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## THE READYMADE WAS ALWAYS A TROJAN HORSE: CHARLES STANKIEVECH + TIM JOHNSON IN CONVERSATION ABOUT HOMELAND SECURITY

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### *between Charles Stankievehch\* and Tim Johnson\**

**Tim Johnson:** For an artist who has investigated military outpost architecture, I suspect Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation must provide an especially interesting site. When you learned that you would be coming to Marfa, did you intend to engage with this particularly mixed history, where art has come to inhabit a former military base, or did your recent project *HOMELAND SECURITY* develop independently?

**Charles Stankievehch:** Marfa drew me as artist because of its complex history: as a long-standing border town, the history of Donald Judd's vision and the sublime landscape. I wasn't exactly sure what I would be creating before coming, as is usually the case. I want to be as sensitive to a place as possible and be in a location for a certain amount of time before it becomes a place of production—this is out of respect to the community as well as to allow for a depth in the work. In this way, preliminary research can only act as intuition. I was also in Marfa on a research residency and so there was no pressure to produce anything—an attempt to combat the artist as tourist.

**TJ:** One of the aspects of this work that interests me is the way it deploys two old-fashioned elements, the bug zapper, whose resemblance to the street lamp lends it an almost romantic appeal, and the grid, which we frequently associate with Modernism. How do these things

relate to the contemporary system of homeland security, which I think of as being extremely technologically advanced?

**CS:** Unlike the Cold War and its interfaces—such as the radar infrastructure of the DEW Line—contemporary conflict is asymmetrical: be it overseas or along the Southern Border of the US where Marfa is located. Other than say the public milestones of the arms race, military strategy is not normally strictly linear. It's a complex game with required redundancies, constant technological modification, shifting allies, continual adjustment to different theatres and the reality of cost-benefit analysis always in flux. The decades-long conflict and multiple players in Afghanistan or the engagement with Mexican drug cartels illustrate this, as you know. So while technology is always advancing and there is something frightening in some newer forms of “war at a distance” (to use a title from a brilliant video by Harun Farocki), the far more frightening development post 9-11 is the loss of civil liberties under legislation such as the Patriot Act, the founding of the Homeland Security umbrella, Executive Assassination without “due legal process” and the bureaucratic establishment of the War on Terror. In an email written to me after we presented *HOMELAND SECURITY* and after I had already described the work as a “matrix,” Gregory Whitehead (who has been following for quite some time the dark rhetorics of the US government and interviewed me [here](#)), wrote to inform me of the recent discovery of Obama's “disposition matrix”: a new euphemism for the executive ability to kill targets based on a bureaucratic workflow. The “grid” in the killing fields is about as outdated as *1984* by George Orwell—in other words, sadly not at all. What once were temporary measures and government overreach in the name of emergence for national security is steadily again and again becoming policy for the long haul—both affecting overseas operations and, sadly as most American's don't realize or don't care, more and more domestically.

**TJ:** To make visible the invisible forms of monitor and control is one aspect of the piece that interests me. I also think of the regular passage of Border Patrol vehicles through the town, and really, right past the installation. The piece also makes visible that which has become invisible through habit and a sense of something like relief, which is based on the economic benefit of jobs and general expenditure on the part of ICE / the Border Patrol in a small town with a struggling economy, a sense of relief which works to suspend any desire to criticize or even consider their actual role in a community, and by extension the country.

**CS:** For the last 100 years, Marfa has relied on a military presence for its existence. Fort Russell / Camp Marfa from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has supported the existence of the town economically, and even when the base was threatened to be closed, the town lobbied Washington to keep it open. Due to some serendipity with car trouble I had the fortunate experience of a casual conversation with two Homeland Security officers at ironically the remote PRADA Marfa false store / artwork. For over an hour we talked about their job, their prime directives, what a daily routine was like and where they came from before being posted in Marfa. Usually, one interfaces with such officers (and in fact I did with these exact officers several times later) at the internal checkpoints throughout the border zone, and in these circumstances the power relations are quite hierarchical. But in this candid “hanging out” I learned a lot of the behind-the-scenes and psychology of such personnel that was eye opening for me—such as the reality of the paycheck and the link to politics.

Interestingly, the Chinati and Judd Foundations also play the same role in the town—especially when it comes to those involved in the arts. There is an orthodoxy established, and hopefully a piece like *HOMELAND SECURITY* offers a certain satire that doesn't directly critique but uses an oblique tactic. There is of course a long history of playing the court jester.

**TJ:** Yes, there is a way in which the beauty of the lights can entrance a viewer or visitor and only the occasional electrical charge, as an insect enters the cage, disrupts or unsettles the way we become accustomed to the low buzz of the machines. There is that aspect of attraction that resembles distraction at work in this piece.

**CS:** The fieldwork *HOMELAND SECURITY* looks inviting from afar, as does the concept of National Security—it seems like a good idea and possesses good public relations capital, but when you're in the matrix, the glow and invisible electrical field can turn offensive easily. One of the paradoxes in contemporary politics and the media is how polarized reality is between secrecy and spectacle. A möbius loop has formed where policy appears only accountable as spectacle and inversely is hiding a secret. Indeed the public sphere has become attraction for distraction. The paradox has twisted so far these days that even secrecy is spectacle itself. Euphemisms are stenography—secret writing—where images and press conferences are dazzling smoke screens for dark operations far more radical than the previous administration. Congress might not agree on anything, but the trajectory of black ops, redacted spending lines in budgets, and “exceptional” exercises march on despite any disagreements in the public forum.

I'm curious why you were interested in producing *HOMELAND SECURITY* with your gallery?

**TJ:** I wanted to produce *HOMELAND SECURITY* because it raises a lot of difficult questions, many of which are postponed or totally avoided here in Marfa. And because I want to bring the Border Patrol “installations” more fully into the conversation about the culture and economy of the area.

**CS:** Before running Marfa Book Co. (a bookstore, art gallery and Marfa's primary venue for cultural programming), you worked in Juarez particularly with issues of border control and immigration. Can you tell me a little bit about this?

**TJ:** When I graduated from college, I moved to El Paso to work for an organization called Annunciation House, which is based on the principles of the Catholic Worker tradition. Their work consists in providing emergency housing to recently arrived undocumented immigrants who have few or no resources and whose presence is termed illegal. At the time that I worked there, Annunciation House consisted of about twenty people operating three shelters, or what they call “houses of hospitality,” two in El Paso and one in Juarez. They also operated a small “house of solidarity” in the squatter community of Anapra whose purpose, to the extent that such a thing could be considered purposive, was simply to keep an active connection with that community, many of whose residents had once passed through one of the other buildings. I lived on both sides of the border, first in El Paso and later in Anapra.

**CS:** What was your opinion of the border situation?

**TJ:** For me, the border is a complex system whose primary purpose is simple: to control labor markets. The incredible rise of immigrants from Mexico, part of which I experienced during the two years I lived on the border, and I want to add, during a few years after that, working for another organization in central Texas, coincides with the passage of NAFTA and the consequent collapse of the Mexican agricultural economy. Millions of people moved north when they couldn't compete with the industrial farming practices of the major agribusinesses. They were expected to take jobs in the newly introduced factories in the north of Mexico, many of which are owned by, or provide products to, major U.S. corporations. You have a situation where the televisions and refrigerators and all these unique products can move freely across the border, but the people who make them cannot. Plus, of course, the wages in those factories, which are the incentive for the corporations, are considerably lower than they would be in the U.S., whereas the cost of living at the border is almost the same on both sides. So, the question of whether a worker can afford the product they make is secondary to questions about their basic survival. In Anapra, most people live in houses made of pallet wood discarded by the factories, with newspaper insulation and tin roofing. A further fact to consider is that the factories pay few state or local taxes, so there's not enough money to pay for improvements to infrastructure or social services. Any fool can see you'll need a fence and some advanced surveillance equipment to prevent people from seeking a better life, especially when they're being forced to suffer so that a very small group of people will benefit financially. That may seem crass, but it's a crass situation, and one that's supported by some very crass class and racial stereotypes.

**CS:** Do you think the situation has changed since this period?

**TJ:** Yes and no. The impact of the recession has resulted in a significantly smaller number of people coming to the U.S. to find jobs. This is what recent figures suggest. However, the apparatus of border security continues to expand, that is to say the militarization of the border, continues. The introduction of drones to our area is only one development among many. There is the border wall, of course, which maps the exact shape of our madness, if you ask me. Presumably we are trying to "naturalize" the flora and fauna of the region, to grant them a nationality according to their whereabouts when the wall is raised.

**CS:** While we installed the main version of *HOMELAND SECURITY* as a fieldwork outdoors in the "agora" of Marfa, I also had a "prototype" running inside the white cube of the gallery at Fieldwork for a couple months and which now is also being shown indoors at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin. When installed indoors—particularly in a storefront space, as was the case at Fieldwork—there is this surreal *détournement*. Severely hampered in its intended purpose, the ultraviolet light of the bug zapper still attracts a plethora of insects, but they are for the most part kept out by the window. This extra barrier coated at night by bugs became an interesting metaphor for not only the game of the art world with the gallery's white cube as "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" (Hemingway) but also the contemporary American Dream vs. reality of immigration. I'd be curious what your experience was working on both sides of the border dealing with the full spectrum of social classes from aliens to celebrities. What were the paradoxes you've witnessed?

**TJ:** Well, the American Dream is but one mythology within the greater system of capitalism, something I am very much inside, as are the people who live in Anapra. Still, there is a limit, a boundary between two communities in this part of the world. The presence of the bug zappers in the agora, perhaps our central communal space, reminds us that every activity

here, including the festivals and so forth, exclude a significant number of people, many of them living nearby. The bug zapper in the window at the gallery raises the issue in a different way. There, it resembles all the promises of glass, the shop windows which, giving us an image, give us another object of desire, something charged with all sorts of ideas about pleasure and leisure. Being hampered in its purpose, does the zapper exert itself as art or does it demonstrate an uneasy affiliation among objects of art and commerce? For me, the terms of commerce dictate the forms of security. And, of course, the tools of security are significantly objects of commerce, as anyone who lives in a small town along the border knows. We need look no further than the competition among firms to build the border wall.

A further, and not unrelated, question that the two sites pose for me concerns this dichotomy of the interior and exterior. Is an artist who works outside of the gallery, say for example, in an unconventional or public space, outside the system of art? That is to say, are there works of art that are unaffected by the commerce of art, which the gallery represents? Perhaps this is a contemporary version of asking Duchamp's famous question about whether there are works that are not of art. Or perhaps it is the same question?

**CS:** There are definitely artists who work outside of the gallery system or the contemporary art world. I make no claim to this at all. *HOMELAND SECURITY* was produced by your commercial gallery, backed by three European Academies via Fieldwork (ESBA—Nantes, HEAD-Genève and Gerrit Rietveld Academie—Amsterdam) as well as in discussion with the Chinati Foundation in regards to overlapping programming during their open house weekend, so even if its in a public space that hadn't previously been the site of exhibition, it's still very much supported by these institutions. This doesn't mean the work cannot participate in critique. The premise of democracy and a free society is the ability to critique from the inside. I think to many people's surprise however, public art is often much more tame than gallery art since it must be approved by people not normally versed or comfortable with the "professional" art world, which is usually quite far from the general public—be it the economics of collectors, the lifestyle of the artist or the theoretical contextualization. While working outside the gallery allows for a more direct contact with the general public, I believe official public art has a much harder time engaging the public due to shallow conventions. Public Art needs to function on the subconscious level to avoid remaining pure spectacle.

It's interesting you mention Duchamp as he was actually influential in making this piece—but I don't mean only in the general quotidian art strategy of the "readymade" which re-appropriates an everyday object and sublimates it into the aesthetic sphere by giving it a name within the art economy. I mean in a more specific but indirect manner—through the poetic treatment of the idea of geometry. *HOMELAND SECURITY* being created in Marfa was of course initially influenced by Donald Judd's gridded installations—particularly the scale and spacing of the aluminum box work at the Chinati Foundation. It's worth noting the poetic and political tension which exists with Judd. As formal as Judd's art is, it was significant for me to discover during my research in Marfa how political he was: e.g. the reasons for establishing Chinati, organizing anti-Vietnam demonstrations, involvement in local politics in NYC and his strong words about the Border. But back to Duchamp, during my research I of course had to work my way through Roberto Bolaño's *2666*—an epic novel about the violence in the region. Bolaño inscribes an interesting gestural quote that seems central to the entire book since it appears more than once and thus acts as a nexus between the individual sub-books. This pictorial intersection of narrative tangents is the re-enactment of Duchamp's *Unhappy Readymade* (1919)—a geometry book hung on a clothesline and left exposed to the

elements. This political act by Bolaño via his character Professor Amalfitano of taking an art world gesture and repeating it across the ocean in the fictional “Juarez” resonated with me. In turn, this gesture of suspending geometry in the air was one factor of influence for me in creating a suspended geometry in *HOMELAND SECURITY*. For me, the readymade was always a Trojan horse.

During the run of the exhibition, you received a letter from the real Department of Homeland Security about compliance issues related to your business (bookstore/gallery). Beyond the eerie coincidence of timing, what was your reaction to this letter?

**TJ:** I received the letter as an encouragement from the Department of Homeland Security to talk clearly and publicly about the exhibition and the questions it raises for me. The text of the letter sends a remarkably mixed message, equal parts invitation and threat. Here is an example, which I have treated as a poem, marking the line breaks: “U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) / is pleased to invite you to a free seminar on compliance.” What is so free about compliance? And then there’s the line, “What is IMAGE and how can it help you?” which is underlined like a hyperlink, which, obviously, since it’s a paper letter, we cannot follow. That kind of incoherence on the part of a national agency, especially an agency charged with enforcing some aspect of the law, is terrifying. What do you think of the letter?

**CS:** I wish we had this invite before the show started so we could have used it for our invitation! Ironically, we didn’t send out a paper invite but only sent an e-invite with actual clickable hyperlinks. Serendipitously, the only paper advertising we had were the risograph posters on (unbeknownst to me) fittingly yellow paper.

**TJ:** Showing a version of the work in Berlin, has the work changed for you in its new setting, so far from the border? Have you given it a new title?

**CS:** No, I did not give the work a new title nor reconfigure it, since a white cube version of the piece existed first. I was also pleased to be able to exhibit the work abroad and outside the domestic territory of the United States. The irony of America’s Homeland Security is that it is part of a mechanism that extends far beyond the territory of home along the lines of the “Preemptive Defense” strategy. Already back in the 1970s Marshall McLuhan called America a “World Environment” and there is an interesting double articulation in the State Department’s functioning: the questionable legitimacy of their operation beyond their borders transgressing other nation’s sovereignty countered by their convenient extra-territorial locations like Guantanamo Bay and other detainment sites for Extraordinary Rendition. The dance of breaking international law while trying to keep their own domestic laws (or at least breaking their domestic laws while not at home). Berlin was an interesting place to remount the piece for several reasons, not only because of the city’s general history but because of the building itself; the House of World Cultures, where it is to be installed, is a contemporary art space built by an American student of Walter Gropius commissioned by the Benjamin Franklin Foundation and given as a gift by the U.S. Government to the city of Berlin in 1957. Originally called “Congress Hall” and erected directly beside the border with East Berlin and thus designed to be seen from the “other side,” the building was strategically built by America as a symbol of Freedom. The catalogue for the Berlin exhibition also reproduces documentation of the original fieldwork in Marfa with a text by the curator, so the references and inertia in the work is sustained if one feels this is necessary. I also feel the publication I made (co-published by your Marfa Book Co. and Paper Pusher, Toronto) is available no matter where the work is and helps establish a *critical apparatus* of meaning for the work that

ties back to the tradition of American ideologies associated with the piece. In short, the work could be displayed anywhere because Homeland Security has become an international brand based on the myth of the border.

**\*Charles Stankieveh is a Canadian artist whose fieldworks and performances have been presented internationally. He is also a curator as well as a founding faculty member of the Yukon School of Visual Arts in Dawson City.**

**\*Tim Johnson (b. 1978, Nashville, USA) lives in Marfa, Texas, where he owns and operates the Marfa Book Company, a bookshop; gallery; film, music and performance space. He is also a poet, translator and Contributing Editor for the poetics journal *Evening will Come*. From 2000–2006 he worked for Annunciation House and Casa Marianela, Texas-based houses of hospitality dedicated to providing emergency shelter to recently arrived Undocumented Immigrants. From 2000–2002, as director of border education for Annunciation House, he lived in Anapra, Chihuahua, a squatter community on the outskirts of Juarez, where he hosted visiting activists, journalists and students, and worked with various community organizations, including Hormigas De La Comunidad En Desarrollo and Taller De Las Tazas.**

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