

# Frieze

## How Nature and Art Reveal the Illogic of Borders

Even as right-wing politics increasingly tries to enforce them, remembering that nature and art know no borders

This past summer, to escape the heat, I found myself wandering New York's Hudson embankment and considering its jagged outline. Where beneath that steel and asphalt is the island the Lenape call Manaháhtaan? From 1690 to 1976, millions of tonnes of earth were carved from the island's rolling hills and dumped onto its shores, padding a growing port while flattening the city into its famously monotonous grid.

Not all that dirt was local: much was unloaded from the cargo holds of trading ships, where it was used as ballast on the long voyage back from South America or Singapore. The river's shores began to bloom with flora few had ever seen before: cheatgrass, mugwort and pink purslane. Many of those plants now thrive on the High Line, New York's popular selfie promenade, where artist Maria Thereza Alves has planted a selection of them for the latest iteration of her project 'Seeds of Change' (1999–ongoing). All appear wild on their blacktop perch overlooking the West Side Highway, as though the wind, not the artist, had buried them there.

These plant species colonized the Hudson ecosystem because they were first imported by agents of the nations that colonized their points of origin. For more than half of New York's history, human bodies were also packed in the bellies of ships, like ballast, and unloaded in American ports. Alves's work reveals that the effects of colonialism run deep into the soil; but, also, that this same soil – a stolen mulch – is itself a colonized body.

If the earth could shed its carapace, it would remind us that it was never ours to own. As I write this, more than 2,300 children have been forcibly separated from their families and locked in cages by US immigration officers – victims of a 'zero tolerance' policy that regards their hope for survival as a crime. Many migrants are indigenous and consider the border an ancestral home: what the Aztecs called Aztlán, stretching from the low Sonoran Desert high into New Mexico and Arizona. Who has the right to label them 'illegal'? Their wells tapped to bottle beer for export, their villages plagued by a violent drug trade, they come north to work on US farms for low wages and without labour protections, only to be labelled hostile 'aliens' on their own land.

Nature knows no borders. Trump's wall would cut into this territory, dividing a rich ecosystem and disrupting the migration patterns of at least 93 endangered species along the Rio Grande, according to the Center for Biological Diversity. A toxic combination of racism and hubristic nationalism has taken hold in the US, with no regard for human, plant or animal life – trading even the fortunes of children for political gain. Such a cruel and callous policy may feel nauseatingly familiar to those of you reading this in Europe, seven years into the continent's own migrant crisis. The Mediterranean, another climate known for its broad biodiversity, is carved by invisible maritime borders that too often determine the fates of those who paddle out into it towards safer land. More than 16,000 migrants have drowned there since the Arab Spring began in 2011, many simply because they failed to cross a line they couldn't see, where a European navy might rescue them. Meanwhile, right-wing government officials pander to their bases' basest instincts. Punishing those who dare to seek asylum.

Many artists in this summer's edition of Manifesta, in Palermo, focused on the crisis that has washed up on the shores of Sicily. Many others turned their eye to the island's natural diversity: there, Aleppo pines mingle with Mexican prickly pears. Gardens tell tales of foreign conquest, while offering their bounty to local kitchens. That heritage binds palermitanos to their neighbours on the shores of Libya and Syria, whose similar landscapes so many have fled. The Mediterranean biome, a liquid medium linking all bodies it touches, remains indifferent to geopolitical conflict.

Borders are a violent political construct that defy nature's logic of cohabitation. Though they shape the lives of so many, Alves's project reminds us how little they tell us about the way the earth operates. Art, unlike focused political activism, may not be able to free the detained children – many of whom are locked up far from a recognizable border region, in New York or Washington, D.C. – but, like a seed of change, it can transcend the prison of nation and culture, space and time. Artists will continue to complicate our notions of belonging and our relationship to the land. In the meantime, the rest of us have work to do.