

Negotiating, Subverting,  
Reconfiguring Borders in  
the English-Speaking World  
Philip Ursprung

## NEGOTIATING, SUBVERTING, RECONFIGURING BORDERS IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

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...I think the major issue now in art is what are the boundaries.

—Allan Kaprow, *Robert Smithson and the Art of their Time*, 1979.

Wolfgang Tillmans' *Empire US / Mexican Border* (2005) depicts a border fence reminiscent of a bolt of lightning running like a fissure across the composition. The cast shadow of its grill parallels and complements this jarring, vertical movement. A sign reading "Declaration Line" confirms the politically tense location, yet the spaces intertwine in a labyrinthian manner as though inviting misinterpretation. People are captured from behind, faces angled away from the shot as though to eliminate the possibility of empathy. The clothing of the male figure in the center indicates cool weather, but alludes to prison garb. The chaos composed around the fence obscures the immediate situation.

Locating the vantage point of the camera proves to be a difficult task—normal circumstances forbid photography. The tips of the metal fencing undoubtedly point towards Mexico to impede climbing. From this, we infer the American territory is on the left and Mexican territory on the right, with the view oriented towards the south during the evening hours. Perhaps this picture shows a border crossing in Arizona or New Mexico as commuters return home from work.

I have only crossed this American border condition twice. Once in the spring of 2018 with students on a trip to Texas, between El Paso and Juarez, and once in Tijuana, in the late 1990s, with Allan Kaprow who was living in San Diego at the time. On our return trip, the officer asked him, "Citizen?" without glancing at the presented documents. Kaprow abruptly declared, "*American citizen!*" with a tone still tolerable in a time before (conspicuous) socio-political consciousness and the establishment of the United States Department of Homeland Security. Though significantly before September 11th, 2001 and the massive increases in security, defense, and societal paranoia, the authoritarian resemblance to Ancient Rome (the assumption that only Roman citizens were citizens) was all too evident.

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**Allan Kaprow, *Sweet Wall*, 1970. Photo by Dick Higgins. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.**

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