MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

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Zoe Leonard

Al río / To the River

15 October 2022 – 29 January 2023

PRESS RELEASE

From 15 October 2022 to 29 January 2023 the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris is hosting photographer Zoe Leonard's exhibition *Al río / To the River*. Although rarely shown in France, Leonard is a leading figure on the international scene.

Zoe Leonard (b. 1961, Liberty, New York) works with photography, sculpture and installation. Her photographs are often grounded in observations of daily life, while also drawing attention to the physical and bodily act of looking. Migration and displacement, gender and sexuality, mourning and loss, cultural history and tensions between the natural worldand human-built environments are recurring themes.

Al río / To the River is a large-scale photographic work which takes the Rio Grande, as it is named in the United States, or Río Bravo, as it is named in Mexico, as its subject. Over a period of four years, beginning in 2016, Leonard photographed along the 2,000 kilometres where the river is used to demarcate the international boundary between Mexico and the United States of America. "*The shifting nature of a river – which floods periodically, changes course and carves new channels – is at odds with the political task it is asked to perform*" says Leonard.

Following the river from the border cities of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, to the Gulf of Mexico, *Al río / To the River* is composed of close observations of the river itself and the natural and built environments around it. In Leonard's photographs, daily life unfolds in tandem with agriculture, industry, commerce, policing, and surveillance with a particular focus on the accumulation of infrastructure built into and alongside the river to control the flow of water, the passage of goods, and the movement of people.

Museum Director
Fabrice Hergott

Curators
Jessica Castex
Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy
assisted by Margot Koutsomitis

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Zoe Leonard *Al río / To the River*, 2016–2022
Gelatin silver prints, C-prints and inkjet prints
Exhibition Copy
Edition of 3 + 1 AP
Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Gisela Capitain and Hauser & Wirth
Production of *Al río / To the River* supported by Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Galerie Gisela Capitain and Hauser & Wirth

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Open Tuesday – Sunday
10 am – 6 pm

Late opening: Thursdays until 9:30 pm

Ticketing
Full rate: 11 €
Concessions: 9 €

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Al río / To the River engages with photographic language from abstraction to documentary to digital surveillance imagery, and in so doing, considers various histories of representation that have shaped our perceptions of both border and river.

Zoe Leonard's exhibition *Al río / To the River* is organised by Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, Paris Musées and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

Biography

Zoe Leonard, (1961, Liberty, NY) works with photography, sculpture, and site-specific installation, balancing a rigorous conceptualism with a distinctly personal vision. Leonard's work encourages the viewer to reconsider the act of looking itself as a complex, ongoing process. Using repetition, shifting perspectives, and a multitude of printing processes, Leonard's practice probes the politics of representation and display and invites us to contemplate the role that the medium plays in constructing history.

Leonard has exhibited internationally since the early 1990s. A retrospective exhibition was presented by the Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles in 2018. Leonard has participated in numerous international exhibitions, notably Documenta IX in 1992 and Documenta XII in 2007.
In 1992, Leonard wrote a short text piece entitled *I Want a President*, which has been distributed in many countries. Taken up by others, it has been translated into multiple languages, circulated globally through social media, and presented in public readings and performances.

Leonard is a founding member of the artist collective fierce pussy. Formed in 1991 the collective remains active today with three other core founding members: Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, and Carrie Yamaoka.
Zoe Leonard lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and Marfa, Tx.

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a two volume trilingual publication (French-English-Spanish), published by Mudam Luxembourg and Hatje Cantz. The first volume contains a selection of photographs from *Al río / To the River*. The second, edited by the poet Tim Johnson, brings together newly commissioned contributions by individuals and groups working in a wide range of fields, including art, art history, fiction, journalism, music and poetry, who engage their varied perspectives on the river and the border.

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Editor : Tim Johnson
Design : Joseph Logan
Publishers : Mudam Luxembourg, Hatje Cantz
Languages : English, Spanish, French
Publication : 318 pages (vol.1) + 232 pages (vol.2) : 74 €

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

CATALOGUE EXCERPTS

FOREWORD

FABRICE HERGOTT, Directeur du Musée d'Art Moderne et SUZANNE COTTER Directrice, Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean

Al río / To the River is a work of art by Zoe Leonard that follows the flow of a river with two names: Río Bravo and Rio Grande. This mighty waterway, described by the Mexican novelist and essayist Álvaro Enrigue as a "liquid Janus," derives its linguistic duality from the two countries whose borders it has served to define for 1,200 of its 1,900 miles: Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos and the United States of America. Leonard's work, which began more than five years ago as an idea, comprises more than 500 black-and-white silver gelatin prints and around fifty color C-prints selected from images taken over the course of four years, as she followed the river from Ciudad Juárez and El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico. This book, in two volumes, is an iteration of Leonard's conceptually driven photographic work and the result of an inspired editorial collaboration between her and the poet Tim Johnson.

In this work, Leonard harnesses the medium of photography, drawing upon its historically embedded genres of landscape, pictorialism, modernism, and photojournalism, including their associations with colonialism and American Manifest Destiny, as well as with the forensic elements of police work and state surveillance. The ambition of her project is underpinned by a profound humility, in her desire to complicate a binary view of what has become an acutely politically charged geography, a view that is reinforced daily through newsfeeds and media outlets. Her approach results in a visual meditation on the time of the river—on its geological time, its historical time, and its present time, to borrow from historian C. J. Alvarez—and offers a portrait of multiple and coexisting identities: the river as a cultural and environmental ecosystem and natural force as well as a border, construction site, and police zone. Leonard's journey and her embodied gaze through the mobile apparatus of the camera take us "from sensation to intellectual engagement," to borrow from the artist's own words—a witness to the specificities of place as an unfolding situation and "a metaphor for how we might navigate a troubled landscape that is our present." The image volume of this book is an iteration of the physical exhibition of *Al río / To the River* that will have its first presentation at Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean and at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris. The selection of images, their absorbing analogue physicality, their passages, and their phrasing—at times cinematic, at times literary—have been made by Leonard and designer Joseph Logan, working together to capture the flow of the river as experience and as witness. Majestic landscapes defined by flood plains or sierra, and scenes of people swimming or birds in flight, vie with views of abandonment—of the river from its natural course, of halogen-lined river crossings and border control gatherings, of river access roads swept clean by surveillance vehicles to better track cross-border movements, historically embedded in the life of the river's communities rendered suspect by the criminalizing structures of law enforcement.

The text volume is an intellectual, poetic, and political landscape to accompany Leonard's Al río. Edited by Tim Johnson as part of a collaborative dialogue with Leonard, the essays, interviews, poems, and playlists provided by contributors from Mexico, the US, and Europe constitute a richly structured set of urgent voices and mental lenses through which to understand the place of the river from historical, geopolitical, and geo-cultural perspectives: C. J. Alvarez, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Cecilia Ballí, Carolyn Boyd, Remijio «Primo» Carrasco, Alfredo Corchado, Yuri De La Rosa, Natalie Diaz, Dolores Dorantes, Darby English, Álvaro Enrigue, Catherine Facerias, Nadiah Rivera Fellah, Josh T Franco, Esther Gabara, Adolfo Guzman-Lopez, Angela Kocherga, Land Arts of the American West, Elisabeth Lebovici, Aimé Iglesias Lukin, Inocencio Lugo Ruiz, José Rabasa, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Cameron Rowland, Roberto Tejada and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. We are honored by their words, which resonate so powerfully with Leonard's photographs. Both texts and images dismantle entrenched ways of thinking by framing them anew.

We are indebted to Tim Johnson for his role in producing this exceptional volume, for his perseverance in the face of pragmatic institutional constraints, and for his determination to ensure its contents were the best they could be. He has crafted this book with passionate intellect and a deeply considered attention to the river and its

often unheard and less visible realities. It is something of a cliché to suggest that this book has been a labor of love, but we would propose that it is indeed love—for the work of Zoe Leonard, for dignity and equality, and for language and poetry, that "most dangerous art," to quote from a line of poetry by Gregory Corso, that has been the driving force behind what Johnson has accomplished.

We are also profoundly grateful to designer Joseph Logan for his attention to the presentation of words in three languages on these pages, and to his committed and brilliant design for the publication overall. We are especially beholden to Hatje Cantz and their editorial team in Berlin, led by Nicola von Velsen and Adam Jackman. We cannot thank them enough for their partnership on this ambitious publishing project and for managing the production process to ensure its realization. Zoe Leonard's studio team of Jocelyn Davis and Ryan Lipton have played an indispensable role in the production of this book and the exhibition *Al río / To the River*, supporting production for both iterations at every stage—for which we thank them wholeheartedly. They have worked in close collaboration with the dedicated team of Mudam curators, Christophe Gallois and Sarah Beaumont, and the Chief Registrar, Véronique de Alzua. Editorial coordination at Mudam has been diligently and expertly assured by Deborah Lambolez, Head of Publishing, and Clarisse Fahrtmann, Publications Officer. Mudam has also been privileged to have the collaboration of architect Marcos Corrales Lantero, who developed the exhibition design for the exhibition with intelligence and sensitivity in close dialogue with Zoe Leonard.

At the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris – Paris Musées, the project was led by Jessica Castex and Olivia Gaultier- Jeanroy, co-curators, and Laurie Szulc, General Secretary, as well as Solène Delanoue, Registrar, Pierre Malachin, Exhibition Manager, Jeanne Bossard, Production Manager, and Nathalie Bec, Editorial Coordinator. The exhibition design was conceived by Cécile Degos, in dialogue with the artist. We would like to thank them and all the teams for their involvement. In producing *Al río / To the River* we have also relied on the invaluable generosity of Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, and Gallery Hauser & Wirth; we wish to express our gratitude for their encouragement and their sponsorship from the outset. Support for Zoe Leonard's development of this important new work from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts for Tim Johnson as editor of the text volume of this publication, has been crucially enabling. We also acknowledge Anthony Meier for stepping in to support the ambitious editorial content of the book at a crucial time in its planning.

At the heart of all has been Zoe Leonard and her remarkable work, through which she has, with characteristic generosity, given the privilege of involvement to so many people. We are unable to express adequately our admiration for her art and for her humanity. In taking us to the river to view its many aspects, slowly and over time, she has opened our eyes to the world, inviting us to think and, possibly, to act, as she discreetly steps aside.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RIVER

C. J. Alvarez

The river is old. When it was young it looked different, and so did the world around it. In its youth it was not even a single stream. The unified watershed we know today was once a disjointed array of smaller waterways
and pools scattered across 300,000 square miles of land. Multiple watersheds covered the region, each one's slopes channeling rainfall and snowmelt into different places. Some of its ancestral tributaries flowed down from the mountains onto the flatlands only to disappear into the earth. Others ran into closed basins, and the trapped water formed lakes. Today, these ancient lakes have become deserts. In certain places you can find the imprints of primordial sea creatures fossilized into rock. What a disconnect: one of the driest places on the continent flecked with reminders of wetter days.

In 1848, the river got a new name: border. Native peoples, many of whom still live near the Río Bravo/Rio
Grande today, never built any large irrigation works or other kinds of structures that significantly disrupted the channel of the river. At first, the freshly-minted international divide did not alter the river much more than hundreds of generations of Native people had. For the second half of the nineteenth century, border towns were few and far between, cross-border regulation was lax, and irrigated commercial agriculture had yet to reach monumental status. The river flowed more or less as it always had, unguarded, undiverted, its banks sparsely populated. But by the start of the twentieth century, border history was becoming a story of major construction projects. Americans and Mexicans used draglines and concrete and steel to retrofit a political divide onto a natural thing. And in a span of time so short it doesn't even register in the bottomless tally of years the earth has existed, humans proved that the freedom of the river is not eternal after all. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the local, informal qualities of the border region had begun deteriorating. Investors, property owners, commercial farmers, urban planners, politicians, and others who sought out standardized measurements and fixed boundary lines began to see the wildness of the river as a problem. Border towns got larger, immigration restrictions became more complex, and, at the same time, hydraulic engineering reached its apex. For the first time in the history of the species, human beings developed the technological capacity to directly confront the power of rivers.

The river's millions of years of nameless wandering and its 12,000 years of low-impact cohabitation with indigenous peoples was fundamentally altered in less than a century.

Some sections of the Río Bravo/Rio Grande border, especially the part that passes in between El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, are barely recognizable as a river anymore. There, the waterway has almost been built out of existence. The channel was "rectified" in the 1930s, the bends cut out of it. Hundred-foot boom operators, at the behest of the federal governments of the United States and Mexico, used two- and three-cubicyard buckets to remove the meandering curves. When they were finished, sixty-seven miles of the waterway were gone; the river was shorter and straighter. In addition, two dams divert water out of the river and into irrigation ditches that often carry more water than the river does. The riverbed was lined in concrete, encased and locked down in the 1960s. For much of the year, no water runs through it at all—it is merely a massive trapezoidal canvas for graffiti. It is an axiomatic truth that in the desert, water is life. In the past, the river was the epicenter of plant life in the drylands and the organizing force for human society. Today, the fence is the most prominent feature in the landscape.

The river runs for about 1,900 miles, making it one of the longest on the continent of North America. For 700 miles, it is not the border. Yet the upper Rio Grande was modified in many of the same ways that the border section was, minus the federal police and their equipment. It has also been rectified, drained, and dammed, put to human use above all else, just like nearly every other river in North America. In some of the small villages in the canyon country of northern New Mexico, farmers still use the dirt irrigation ditches their ancestors did hundreds of years ago.

Underneath all this, however, the river has not yet been robbed of all its mystery, nor of its power. Like
all civilizations, ours too will someday decline or become something else. The border will not be there
forever. Perhaps new volcanos will erupt and reshape the watershed once again. Maybe some future generation will start a process of unbuilding. Possibly the places we know today as the "United States" and "Mexico" will erode into some new type of polity. When I imagine a time in the distant future, when all of us are long gone, I take comfort in picturing the river once again running great and wild.

BORDERLANGUE

Catherine Facerias, Elisabeth Lebovici

The border is a dividing line and an agent of relation. It is an area of juxtaposition, a territory of edge to edge. Simultaneously threshold and act of construction, determining our relation to the other: I am here, I inscribe myself, I establish myself, I found society. In doing so, the borderline that I create in this environment is what connects me to it. The border traces the limit, inscribes the status. It is carved in stone, painted on a signpost, bordered in red on my map. Here it is a mountain, there a river. Sometimes it's the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

[...]

What keeps me company in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is its palpable, embodied use of language as a critical tool of language. Gloria Anzaldúa does more than invent a language: she incorporates several. Without translating them, she produces a new way of speaking them, writing them, living them: "a languaging," that is to say, a vision of the world performing *the world in frontier*.

I wish to focus on this deviant experience of languages, on this "loca-centric" liminality, built at the confines of two graphic signs: Borderlands and borderlands. With a capital letter, it is about becoming fully involved in the linguistic, metaphorical demands of this multi-bodied language; the use of the lower-case letter qualifies this "vague and indeterminate place, created by the emotional residue of an unnatural border." As a scarred word, B/borderlands testifies to a lived experience of deterioration, deterritorialization, and domination. Such experience is, at the same time, completely specific and thus unfit to be universalized, and yet transferable because at some point in our desires, we are committed to abnormally resisting a norm, a conduct, an image that is not ours. But how can we approach it outside of generalizations? Gloria Anzaldúa offers the diabolical machine of her tongue "forked like a serpent." Forked, because she fuses in the same experience the living body, the tongue as an organ, and language as tool of communication.

The border marks a transition. Between two places, environments, languages, cultures, bodies, or worlds. It is named liminality, confines, wasteland, or zone. It is intermediate, between here and there, a place of transit, of passage, a bit like an inn. A place where one settles down to live just a little, just for a while. We often hear that globalization has removed borders. Again, this is true for some. What is true for everyone is that the number of walls has doubled since the beginning of this century. Put end to end, they would encircle the Earth, suffocating the Equator.

[...]

"My identity is always in flux, it changes as I step into and cross over many worlds each day—university, home community, job, lesbian, activist, and academic communities. It is not enough to say I'm a Chicana. It is not enough to say I'm an intellectual. It is not enough for me to say I'm a writer. It is not enough for me to say I'm from working class origins. All of these and none of these are my primary identity. I can't say, this is the true me, or that is the true me. They are all the true me's."

The words "country," "homeland," "nationality," "citizenship" are abolished. Anzaldúa's tongue is shunned from any belonging, any affiliation. With her borderlangue we learn, as Europeans, that the frontiers between nation-states are an invention, an imposition. Once these terms have been removed, we find ourselves wordless. The terms Borderlands, Mestizaje, Nepantla (liminality) can therefore operate at their ease in the political imagination of European countries, crossed by migrations. We are reminded of the historical reality that the place in which we live is a land ploughed by colonization: the Greco- Romans, the Ottomans, the Empires. Therefore we find ourselves juxtaposing the positions of the colonizer and the colonized and the bridge that crosses them: inseparable without being identical.

[...]

Police borders are easily transported. Living on borders without stabilizing our changing and multiple identities means to be permanently traversed by a political stake, coiled in discursive practices "so that we will not be destroyed, so that we will not be co-opted or assimilated, so that we can make sense out of and teach our histories to ourselves and those who will come after us."

BORDERLANDS JOURNALISM: A CONVERSATION

Cecilia Balli, Alfredo Corchado, Tim Johnson, Angela Kocherga

Tim: Cecilia, you wrote something to me several months ago that really shook me. You said, "I feel the border has buckled under the weight of its own significance." It reminded me of things Angela and Alfredo had told me separately. Could you tell me what that phrase means to you, where that feeling comes from?

Cecilia: Across these twenty or thirty years that we've each been reporting, we've witnessed the hardening of the border. We've seen how much harder it is to cross, because of increased enforcement. We've seen the toll violence has taken on local communities. People are traumatized. In some cases, when family members have been disappeared, people live in a permanent state of grief: they go silent. Some family members have been very brave and have taken on the authorities and become activists as a result. But you also meet people who are living permanently in trauma. I've been reflecting on the toll these forces have taken on border life, people and communities. Entire communities are traumatized. At the same time, there is more and more interest in representing the border, among well-meaning people as well as less well-meaning people. Politicians want to use the border as theater. The media wants to control the narrative, or be the first ones to get a story.
Artists and activists of all sorts come to do work on the border. I remember a good friend, Julián Cardona, a journalist from Juárez, who used to say that "everybody finds their cause in Juárez." I feel like that's true of the border as a whole. You have everybody attempting to represent the border. The border makes a very powerful metaphor, so we all use it in our writing, and in our art, and in our politics. But what about the local experience? What about those communities that are still paying the price for this hardening and thickening of the border? What about those who are silent because of trauma, or who have no claims as immigrants or asylum seekers? I feel like we're at this moment where the metaphorical significance of the border, the political significance, is so heavy that the border is buckling under that weight. What will it take to achieve more balance? What will it take for those communities to have more voice, to be the ones telling their stories, representing their experience, creating their art?

Angela: I appreciate Cecilia describing it as buckling, because I do feel this huge weight. There's a revolving door of politicians who come down and do the border tour. Stealing a phrase from Alfredo, it's a political piñata. The border is bashed and you get political points. You stir up fear, you get votes. Just this year, we've had at least half a dozen congressional delegations coming to the border, standing at the fence, talking to Border Patrol agents, and making no attempt to meet with locals to talk about their concerns. They're interested in photo ops indicating how terrible things are, rather than in the local residents who live here. This is the buckling, this dash to the border to do the crisis story. I'm always happy to have people come to the border and see it for themselves. I think journalists can learn a lot just by physically being here. But there is the same repetitive narrative about the border in crisis—you plug in a new byline and posts from the same type of people, and the stories become very similar. And there is very little effort to explain the reasons behind all of this.

Alfredo: I don't know that I can add much more to what Cecilia and Angela said. I would just say that the border has become a reflection of the divisions in this country.
As an immigrant, I'm usually a very hopeful person. I've tried to look for signs of hope, and at this moment, I don't see any. I know the border will renew itself, because it always has. But right now, I feel like we're drained.

Tim: I agree that it's important to acknowledge the metaphorical uses of the "border." It's also the word itself that has been fractured. It seems to mean different things for different people in different places. What does the border mean for you, and what do you think it means for national and international media?

Cecilia: The border for me, growing up, meant that I went back and forth, but we didn't think about it as two separate countries. We would talk about este lado y el otro lado [this side and the other side], but we didn't reference Mexico or the US. In my family we spent every Sunday, all day, at my grandmother's ranchito on the outskirts of Matamoros. I think when the national media is talking about the border, especially these days, they're only thinking about immigration enforcement, maybe drug violence. They're thinking about it as a national boundary —how it gets violated and how to protect it.

BORDELANDS IMAGE ENVIRONMENT : A CONVERSATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Esther Gabara, Aimé Iglesias Lukin, Nadiah Rivera Fellah, Roberto Tejada

Aimé Iglesias Lukin: The idea for this dialogue was born of a bibliographical conversation with Zoe and Tim, in which I mentioned that I perceived a problem with the lack of translation in the field of Latin American art and visual culture, and with how Anglocentric the discussion can be.1 This prompted us to organize a talk with the three of you—Nadiah, Esther, and Roberto— who in your scholarly research and writing explore the role of photography in configuring our understanding of the border. I would like to open the discussion by asking you about the history and historiography of Latin American visual culture generally, and of Latin American photography in particular.

Roberto Tejada: It's such a complicated and overwhelming issue. We're in a pivotal moment at the border. On the one hand, it has become hyper-visible, but on the other, it has become marginalized in the national imagination. I just went back, briefly, to some of my news clippings and realized that the news cycle is so accelerated that I had completely forgotten about an op-ed piece by Matthew Connelly, a professor at Columbia, regarding the US National Archives and the deletion of files relevant to ICE. And this was back in February of 2020, before the Covid-19 crisis. News events get covered over or forgotten because the news cycle is so rapid and erratic, especially in the particular reality in which we're living. If I can start with a show-and-tell, Zoe and the poet Dolores Dorantes created a beautiful book that Gato Negro Ediciones, a small, very hand-crafted publisher in Mexico, produced in 2018.3 So we could talk about the borderlands as it has been visualized, especially during the Trump administration, or we could also bring in these objects and artworks that are forms of resistance, ways of creating alternative narratives that don't depend on the visuality of the news cycle.

Esther Gabara: That makes me think of Ken Gonzales-Day's incredible book Lynching in the West: 1850–1935. In addition to his excavation of photographs of the lynching of people identified in archives as "Mexican," he takes pictures of trees that could have been, but probably were not, hanging trees. And I think of the way in which the archive has erased the lynching of Mexicans under another establishing scene, the lynching of African Americans. I teach that book to PhD students, both because it's an artist doing the research, and because he is able to make tangible perhaps the key tension when we think about photography and social justice: the tension between visibility and invisibility. Photography played an important role among some white US citizens in creating sympathy for the struggles of African Americans in the civil rights movement.

But photographers of lynchings were part and parcel of the spectacle lynchings offered to white observer-participants decades before. Photography has been used to make demands for justice across the Americas, but it has also been used to deprive certain people of those rights. In Gonzales-Day's book, this violence against bodies, a violence that one can never represent photographically without reproducing it, is extended metonymically to the defining western frontier of the United States. We're all literally lost among the trees especially where I live, in North Carolina—and so we are unable to look out onto, much less conquer, the frontier.

[...]

Nadia Rivera Fellah: I was just going to say that it's overwhelming to think of the present, and yet it's very urgent to think of the present. The news cycle, and the ability of social media to provide some accountability for things, is unique to the way we experience the border now. I was finishing my dissertation when the migrant caravan hit the US-Mexico border and that image went viral. I think that picture was arresting for people because it was so humanizing. Whether it was because of this mother with her children wearing nothing but diapers or people running from clouds of rising smoke, there was something that grabbed you about that image. At the same moment, we were all still recovering from Ferguson, from the Dakota Access Pipeline, all moments when those gas canisters were present. And right after that, the Whitney Biennial boycott came up, protesting the vice-chair of the board and his involvement in the production of those canisters. It became a flashpoint that was compounded by the speed at which images circulate through the internet. It was an image that could help my colleagues and friends and acquaintances to understand the urgency: here is the material evidence.

Esther: I think the questions around photography, such as those Zoe Leonard is working with and through, hold this together in ways that are much more sophisticated than just the "capture of an instant." What I found to be so interesting in that Whitney Biennial was the inclusion of Forensic Architecture and their investigation of the gas canisters using a version of photography and photographic investigation. They don't define themselves as an artist group. They're a political research group. And somehow their inclusion helped bring all of this to the fore in a very provocative and powerful way. I feel like that nexus also has to do with Zoe's investigations into photography, in the image and far beyond the image: as a technology, as an archive, as a tool of investigation, both artistic and political.

The First Water Is the Body

Natalie Diaz

The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States—also, it is a part of my body.
I carry a river. It is who I am: ‘Aha Makav. This is not metaphor.
When a Mojave says, Inyech ‘Aha Makavch ithuum, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence.
The river runs through the middle of my body.
So far, I have said the word river in every stanza. I don’t want to waste water. I must preserve the river in my body.
In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative.
*
The Spanish called us Mojave. Colorado, the name they gave our river, because it was silt-red-thick.
Natives have been called red forever. I have never met a red Native, not even on my reservation, not even at the National Museum of the American Indian, not even at the largest powwow in Parker, Arizona.
I live in the desert along a dammed blue river. The only red people I’ve seen are white tourists sunburned after staying out on the water too long.
[...]
*
This is not juxtaposition. Body and water are not two unlike things—they are more than close together or side by side. They are same—body, being, energy, prayer, current, motion, medicine.
The body is beyond six senses. Is sensual. An ecstatic state of energy, always on the verge of praying, or entering any river of movement.
Energy is a moving river moving my moving body.
*
In Mojave thinking, body and land are the same. The words are separated only by the letters ‘ii and ‘a: ‘iimat for body, ‘amat for land. In conversation, we often use a shortened form for each: mat-. Unless you know the context of a conversation, you might not know if we are speaking about our body or our land. You might not know which has been injured, which is remembering, which is alive, which was dreamed, which needs care. You might not know we mean both.
If I say, My river is disappearing, do I also mean, My people are disappearing?
*
[...]
*
How can I translate—not in words but in belief—that a river is a body, as alive as you or me, that there can be no life without it?

John Berger wrote, "True translation is not a binary affair between two languages, but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal."
Between the English translation I offered, and the urgency I felt typing ‘Aha Makav in the lines above is not the point where this story ends or begins.

We must go to the place before those two points—we must go to the third place that is the river.

We must go to the point of the lance entering the earth, and the river becoming the first body bursting from Earth’s clay body into my sudden body. We must submerge, come under, beneath those once warm red waters now channeled blue and cool, the current’s endless yards of emerald silk wrapping the body and moving it, swift enough to take life or give it.

We must go until we smell the black root-wet anchoring the river’s mud banks. We must go beyond beyond, to a place where we have never been the center, where there is no center—beyond, toward what does not need us, yet makes us.

What is this third point, this place that breaks a surface, if not the deep-cut and crooked bone bed where the Colorado River runs—a one-thousand-four-hundredand-fifty-mile thirst—into and through a body?
Berger called it the pre-verbal. Pre-verbal as in the body when the body was more than body. Before it could name itself body and be limited, bordered by the space body indicated.
*
[...]
*
Toni Morrison writes, "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Back to the body of earth, of flesh, back to the mouth, the throat, back to the womb, back to the heart, to its blood, back to our grief, back back back".
Will we remember from where we’ve come? The water.
And once remembered, will we return to that first water, and in doing so return to ourselves, to each other?
Do you think the water will forget what we have done, what we continue to do?

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

EVENTS

Thursday October 20th
7:30pm in the Matisse room
Meeting and Discussion | *Al río/To the River* | **Zoe Leonard and Anne Bertrand**, meeting in English, free access within the limit of available seats

Thursday December 1st
night visit
Carte blanche to Laura Huertas Millàn, free access within the limit of available seats

Thursday January 26th
Poetry evening : second carte blanche to Laura Huertas Millàn, free access within the limit of available seats.

Find all the events related to Zoe Leonard's exhibition on our website www.mam.paris.fr / «Activités et événements »

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

Visitor information

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

Postal address

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www.mam.paris.fr

Public transport

- Metro : Alma-Marceau ou Iéna (ligne 9)
- Bus : 32/42/63/72/80/
- Vélib's bike station : 4 rue de Longchamp ; 4 avenue Marceau ; place de la reine Astrid ; 45 avenue Marceau or 3 avenue Bosquet
- Bike : Bicycle parking spaces are available in front of the museum entrance.
- RER C : Pont de l'Alma (ligne C)

Opening hours

- Tuesday-Sunday, 10am - 6pm (last entry 5:15pm)
- Closed Monday and on some public holidays
- Open late: Thursday 9.30pm

Admission

Full rate: 11 €
Reduced rate: 9 €
Free under 18 years of age

The exhibition is accessible to people with motor disabilities and reduced mobility.

Wearing a surgical face mask is recommended.

No-queue tickets: www.mam.paris.fr

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