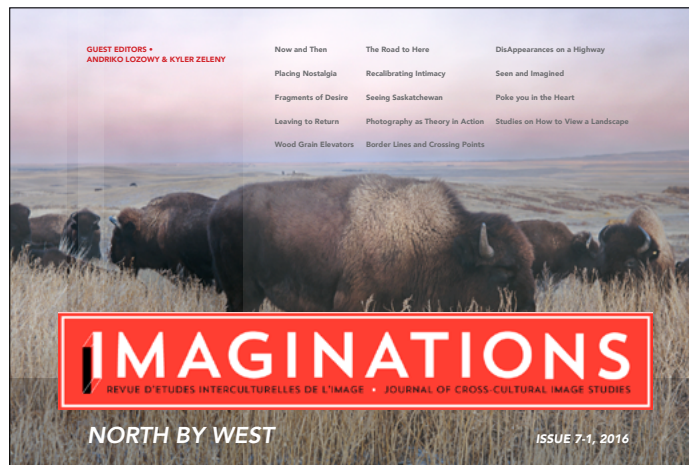


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BORDER LINES AND CROSSING POINTS: A RESPONSE TO ANDREAS RUTKAUSKAS' PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE CANADIAN-U.S. BORDER

ANDREAS RUTKAUSKAS & KARLA MCMANUS

Résumé

Écrit en réponse au projet Borderline du photographe Andreas Rutkauskas, cet essai est une réflexion sur les tensions historiques, culturelles, politiques et géographiques visuellement et viscéralement vécues le long de la frontière Canda-États-Unis. A la fois un emblème et une manifestation physique de la nation-état moderne qui maintient son autorité à travers le contrôle et la surveillance de ses frontières, la frontière entre le Canada et les États-Unis soulèvent des questions sur l'utilisation du sol officielle et vernaculaire, les droits autochtones et les droits des colons en rapport avec le territoire et l'identité culturelle inhérente. Considérant les points de passage entre frontières comme des espaces culturels tendus, Rutkauskas utilise son objectif pour réfléchir aux similarités visuelles et spatiales- et à l'ordinaire banal- que l'on trouve au long de cette vaste frontière. En se concentrant sur la section de la série Borderline qui porte sur l'ouest canadien, cet essai interprète les images de Rutkauskas comme une réflexion sur l'intervention humaine constante sur l'environnement. Ultimement ce projet pousse le spectateur à découvrir ce que signifie partager un environnement séparé non par l'écologie, l'architecture ou l'ethnicité mais par une autorité nationale arbitraire.

Abstract

Written in response to the project Borderline by photographer Andreas Rutkauskas, this essay reflects on the historic, cultural, political, and geographical tensions visually and viscerally experienced along the Canada-US border. Both as an emblem and physical manifestation of the modern nation-state that maintains its authority through the control and surveillance of its boundary, the Canada-US borderline evokes questions about vernacular and official land use, indigenous and settler territorial rights, and the cultural identity inherent in place. Responding to the border points as fraught cultural spaces, Rutkauskas uses his camera to reflect on the visual and spatial similarities—and outright banal ordinariness—found along the vast boundary. Focusing on the western-Canadian portion of the Borderline series, this essay understands Rutkauskas's photographs as a reflection on the continued human transformation of the landscape. Ultimately, this project provokes the viewer to ask what it means to share an environment divided not by ecology, architecture, or ethnicity but by the arbitrariness of national authority.

I am crossing the border in a rented car. It is early summer and I'm enjoying the gloriously scenic drive along the St. Lawrence River from Montreal to the Thousand Islands border crossing under an almost-equinoctial sun. My companion and I have decided to avoid the heavy traffic of Highway 20 (Quebec) / 401 (Ontario) by taking the more winding and time-consuming route through the small towns and cities that make up the most southern border of Canada. The boundary on this route is mostly river: once past Saint-Zotique, Québec, you enter Ontario and for another 50 kilometres or so you drive along a river that is divided between the two largest provinces of Eastern Canada. The Canada/U.S. border becomes watery at Cornwall, Ontario or, more accurately, in the middle of Saint-Régis Mohawk Reservation, which juts into Canadian territory from the American side and is bounded by two countries and two provincial boundar-

ies. Part of the larger Akwesasne Mohawk First Nation on the Canadian side, severed from the Saint Regis Mohawk Reservation in upstate New York, this little blip of land stands as a reminder of the colonial history and violence that continues to shape our understanding of territory, place, and identity in North America. For another 139 kilometres, we drive along a boundary that exists as solidly as a metaphor, with a current that flows across and around and under (into the Earth's very core?) this rock-steady divide. It feels only natural, then, that the border checkpoint should require us to traverse two bridges and a series of islands to achieve our goal of international travel. Somehow, the form of this journey seems right: crossing the border should be as complicated and arbitrary as the surrounding geographical and cultural landscape. Argued another way, creating a boundary is an act of authority, regardless of good intentions or practical neces-

sity. The imposition of place and order on a landscape should be something that we recognize as interventionist and domineering, like lines on a map, done with purpose and insight and, at the very least, it should make us a little uncomfortable.

This border response is not about the North or West of Canada. Like many Westerners, I have ended up "back East"—a funny expression meant to reflect how our origins as Canadians can be traced back to the settler-colonial roots of England and France, regardless of the fact that many of us have no ancestors from those founding nations or even Eastern Canada. These days I am more likely to take a plane across a border than to drive across the physical boundary between Canada and small-town America at one of the small checkpoints that barely see a hundred people in a week. Yet when I fly back West the sense of crossing a border always hits me while I look out the window at the lakes and forests below. Somewhere just north of Thunder Bay, I cross an imaginary boundary and, just like that, I'm almost home.

Like me, the photographer Andreas Rutkauskas is from “out West.” Full disclosure: we grew up together in Winnipeg, playing softball and eating birthday cake in the historic Wolseley neighbourhood, named for the colonel who led the Anglo-Canadian military forces against the Red River Settlement’s short-lived provisional government. When we were kids, you could still drive down to the border crossing at Emerson, Winnipeg’s closest boundary point and enter North Dakota or Minnesota with just your birth certificate and photo ID to do some cross-border shopping. If this makes me sound old, let me clarify that this was not very long ago: only the 1980s and ‘90s, a time before the heightened security and the extensive use of CCTV, thermal-imaging cameras, and other forms of high-tech surveillance. In fact, it wasn’t until 2008 that regulations began to require that Canadians present their passports. To drive from Winnipeg to Grand Forks was still a big deal during our childhoods. Most of the people we knew hadn’t travelled much farther than Vancouver or Toronto, unless as immigrants who often did not have fond memories of their past border experiences. To cross a boundary into another country, especially into our big, bad neighbour to the south, seemed suspect—both risky and cosmopolitan—unless it was for a good consumer deal, something our prairie neighbours could always get behind. Yet, for people living right along the boundary, I suspect things were different. The border was more porous then and going across was like crossing the street. For those folks, it was only in the post-9/11 era, with its escalating regulation of the Canada-U.S. boundary, that the land beyond the border started to feel increasingly like a foreign place.

Rutkauskas understands the power and the fear of borders. Between 2012 and 2015, Rutkauskas traveled the Canada-U.S. boundary line—from Tsawwassen, British Columbia to Campobello, New Brunswick, and up to the most northerly crossing point between Little Gold Creek, Yukon and Poker Creek, Alaska—to photograph official and unofficial, active and decommissioned boundary points between the two nations. The U.S. and Canadian divide is, at 8,891 kilometres, the largest “undefended” border in the world and it marks the landscape softly yet surely: in the words of the International Boundary Commission, the organization in charge of boundary maintenance, it is “undefended but not uncared for.” (“The Boundary”) Across mountains, lakes, and forests—and sometimes right through buildings—the boundary marches along, demarcated at regular intervals by waist-high obelisks (over 5,500 of them), unobtrusive monuments to hundreds of years of bloody and not-so-bloody settler-colonial occupation, settlement, and statecraft in the Americas. By cleaving Canada out of the continent of North America, the boundary renders tangible—if not always visible—the social, political, and cultural histories that lurk behind the innocent signage and loosely barred gates that mark the Canadian from the Other. In the case of the United States of America, the Imperialist Other is both our best friend and the bully we watch for as we walk home from school.

Fig. 1. Monument #276 Waterton Lakes, Alberta - 2014

Fig. 2 Most Northerly Land Border - 2014

Fig. 3 Port of Climax - 2014



In Rutkauskas's series *Borderline*, we see pictured this historical friction, which scholar Rob Nixon has called the tension between vernacular and official landscapes. Nixon, drawing on the ground-breaking work of American cultural geographer J.B. Jackson, describes a vernacular landscape as an evolving space that is integral to the social, economic, and ecological functioning of a local community (Nixon 17). On the other hand, an official landscape is one imposed on a place by an external group, sometimes governmental, non-governmental, and/or corporate, to reshape existing land practices and livelihoods—both human and non-human—for the purpose of bureaucratic, cultural, or financial power gain (17). This type of landscape-reordering attempts to quantify the value of certain people on the land—such as the Mohawk people of Akwesasne or the Métis of Riel's Red River Settlement—and measure the benefits of displacing them to restructure the landscape along official lines. The Canada-U.S. boundary was imposed through such a bureaucratic and delocalizing intervention, “severing webs of accumulated cultural meaning and treating the landscape as if it were uninhabited by the living, the unborn, and the animate deceased” (17). Today, like many acts of greed on the land, what was a *cultural act* of landscape transformation has been normalized to be seen as a regular function of the contemporary nation-state. We expect the authority of border guards to make us nervous, to be watched by CCTV cameras, and to feel slightly uncertain about whether, having made it across, we might have gotten away with something.

Rutkauskas' *Borderline* project was influenced by a 2010 invitation to produce work about the small town of Stanstead, Québec, which, as a border town, shares its town library with Derby Line, Vermont. Inspired by the increase in security in these traditionally linked communities, curator Genèvieve Chevalier invited three artists to respond to the site and the question of how borders shape and transcribe a sense of place (“Exhibitions—Stanstead Project”). Struck by the difference between the well-supervised town and the vast unmonitored forest that stretches out on both sides, Rutkauskas made a series of works—photographs, a book work, a video—that addressed what he calls the “wilderness-border zone” (“Stanstead Project”). In turn, Rutkauskas was inspired to explore the larger critical questions raised by this singular piece of the Canada/U.S. border. Intrigued by the problem of how to represent such a vast and complex site as the Canada/U.S. border, and inspired by the larger global context of migration, borders, and security in the 21st century, Rutkauskas planned his expedition across Canada. Rutkauskas was drawn to the unique and diverse border points: ones that offered complex visual, cultural, and historical readings and aesthetic and spatial problems for his eye to solve. Made up of approximately 50 photographs, a third of which focus on the West of Canada, the photographer now considers the series complete (“Re: Imaginations Journal.”).



As much as *Borderline* reinforces the sense of infrastructure as authority, Rutkauskas' project also displays the banal ordinariness of many boundary points, shaped as they are by local geography, architecture, and land-use. Rutkauskas seeks to capture the similarity of place in his pictures, demonstrating that while the official boundary of the two modern nation-states rely on the authority of separate identities, difference isn't found on the ground or easily pictured. In his image of the small peninsula border town of Tsawwassen, B.C., the two sides of the vast border are distinguished with nothing more than a concrete marker and a chain-link fence. Rutkauskas frames the image tightly between the white clapboard building that stretches across the two sides of the boundary on the left of the picture and the two lane highway that leads towards the ocean, forcing our eye towards the horizon, on the right. In another image, "Chief Mountain, Alberta / Montana" (2014), the divide is marked by a couple rusty gates, a "welcome to Canada" sign, and a six-metre track of cleared forest receding into the mountains. Rutkauskas shoots the crossing from above and his elevated vantage point gives the viewer a direct sightline along the clear-cut tree line that leads towards the distant mountain range. The tiny line of the boundary is apparent even in the distance, as a white scar against the green of the forest.

A committed tourist who enjoys touring little towns, wilderness parks, and scenic routes might easily identify the Western Canadian locations by geography alone. In *Monument #276 Waterton Lakes, Alberta*, the mountains and water

Fig. 4 Chief Mountain,
Alberta / Montana - 2014

Fig. 5 Monument #4 Tsawwassen,
British Columbia - 2014

opposite page:

Fig. 6 Snowflake, Manitoba - 2014





receding into the background behind the concrete marker that reads “Canada” can be clearly recognized as the landscape of the southern Rockies. No small town with border guards marks this site. The Waterton Lakes obelisk is located in a national park in which a micro-habitat of prairie meets the might of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, bordering Montana’s Glacier National Park to the south. These two parks together have been jointly known since 1932 as the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, designated a UNESCO World Heritage in 1995. Fantastically scenic, one might think one was seeing a landscape free of human interference—what we used to call wilderness—if it wasn’t for that tall marker of ownership solidly upright in the middle of the photograph.

Another official peace park marks a border crossing between Manitoba and North Dakota. Its founding in 1932 was a diplomatic event between neighbours attended by 50,000 people and celebrated with the dedication of a rock cairn that pledges: “To God in his Glory, we two nations dedicate this garden and pledge ourselves that as long as men shall live, we will not take up arms against one another” (“History”). Carved from Turtle Mountain Provincial Park on the Canadian side and surrounded by lakes, forests, and farms, and the Turtle Mountain Reservation to the south, the International Peace Park requires visitors to check in and out with customs upon arrival and departure. A colossal landscaped outdoor space that spreads across both sides of the boundary, the garden includes hiking trails, camping, picnicking, a 3000-square foot conservatory, a series of interpretative centers and arts camps, a 18-foot flower clock, a Carillion bell tower, and seven peace poles donated by the government of Japan. Most striking—photographed by Rutkauskas in his image of this site—is the Peace Tower: four concrete columns rise 120 feet into the air, straddling either side



Fig. 7 *International Peace Garden* - 2014

Fig. 8 *Monument #162B, Alaska / Yukon Border* - 2014

of the boundary, two on one side and two on the other. Built in 1982 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the park, today the Peace Tower is a crumbling monument to the folly of building in the international architectural style of late Brutalism in a continental climate. It is currently scheduled for demolition (Wasney). By far the most spectacular of Rutkauskas' border subjects, the International Peace Park is a parody of itself—glorying in its status as monumental symbol of Canadian-U.S. goodwill and freedom of crossing.

On the other hand, the border crossing in Snowflake, Manitoba represents a contrast to the monolithic peace park. The small-town checkpoint is located an hour east of the International Peace Park by car, winding along the small gravel roads and two-lane highways of rural Manitoba. *Snowflake, Manitoba* (2014) pictures a white clapboard building with a peaked dark asphalt roof punctuated by a series of antennae and an overhang for cars to drive through. SNOWFLAKE is marked prominently on the side of the building. A double-car garage to the back completes the architectural infrastructure of the site. In between the two buildings, a truck is pulled off into a field where several bales of hay are piled. To the right of the building, where the road pulls off towards the U.S., a man puts gas into a lawnmower. Just in front of him, a smoky pile of burning weeds confirms that he has been hard at work keeping the boundary clear of unwanted vegetation and unauthorized life. Rutkauskas' photograph shows an official structure imposed on the landscape, just as the grain farms and settler towns in the surrounding

region were forced onto a land once lush with mixed and tall prairie grasses, lady-slippers, and Saskatoon bushes. This small contact point between two vast nations suggests a once vital past for this rural crossing, when agricultural settlers to the fertile uplands of the Pembina Valley would have seen the border as little more than an arbitrary divide, a fence between neighbours.

Borders are fraught cultural spaces, some more so than others, and Rutkauskas' photographs reminds us that even the most seemingly innocuous boundary points

are places of bureaucratic power and authority. By highlighting the tensions between local and official interventions in the landscape, Rutkauskas asks the viewer to consider how national diplomatic, economic, and ecological interests shape our sense of place, identity, and community. Following the history of photography in the Canadian West, when photographers came to survey and document territory for future use, Rutkauskas' *Borderline* pictures the human transformation of the West, offering a new way of imagining what it means to live along, below, and above the 49th parallel.



Fig. 9 *Whiskey Gap, Alberta* - 2014

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Fig. 10 Monument #120
Chilkoot Pass, Alaska - 2014