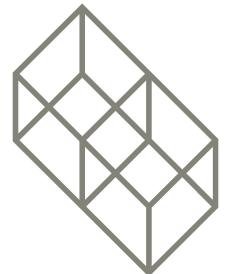


2014 Benjamin
MENSCHEL
Fellowship
EXHIBITION



THE COOPER UNION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE AND ART

Maria de los Angeles Rodriguez-Jimenez
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The Benjamin Menschel Fellowship Program to support creative inquiry was endowed by a grant given to The Cooper Union by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation in 1994 to support work in the fields of art, architecture, design, and engineering. This generous grant was intended to provide funding to exceptional students who propose scholarly, independent projects that will in some way provide a culmination to their educational endeavors at The Cooper Union. It is the hope of the Goldsmith Foundation that students designated as Menschel Fellows will be encouraged by their awards to complete bodies of artwork, develop scientific protocols, or otherwise further their intellectual investigations in a manner that will provide inspiration and illumination to the community as a whole.

Professor Sohnya Sayres, *Project Director*



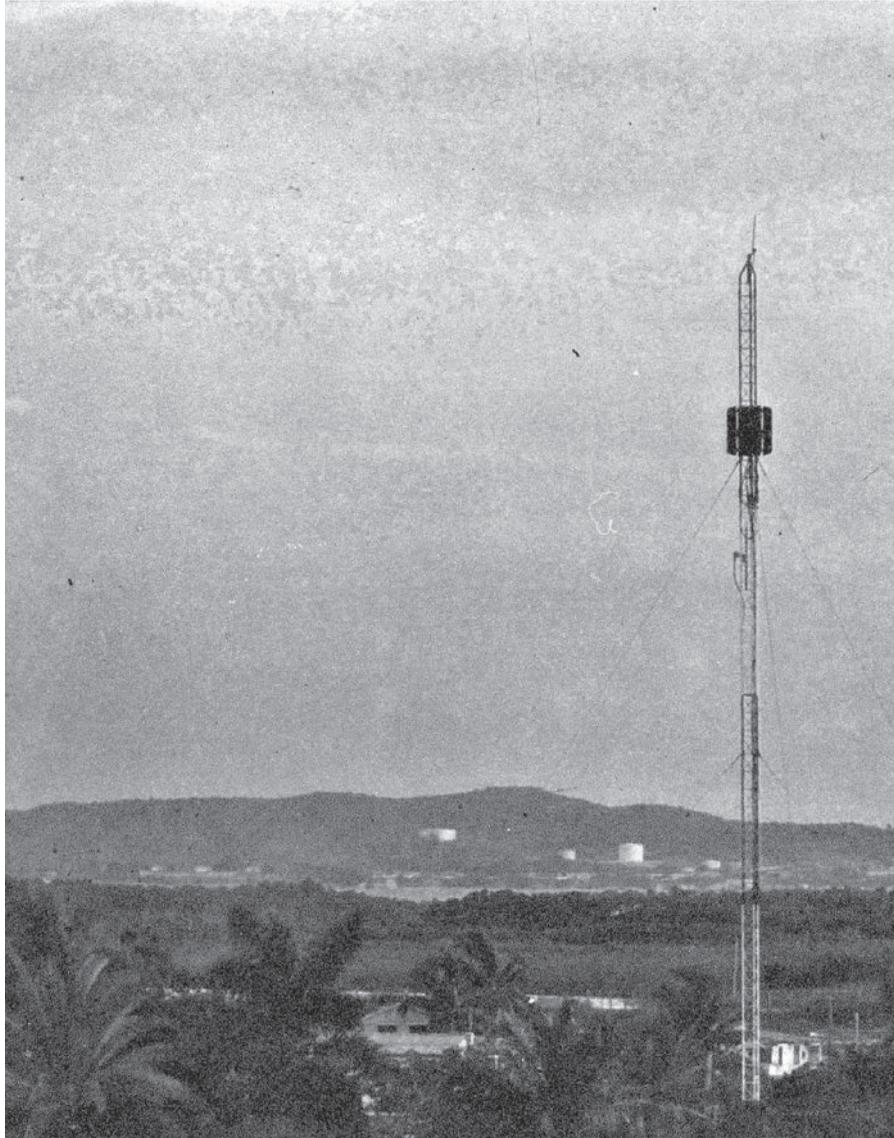
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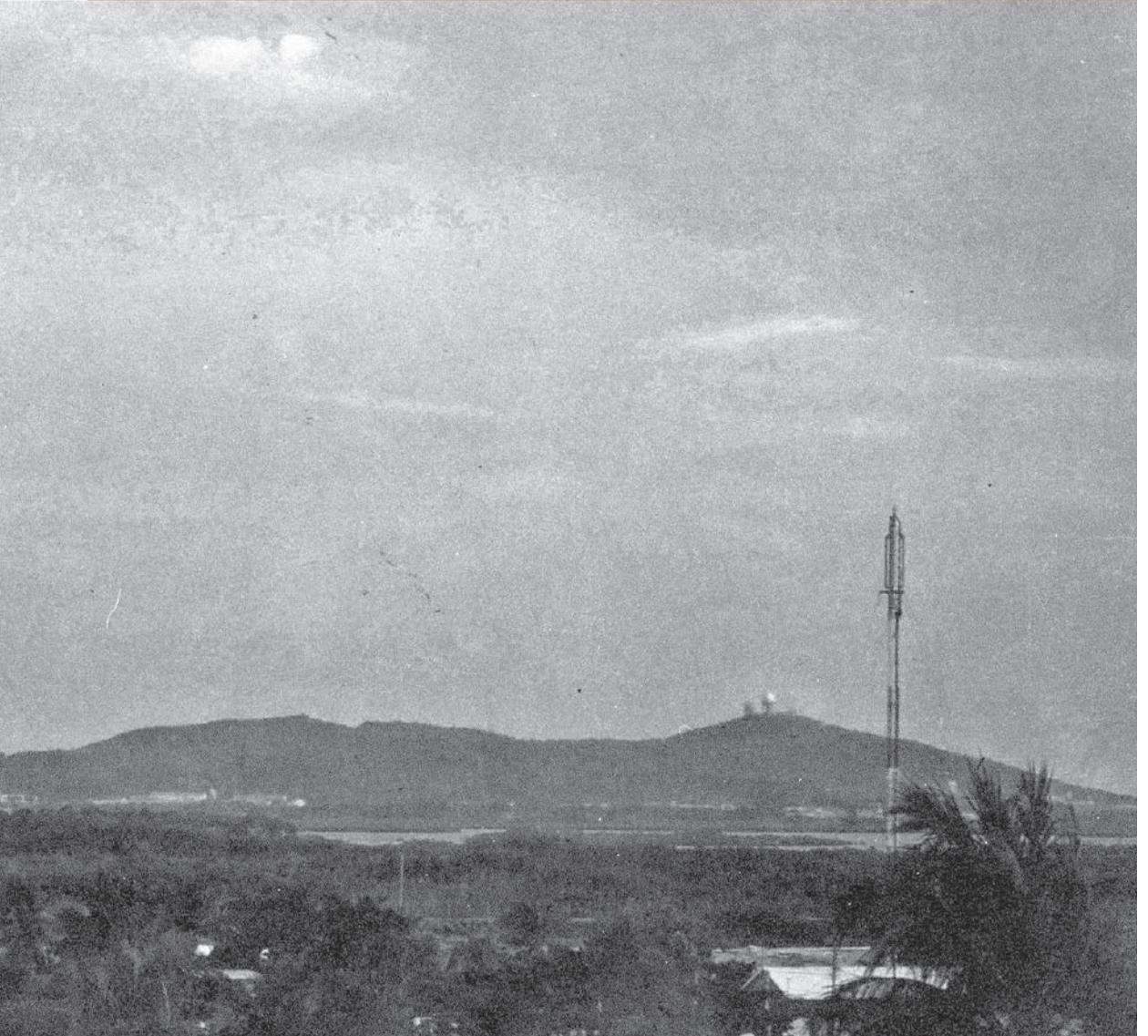
*left:
Arta Perezic and
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CUBA: HUMANISM UNDER SIEGE



MARIA DE LOS ANGELES RODRIGUEZ-JIMENEZ
PEDRO GALINDO-LANDEIRA



Our travels through Cuba allowed us to explore our concerns with the conceptual implications of limits. The sights we came across, and the experiences we had, forced the realization that Cuba is a society imprisoned under two powers. The capital, La Habana, Cuba is imprisoned by the constant propaganda of a failed regime. The presence of this power is carried all the way to the most eastern coast, Guantanamo Bay. There, at a distance no longer than a mile, the towns of Guantanamo confront a fence that literally cuts the island nation into two lands by the presence of another authoritarian regime, the foreign policy regime of the United States.

It is hard for us to convey the impact of our feelings as we contemplated that fence. Two political doctrines shape themselves on either side, two crude and cruel cultures of surveillance. Visually, viscerally, mentally, we were forced to consider what provokes such scrutiny of persons and cultures, what justifies the bondage, what legitimates such repression.

When we visited the small towns near the U. S. base, we noted that the Cubans there live as other Cubans do, except that both regimes have taken over the area with the accoutrements of hostility. The United States, for example, does not allow for its proclaimed freedom of expression and assembly. No one may protest the brutalities that take place inside the base.

Today, architects question the fundamentals of architecture. But none of them truly questions the Fence, perhaps one of the first structures built by man, that which encloses and separates. Today, the principle ally of those who control power is the Fence.

Since the United States has just agreed to open an embassy in Cuba, we are likely to be looking at new junctures in the name of consumerism. Consumerism allows commercial bombardment of nearly every moment and space of our lives. It too is an imprisoning dogma. But these new initiatives are unlikely to remove the Fence.

Chantal Mouffe, in *Artists Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, has expressed well our sense of purpose in this installation: “Critical art is art that foments dissensus that makes visible what dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate.”

We hold that it is crucial that artists make transparent all the dysfunctional aspects of our reality. In that way, we can offer “clearance” to that which is stayed and forbidden.

MARIA DE LOS ANGELES RODRIGUEZ-JIMENEZ
PEDRO GALINDO-LANDEIRA



GHANA: DOCUMENTING CRAFT



ALYSSA DAVIS





For my Menschel project, I chose to attempt a different form of documentation. From my previous trips to Ghana, it has become apparent that filming furthers the divide between who is filming and who is being filmed, and reinforces stereotypes on both sides. I came to recognize that there is a standard routine of documenting and representation that is difficult to break. In addition to being a tired format, it is often used by international aid foundations in dubious ways, for “poverty” touring, for instance, or for creating “poster-children” for development claims. The whole concept of being filmed for documentation is resented and starting to be resisted.

I proposed that we collaborate with craftspeople to produce works for a gallery in New York City, focusing primarily on curation instead of documentation. We sought unrehearsed, sustained interactions, in some cases commissioning works themselves. This installation reflects the result of these collaborations with a seamstress, a tailor, a coffin maker, a shoemaker, a painter and a traditional priest.

Over the summer I traveled to Ghana with the filmmaker Alicia Lane to identify and work with people who are involved with craft, a term that can be applied to such diverse activities as handmade meals that are served up along the roads by street-side chefs every morning to the matching wooden chair- and-table sets displayed along the same highways. It can also include the “craft” of healing traditionally and guiding spiritual life.

ALYSSA DAVIS



For instance, I met William Tetteh, a coffin maker in Pokuase, two summers ago. His studio runs along the highway not seven feet from the usual Ghanaian traffic of trucks, tro-tros, buses, and taxis flying by. William and his apprentices build and display their custom-made coffins after the request of persons now deceased—to represent their favorite objects, or their professions and status. Traditionally these “fantasy coffins” are of the Ga people (from Accra and coastal Ghana). It was a practice almost lost but then revitalized in the 1950s.

I met Nana Kwaku Bonsam by chance at a money exchange in a suburb of Accra. It was clear that Nana had power. He had three smartphones on him and a small group of people waiting for him in the parking lot. I soon found out that Nana is a well-known traditional priest in West Africa who often travels to the Bronx to extend his practice of spiritual and herbal medicine.

Through our interactions with men and women around the country, a major thought emerged. We had to confront the idea that just because something is handmade, it doesn't mean that it is authentic, an idea that is most obvious among the market crafts bought primarily by tourists. We learned from people who have been forced to adapt their practices in order to compete with imported products and from people like William who have strong opinions and histories associated with their work.

I'd like to acknowledge Alicia Lane for collaborating, Aran Simi for assistance, and all of the people we were able to work with: coffin maker William Tetteh, traditional priest Nana Kwaku Bonsam, painter Mark Anthony and his grandson Robert, wood carver Gelson Dzigbordi Avorwlanu, shoe maker Alex Baah, and tailors Samuel Armah, David Saman, Julius Fosu Edem, and Shaibu Ibrahim.

PUERTO RICO: LAND, CROP, SYMBOL



The Neolithic Revolution has left us its tools, vessels, pictographs, all objects communicating a collective need--an exchange between technological advances, spiritual practices, and ultimately, nourishment. Civilization was made possible because of agricultural practice.

We wanted to bring to light a civilization that existed across the Caribbean, the underexposed civilization of the Tainos. The Tainos developed a complex agricultural practice dating back to 1000 CE. With the arrival of Columbus in 1492, the Tainos were captured and taken prisoner, to be worked as slaves, or killed by infectious diseases, against which they had no immunity. By 1549, there remained less than 500 indigenous people.

To study this civilization that contributed so greatly to agricultural advances and cultural practices throughout the Caribbean, we chose Puerto Rico--which had one of the densest Taino populations of all the islands. As architects, we wanted to trace the relationship between practices, sites, land, nourishment and symbols, design and spiritual ideas. We designated for our study three important eras: pre-Columbian, Spanish colonialist, and present-day.

We began by traveling to the mountains of Utuado in central Puerto Rico. This is where much of the agriculture on the island exists today. We stayed on a small independent farm about 2km away from the protected Taino site Parque Ceremonial Indigena de Caguana. Staying in such close proximity to the Taino site, we were experiencing the land that they had lived in. We learned which fruits and vegetables still grow best in that altitude and conditions. The most common crops include: papaya, banana, coconut, coffee, limes, star fruit, mamey, yucca, and cacao. Through researching the Taino sites, we discovered their petroglyphs and the plazas that marked the way they used their land for agriculture, assembly, celestial worship, and a ball game that

SAM FRIEDBERG
ANDREA RECALDE





they called batey. Thus, the land was used to provide varied food for their tribe and to leave behind enough information to pass on to future inhabitants.

Moving forward chronologically, we visited farms and coffee plantations that were started after the Spanish conquest. There we learned about the methods and mechanisms that the colonists developed for better use of the land. At the Hacienda Buena Vista, there is a working restoration of the first hydraulic turbine in Puerto Rico that uses a nearby river to power its mills. At a present-day, family-run plantation Café Gran Batey, a deep understanding of the local conditions allows the family to grow multiple crops that benefit each other.

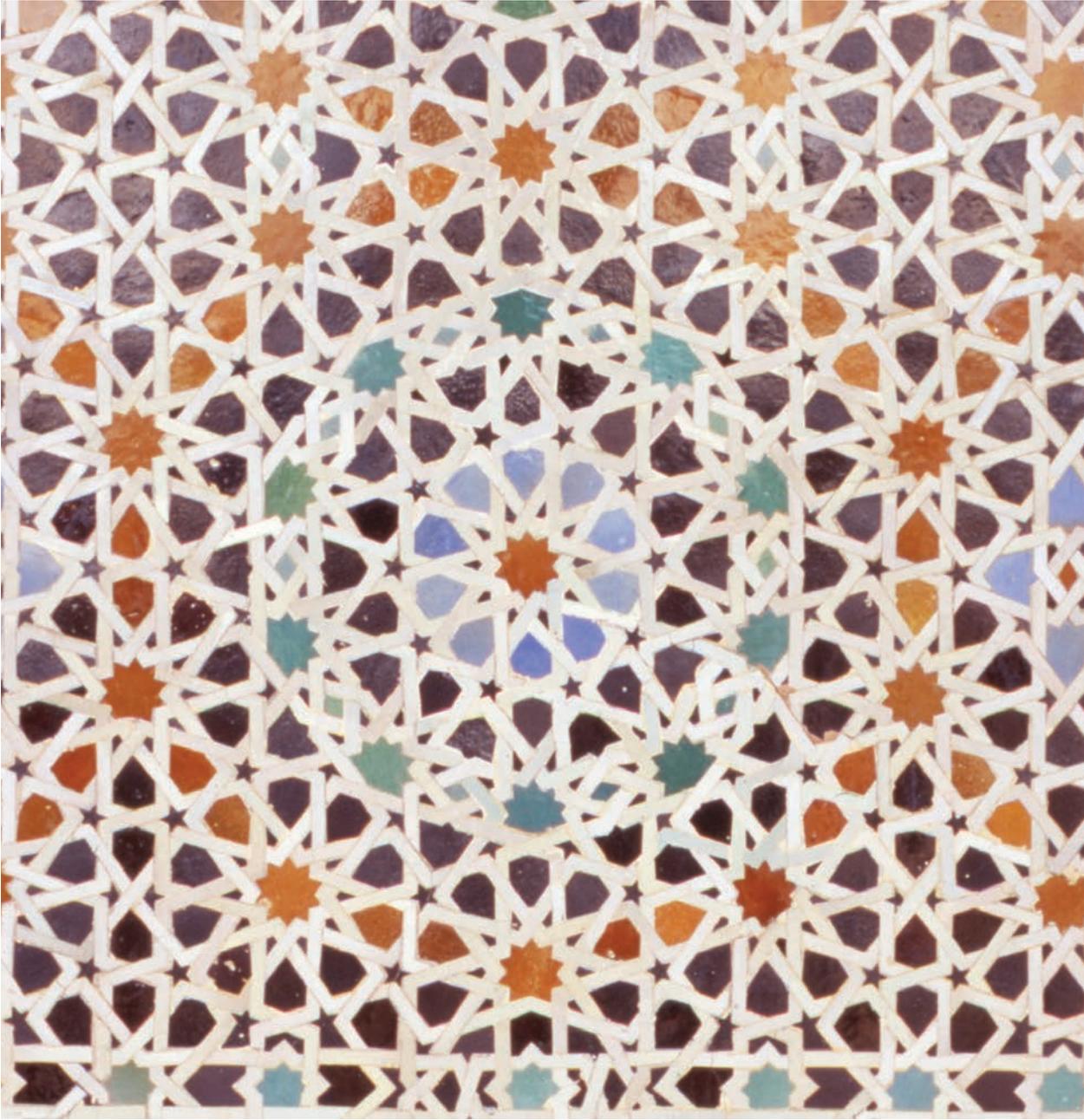
SAM FRIEDBERG
ANDREA RECALDE



We discovered that the ancient is far from having been erased. We could see how the protected sites where the artifacts have been found are on the very land where contemporary farms and mechanical agricultural cultivators sit. Today, Puerto Rican campesinos continue the tradition of growing the very same crops as the Tainos—in an unbroken lineage.



ZELIJ AND ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE:
INNOVATING CRAFT IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT



MAJA HJERTÉN KNUTSON
PHONG KIWI NGUYEN



The tile work or “zellij” on the surfaces of Islamic architecture produces spaces of awe and contemplation, lifting minds and spirits through the beautiful work of many generations of craftsmen. The basic unit is a terracotta tile covered with enamel in the form of chips set into plaster. The zellij are laid in precise, geometrical patterns as a surface treatment to walls, floors, ceilings, and fountains. Our exploration took us through Andalusia in Spain and to the northern regions of Morocco to investigate the craft of zellij alongside craftsmen, restorers, and manufacturers. Through site visits



and hands-on experimentation, we examined the role of color, material, process, pattern, and function of these architectural tiled surfaces. We understand the surface of architecture as a tectonic element that can be used to affect the space in profound ways that go beyond merely an aesthetic exercise.



The civic and religious buildings dating from the Islamic rule of the Middle Ages have a strong presence in the urban fabrics of Andalusia as well as Morocco. Yet, the way that the architectural heritage is treated on the two sides of the Mediterranean is diametrically opposed. In Spain, we found that Islamic structures, like that of the Alhambra in Granada and La Mesquita in Cordoba, have become archaeological sites. Time seems arrested. As Ramon Rubio, chief restorer at the Alhambra explained to us, the goal is to “preserve as much as possible by carefully intervening as little as possible.” The approach is completely different in Morocco, where spaces filled with zellij are not museums as in Andalusia, but are used and worn in daily life. Medieval Islamic and civic buildings are still in use, and history is considered to be a continuous flow of time that reaches the present.



Observing and participating in the ritualistic craft of zellij in the actual workshops gave us further insights. We discovered again the individual artisan working on sensitive materials, accepting, delighting really, in imperfection. Returning to New York with the experiences and documentations from our travels, we have continued to experiment with the transformative quality of craft and ritual in our own practice.



Industrialization and mass production have succeeded in separating us from the act of making. As a consequence, there seems to exist a tendency in architecture towards uniformity that denies human expression. This project is an attempt to find new ways of reintroducing craft into the continuing tradition of building.

MAJA HJERTÉN KNUTSON
PHONG KIWI NGUYEN



AMERICA'S FOURTH COAST: INDUSTRIALIZATION ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER



The world's great rivers encourage wonder and awe. They cleanse the body, nourish appetites, sooth our senses, yield fertile ground, float our stuffs and persons, and have done so seemingly forever. In the United States, our great river is the Mississippi, and its feeder streams and main currents act to define the physical and social landscape of America's Heartland.

The Mississippi of the present century is one that flows with a boiling rage, its waters blackened by the pollutants of industrial malpractice. Cities and towns along its banks, once critical hubs of trade, travel, and culture, are now in stages of decline and struggling with the terms of recovery.

For our Menschel Fellowship, we proposed traveling the length of the Mississippi River. We began our journey at the headwaters outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota, accompanied by the strident sounds of St. Anthony Falls. Traveling south we encountered industrial cities of varying historical significance: Red Wing, Wisconsin; Quad Cities, Iowa; Saint Louis, Missouri; Memphis, Tennessee; and Helena, Arkansas, among others. Our journey ended in the fabled city of New Orleans.

We consider architecture as agency to the built environment. Through intimate exploration of the structures that account for the use, control, and misuse of the river's mighty gifts, we hoped to open up a dialogue with the unseen social and political policies that direct these structures' purposes. We came to see a river continuously buttressed by railroads, highways, cornfields under industrial management, petroleum processing plants, flood-prevention infrastructures, and a signature urban development which reads as a kind of bloodline from which America is aggressively, if not desperately, feeding. In this part of the country, the river rules.

This work is an exploration. We have revisited our journey via journals, maps, sketchbooks, photographs, and various acquisitions. We are motivated by the river's great impact, but also by the call to study the contrasting elements of river-use—urban and farm landscapes, human and non-human scales of production, states of marginalized decay and



ARTA PEREZIC
NICHOLAS PACULA





concentrated growth, projects of environmental assault and environmental restoration. We are seeking a way for architectural means of representation to act as clarifying tools of understanding. We are challenging ourselves to engage these indexed moments of divergence as they occur within a landscape of strong geophysical commonality.

A river draws people to it, to travel down it, to grasp its energy and power. We were drawn down this river's banks, seeking a dialogue with the river's disparate and dissimilar moments in industrial practice. Our exhibition is dedicated to the architect as interlocutor between social needs and the landscape in one of this country's most defining events: the Mississippi River.

ARTA PEREZIC
NICHOLAS PACULA

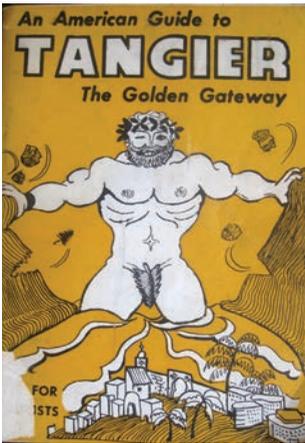


SPAIN AND MOROCCO:
THE STRAIT BETWEEN THE KNOWN AND UNKNOWN



PEDRAM SAZESH
EMMANUELA SORIA RUIZ





What if the horizon is not just a phenomenon that shows the limit of what the eye can see, but a sudden halt, the limit of the earth? We traveled to the Strait of Gibraltar in order to look at the particular horizon that marked the end of the known world for the ancient Greeks.

There are different myths that explain the creation of this limit; most agree that Hercules made the Strait by separating or pulling together Europe and Africa, and that he placed a column on each side to demarcate it as the passageway to the end of the world. Today, two mountains, one on each continent, are said to be the present remains of Hercules' feat. The current location of these two mountains is very curious; the rock of Gibraltar, though on the Spanish peninsula, is located within a British holding in Spain. The African column, Monte Hacho, is located in the city of Ceuta, a Spanish holding in the middle of Morocco, both territories remnants of colonial occupations.



Our initial strategy was to look at the Pillars of Hercules in a way that would capture the poetic relationship between myth and geography. However, in our journey, we encountered first hand the present reality of the area as a place of migration and tension. What was the end of the world for the ancient Greeks is now the entrance to Europe for millions of refugees and emigrants. In the Spanish city of Ceuta, on the north Moroccan side, we met a group of Syrian refugees who were camping in a public square, demanding that the Spanish government expedite their asylum process. The group consisted of families with young children and elders who had traveled a long and arduous journey in order to obtain refugee status and protection in a European country.

We spent many days listening to their stories about their past lives in Syria and why they had to flee. The children of the group would amuse themselves playing with our cameras, filming their families and the camp where they would live for months. Hearing about their struggles, and learning about the unjust position they were put in by the inhumane

PEDRAM SAZESH
EMMANUELA SORIA RUIZ

immigration policy in the area, we saw how this place still holds, for many, real limits and concrete boundaries to unknown worlds.

Our exhibition proposes an investigation between the visible and the invisible. The visible is the geography, the fences, and the material records of the stories we heard, the faces we saw. The invisible are the traceless myths and the contradictions of our own situation, both impossible to capture with a camera.

Just as the horizon is the line where the earth's surface and the sky appear to meet, but also the line beyond which we cannot see any further land, our film presents a series of unfolding metaphors. It reflects on the implications of the Strait, both in its mythical past and in the present, as a new myth that superimposes itself onto geography and into our political reality.





Emmanuela Soria Ruiz and Pedram Sazesh