The Weaponization of Nature

The gallery at the back of UCI’s Art, Design & Architecture Museum is feeling a little crowded, with people moving in and out of the space. The exhibit is called Hostile Terrain 94, and it is one of more than 150 such exhibits set up around the world this year by a team led by UCLA professor of anthropology and 2017 MacArthur Foundation winner Jason De León. In order to fully appreciate Hostile Terrain 94, you need to follow the exhibit’s instructions. I’ve spent some part of the last two Saturdays participating in the show. Seated at one of the worktables in front of the map, I used a black pen to fill out the slaps of cardboard and string known as “tree tags,” which are used to identify dead bodies. From the printed spreadsheets, I dutifully copied the 94 data fields onto each tag I made by hand, writing down case numbers and location information. Some of the categories—state, country, and latitude and longitude—were familiar. Others, such as “field management” and “corridor,” were new to me. The work was at once relatively easy and impossibly difficult. The heart of the process centers on the most strongly in the five fields labeled name, age, cause of death, OME, determined COD, and body condition. For example, “Armando Delgado Gil, 23, exposure, probable hypothermia, fully fleshed.” There are two types of tree tag—manila, for corpses that have been identified; like that of Armando; and orange, for the large number of cases in which the identity of the body remains unknown. The causes of death and body condition fields on these orange tags offer such details as “severed remains,” “complete skeletonization with bone degradation,” and “decomposition, disarticulated.” Whether the tags are manila or orange, the bodies they describe all have one thing in common: They perished in the process of crossing the border from Mexico into the United States.

PUSHED TO DEATH

As a result of a U.S. border enforcement policy introduced in the 1990s called Prevention Through Deterrence, or PTD, thousands of corpses have accumulated in the most remote and dangerous areas along the border between the United States and Mexico. By focusing enforcement personnel and infrastructure in urban areas, the United States government has deliberately forced border crossers to take their chances in increasingly treacherous terrain. Enlisting the extremes of weather found in these places, along with such natural predators as rattlesnakes, scorpions, and coyotes, the Border Patrol has weaponized the desert, turning nature into something much more deadly than any man or wall.

The more than 3,200 people who have lost their lives in this way, and whose deaths are documented by Hostile Terrain 94, are victims of deadly force just as surely as the young men of color who have been gunned down in the streets of Chicago and St. Louis, and no bullets were fired. PTD may claim to deter people from crossing the border illegally, but writing hot tags has given me a different view on those three letters. An interpretation that takes into account the results of this policy might yield something more like “Pushed to Death.”

Jason De León did not start out as an activist. His work at the border began when he discovered that the field and lab skills he had acquired on archaeological digs for ancient Meso-American artifacts had suddenly become relevant in the killing fields of the Sonoran Desert, where human remains were piling up at an alarming rate. De León documented this state of affairs in a book, The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail (2015), but when Donald Trump was elected in 2016, he put off another book project in favor of doing something more public. What 2016 did, he told me, was intensify his search for a way to “convey social science data through things that people can connect with.” “We are in an important election cycle,” he went on to say, “and I felt that I had to make a choice. Either I could hide away and finish a book that wouldn’t come out for

Hostile Terrain 94 Explores the Deadly Impact of U.S. Border Policy

by Charlot Donelan

Photos by Michael Wells
You're Invited

Join us on Friday, Feb. 7,
for our monthly tour of our family emergency
shelter and learn more about the issue of
family homelessness in Santa Barbara.

Find out what Transition House is doing to get
families back on their feet and into housing.
We will also share ways you can get involved.

NEXT TOUR DATE: FRIDAY, FEB. 7
Drop in between 11:30 am - 1:00 pm
Transition House Emergency Shelter
434 E. Ortega Street, Santa Barbara
For more info, contact Carmela at 770-5109
or carreno@transitionhouse.com
www.transitionhouse.com

ROUGH COUNTRY: The
Boer-Partisan Conflict
through Settler Colonial
pictorial landscapes to the
hardest and most frontier
regions of the earth.

UNPLUGGED: A completed toe tag
from the exhibit at ACE.

another year and a half, or I could try to do something
more public facing that would raise awareness, not just
about what was happening in Senora but about the plight
of migrant worldwide.

De León is no stranger to the public eye. In 2012, he
coordinated a Discovery Channel series with another pro-
fessor of anthropology, Kirk French, called American
Traitors. The pair traveled around the country Ministering
requests from people who believed they had stumbled on
important historical artifacts. It was a kind of younger,
edger Antiques Roadshow shot on location, rather than
in a studio.

In 2013, De León created the Undocumented Migration
Project while on faculty at the University of Michigan, and
in the years that followed, he took graduate students
and the photographer Michael Welles to the Sonoran
Desert, where they captured and classified not only
human remains but also the vast desert scattered with
ecotone, the wilderness trail to America. This research,
along with Welles's photos, were into the book, and the
desert—T-shirts, backpacks, water bottles, sneakers,
etc.—went into an exhibition called State of Exclusion/Estado de Exclusión, that trav-
elled around the country and received posi-
tive notice form the New York Times when
it landed at the gallery of the Parsons School
of Art in 2017.

His next attempt to bring his border
research to the gallery space resulted in a
powerful show in Portland, Maine, but
the big map of the desert in that exhibit was
a static representation covered with red dots
marking the locations where bodies were
found. Determined to bring the reality of
these deaths closer to his audience, De León asked a group
of students he was teaching at Franklin & Marshall Col-
lege in 2018 to start scouting toe tags. It took five of them
almost three months to copy over the project's 5,000 and
by the end, they were exhausted. Their remarks about
how emotionally draining the work had been led De León
to a breakthrough. What if the exhibition was designed
to draw visitors into this work? What if the conversion
of spreadsheet entries to handmade toe tags could be crowd-
sourced? How would that affect the experience of people
countering the show?

De León, State of Exception and the subsequent
show in Portland forced a breakthrough and a turning
point. State of Exception's extensive media component,
which included floor projections and other high-
tech elements, made it prohibitively expensive. Only a
few museums could afford to display it. When it came
time to try again with Hostile Terrain, De León knew he
wanted to make something that would be affordable for
even the most humble spaces. As a result, Hostile Terrain
is available for approximately $4,000 to any organization
willing and able to host it. In some locations, where its
relevance to urgent and resources are also, even that small
fee has been waived.

MORE THAN FOUR FIELDS

In order to learn and tell the exhibition and the scienti-
ific project of which it is a part, it's necessary to look at
how many different aspects of the discipline of anthropol-
yogy are engaged by this work. Anthropology ordinarily
sticks to one of the subject's four fields—physical anthropol-
yogy, which studies human remains in order to understand
the impact of environment and culture on human evolution;
cultural anthropology, sometimes known as ethnology,
which studies the learned aspects of human communi-
tions linguistic anthropology, and archeology, which
examines the objects that people have made. In relation to
these divisions within the discipline, Hostile Terrain 94 is

$6000: De León's summer house in Maine, which he uses as a
scientific unique—a so-called "four-field project" that
combines all the different branches of anthropology into
a single overarching structure of knowledge. For example,
De León's chapter in The Lands of Open Ground on the mid-
geography plays in the communities formed by crossing
the border are among his most exciting.

Yet even this description, despite the degree to which it
reflects an extraordinary synthesis within the discipline of
anthropology, fails to cover the scope of Hostile Terrain's
intellectual and cultural footprint. From an art historical
perspective, the show reflects a significant step beyond
participatory art into the realm of a movement that has
come to be called "relational aesthetics." Interactive art
exhibits visitors to touch the sculpture or play games with.
The United States government has forced border crossers to take their chances in increasingly treacherous terrain.