
FROM
THE
DIVIDING
LINE
SUPPORT FOR CREATION'22
COMISART

WITH WORK BY

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FROM THE DIVIDING LINE

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FROM THE DIVIDING LINE

We live in a time and space in which borders, both literal and figurative, exist everywhere. . . . A border maps limits; it keeps people in and out of an area; it marks the ending of a safe zone and the beginning of an unsafe zone. To confront a border and, more so, to cross a border presumes great risk. In general people fear and are afraid to cross borders. . . . People cling to the dream of utopia and fail to recognize that they create and live in heterotopia.[1]

— Alejandro Morales[2]

1 In *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), Michel Foucault defines *heterotopia* as "the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*. . . . In such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence of them."

2 Alejandro Morales, "Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia", *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe* 20, no. 3 (September–December 1995): 14–27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25745296.

1

border *noun* **1** a line separating two countries, administrative divisions, or other areas. **2** the edge or boundary of something, or the part near it.

boundary *noun* that which serves to indicate the bounds or limits of anything whether material or immaterial; also the limit itself.

Oxford Dictionary of English

border *noun* **1** an outer part or edge. syn MARGIN, VERGE, RIM, BRIM, BRINK.

borderland *noun* **1a** territory at or near a border: FRONTIER. **1b** an outlying region.

borderline *noun* a line of demarcation.

dividing line *noun* a line or object that separates two areas, often used figuratively.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

When we talk about the words *border*, *boundary* or *dividing line*, what first comes to mind? Is it the set of meticulously drawn and accurately measured lines on a map? Or is it some form of intangible social distance between people? *Border* is a word with multiple meanings and it encompasses various different interpretations.

First and foremost, it has a physical definition as an external state border. It pertains to territoriality. It is a rational, authoritative and legal line demarcating different jurisdictions, be it an external border between different countries or an internal boundary marking out internal divisions within a country. Moreover, it can also represent a "zone of transition" between different societies and centres of power,[3] distinguishing the "centre" from the "periphery".

In addition to these tangible, visible boundaries, there are also many invisible borders around us. In his article "Theorizing Borders", Chris Rumford explores the concept of "technical landscapes of control" that extend from physical borderlines.[4] Modern technology, including web browsers, cameras, fingerprint scanners and digital scans, meticulously tracks our every move, making it almost impossible to go anywhere unnoticed. We can barely take a single step from one city to another without being caught on some device or other! In this sense, every town we find ourselves in becomes a new frontline, although since the advent of modern means of transport, we no longer need to cross physical boundaries on foot. As a result, in the context of globalisation, the concept of the *border* has evolved into a new spatial dimension of politics.[5]

The discursive landscape of social power is another significant component of invisible borders: language, narratives and communication practices are used to influence, control or discuss balances and distributions of power in a certain society. Over the long term, these factors

3 Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay, eds., *Medieval Frontier Societies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

4 Chris Rumford, "Theorizing Borders", *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (May 2006): 155–169.

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Society under Siege* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

gradually create an institutionalised structure that manifests itself in the material landscape of the entire society, ranging from military commemorations and ideologies to nationalistic acts, expressions and performances,[6] including significant national events and celebrations, grand displays of flags, militaristic parades and portraits of leaders, as well as the various forms of media propaganda in our daily lives and even the education of children and young people. All these elements subtly reinforce a sense of internal homogenisation or/and nationalism. These "emotional landscapes of control" distinguish originally diverse communities and separate "us" and "ours" from "them" and "theirs".

In essence, these invisible boundaries, both technical and discursive, shape our perceptions and interactions in profound ways that extend far beyond countries' physical borders. This new form of border, deeply embedded in our daily lives, influences not only how we move but also how we think and interact with the world around us. The omnipresence of technology, coupled with the subtle yet powerful forces of nationalistic and ideological narratives, crafts a reality where borders are no longer just lines on a map but intrinsic parts of our social fabric. They dictate the flow of information, culture and even personal identity, often without our conscious awareness. As we navigate through this landscape, it becomes crucial to question and understand the implications of these invisible borders on our freedom, privacy and sense of belonging in an increasingly interconnected yet divided world.

6 Anssi Paasi, "A Border Theory: An Unattainable Dream or a Realistic Aim for Border Scholars?", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 11–31.

The convergence of invisible borders in contemporary society elucidates a complex interplay among technology, politics and social constructs. This phenomenon in turn necessitates a critical examination of the modalities through which power is exercised and perpetuated via these covert mechanisms. In the context of globalisation and the digital era, recognising and identifying these invisible borders becomes paramount. Such an analysis is essential for discerning whether these borders function as connectors or dividers, as instruments of empowerment or control. And this discourse is indispensable for developing a more inclusive and equitable global community. It calls for a critical assessment of how diversity and individual freedoms are either upheld or undermined within these frameworks. The future trajectory of our interconnected world is contingent upon a nuanced understanding of these borders. Academic enquiry can examine how these borders can be reconfigured, not as lines of demarcation but as spaces for the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures and ideas. More exploratory than prescriptive, this approach seeks to understand the dynamics of invisible borders in the shaping of contemporary society.

2

The Utopian Imagination of a Borderless World

At some point, many of us might well have been, or perhaps still are, caught up in the utopian imagination of a "borderless world". This concept first gained prominence in an article by Kenichi Ohmae in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1989 and was fleshed out more fully the following year in his book *The Borderless World: Power and Strategy in the Interlinked Economy*. Shaped against the backdrop of globalisation, Ohmae's theory constructed a new consumer-driven "truly global world". In this world without boundaries, he believed that all national borders and invisible barriers would become transparent as a result of internationalised consumption and trade:

> On a political map, the boundaries between countries are as clear as ever. But on a competitive map, a map showing the real flows of financial and industrial activity, those boundaries have largely disappeared. Of all the forces eating them away, perhaps the most persistent is the flow of information—information that governments previously monopolized. . . . Their monopoly of knowledge about things happening around the world enabled them to fool, mislead, or control the people, because only the governments possessed real facts in anything like real time. . . . When information flows with relative freedom, the old geographic barriers become irrelevant.[7]

7 Kenichi Ohmae, *The Borderless World: Power and Strategy in the Interlinked Economy* (New York: Harper Business, 1990), 18–19, 22.

This borderless world may to some extent have become established in contemporary society, but Ohmae's theory has evident shortcomings. For while we can sit at home and shop online for products available worldwide, things begin to look rather less rosy when courier services withhold our goods from other countries and demand additional taxes—this is when we feel the inconvenience of real geographical barriers and suffer a sense of powerlessness. And although online social media platforms have indeed broken the information monopolies that governments and official media once held, we continually find ourselves lost in a sea of information, where it is difficult to determine whom to trust. Not to mention the disinformation, malicious competition and defamation that politicians and political parties concoct at election time and then spread on a global scale. And this is but a tiny fraction of the many mental and physical borders we encounter in our daily lives.

Henry Wai-chung Yeung suggests that the notion of a borderless world is "more folklore than reality". In fact, this expression can be read as an ironic swipe at the intricate and multifaceted relationships between capital, nation-states and localities, understood here as specific geographical areas or places often characterised by their distinct features, boundaries and communities. Varying in size from small neighbourhoods or villages to larger towns, cities or regions, localities are defined by their geographical location and can be distinguished by cultural, social, economic or political attributes unique to that area. Yeung argues that the multifaceted trends of globalisation

will neither lead to a borderless world nor result in the end of geography. Capital is not intangible and fluid; it is rooted in localities.[8] In examples closer to home, slogans like "Tourists Go Home" and "Ban Short-Term Rentals" can be seen throughout the streets and alleys of Barcelona. Local resistance of this kind, and expressed in similarly pithy terms, seems to be on the rise every year.

As envisioned by Ohmae, the concept of a borderless world presents an idealised vision of global interconnectedness driven primarily by economic forces. This perspective posits that the relentless march of globalisation, bolstered by advancements in technology and communication, will inevitably erode traditional national boundaries, leading to a more integrated global economy. From this vantage point, the world is seen as a single market, where the flow of capital, goods and information transcends geographical and political barriers to create a seamless global network.

However compelling in its optimism, this vision may oversimplify the complexities of global interconnectedness. It underestimates the resilience of national borders and the enduring significance of local cultures, politics and economies. While global trade and communication networks have indeed blurred some of the lines that once clearly demarcated national boundaries, they have not erased the importance of place and context. The persistence of local identities and the resurgence of nationalist sentiments in various parts of the world suggest that the notion of a borderless world is more aspirational

8 Henry Wai-chung Yeung, "Capital, State and Space: Contesting the Borderless World", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 23, no. 3 (September 1998): 291–309.

than actual.

In re-evaluating the concept of a borderless world, it is crucial to acknowledge the disparities that globalisation and technological advancements have brought to light. The ideal of a seamless global network where information and resources flow unimpeded contrasts sharply with the reality of uneven development and access. Rather than flattening disparities, globalisation often accentuates them, creating pockets of exclusion even in an increasingly connected world. The digital divide not only highlights the gap in technological access but also underscores the broader socioeconomic disparities that persist globally.

Therefore, while the vision of a borderless world encapsulates the potential for global unity and interconnectedness, it also risks oversimplifying the complexities and inequalities inherent in the global landscape. In its most optimistic form, the narrative of a world without borders overlooks the nuanced realities of those who remain on the peripheries of this global integration. As such, this concept, while forward-looking and aspirational, requires a more grounded approach that considers the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of our modern world.

3

Borders Are Everywhere

We live in a world full of boundaries. As Étienne Balibar aptly stated: “Borders are everywhere”.[9] Although the the symbolic system of the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain, which sharply demarcated ideological and political boundaries, was dismantled after the Cold War, the world today is still marked by various forms of boundaries and obstacles, from international conflicts like the Ukraine–Russia war and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to internal challenges such as the European refugee crisis, terrorist attacks, the resurgence of nationalism, the rise and electoral success of far-right political parties and a widespread dissatisfaction with liberal democracy. All these examples serve as constant reminders of the multiple layers of restrictions and barriers around us, as well as the invisible distances between people. If religious conflicts or wars in the Middle East may seem like easily ignored, distant news, events like the Ukraine–Russia war in Europe and rising oil and commodity prices make it clear that these issues are actually happening right now in our very midst and have significant impacts on our lives.

The exhibition *FROM THE DIVIDING LINE* comprises eight works from the ”la Caixa” Foundation and MACBA Collections selected to bring the concept of “borders” back into perspective and stimulate public discussion. The artists featured—Vanessa Beecroft, Pep Duran, Asier Mendizabal, Annette Messager, Paulo Nazareth, Francesc Torres,

9 Étienne Balibar, “The Borders of Europe”, in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 216–233

Isidoro Valcárcel Medina and Akram Zaatari—explore the "dividing line" discourse from various angles, addressing physical boundaries such as flags and geographical borders, as well as abstract, invisible boundaries related to religion, ideology, gender and the hidden distances between individuals. Although created some years ago, many of their artworks resonate remarkably with certain historical moments and lay the groundwork for a profound exploration of the exhibition and the concept of "borders" by prompting introspection and reflection on the weight of historical context.

I agree with Cas Mudde when he argues that, when faced with far-right forces on the rise, politicians are all too willing to sound the warning "If you don't vote for me, the far right will win" without providing any practical solutions for improving society—a shortcoming that can lead people to become increasingly disenchanted and eventually disengage from the political process.[10] Instead, might we not explore alternative avenues for addressing social issues linked to geopolitical boundaries or unseen impediments that lie beyond the reach of government oversight? While such approaches may not present immediate, all-encompassing solutions or policies, they could function as gradual and subtle modes of communication. Art and culture can act as bridges to overcome invisible borders, deepen mutual understanding and foster empathy. It may sound ambitious or utopian, but this exhibition attempts to use contemporary art as a lens to focus thought and

10 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

encourage reflection on boundaries and mutual distrust and estrangement in today's society by providing a platform for diverse, respectful coexistence and equal dialogue. Contemporary art practices have a unique ability to transcend these boundaries and inspire dialogue and connection among individuals and communities.

FROM THE DIVIDING LINE not only showcases artistic interpretations of borders but also serves as a mirror reflecting the current sociopolitical climate. The artworks, diverse in medium and message, collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of borders, both visible and invisible. They challenge visitors to confront the realities of division, whether manifested in the form of national borders, cultural divides or ideological rifts. In this context, the role of art transcends aesthetic appreciation; it becomes a tool for social commentary and a catalyst for change. Through their works, the artists provide alternative narratives and perspectives and invite viewers to reconsider their understanding of borders and boundaries and the forces that shape them.

Moreover, the exhibition posits contemporary art as a medium for fostering dialogue and empathy in a world increasingly polarised by rigid boundaries. In essence, the exhibition is a call to action—an invitation to engage in conversations that bridge the gaps created by physical and ideological borders. It suggests that art, in its myriad forms, can serve as a unifying force, offering a space

for diverse voices and experiences. In doing so, it not only challenges the existing notions of borders but also reimagines the possibilities of a world where these divisions are acknowledged, questioned and perhaps eventually transcended.

4

Flags

The national flag typically serves as an emblem of a country's identity, designed to proudly proclaim its existence within its current territorial boundaries while also representing its historical background and aspirations. It plays a pivotal role in fostering national pride and unity among its citizens and its constant presence is taken for granted. Flags therefore represent a "banal nationalism"[11] that goes unnoticed but unconsciously reaffirms us in our sense of belonging or national identity. As Tim Marshall posits, a flag is a political symbol that assumes a pivotal role in international diplomacy and domestic politics, often described as the "banner of nationalism".[12] Flags are often found fluttering in the wind along a country's borders and their presence is consistently observed at events such as the Olympics or international negotiations. Beyond national flags, historical party banners or association symbols have similarly conveyed their historical, value-laden and cultural significance. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that this revered and consequential symbol is, in fact, a social construct of human design, much like the artificial delineation of the geographical and sociopolitical borders it represents. These constructs artificially partition groups sharing commonalities in culture, history, religion, language and ethnic origin, even though the meaning and significance of state borders and their geographical placement may change over space and time.

11 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).

12 Tim Marshall, *Divided: Why We're Living in an Age of Walls* (London: Elliott & Thompson Limited, 2018).

Flags can serve as a potent medium for artistic expression, with artists employing them to convey intricate thoughts, pointed critiques of society and their own personal viewpoints. The reinterpretation or subversion of established perceptions concerning flags can incite discussions related to the concepts of territoriality, boundaries and nationalism. *FROM THE DIVIDING LINE* includes two key works closely associated with the concept of the flag. Brazilian artist Paulo Nazareth's large-scale installation ***Banderas rotas*** (Broken Flags, 2014) occupies the central area of the exhibition space, instantly capturing visitors' attention as they enter. Arranged at different angles on wooden pallets, 19 analogue television sets show images of various national flags swaying in the wind. Some dangle perilously from the top of flagpoles, almost blown away by the strong winds; others tremble and waver at different heights and positions; another set remains relatively still. These videos were captured and collected by the artist during a two-year journey to various locations.

Intriguingly, these television sets are all positioned below eye level, requiring visitors to lower their heads and look down at these flags. Likewise, the use of commonplace wooden pallets as a base further divests the flags of their usually formality. This installation offers a stark contrast to the conventional notion that national flags should be flying high and proud, typically at a height governed by specific laws, regulations and cultural norms. Furthermore, the

interaction between the wind and the flags in each video is an additional focal point of interest. The sacred national flags, laden with symbolic significance in human society, are helplessly at the mercy of the ravages of the wind, stripped of any "prestige", offering a metaphorical allusion to the insignificance of human actions when compared with the forces of nature.

Another related work is the 4.5 m by 3 m flag installation ***Not all that moves is red (Telón) #1*** (2012), by Basque artist Asier Mendizabal. This distinctive work combines red and black to form a mosaic-like geometric pattern that easily triggers numerous associations upon first sight. Red-and-black flags exist in real life, and many carry significant historical and political meanings. One notable example is the Anarchist Flag, typically composed of these two colours, with the black symbolising anarchism and opposition to authority and the red representing the struggle for socialism and workers' rights. In addition, the flag of the National Socialist German Workers' Party also notably included black and red. The red background represented the party's originally socialist roots as a workers' party—although it later adopted extreme nationalist and far-right political positions—while also symbolising its unity and strength. The central black swastika embodied the flag's distinctive ideology and authoritarianism, with black signifying the party's authority and control. The visual impact of the combination of red and black, together

with the contrasting meanings and the political conflicts symbolised by these two flags, makes this artwork exceptionally prominent in this exhibition.

The combination of red and black also brings to mind Spanish director Carlos Arévalo's film *Rojo y negro* (1942), which tells the story of a couple from Madrid who grew up together but developed vastly different political affiliations: he became a member of a left-wing party, while she joined the far-right Falange Española. Their divergent political choices are swept away by the currents of history, leading the two of them down entirely different paths in life. This film is one of several movies in Spain to prominently feature the concept of the Falange Española, and it shares the red and black in its title with the colours of the flags of both the Falange Española and the Spanish anarchist movement Federación Anarquista Ibérica. The film was initially banned by the Franco regime and was only restored by the Spanish Film Archive in 1996. In this context, the intersection of red and black in the flag not only gives the film its title but also vividly illustrates the boundaries and divisions between individuals (such as the main characters) caused by their differing political ideologies. Red and black, these two contrasting colours, serve as a sharp metaphor, cutting through and dividing the many moments of seeming contentment and happiness in the river of history.

5

Lines on Maps and Geopolitical Limits

Maps consist of various boundaries and geopolitical limits. The end of the land, sandy ocean beds, turbulent rivers, steep mountain peaks, towering cliffs, vast forests and sweeping deserts all represent natural boundaries. National borders, provincial boundaries, city limits, regional and socioeconomic divisions, urban–rural divides, as well as the boundaries between the natural and industrial environments, are human-made boundaries. These boundaries delineate and piece together the maps we are familiar with, indicating where safe and viable frontiers lie and warning of perilous and complex terrains. Human-made map boundaries are not immutable; they change over time and history.

According to the theories of Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel,[13] borders serve as markers in two ways. First, they demarcate clear boundaries between citizens with certain rights and obligations on the one hand and "aliens" or "foreigners" on the other. Second, they become markers of the actual power exercised by a state over its society. As Peter Sahlins points out, states do not merely impose boundaries or nations on local levels. In the past, village communities, peasants and nobles used demarcated nation-state borders to define their own social and territorial boundaries. Even after the establishment of boundaries, state power in border regions may remain

13 Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 211–42. https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2005.0061.

restricted and unstable. Local community members attempt to use state institutions to achieve their goals, sometimes even playing one country off against another.[14] Geopolitical boundaries extend from human-made borders on maps and possess strong territorial, cultural and social significance. They can foster interaction and mutual development between commercial cultures or generate disputes and bloodshed that can last for years or even centuries.

In the exhibition space, two works delve into the boundaries of maps and geopolitical conflicts. The first, ***Grafismos de frontera*** (Border Graphics, 2016), is a set of six drawings by Spanish artist Isidoro Valcárcel Medina. Each drawing maps out the geographical border between Spain and Portugal anew using commonly used words in Spanish and Portuguese—written on tracing paper in black and blue ink respectively—starting with a letter from a particular section in the alphabet. Set against the white background, the linear, geometrical language of text divides and redefines the space. Different languages frequently underlie the demarcation of geographical national borders and territoriality, and from an anthropological perspective they fundamentally distinguish two ethnic groups and their societal characteristics. However, these seemingly unquestionable national boundaries are often the result of human-made divisions, sometimes separating two ethnic groups that were originally culturally and linguistically

14 Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 276.

similar. Language and writing are poetic in nature, and Valcárcel's set of drawings not only questions how the geographical borders of two countries shape our political and cultural structures but also prompts viewers to engage in reflection through romantic writings and techniques.

When interviewed about this piece, Isidoro Valcárcel Medina says that "grafismos" refers to written text and drawings or images created through writing, the first of which is the border itself. The separation between people caused by borders has not ceased to exist. He believes that although the border between Spain and Portugal, as chronicled in history, may be one of the oldest in Europe, it makes no more or less sense than any other border. People adhere to such borders because they serve their interests. More specifically, as a construct of political and cultural identity, the geographical border between Spain and Portugal shapes our individual identities. This fictitious border is ultimately just a political issue that is hard to explain rationally. "Think about things such as language differences: we all know that if a Portuguese and a Spaniard converse slowly, they can understand each other perfectly well."[15]

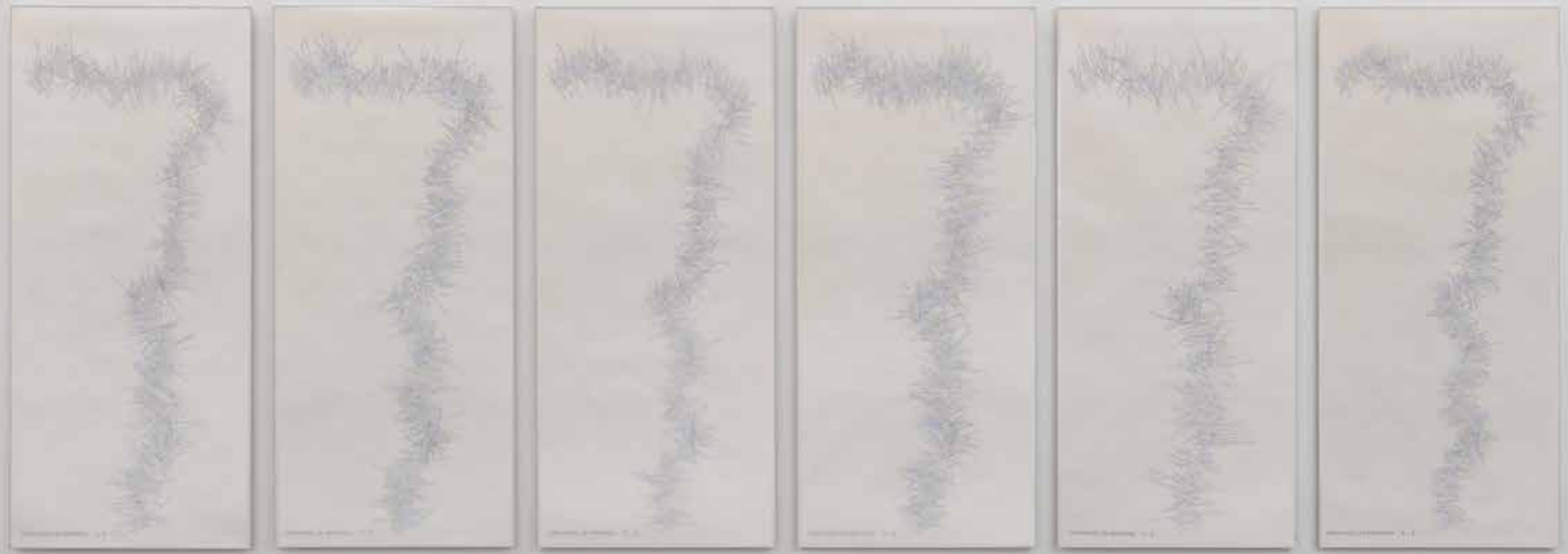
The second work is the video piece ***Nature morte*** (Still Life, 2008), by Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari. This artwork revolves around the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and gains added reflective significance in the current context

15 Estela Viana, "Grafismos de fronteira", 25 October 2016, in *Emissão em português*, produced by Radiotelevisión Española, podcast, MP3 audio, 33:18, https://www.rtve.es/play/audios/emision-en-portugues/emissao-em-portugues-mostra-sobre-fronteiras-construcao-politica-cultural-25-10-16/3770364/.

following Hamas's incursion into Israel and the subsequent military action taken by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip. In this 11 min 30 s video we witness a sombre moment: two men, one older and one younger, are preparing for an impending military operation. The scene unfolds in dim lighting, with the older man appearing gaunt and sharp, his furrowed brows concentrating on binding explosives with tape. In stark contrast, the younger man, whose baby-faced appearance is incongruent with his scruffy beard, is carefully sewing a patch onto a worn jacket sleeve and packing canned food. This scene sparks a cascade of thoughts: What are they preparing for? What does the future hold for them? How many casualties will result from this operation? As the video draws to a close, the two men stand face to face, wordlessly. It seems as if there is an abundance of words left unspoken, or perhaps silence is the only communication between them. Suddenly, the lights go out, leaving only the silhouettes of the two men cast on the wall. Ultimately, the older man, armed, leaves the house, while the young man stays behind.

The video was shot in Hubbariyeh, a village in the Aarqub region of southern Lebanon which served as a base for the Fedayeen (Palestinian resistance fighters) in the late 1960s. The village is just a few kilometres away from the disputed Shebaa Farms, currently under Israeli control. In the video, we can clearly sense the impact of border disputes on the lives of two generations and their differing approaches to

war. The unspoken understanding between the two actors blends with the sounds of prayers coming from the mosque. It exposes the harsh reality: besides wars related to border conflicts and geopolitics, there are also intangible yet omnipresent social, political and religious boundaries.



6

Invisible Borders in Everyday Life

What kind of boundaries are invisible in everyday life? The artwork ***Esotro s/t*** (Otherone Untitled, 1999), by Catalan artist Pep Duran, interprets this concept through visual languages. This installation consists of five hanging garment ensembles in deep black and grey, giving a somewhat sombre and oppressive impression. Four of the ensembles are neatly suspended at one end of the wall, while a single black one hangs in solitary isolation at the opposite end. Although garments, they inevitably evoke thoughts about the people who once wore them and the stories behind them. The black garment appears to be isolated and exudes a sense of vulnerability and unease. All these clothes are of the same colour palette and make, so why have they been separated into two groups? Is this intentional? What criteria were used to set them apart? These questions are mere associations upon viewing the artwork and perhaps there are no answers, nor any need for them. However, the sense of solitude and the oppressive atmosphere created by the installation itself are undeniable. The distance between the two groups of garments has become an invisible chasm, separating what was originally a similar collective.

Of course, the debates about borders raised in this exhibition go beyond geographical edges, territorial divisions and the issues they generate. As mentioned earlier, there are invisible boundaries in people's everyday lives. Differences in skin colour, religion, race, ideology,

culture or language can lead to feelings of discomfort, unease, discord or even violence. Conversely, this diversity and complexity can also inspire inspiration and creativity, as exemplified by Italian artist Vanessa Beecroft's photograph ***Black Madonna with Twins*** (2006). Beecroft explained in an interview[16] that the inspiration for this series of works came from a religious journey: while travelling in South Sudan, she sought to alleviate her pain from mastitis and was invited by local orphanage nuns to breastfeed homeless infants. Although for various objective reasons she was unable to fulfil her wish to adopt the twins she breastfed, their vivid images have always stayed in her mind, never to be erased. Upon returning home, she started creating this series of works and connected them with her environment and references to Italian religious art.

In this artwork, a black Madonna is adorned in a crimson robe, exuding an air of sanctity and regalness as she sits gracefully on an ebony lacquered chair. Her head is turned slightly to one side, with her gaze directed upwards as she cradles a pair of black twins in her arms. The photograph captures a grey-toned ground and wall with a texture reminiscent of the *cun*[17] brushwork technique found in Chinese painting, and the stark visual contrast leaves a powerful impact. The skin tones of the Madonna and the children in this piece differ significantly from the traditional depictions commonly found in Catholic iconography. It gives rise to a sense of cognitive disruption and may even evoke discomfort in some viewers. However, this raises the question of who exactly dictates the norm that religious

16 Neville Wakefield, "Interview with Vanessa Beecroft", *Flash Art*, December 2016, https://flash---art.com/article/vanessa-beecroft-2/.

17 *Cun* (Chinese: 皴) in Chinese painting, refers to brushstrokes or dabs that give texture, or surface, to the pictorial elements. Definition from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: https://www.britannica.com/art/cun.

figures must conform to predetermined skin colours. Is this not a contemplation of the latent, invisible boundaries entrenched within our biases and fixed preconceptions? Furthermore, it is worth noting that the dominant colour palette of red and black in this artwork resonates with Asier Mendizabal's flag installation and that the black Madonna here recalls the *Moreneta* in the Montserrat Monastery in Catalonia.

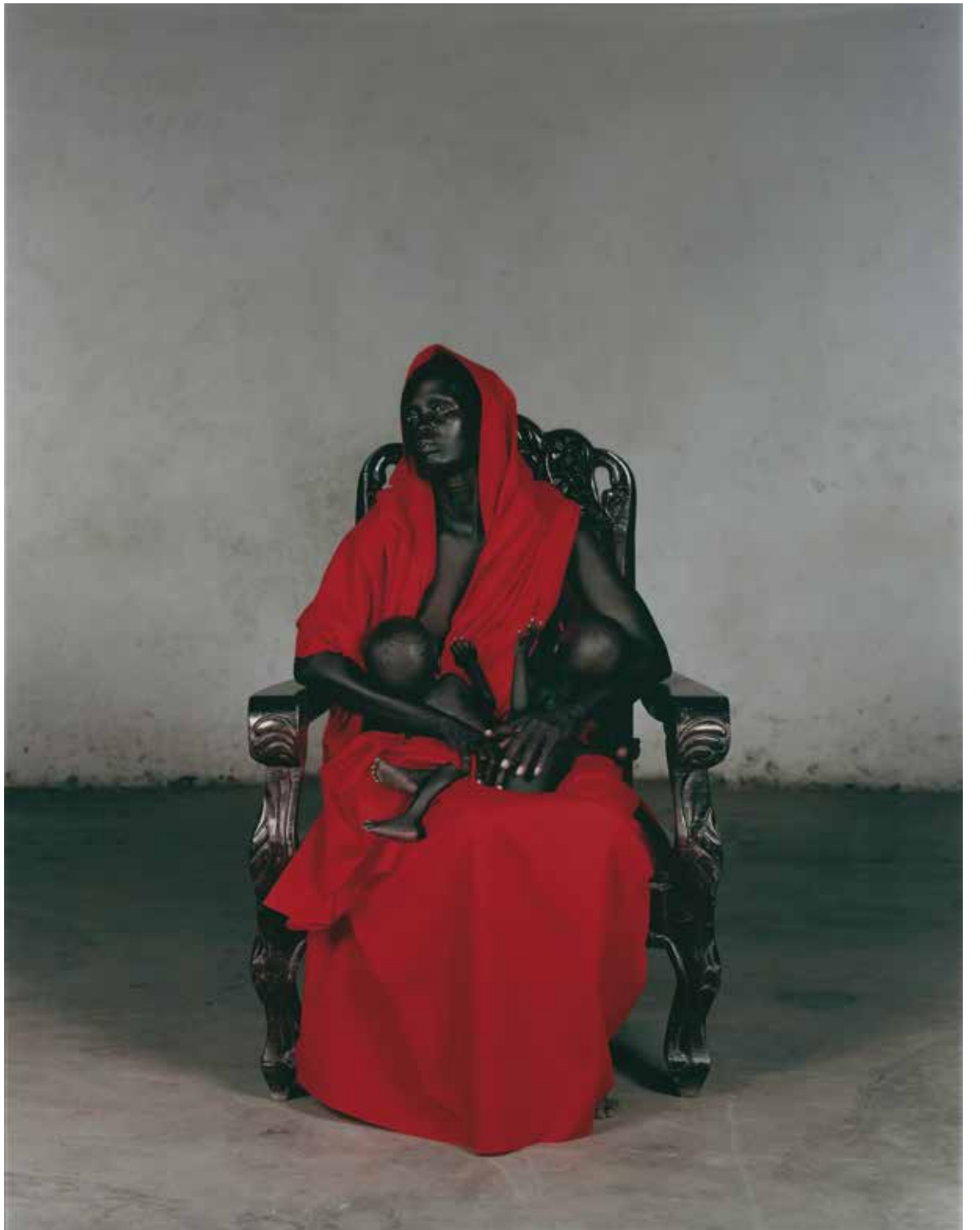
Another example of invisible boundaries is the artwork ***Construction of the Matrix*** (1976), by Catalan artist Francesc Torres. At first glance, the centrepiece of this installation appears to be a mound of earth lit by a radiant red light to reveal a neonatal image. However, a closer look reveals that the mound is actually made up of a multitude of spent bullet casings. In addition, two books illuminated by reading lamps lie open on two sides of the mound. The book under the brighter light is *The Communist Manifesto*, while the book under dimmer lighting is the New Testament. This installation resembles a theatrical stage, portraying a blood-red, curled-up new life reborn from the ashes of heavy bombardment and incineration. Every metaphor in the artwork appears to point towards a specific segment of historical memory: the Spanish Civil War and postwar period, when, following ideological conflicts and persecution of the defeated side, a new societal paradigm emerged. What is the cost of seeking freedom and challenging political and ideological boundaries? Perhaps only the scattered bullet casings and ashes on the ground hold the answer.

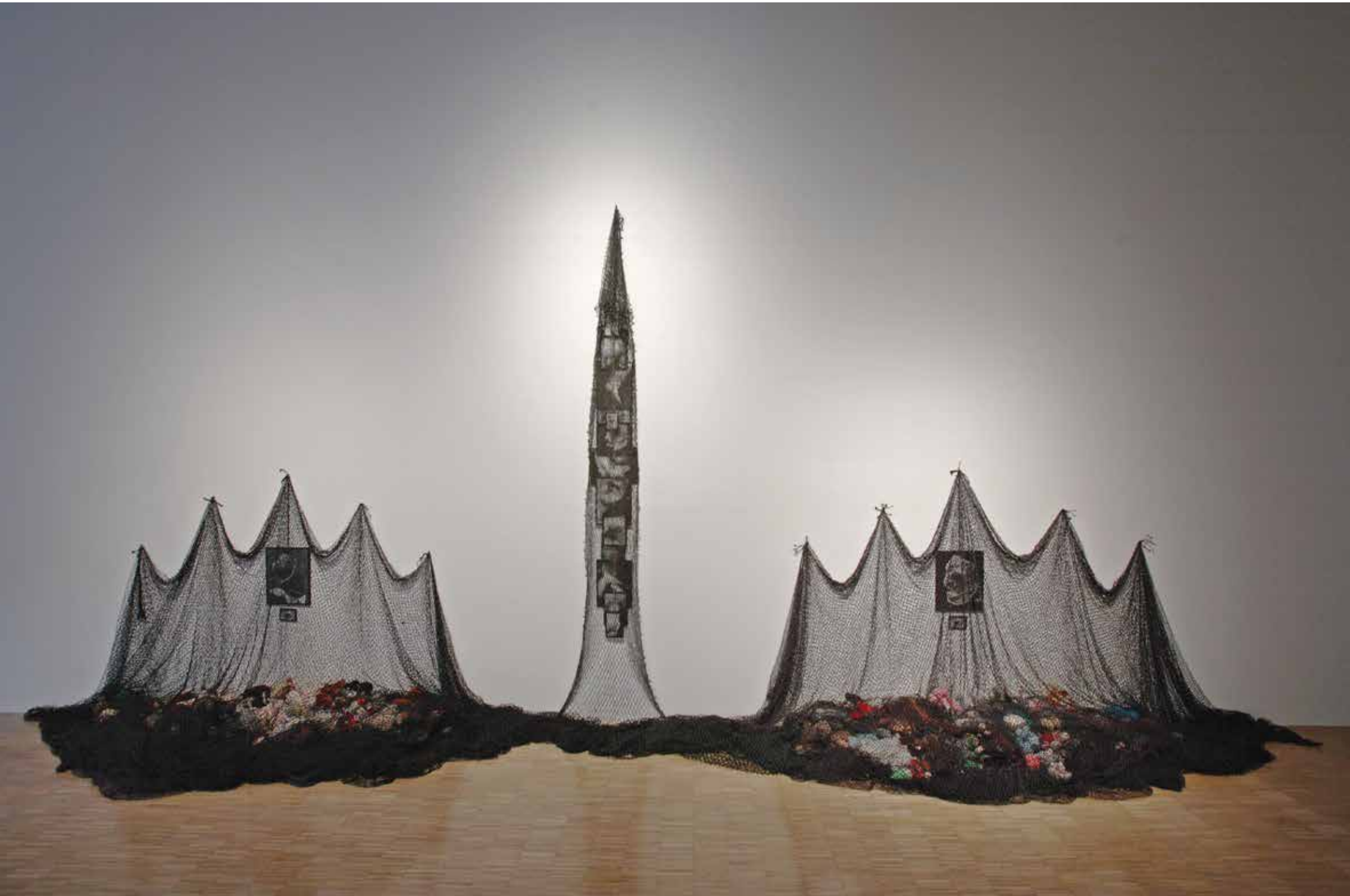
The final piece is French artist Annette Messager's installation artwork ***Jeu de deuil*** (Mourning Game, 1994), in which suspended black-and-white photographs and stuffed toys are enmeshed by a large black net. The photographs depict various parts of the human body and bear a striking resemblance to her earlier piece *Mes vœux* (My Vows, 1988–1991). Here, however, the photographs are arranged differently and assembled into two distinct shapes: the long vertical strip at the centre of the piece is flanked on either side by two squat sections, each with two photographs positioned above stuffed toys scattered on the ground. The first impression upon encountering this piece may well be a sense of almost suffocating unease. From a distance, the centrally suspended amalgamation of photographs looks like a monument or a tombstone in a cemetery, and the photographs on the left and right can easily resemble images of the deceased and their plaques. The scattered stuffed toys evoke a sense of offering or tribute to these photographs. The use of a large black net—reminiscent of funeral colours in some cultures—further intensifies this feeling of discomfort.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of stuffed toys typically associated with children alongside photographs of adult bodies is also uncanny. By breaking conventional boundaries, this arrangement challenges our perceptions. In keeping with its title, it seems to be a lament for adults gazing at their increasingly corpulent and bloated bodies, mourning the crossing of the line between the innocence and tenderness of childhood and the harsh reality of

adulthood. It also recalls the practice of placing toys and flowers by lampposts as a tribute to children who died in disasters, particularly after terrorist attacks. When asked about the meaning of her work, Messager herself once remarked: "Meanings can migrate; those that have no certain value are the most dangerous."[18] In this piece, the unorthodox arrangement and the breaking of conventional boundaries infuse seemingly ordinary objects with a reflective purpose and meaning. In this undefined state, the previously undervalued becomes powerful.

18 Sheryl Conkelton and Carol S. Eliel, *Annette Messager* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 33, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_471_300063148.pdf.





7

Past and Present

As George Santayana cautioned: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”[19] Although the ”la Caixa” Foundation and MACBA Collections date back several decades, the contextual background to each artwork, while not entirely similar to the present, remains highly meaningful for people’s understanding of contemporary conflicts. *FROM THE DIVIDING LINE* is an experimental exhibition practice. Many topics covered in the exhibition were banned from discussion at different periods in some countries’ history. Furthermore, even in today’s world, artworks or exhibition themes of this nature continue to undergo scrutiny and suspension or are stamped with a “sensitive” label in many countries. Yet why do borderlands or boundaries become controversial topics? If we choose to avoid discussing and contemplating them, or shy away from examining these histories, will they cease to exist? No, they persist, and our disregard may even empower them further, making them more formidable.

In a sense, if this exhibition can prompt reflection, make you uncomfortable or provoke different opinions within you, it has already achieved a step change. We are living in the middle of a paradigm shift that is already in us.[20] Furthermore, although its overarching subject matter may seem weighty, *FROM THE DIVIDING LINE* does not approach discussions on borders and boundaries from a negative perspective. On the contrary, its purpose is

19 George Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense, vol. 1, The Life of Reason* (New York: Scribner's, 1905), 284.

20 Inspired by Paul B. Preciado, “I Am Falling in Love”, *Artforum*, 6 October 2022, https://www.artforum.com/slant/i-am-falling-in-love-89412.

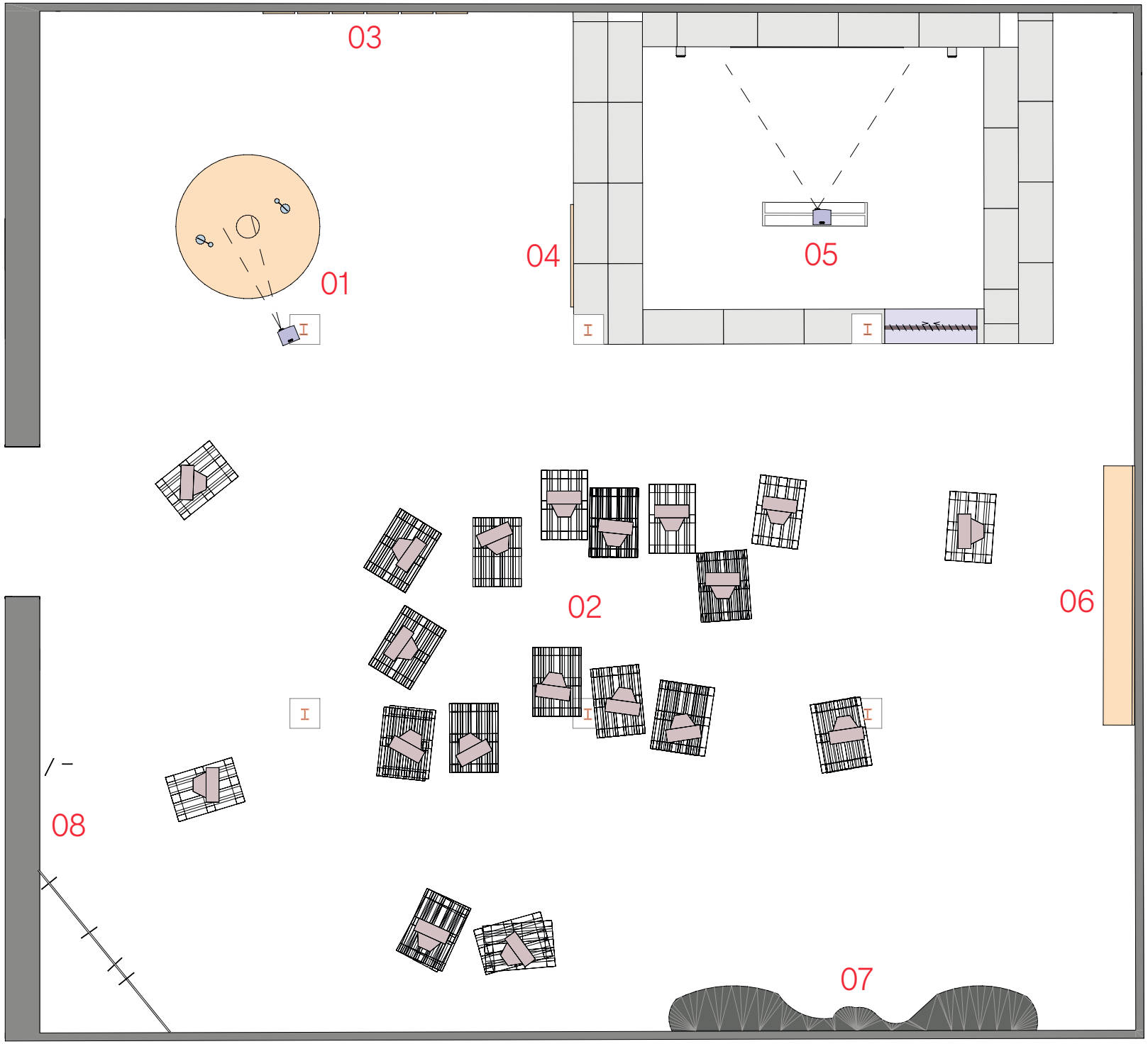
to provide a visual experience that eschews any form of exclusion or homogenisation, emphasising the diversity and complexity of the contemporary world.

As Marcel Proust remarked in *Time Regained*, “Every reader, as he reads, is actually the reader of himself.”[21] Barcelona, as a globally renowned tourist city, welcomes visitors from various backgrounds: locals from Catalonia, citizens from elsewhere in Spain, other Europeans and people from all over the world with diverse nationalities, sociopolitical perspectives and cultural contexts. These viewers can interpret and reflect on these artworks based on their own unique real-life experiences. The exhibition prompts visitors to confront uncomfortable truths and challenge preconceived notions. Borders, whether physical or metaphorical, persist in shaping our comprehension of the world around us. Through engagement with the artworks, audiences are asked to ponder the significance of boundaries, the influence of historical narratives and the role of perception in shaping our collective consciousness. In this nuanced exploration, *FROM THE DIVIDING LINE* acts as a reflective surface, capturing the diversity and complexity of today’s world. It invites visitors to become active participants in the ongoing dialogue surrounding borders, conflict and the intricate facets of the human experience.

21 Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Stephen Hudson (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931). Originally published as *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927).

GALLERY

LAYOUT



01
Francesc Torres
Construction of the Matrix
1976

02
Paulo Nazareth
Banderas rotas
2014

03
Isidoro Valcárcel Medina
Grafismos de frontera
2016

04
Vanessa Beecroft
Black Madonna with Twins
2006

05
Akram Zaatari
Nature morte
2008

06
Asier Mendizabal
Not all that moves is red (Telón) #1
2012

07
Annette Messager
Jeu de deuil
1994

08
Pep Duran
Esotro s/t
1999

LIST OF ARTWORKS

PAGES 60–61

Vanessa Beecroft
Black Madonna with Twins

2006
Digital C-print
231 × 178 cm
”la Caixa” Foundation Contemporary Art Collection

PAGES 58–59

Pep Duran
Esotro s/t
[Otherone Untitled]

1999
Fabric, lead and wood
Varying dimensions
MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium.
On loan from the artist

COVER AND PAGES 38–39

Asier Mendizabal
Not all that moves is red (Telón) #1

2012
Stitched cloth
300 × 450 cm
”la Caixa” Foundation Contemporary Art Collection

PAGES 64–67

Annette Messager
Jeu de deuil
[Mourning Game]

1994
17 black-and-white framed photographs, soft toys and nets
264 × 650 × 75 cm
”la Caixa” Foundation Contemporary Art Collection

PAGES 35–37

Paulo Nazareth
Banderas rotas
[Broken Flags]

2014
19-channel video installation, colour, sound
Varying dimensions
”la Caixa” Foundation Contemporary Art Collection

PAGES 62–63

Francesc Torres
Construction of the Matrix

1976
Sand, stones, bullet casings, surgical scissors, lamps, books and slide projection
Varying dimensions
MACBA Collection. Ajuntament de Barcelona long-term loan

PAGES 46–49

Isidoro Valcárcel Medina
Grafismos de frontera
[Border Graphics]

2016
Ink on tracing paper
6 drawings each measuring 126.5 × 56.5 cm
”la Caixa” Foundation Contemporary Art Collection

PAGES 50–51

Akram Zaatari
Nature morte
[Still Life]

2008
Single-channel video, colour, sound, 11 min 30 s
Ed. 5/5 + 2 A.P.
Varying dimensions
MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium

BIOGRAPHY

Mei Huang (1989) is an independent curator, researcher, writer and lecturer based in Barcelona, where she currently works at Blanquerna–Ramon Llull University. She holds an MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths, University of London, and is due to complete her PhD in Art History at the University of Barcelona in 2024. Huang is the author of the book *La Xina avui. Minories, cultura i societat* (China Today: Minorities, Culture and Society, Lleonard Muntaner Editor, 2022) and has curated a number of international exhibitions, including *The Protector* (Beijing Aimer Art Museum, 2022), *Silent Narratives* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Yinchuan, 2019), *Survey* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chengdu, 2014) and *Asia Triennial Manchester* (CFCCA, Manchester, 2014), among others. She is also a regular contributor to *ArtReview*'s "Power 100" and writes articles and columns for *The Art Newspaper* and the China-based *Art and Business Journal*.


"la Caixa" Foundation