

# The Imaginary Line



# **The Imaginary Line**

## **Buffalo Arts Studio**

2495 Main Street, Buffalo, NY

**May 17 - August 9, 2008**

## **El Museo**

91 Allen Street, Buffalo, NY

**May 30 - July 22, 2008**

## **Hallwalls**

341 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY

**May 15, June 20, July 25  
and August 8, 2008**

## **The Artists**

**featured at Buffalo Arts Studio:**

**Paula Braswell  
Peter Dykhuis  
Shelley Niro  
Leandro Soto**

**Featured at El Museo:  
Border Film Project**

**Screenings at Hallwalls:**

**Jim Finn  
Guillermo Gómez-Peña  
Ursula Biemann  
Fereshteh Toosi**

"Imaginary," as used in the title, is meant to call attention to the fact that borders are a creation. They are born of the mind, manifestations of individual nations' processes of differentiation, restraint or control. Using the term "Imaginary" is in no way meant to diminish the struggles that have developed as a result of these borders; the struggles are not "imaginary," nor is the negotiation between cultures. Rather, the word is used to understand borders and boundaries as a consequence of a way of thinking. Borders themselves are not inherent to the lands that we inhabit. Even a natural boundary such as water does not fundamentally exist to separate, even though that can be a byproduct of its existence, a byproduct that is often exploited for its ability to disconnect. Mankind has had no trouble traversing natural borders, not in the past or now, but man made borders - the ones we impose upon ourselves or others - have proven to be a continuously difficult hurdle.

Over the last two decades, artists and curators have addressed the idea of the border in their work and today it still remains an issue that is both relevant and highly charged. The artists participating in *The Imaginary Line* engage with this idea in their own specified way and the result is multiplicity of media, concepts, and views. Thanks to The Canadian Consulate for sponsoring the exhibition catalogue. Also thanks to Carolyn Tennant, Media Arts Director from Hallwalls and to El Museo, for participating in *The Imaginary Line* and helping create a truly multifaceted exhibition experience.

Brooke Fitzpatrick, Curator  
Buffalo Arts Studio



Paula Braswell, *Search Me (homeland security)/ (Crossing Borders)*, 2006. acrylic, archival polyester resin transparencies, photo based digitally manipulated images.

**Paula Braswell's** *Search Me (homeland security)/ (Crossing Borders)*, draws the viewer into a disquieting situation as one walks through her installation's eerie unblinking eyes. An unnamable omnipresence follows through this gauntlet of penetrating gazes and fixed stares until the viewer emerges on the other side feeling exposed and vulnerable. *Search Me* intensifies the common experience of being scrutinized under modern technological surveillance and systems of control such as border security. While surveillance is there to protect, the hierarchy that is created can leave the individual helpless and exposed, and in extreme cases feeling dehumanized by the experience. As with any form of surveillance, the sensation of being watched by someone that knows more about you than you do about them, fuels this hierarchy. Braswell's installation builds and heightens this situation through the negation of bodies and the existence only of the eye. Without an entire human form for one to view, it is impossible to discern who is watching and why. This lack of knowledge further enhances the feeling of insecurity, as one cannot gain access to this unknowable personage.

This environment of control that Braswell recreates from the experience of border crossing is more fully understood through French philosopher Michel Foucault's seminal essay from *Discipline and Punish*, "Panopticism." Foucault analyzes systems of control that permeate society, through the Panopticon, an architectural structure of imprisonment devised by Jeremy Bentham in 1777 where the guard or supervisor is placed at a central point with prisoners' cells encircling the supervisor's tower. Instead of the medieval dungeon where the purpose was to enclose, hide, and deprive the prisoner of light, in the Panopticon the cells are backlit and the

supervisor can observe the prisoner inside, without himself being observed. As Foucault explains of the Panopticon, "Full lighting and the eye of the supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap."<sup>1</sup> In *Search Me*, it is our very visibility in the gaze of an unnamable personage that creates such vulnerability. Braswell's set up does not replicate the Panopticon exactly since her translucent cylinders and large photographs of open eyes create multiple "supervisors" rather than just one, but we are still continuously visible to the nameless controller. Bentham, "laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable", much like in Braswell's work where we see our "supervisor," but cannot identify him.<sup>2</sup> Braswell's work, through its development of unease and insecurity, encourages us to ask at what cost to our selves do we need this safeguard? At what point does surveillance and control become an oppressive deterioration of our civil liberties? Simply walk through Braswell's gauntlet to see - or should I say be seen, and the sense of omnipresent scrutiny will surely render a decision.

**Peter Dykhuis's** *State Dinner* was created in 1994 as a response to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and then revisited by the artist in 2005. At its inception, NAFTA set out to equalize trade opportunities for Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Now in its fifteenth year, public opinion is mixed about its impact. *State Dinner* re-creates NAFTA's intended equality, but sends mixed messages about its own simulated, seemingly choreographed impartiality.

*State Dinner* consists of ninety-five Chinet paper plates upon which the states, provinces, and territories of Canada,



Peter Dykhuis, *State Dinner*, (detail), 2005. water color on paper plates.

<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Mexico, and the United States are painted in watercolor. Each of these political entities is painted in the same scale and in the predominant flag color of its nation and then arranged alphabetically. What results is the reduction of the heterogeneous map model, into a homogeneous, standardized grid. Along with this meticulous and ordered grid is a playfulness that is created by the primary colors and the curious use of paper plates. It is as if the viewer is invited to a giant picnic, an ideal one, where all guests are treated equally. The installation then is quite utopian in its suggested equality. No one land mass can dominate another in terms of size or geographic positioning, and the egalitarian dispersal according to alphabet avoids any one concentrated grouping of nation states.

Despite the allure, utopias are often impractical or unreasonable in their schematics, and the longer one looks at *State Dinner* the more unnatural this artificial equality appears. One cannot help ask whether they prefer the tidiness of a utopia achieved through distillation or the disarray that comes from preserving difference and working with it no matter how complicated that might be. *State Dinner's* hopeful idealism is tinged with impracticality (intentionally so); hopeful in the result, but impractical in how it's achieved, as if homogenizing the world into one analogous geo-political entity would solve all of our problems. There are no easy solutions for greater equality. We cannot simply re-draw the map, and if the world's nations were all the same - culturally, linguistically, and geographically, then of course it would be easy to sit down and have a pleasant dinner together. But sameness could get tiresome, so who would want to attend?

(top) Shelley Niro, *Borders*, 2008. photo and collage.

(center) Shelley Niro, *Treaties*, 2008. digital photo.

(bottom) Shelley Niro, *Boundless Boundaries*, 2008. digital photo.

Through a straightforward aesthetic that harbors a vast store of meaning, **Shelley Niro's** images delve into an examination of the boundaries that exist within our consciousness. Boundaries or borders can be considered in a multitude of ways, but most commonly they are thought of as physical lines that separate one geographical entity from the next. With this geographical delineation comes either separation or integration of culture, politics, and principles. But as Niro demonstrates borders are not merely physical. Rather they are representative of deeper fissures that can result when confronted with difference or the unknown. She elevates the tangible border into one that is metaphysical or psychological, while at the same time grounding these abstract borders with real world objects.

Niro's images of the outstretched arms with varying hand gestures are remarkably simple in their expression of tolerance or intolerance. She adds to these images different objects, such as a wampum belt or barbed wire fence that not only reflects the hand gesture, but also connects the gesture to reality. Whether the hands are reaching towards each other, or the fists firmly clenched in defense, they symbolize the more complex interaction that individuals experience in their everyday lives when confronted with the opportunity to be open minded or to close themselves off from another's ideas. Niro's images manage to strip away any superfluous rationalization for prejudice. She essentially eradicates excuses and presents the viewer with simple choices - to close oneself off and remain intolerant, to want understanding, or to reach out and make a connection. Niro humanizes the problems of indifference and leaves it impossible for any individual to say that they cannot do anything about the prejudices that plague the



Leandro Soto, *Fuera de juego I*. The Liborio Series, 2002. ink on paper.



world, when all it takes is simple actions, symbolized by taking the hand of another person. Her images underscore that one gesture of compassion and understanding is profound and should not be underestimated, while at the same time a gesture of intolerance is just as powerful in its ramifications. Niro's work shows that the choice can be made to view borders, whether physical or psychological, as barricades and places of intolerance, or as places to truly connect and share with another individual, thus reducing the border to merely a creation; an imaginary line that need not keep one individual at a distance from another.



**Leandro Soto** was born in Cienfuegos, Cuba where at the age of eleven he enrolled in art school. Soto never strayed from this artistic trajectory and became a leading figure in Cuba's famous artistic movement known as *Volumen Uno*. For over thirty years he has worked in a variety of visual arts media such as painting, installation, media and performance art, as well as theatre and set design. Consistent throughout his works, is the infusion of various cultural heritages, aesthetics, religions, and symbols. His understanding of the Afro-Cuban heritage of his homeland, keen knowledge of the aesthetics of pre-Columbian and contemporary Native American cultures, extensive travels, and residency in Arizona, combine to position Soto as a cultural wellspring.

Each of Soto's works exhibited in *The Imaginary Line* uses the ocean, an entity that is close to Soto both geographically and emotionally, as a stage on which to display the longing and struggle that result from a search for a sense of place. There is no terra firma to take refuge on in these images, only the undulating, ceaseless motion of the water that induces a sense of the isolation and disorientation of being lost a

(top) Border Film Project, *Migrant Workers*, 2006. photograph.

(bottom) Border Film Project, *Minutemen*, 2006. photograph.

at sea. While there exists a sense of sorrow in some of his works such as *Liborio III*, one does not have to feel lost in the vast ocean for very long. Many of Soto's works create metaphorical shelters in the form of the symbols, iconography, aesthetic sensibility, and representations of varying cultures that he has come to know throughout his life. Soto intends these works to be more than his personal story: "In my artwork, the personal anecdote has been displaced, leaving plenty of room....to understand those key symbols and rituals that transcend individuality." They are not his story, but the culmination of stories from a lifetime of engagement with a multitude of people's customs and traditions.

Ultimately, Soto's works suggest that borders, no matter what form they may take, should not be approached with trepidation or viewed as impenetrable boundaries where what lies on the other side is best left undisturbed. Rather, Soto's transcendent synthesis of varying cultures helps us understand that borders, the kind that seemingly separate and disconnect, only exist in our minds, and that borders looked at differently can actually be a place of agreement. The immense and formidable ocean can be conquered and turned into something that connects rather than separates, as long as we reach for the life rafts - awareness and acceptance of the traditions and cultures of another person - to keep not only ourselves but our humanity afloat.

In 2005, recent college graduates Rudy Adler, Victoria Criado and Brett Huneycutt developed **Border Film Project** to document the experiences of two groups on opposite sides of the U.S./ Mexico border - the undocumented migrant workers crossing into the U.S. and the American Minutemen trying to prevent their passage. Rather than photograph these

experiences themselves, Adler, Criado, and Huneycutt put cameras into the hands of the men and women whose lives are profoundly affected by this situation. They handed out disposable cameras to both the migrants and Minutemen with self-addressed stamped envelopes for the cameras to be returned after filled. Migrants and Minutemen who returned their cameras were given as an incentive to do so, Walmart or Shell gas station gift cards. To date, Border Film Project has "received 73 cameras - 38 from migrants and 35 from Minutemen - with nearly 2,000 pictures in total." The images on view are incredibly candid and reveal intensely personal moments of excitement, reflection, pain, weariness, and alienation. But most importantly, as expressed on Border Film Project.com, "The pictures show the human face of immigration."

**Brooke Fitzpatrick, Curator  
Buffalo Arts Studio**



Jim Finn (HARP artist), *The Juche Idea*, 2008. 62 minute digital video.

Experimental filmmaker **Jim Finn** explores the operations of, and often-subtle divisions between, propaganda and art. Using humor, historical fiction and documentary strategies, his films examine communist ideologies, capitalism, and revolutionary art practices. For his 2007-08 Hallwalls Artist-in-Residence Project (HARP), Finn has turned his attention to the North Korean ideology Juche. In the late 1960's Kim Jong Il guaranteed his succession as the Dear Leader of North Korea by adapting his father's Juche philosophy to propaganda, film and art. Translated as self-reliance, Juche (pronounced choo-CHAY) is a hybrid of Confucian and authoritarian Stalinist pseudo-socialism. Finn's 2008 feature *The Juche Idea* is about a South Korean woman, Yoon Jung Lee, who transgresses the North/South border after she is invited to work at a Juche art residency on a North Korean collective farm. Inspired by the real-life story of the South Korean director kidnapped in the 70's to invigorate the North Korean film industry, the film follows the young video artist who is expected to help bring Juche cinema into the 21st century. The story is told through the work made during her residency, interviews with a Bulgarian filmmaker, and even a brief sci-fi movie. The film premiered at the 2008 Ann Arbor Film Festival, and was the official closing film of the final New York Underground Film Festival.

In his multi-media and performance projects, west-coast artist **Guillermo Gómez-Peña** simultaneously remixes genres and languages, re-imagining border politics. His work blends humor, pop-culture, cyber-punk and activist strategies, and often involves collaborations within communities and



(top) Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999. 42 minutes, video.  
(bottom) Ursula Biemann and Angela Sanders, *Europlex*, 2003. 20 minutes, video.



Fereshteh Toosi, *Erie Canal to Love Canal*, 2008.

across racial, gendered and generational divides. A founding member of the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, Gómez-Peña continues to work collectively with La Pocha Nostra. In addition to large-scale performances and installations, this ensemble uses workshops as a vehicle for cross-disciplinary cultural production. In his own video works he employs hybrid structures that juxtapose found footage with performance, B-movies with radical manifestos. In *El Naftazteca: Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 AD* (1995) he performs the role of a pirate veejay who interrupts broadcast television signals from his bunker, offering viewers a radicalized entertainment. In his 2001 mockumentary *The Great Mojado Invasion, Part 2 (The Second U.S.- Mexico War)*, he interrogates Hollywood's colonial gaze within the imagined context of a "New Aztalan Regime."

These "Chicano Sci-Fi" videos each use postmodern irony to examine issues of globalization—those occurring on land or manifest in virtual spaces. Thirty years after coming to the United States from Mexico City, Gómez-Peña continues to ask, "What are the new borders that we must cross?"

In recent years, Swiss artist **Ursula Biemann** has produced a wide variety of works that investigate issues of mobility, technology and identity. As a theorist, curator and artist, she has taken up the questions surrounding migration, maintaining, "Location is spatially produced rather than pre-determined by governance." Her experimental video essay *Performing*

*the Border* (1999) is set in Ciudad Juarez, situated across the border from El Paso, Texas, where many U.S. industries hire Mexican workers to assemble digital equipment and electronics. Using interviews with women factory workers and prostitutes, scripted voice over, and found footage, Biemann explores topics such as divisions of labor and sexual violence in order to document the gendered conditions of this border town. In *Europlex* (2003), made in collaboration with visual anthropologist Angela Sanders, Biemann documents the daily, sometimes illicit, border crossings of "domesticas" who traverse Spain and Morocco. With a mesmerizing soundtrack and a collage of digital graphics and texts, Biemann effectively highlights the surreal "time travel" that occurs when these migrants step back in time as they enter Europe. Both video essays survey the feminization of the global economy, and by focusing on the activities that occur at the periphery of these transnational zones, demonstrate the ways in which these spaces are enacted.

In her videos, performances, and public interventions, media artist **Fereshteh Toosi** often invokes cultural icons in order to explore current events and popular mythologies. This summer she will re-enact Mahatma Ghandi's Salt March to Dandi, a protest against British rule, when she walks along the Erie Canal from Syracuse to Buffalo. *Erie Canal to Love Canal* links two upstate New York waterways, remapping these borders that share a toxic, post-industrial history. For the past year, Toosi has lived in Syracuse where she has researched the environ-

mental issues related to the Onondaga Creek, a stream that flows into the Onondaga Lake. "The Erie Canal caused a population boom and increased commerce, including the salt industry and the chemical companies that polluted our watershed," she writes. "By walking the Erie Canal, my project honors the legacy of resistance movements like those at Love Canal in the 1970s and in India in the 1930s ... and brings attention to current ecological conditions by drawing connections between the history of salt as a commodity and industries' responsibility to address environmental destruction." On 08/08/08, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Love Canal catastrophe and the events of August 1978, Toosi will screen documentaries about environmental justice as well as present the field recordings collected on her journey using an underwater microphone.

**Carolyn Tennant, Media Arts Director  
Hallwalls**

**Ursula Biemann** (b. 1955, Zürich) studied art and cultural theory in Mexico, at the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Independent Studt Program in New York. Her work has been exhibited widely at international biennales. She is the author of the artist book *Been There and Back to Nowhere - Gender in Transnational Spaces* (2000). In 2003 she curated the exhibition *Geography and the Politics of Mobility* in Vienna. She is a researcher at the Institute for Theory of Art and Design at HGK Zürich and lectures at the CCC program of the Arts Academy in Geneva. Her videos are distributed in the United States by Women Make Movies.

**Paula Braswell** received a BA in Studio Art from the Jacksonville State University, and an MFA in Studio Art/Installation from the Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida. She is now a multimedia installation artist living and working in Toronto, Canada, where she has been for over twelve years. She has exhibited extensively in solo and group shows in Canada and Europe and across the United States and has been the recipient of numerous awards and grants from organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council

**Peter Dykhuis** was born in London, Ontario. He graduated in 1978 with a BFA from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, then moved to Toronto where he established an active studio practice. In 1991 he relocated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and was recently appointed Director/Curator of the Dalhousie Art Gallery after a decade in the position of Director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Dykhuis has maintained an active studio practice throughout the decades and has exhibited in public galleries throughout Canada, the United States and Japan. Recently, he has participated in international group shows in Chicago, Illinois, Dallas, Texas, and Vienna, Austria, with new projects pending in Sydney, Australia. For full detail please visit [www.dykhuis.ca](http://www.dykhuis.ca).

**Jim Finn** (b. 1968, St. Louis) is a media artist whose work has screened at festivals, museums and cinémathèques such as Rotterdam International, the New York Underground Film Festival, Edinburgh International, Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid and the Harvard Film Archive. His three feature films *The Juche Idea* (2008), *La Trinchera Luminosa del Presidente Gonzalo* (2007) and *Interkosmos* (2006) have received awards and citations from the Ann Arbor Film Festival, Black Maria Film Festival, and the Chicago Underground Film Festival among others. He recently received his MFA Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña** (b. 1955) was raised in Mexico City and is currently based in California. A regular contributor to NPR's *All Things Considered* and the author of several books, his award winning performances and installations have been exhibited widely at museums and galleries, as well as at festivals and international events such as the Whitney Biennale, ARS Electronica, and the International Theater Festival (Havana, Cuba). In 1991, he became the first Chicano/Mexicano artist to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. The Video Data Bank distributes his videos.

**Shelley Niro** is a member of the Six Nations Reserve, Mohawk, Turtle Clan. Working in a variety of media, including beadwork, painting, photography, and film, Niro challenges stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples through strategies of masquerade, parody, and appropriation. Through her often direct, yet humorous approach, the artist proposes numerous possibilities for lived experience, presenting identity as a fluid and complex state, not one that is fixed and singular.

**Leandro Soto** graduated from the National Art School in Cuba with a degree in painting and engraving in 1976. In 1982 he was appointed as faculty at the Instituto Superior de Arte to teach Visual Arts to drama students after finishing his studies in upper level education (M.F.A) in Havana, Cuba. Soto has been consistently involved in the art world for the past 30 years, participating in 157 group exhibitions and 82 Solo art shows in museums, art galleries, and alternative art spaces in various countries throughout the world. Soto is currently a lecturer at Arizona State University

**Fereshteh Toosi** is an interdisciplinary artist who has exhibited at Groupe Intervention Vidéo (Montréal), Transformer Gallery (Washington DC), Art in General (New York City), Urban Institute for Contemporary Art (Grand Rapids), Space 1026 (Philadelphia) and the Boston Center for the Arts. She received her BA from Oberlin College and an MFA from Carnegie Mellon University. She has taught media art in Maryland and Pennsylvania, and was the Faculty Fellow in Arts and Civic Engagement at Syracuse University before joining the New Millennium Studies program at Columbia College, Chicago.



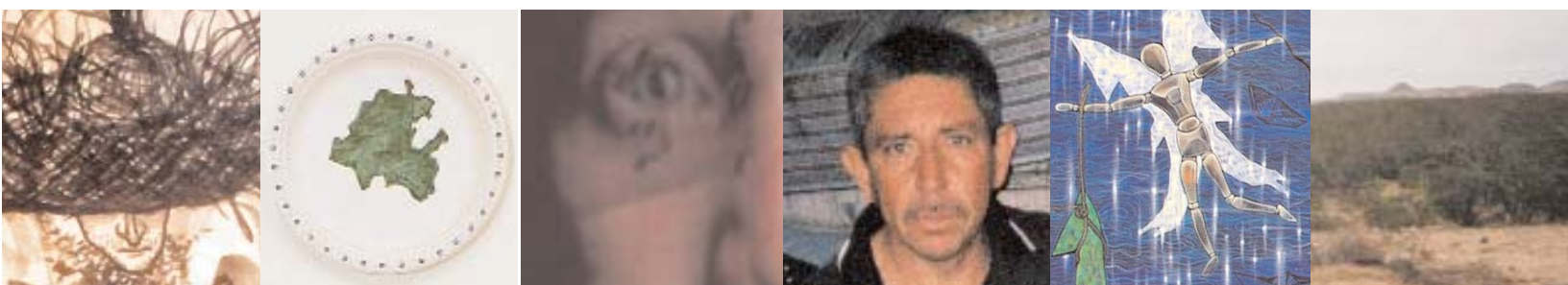
Border Film Project, *Migrant Workers*, 2006. photograph.

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