone who's analyzing the way that people speak about those issues.

INTERVIEWER: So Paja, what made you say yes to this invitation?

PAJA FAUDREE: Well, part of it was just-- I mean, that's kind of how I am. I welcome opportunities that kind of come my way. I mean, I've been working in Mexico for about 15 years in a set of communities that send a lot of people to the United States. There are lots of migrants, lots of migration between the part of Mexico where I work and the United States.

So certainly, some of the obvious issues surrounding the border, surrounding migration, surrounding immigration policy have been part of my research and part of my life for a long time. But this seems like a different way to kind of engage in the conversation, and I really liked the idea of working collaboratively and seeing where that took us. Because it's something that, at least, I think in other fields, there's more of it. But I think in anthropology we don't collaborate as much as we could, and--

GREG THIELKER: And artists don't really do that so much either.

PAJA FAUDREE: So it just kind of seemed like a great opportunity to just sort of-- and Greg was so open and it seemed likely to work.

INTERVIEWER: And Greg, why were you working on the wall in the first place?

GREG THIELKER: I've been interested in environments and looking at boundaries or limits within the landscape for a number of years. So I've done projects where I followed an ancient highway in India that was being renovated. I've done work in Norway, where I followed a route through the mountains and stopped every three kilometers.

So I was actually really interested in the feature of the wall as it cut across this whole section of the continent. That became something of a bigger investigation, once I started to think about the ways that the border was really affecting both people who lived near it, as well as all over the continent, really. People who were traveling through, people who were living their lives.

And so I think using the border wall itself was in some ways a limit, but it gave the project a direction that I think it wouldn't have had otherwise.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about your process of what it looks like when you're collaborating?

GREG THIELKER: I was particularly interested in the part of the country that we visited together, because it's a place that has existed in different ways through history. First it belonged to indigenous people. And then it was part of Mexico. And then it became this kind of boundary area, the Rio Grande Valley, where the river itself forms the boundary between Mexico and the United States. But it's also become a really active border crossing.

We were told that maybe 10 years ago, there were two bridges, now there's 10 or 11 bridges going across. There's a huge presence there for Border Patrol and law enforcement.

PAJA FAUDREE: I just want to point out, border crossing, both legal and undocumented.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask. So these bridges are official bridges?

GREG THIELKER: Yes. These are international transit points.

INTERVIEWER: Security points or whatever.

GREG THIELKER: I was just going to say, so I had been inspired, actually, by the stories I'd heard about one place in particular, and that was the Santa Ana Wildlife Reservation, which had been sort of reclaimed land, formerly farmland, and it was returned to its natural state. So it's a natural preserve. There is wildlife, flora and fauna, thriving there, but it's also become a very contested place. Because it's a point where people are crossing illegally through the river and passing through the forest to escape North, there's discussion currently about whether to build a border wall or fence there right now, and there's a lot of discussion along the local community and preservationists who, obviously, have very strong feelings about that.

INTERVIEWER: And Paja, what were you doing while Greg was contemplating landscape and borders?

PAJA FAUDREE: So I was interviewing people. In fact, one of the things, for me, that was kind of interesting to sort of see the way our process worked was Greg's a visual artist, so visual engagement is really important to him, and it is to me, too. And I certainly saw things, I think, a little bit differently from working with him and collaborating with him.

But I'm not just an anthropologist and an ethnographer who's interested in speaking to people and interviewing them, I'm also a linguistic anthropologist. So I pay a lot of attention to language. So I was very interested in interviewing people, and also because I do some historical work, too, I'm sort of always very interested in knowing something about the history of a place.

And so, I also did a lot of reading and research, in addition to interviewing. And also taking-- I mean, some of the photographs in the exhibit are mine as well, and that's part of my process, too, is to take-- although we kind of both use photography in different ways in our work. So that also was something int-- So it's not like I never paid attention to of visual engagement before, but I began to sort of see things a bit differently as a product of doing this collaboration, I would say.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us how the anthropology informs the photography, if it does, and how the photography

informs the anthropology.

GREG THIELKER: I really enjoyed the kind of pushback that we gave each other. I think it was interesting and useful. And I think oftentimes, when I think of artists who do socially engaged work, there's a strong intentionality. But something that I really value, whether I'm doing painting, drawing, photography, is just really the process of observation. And so a lot of times the way I'll work through an idea is to go there and do sketches and do photographs, and then spend months working on the paintings. There's really a slow growth of the project.

But sometimes that doesn't necessarily come together in the way that I'll draw conclusions. So being there with someone, there's a tremendous amount of experience researching and really probing the issues with the people we were talking to. I think that opened, or illuminated more facets of the place. And there were actually times when I would tell Paja about a place that I visited, and then it would come up subsequently in conversations with people we were interviewing. And I had no idea that this particular park being used at night was a huge border crossing.

I went there because I looked at it on the map. There was something appealing about the position of the river that I wanted to see. And then later we would hear all these stories that were either being told by undocumented people or border patrol, and it kind of opened things up for me.

INTERVIEWER: And Paja, you started to talk a little bit about how you were seeing things differently, maybe?

PAJA FAUDREE: Yeah. I feel like I've used photography a lot in my research already so I interview somebody. As an ethnographer, I would take their pictures in part because they asked me to, and then I would print pictures for them. So it was sort of more of a documentary sort of engagement, I guess, with visual medium.

But one of the things I began to really appreciate as a product of working with Greg was to think about a different way of kind of engaging with some of the stories that we were hearing from people, some of their realities, some of the history through a less direct way of kind of engaging and representing visually. So I originally had a lot of ambivalence about sort of, for example, documenting just the border without people in it. I mean, I just had a visceral kind of discomfort, ambivalence. I'm not sure exactly what the right word was.

But I began to sort of see that representational choice, and maybe not even as a choice, it's

documenting what's there, as a way of documenting something that has a very rich history behind it. I mean, the lack of people, when you see certain vast stretches of the border, is not an accident. It's politically provoked.

And so representing it as such is, not in any straightforward way, representing a deep peopled landscape. I mean, it's much more complicated than that. And then I think particularly if you being to think about the juxtaposition of some of the images, say, that do not have human figures in them at all, juxtaposed with narratives from stories and excerpts from, in some cases, very painful parts of people's lives. Then I think you begin to sort of enter the issue, and the politics of the issue, and the history of the issue in a very different way.

INTERVIEWER: It's interesting that you talk about people as images, or even images of the people. I anticipated the narratives to be captions, and that they're disembodied and not connected, as far as I can tell, directly to the images that they're sitting with is very jarring. And I'm not sure I can locate why, but that was very affecting. And also very affecting I thought was that the narratives were, I'm assuming, transcribed exactly as you received them.

PAJA FAUDREE: Well, I went back and forth a lot with myself about the, again, representational choices. I thought a lot about representation in a different-- I mean, you think about it all the time as an ethnographer, but I thought about it differently in the context of this exhibition.

So one of the interviewees, whose sports appear a lot, is a native speaker of Spanish, but wanted to have the conversation in English. And so, I mean, quite obviously, we respected that, right? So his English is transcribed as such. Some of the interviews we did in Spanish and I translated them, knowing that the audience was not necessarily going to be able to speak Spanish. So those are translations of the original words, not the original words.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: There's a powerlessness that comes from this wall exhibit. The disembodiedness of the voice, the not quite mastering of the language. And yet the sort of determination to tell one's story, and then these images, which are stark in many cases, and haunting. Can you describe some of the images? Are we supposed to know which are yours and which are Greg's?

PAJA FAUDREE: No.

GREG THIELKER: No. I liked the idea that they were going to be blended together, and that you're basically

looking at these fragments of the research, of the experience of being there. There's one image which is of a view of the Atlantic Ocean, and there's actually a hazy cloud on the right side of the image.

INTERVIEWER: I wondered what that was.

GREG THIELKER: Yeah. We had gone to this place because it was important for me personally. There's the river snaking its way to enter the Atlantic Ocean. And so we went there and it was a very gray, kind of misty day.

PAJA FAUDREE: It was downright cold.

GREG THIELKER: Downright cold, clammy and uncomfortable. And we had been hoping for something warm and balmy. That didn't--

PAJA FAUDREE: Totally didn't want that.

GREG THIELKER: That didn't happen. So anyway, I covered the camera with a series of plastic bags to protect the lens and the equipment. And then they started blowing all over the place. So what you're seeing is actually the lens being covered. But I thought it was a good metaphor for the kind of act of being blocked and looking at things.

There's also another image that's a view of the river being seen through these, like, cattails and river marshes. You can see that it's some kind of body of water, but the way that it's framed in the display downstairs is we cut the image down the middle and displayed the two sides at right angles to each other.

PAJA FAUDREE: Yes.

GREG THIELKER: So that was a conscious choice to try to represent this idea of a split, of a schism, while at the same time the US side looks the same as the Mexican side. This is the same plant, same animal, same landscape, same rocks, soil, everything.

INTERVIEWER: Same ecosystem, because borders are man-made.

PAJA FAUDREE: Yeah. One of the things I like about that choice was a couple of things. One of the things that I-- you're just so aware if you spent any time on the border, at least-- I mean, this is my experience. It's very influenced by having spent a lot of time a long way from the border, but where the border, which is to say, a part of southern Mexico that has a huge percentage of the

population migrates to the states or elsewhere.

So the border is present every single day in all kinds of ways, even though it's a long way away physically. But I think one of the things that you're very aware of if you spent any time on the border is how incredibly intertwined these two places are. How artificial and arbitrary the border is that separates them. And the entanglement is across every single domain that you can think of. It's linguistic, it's political, it's economic, it's a lived reality.

I mean, there are families who live on both sides of the border who, because the parents have been deported, their kids go to school still in the United States, and their kids are going to school in the US every single day and going back across the border every single day. And just the incredible cost in every single domain that you can think of that is exacted by the existence of this border.

So one of the things I like about that image and the choice to bifurcate it in that way, and at the same time reunite it is, in part, about representing visually the artificial nature of that boundary. Because I'm so focused on some of the incredible human costs and tragedies that surround the existence of this border.

And not just the border, but one of things I had not thought about very much, until we took this trip, and particularly going to Santa Ana, this particular wildlife reserve, was some of the serious environmental consequences that are already happening, and that will for sure happen if the expansion of the border wall happens.

INTERVIEWER: So describe those environmental consequences.

PAJA FAUDREE: Well, part of it is about litter. I mean, this particular wildlife reserve, if a wall goes up, it's going to disrupt-- I mean, migratory bird patterns, it's going to sort of disrupt the flow of water, it's going to have all kinds of immediate environmental consequences in that particular area. And because it's such an important place for migratory birds, it sort of has all kinds of ecosystem ramifications.

And also, walls are not neutral substances, right? I mean, they sort of prevent the flow of water. They also can have all kinds of other contaminating or disrupting effects. I hadn't thought a lot about some of the environmental consequences before we went. I mean, there's a lot of activism surrounding the prevention of trying to put up this wall. It's an interesting coalition of people who are involved that are activated about sort of trying to prevent the wall

going up for all kinds of reasons. But part of it is about the environmental impact it's going to have.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, you must have preservationists, as you say, and human rights coming together--

PAJA FAUDREE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: --about the same thing. That's so interesting.

PAJA FAUDREE: Which is a bit of a silver lining. I mean, there are a lot of people who come from very different perspectives, who have very different life histories, who speak different languages, and sometimes have a hard time speaking to each other but find a way to do it in the context of these kinds of activist meetings. So it's a silver lining that people from such different perspectives are uniting around to this cause that they didn't have to.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. What do you hope to accomplish with this show? What would you hope that people go away thinking about or feeling?

GREG THIELKER: I hope that people will look at the photographs and be sort of unsettled and say, OK, it's called the wall, but there's no wall here. Or is there? The thought being that each of the images is sort of teasing you away from the expectation that you're given, confronting you with what's really there on the one hand, but also clouding that.

And I think that's something that I appreciate because the issue is also changing over time, and what is true today may be different a month from now. Yet, at the same time, the landscape itself is still there, and it bears witness to all these parts of our history in a sort of indifferent way. That's interesting to me as well.

INTERVIEWER: Mmm-hmm. What about you, Paja?

PAJA FAUDREE: I would agree with one of the things that Greg said about sort of I hope for unsettlement. I hope that people are unsettled a little bit looking at the exhibit, but also that they kind of pause and to think about what they're seeing, and what is behind what they're seeing and what they're hearing. I think that there can be a way particularly given, precisely some of the ways that stories surrounding the border and immigration are covered, that there can be a kind of distancing effect that that whole complex can produce.

I mean, the border is a long way from here, but it still is affecting us in all kinds of ways.

Because it's-- I mean, to the extent that the border's not just a metaphor, but also the flashpoint and the sharp edge of a whole set of policies that long predated Trump. It's not just about sort of the Trump presidency and sort of some of the heightened rhetoric surrounding immigration and immigration policy, build the wall, et cetera, et cetera. It's about a sort of much longer history of holding two things apart that are, at least for me, that are intimately intertwined.

One of the things if you spend any time in the border that you're very struck by is how international the border is. And that means not just Mexico and the United States. I mean, that means there are migrants from all over the world crossing there, with or without papers. And there are people in various places of the United States who are in the process of seeking asylum from countries literally all over the world.

So it's both the kind of like hope of US policy in some sense, because they're coming here to seek asylum. And they're fleeing awful oppression in many cases, and violence. But they're also living in these difficult situations, and our policy is also holding them at bay and enforcing this separation that is unnatural in pretty much every way.

INTERVIEWER: It also just struck me as you were talking that the wall is there because the installation is a wall. And so even if you're looking for well, where are the images that we've learned to anticipate? You know, the cliché of the automatic conjuring of literally the wall. It's not there, but it's there. It's right in front of you, and that's why you stopped, because it's also interrupting your own easy passage, which I think was form and content brilliantly married.

Can you envision this exhibition traveling to Mexico? And would you like to envision that?

PAJA FAUDREE: We literally haven't discussed that, so thank you for the question. I hadn't really given that much thought, but that would be interesting. I would like to see that. I mean, one of the things that I was very aware when we spent time at the border and we spent some time talking to, say, some artists who are sort of border artists.

One of the things I thought about a lot was how the kind of narratives and the visual correlates that we have of those narratives in Mexico are very different from the ones that we have in the United States. From one thing, it's a much more graphic depiction of violence and the after-effect of violence, in part because of the conventions and newspapers.

So one of the most common things that you'll see in Mexico are what are called the policiacas,

which are kind of the final pages of most newspapers which show very graphic images of things like decapitated heads.

INTERVIEWER: And why is that?

PAJA FAUDREE: So what that means is there's a different sort of visual repertoire that people are drawing on. And so some of the border artists are, in some sense, engaging in that history and not, and sort of trying to come at it from different angles.

But what's similar is that they're also, as is the case here, as Greg was alluding to a little bit earlier, there are these kind of discursive and representational grooves that get set up over and over and over again about the way things like narco violence, border issues, immigration policy, the wall. So the narratives are somewhat different. The images are somewhat different. But there's a similar kind of habituation to experiencing the border, and all these complicated related issues through standard journalistic coverage, among other things.

And I think in a different way, this installation would come at these issues from a very different angle. And so it would be fascinating to hear how people in Mexico would respond.

GREG THIELKER: I wanted to add the idea that we met with a poet, Amy Perez, when we were there, and she talked about doing poetry readings at the border wall. And I thought the idea of installing images, whether they're photographs or paintings, whatever, as well as text and writing, even if it's in an impermanent way, to have it actually at the border in some kind of fashion would be amazing.

It's also, at the same time, a very protected area. So when we were there, there were all kinds of border patrol coming and going, and we had to explain ourselves. But at the same time, they're enforcing sort of safety and security. And I think at the heart of a number of the conversation was actually interest on the side of border patrol and law enforcement that I had sort of enjoyed telling them about what we were doing.

And so I don't know what the format is, but I think the idea of doing something--

PAJA FAUDREE: At the border itself.

GREG THIELKER: Yeah.

PAJA FAUDREE: We did some interviews with border patrol agents and sheriffs, et cetera. Some of the stuff I

was saying earlier about how we're all effected by the artificial nature of the border that divides us. I mean, it certainly is true of them as well. They're just as constrained by the existence of the wall and the implications that that has for their lives. So overwhelmingly, they are themselves Latino, often from immigrant backgrounds. The options available to them are different from the options available to migrants who are choosing to-- or not, as the case might be-- to cross where they are, or people who are crossing with papers or not, as the case might be.

But they are very affected, too. I think, at least the ones that we spoke to I think would welcome the conversation.

GREG THIELKER: I hope that people will come to look. I hope that they'll come here to Watson. I hope that they'll come to the Cohen Gallery at Granoff, and see what they think.

PAJA FAUDREE: I guess I would also say for the Watson community, I mean, Greg is going to be in and out of town some, and will be here some. But I'm here. I mean, I'm a faculty member here, and I teach classes that sort of engage, in various ways, with some of the issues raised and are related to the exhibit. And I hope the conversation continues.

GREG THIELKER: I think that particularly having this at Watson, and in the larger university community, I hope that if there are students who are curious about doing this kind of work and have contacts, or friends, or just a desire to go and explore an issue like this, that they will feel motivated. That you don't need to have an extensive background or a research. You can go and do the project that you care about, and rely on the smart, caring sensitive people you're going to meet along the way to help that to become a reality.

INTERVIEWER: Paja and Greg, it's been so great to talk to you today. Thank you for coming in.

PAJA FAUDREE: Thank you so much for having us.

GREG THIELKER: Thank you very much.

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