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Spontaneous Cosmic Becomings: El Paso Spontaneous Shrine and Cosmic Generator Cut Together in Conocimiento

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Abstract

This paper considers Mika Rottenberg's Cosmic Generator alongside the El Paso spontaneous shrine constructed after the August 3, 2019 mass shooting to examine the material conditions of difference with which we are entangled and construct meaning. This paper utilizes an entangled methodology to explore connections and complexities produced by reading these two works together in order to produce complicated understandings of politics, race, and capitalism. This is done while expanding new materialist methodologies and border studies' application in art education to include discursive notions of making. This making involves the generative creation of understanding (conocimiento), where unlike works are read or held together in their difference to create new understandings and resist difference as ossified. We are left with a deeper understanding of the border as a space of cosmic possibility juxtaposed against a notion of racism complicated by an economic system, that we are all implicated in.

Keywords: *El Paso Strong Spontaneous Memorial; Mika Rottenberg; conocimiento; agential cut; difference*

Two co-constitutive/diffracting vignettes

Against the backdrop of the ruddy iron slats of the U.S.-Mexico border wall in Mika Rottenberg's *Cosmic Generator* a vendor pushes a food cart replete with a jaunty umbrella, across the sandy terrain. The vendor trudges across the screen and makes it halfway across when a zooming sound is heard, she and her cart vanishing with a flash as if by some magician's trick or as if the universe produced its own magic—a wormhole that opened and transported both intra-actively to another realm. We are left to contemplate the stark landscape and solemnity of the Euclidean geometry of the rusty border wall structure.

Against the backdrop of a chain link fence, black privacy mesh, and the brown stucco wall of the mega-conglomerate of Sam's-Walmart, mourners place plastic rosaries, veladoras religiosas (religious candles or Seven Day candles), teddy bears, and silk flowers along the road. As the mourners and materials accumulate, they transform the mundane concrete access road, and both are transported magico-religiously and intra-actively to another realm. We are left to contemplate the stark landscape and solemnity of racist acts of the global capitalist economy.

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Introduction

The two vignettes above serve as introductions to two material-discursive works, Mika Rottenberg's *Cosmic Generator* and the El Paso Strong Spontaneous Memorial, an impromptu site of mourning constructed by the community of El Paso shortly after the mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart on August 3, 2019. In this paper, the works will be diffractively plugged into one another (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) "to produce something new... [as part of] a constant, continuous process of making and unmaking" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, 262) and to produce "knowledge [that] is opened up and proliferated rather than foreclosed and simplified" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, 261).

Figure 1. El Paso Strong Spontaneous Memorial with National Flags



Because the El Paso Strong Memorial and the border are sites of trauma readers may presuppose or desire that a specific etiquette or approach be used to redress certain content, namely that of a humanist or anthropocentric attention to the affective qualities of death, trauma, and mourning. While it is this author's intent to proceed with careful concern and sensitivity, this paper is decidedly posthuman in its tenor and it is the hope of the author that readers will be able to suspend the prejudicial, albeit natural, hope and desire that this paper address affective qualities of trauma. Instead, this paper looks to the ways that difference is materially manifested in the hopes of contextualizing a racist event and building greater understanding of racism and of difference as they pertain to the border and in relation to each of us. This paper looks to politics and the way they manifest through human intra-action with objects and matter as a way to examine and understand contemporary conditions, and through that understanding resist or reimagine globalized, capitalist scripts that serve to "cut...[us] into two – as a singular act of absolute differentiation, fracturing this from that, now from then" (Barad, 2014, 168), and us from them. Ultimately, it is this author's belief



that in order to better understand the function of racism at least along the border if not throughout the country, we must look beyond the affective qualities of the trauma of this event to the material conditions of difference with which we construct meaning (Barad, 2014).

Meaning is not an ideality; meaning is material. And matter isn't what exists separately from meaning. Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn't. Difference isn't given. It isn't fixed. Subject and object, wave and particle, position and momentum do not exist outside of specific intra-actions that enacts cuts that make separations—not absolute separations, but only contingent separations—*within* phenomena. (Barad, 2014, 175)

Feminist philosopher and new materialist Karen Barad's conception of difference as contingent not only rests on the ideas of meaning as materially contingent and co-constructed and of matter as material evidence of our priorities, beliefs, and practices of privileging, but also implied in the co-construction of difference is the possibility to do, make, or think difference differently.

Suppose for a moment that we are able to consider the El Paso shooting a phenomenon (this, of course, would require a kind of callousness of suspended affect). We might then consider the actions of the shooter and the events that produce those actions up until the dichotomous cut, a differential cut. Where a dichotomous cut is one that determined or severed the ontology of the victims and forever changed the ontology of the shooter. In other words, difference was not fixed, it was not a given, until material manifested through the phenomenon of the shooting. Therein, difference was fixed and named racism because the phenomenon produced a fixed ontology, one that does not resist contingent separations but is the ultimate separation. In order to understand the way that the material produces meaning up until the final act of (racist) severance, this paper examines the ways that we are materially co-constructed with objects. It is this author's hope that examining our co-constitution and contingent mattering with objects will reveal that we are incomplete, partial, and also co-constituted with and very much contingent upon each other.

Background

El Paso, the border

This paper has come about in the aftermath of the El Paso shooting and continued trauma of loss felt in the region as a hot spot for the corona virus and is in part as an attempt to better understand the complexity, the trauma, and the heritage of the borderland of El Paso, TX where I live and teach. As someone who did not grow up in the border region and who moved around as part of the capitalist corporate structure, eventually settling in the northeast because of parental ties to a rural region in Pennsylvania, it is also an attempt to understand the resistance of the borderland to my own insistence to call it home. Unlike Sperry García (2018), I am not from the border and cannot claim the title “frontizeros,” which she defines as “native inhabitants of the border” (66) and explains possess a specific culture as evidenced through its food and its language (Sperry García, 2021). While Sperry García (2018), through Anzaldúa (1987/2012), describes the border as “a space of ambiguity” as of “los atravesados” (66) or inhabited by the “prohibited and forbidden” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, 25), I would contend that El Paso as a whole, and U.S.-Mexico border towns like it, are not spaces of alienated individual others; rather, they are spaces where like people coalesce around a shared identifiable culture of hybridity and cross-pollination of Mexican and American, Hispanic and Anglo roots. In other words, while the border is an amalgamation of two disparate cultures that might disrupt settled notions of self and home (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; Barad, 2014), there is still very much a sense of shared identity that constructs El Paso's borderland culture. To

this point, I contend that this border culture and the ontology it represents were precisely the targets of the El Paso shooter. His manifesto said as much, claiming, “This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas” (Aguilera, 2020, para. 3).

Mika Rottenberg and Cosmic Generator

Mika Rottenberg is an internationally renowned contemporary artists who creates videos, installations, and sculpture. Now based in New York, she was born in Argentina and later immigrated to Israel. Her video-installation work has been described as surreal and absurdist and explores global capitalism through bizarre, hyperbolic depictions of labor that “expose the surreal inner workings of capitalism” (Apostol & Thompson, 2019, 205). Her videos utilize documentary-like footage, and her installations feature real objects depicted in the videos like scads of freshwater pearls from *NoNoseKnows*, 2015 and technicolor metallic garlands hung in sheets from *Cosmic Generator*, 2017. Other works from Rottenberg’s exhibition at the New Museum *Easypieces* such as *Ceiling Fan Composition*, 2016, a series of ceiling fans each framed by niches cut in the gallery architecture, lighted in different colors, and each rotating at its own pace, and *Ponytail (orange)*, 2016, might be considered more akin to sculpture. Even in these works there is something banal and uncanny in the mechanized objects she creates. In *Ponytail (orange)*, 2016, a ponytail with a bright blue elastic band is attached to the wall and mechanically flips its hair, alluding to a lively, surreal materiality. *Cosmic Generator*, discussed in this paper, is a video-installation work. The video splices documentary footage of various sites of global capitalist excess with fantastical scenes, effectively mapping the shortened distance of difference across the global system of capital. Concomitantly, objects from the video are installed in the gallery; viewers enter the space through a tunnel like those depicted in the video and leave through the sheet of metallic garland described above.

Border studies in art education: Identity and conocimiento

This paper builds upon evolving thought about the border and border studies in the field of art education—much of which involves unfolding interpretations of Gloria Anzaldúa’s work. Initial theorizations of the border hinged largely on the concept of border crossings developed from Gomez Pena’s notion of border consciousness (Congdon et al., 1999; Erickson, 2000; Garber, 1995), a concept that contended that deep cultural encounters with the other might correct surface approaches that characterized multiculturalism at the time of the writing. More recent scholarship has explored border concepts derived from Anzaldúa’s notion of “Nepantla” or “in-between space” (Kaplan, 2019; Keating, 2006 in Yoon, 2018; Sotomayor, 2019) such as border thinking (Yoon, 2018), “a tool to locate the subaltern perspective” and “to subvert coloniality” (261-262), “autohistoria-teoria” or “women of color theorizing their lived experience through critical self-reflection” and revitalized notions of Henry Giroux’s border pedagogy (Sperry García, 2018; 2021) which through its introspective examination of what Minh-ha describes as a difference that “is not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness” (Minh-ha, through Barad, 2014, 170) might address Garber’s (1995) complaint that Giroux’s theorization of border pedagogy makes the mistake of “homogeniz[ing] and misrepresent[ing]” diversity by “dealing in generalities” (220- 221).

This examination of difference within the self, of the ontology of “frontizeros” or inhabitants of the border, or of the in-between space of nepantla or mestizaje (Hernández, 1993) begins an unraveling of identity categories that only widens. Anzaldúa’s post-borderlands writing only further complicates notions of fixed ontologies and, although the complete transferal from ontologies of difference (understandings of ontology through categorically different ways of being) to ontologies of immanence or differential becoming was not entirely articulated at the time of her death, it is



begun in Anzaldúa's late work and in subsequent re-readings of her work (Barad, 2014; Keating & Merenda, 2013; Keating, 2015; Schaeffer, 2018). This complex notion of the border involves "thinking beyond human borders and toward a mestiza consciousness of relational worldview, or intra-becoming" (Schaeffer, 2018, 1011).

Methods of diffraction and *conocimiento*

In this paper new materialist ontology, or differential becoming, or the notion that we are of the world and do not stand outside it (Barad, 2003) will be considered with and against art education's established notions of the border, which include examinations of difference, ontology, and pedagogy, as well as Anzaldúa's (2002) later notions of "*conocimiento*" or "a shift to the feminization of knowledge, one beyond the subject-object divide" (541). Additionally, reading Mika Rottenberg's *Cosmic Generator* diffractively with El Paso's Spontaneous Shrine is an attempt to understand both cultural difference and difference within myself, the community/region, and in the context of global citizenship. Reading these works, *Cosmic Generator* and the El Paso spontaneous memorial, as "cut together-apart," or through the post-qualitative method of diffraction, troubles notions of a pure dichotomy or the "act of absolute differentiation" (Barad, 2014, 168). Instead, diffraction considers how one might be constituted by acts of difference and therefore diffraction or cutting together-apart could be considered the reading of texts, works of art, and theories through each other. This allows for the layering of politics and ontologies to produce new and complex understandings; it engages in *conocimiento* which "is profoundly relational and enables those who enact it to make connections among apparently disparate events, people, experiences, and realities" and it "queers conventional ways of knowing" (Keating, 2015, xxvii). Here Barad's diffraction and Anzaldúa's *conocimiento* are entangled, relational methods that can work with and against each other to create new knowledge.

This paper employs an entangled new materialist methodology that considers possibilities of thinking with diffraction and *conocimiento* and works under the posthumous assumption that Anzaldúa's later works might be considered within this new materialist tradition and at the very least proto-new materialist (Barad, 2014; Keating & Merenda, 2013; Keating, 2015; Schaeffer, 2018). In particular, Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento* is considered a diffractive methodology in which one can come to a more dynamic, complex understanding. *Conocimiento* is not only an epistemology but a "theory of composition, of how a work of art gets composed, of how a field...is put together and maintained, of how reality itself is constructed, and of how identity is constructed" (Hernández-Ávila & Anzaldúa, 2000, 177). *Conocimiento* is a process of coming to know or an awareness that resists a singular identity, emotional state, state of being, or ontology. Like diffraction, it resists a singular, settled a priori ontology, and instead immanent becomings (unsettled, contingent ways of being) are rendered and co-constructed through readings of two different texts together.

Within Anzaldúa's conception of *conocimiento* are seven stages, but she gives two positions or sites names of Aztec goddesses (Anzaldúa, 2015). Anzaldúa's third state of *conocimiento* is called the coatlicue state, named after the Aztec goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue, mother of Coyolxauhqui, whose name means 'serpent skirt' and monstrous symbology is that of a creature whose head has been graphically severed at the neck and replaced with two serpent heads, and has eagle talons in the place of hands (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012). This womblike, liminal state of inward withdrawal or of retreat is a space of healing and one of potential, where the serpent heals the wound of the serpent, referring to the double serpent head of Coatlicue and how "the soul uses everything to further its own making" (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, 68).

The coyolxauhqui imperative refers to “the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing...self or the situation you’re embroiled in differently” (Anzaldúa, 2015, 19-20). Coyolxauhqui, whose name means ‘face painted with bells’, was the Aztec goddess of the moon who was dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochtli while Coyolxauhqui and her other siblings tried to kill her mother Coatlicue. The coyolxauhqui imperative is “the path of the artist, the creative impulse” and a process to heal and to become whole (Anzaldúa, 2015, 243). Both stages hold space for the recuperative, spiritual, and artistic.

Figure 2. El Paso Strong Spontaneous Memorial with **915 STRONG** balloons



The El Paso shooting and spontaneous shrine

Prior to August 3, 2019, the Cielo Vista Walmart in El Paso, Texas had served not only as a popular mercantile but also as a gathering place. However, that changed significantly when a lone gunman entered the Walmart in El Paso, Texas and shot and killed twenty-three people and injured another two dozen. This deliberate and racist act of domestic terrorism was undertaken after the gunman, Patrick Crusius, drove six hundred and fifty miles (about a ten-hour drive) from his home in Allen, Texas (a northeastern suburb of Dallas) to El Paso, TX after posting an anti-immigrant and white nationalist manifesto on the internet message board *8chan*. In the days following the massacre, the Cielo Vista Walmart was shuttered and El Pasoans collectively constructed a spontaneous memorial where individuals placed items of mourning and remembrance along a side street north of the store to mourn the dead. Mourners made offerings by laying silk and real flowers, candles, small statues, crosses, rosaries, hand drawn posters with maxims and the slogan El Paso Strong, metallic balloons spelling out **915 STRONG** (a reference to El Paso’s telephone area code) stuffed animals, flags of Mexico, US, and Israel, handmade artworks, and heart-wrenching photographic portraits of the



dead along the chain link fencing that runs parallel to the road. The sheer outpouring of grief in the form of aggregated offerings transformed the corporate mercantile space between the Walmart and various fast-food restaurants into a communal space for remembrance, solidarity and solemnity.

Figure 3. El Paso Strong Spontaneous Memorial close-up of rosaries hung around the neck of a religious statue



In spite of its local purpose to mourn the victims of the attack on El Paso and to “mediate the psychic crisis of sudden and often inexplicable loss” (Doss, 2006, 298), the spontaneous memorial was similar in form and purpose to other memorials for public people like Princess Diana (Santino, 2006a; 2006b; Senie, 2006; Thomas, 2006) and tragic events like the Columbine High School shooting (Doss, 2006), the Oklahoma City Bombing, or Ground Zero of the World Trade Center Attack (Santino, 2006a; 2006b; Senie 2006). The term spontaneous memorial is typically reserved for large scale memorials spontaneously constructed in response to an impactful, traumatic, contemporary public loss of life, or what Kennerly (2008) refers to as “high-profile sites of public tragedy” (para. 9); whether high profile refers to a victim’s celebrity or to a high number of victims, regardless, the loss is impactful. Typical of spontaneous shrines and memorials is the wealth of items accumulated through the humble, modest gestures of individuals, which then amass to larger, immersive spectacles of materiality and mourning. In other words, objects and matter are quite literally amassed through a process wherein an individual selects an object, imbues it with meaning, and it is then given as an oblation or as a remembrance. This singular, quite personal act grows in meaning when it is viewed in a multitude and, through this shared action, ritual, and process, a

shared space of communality or community is formed between people who share a common perspective and perform a common gesture.

Santino (2006a) explains that all “spontaneous, vernacular responses to untimely death” possess “two qualities, commemoration and performativity” (1), where commemoration refers to the “celebrat[ion of] something or someone” (Santino, 2006b, 5) and performativity “refers to the fact that in each case of spontaneous shrine there is a component of addressing a social issue, of trying to convince people, of trying to make something happen” (Santino, 2006a, 1). Similarly, Senie (2006) supports the notion of the performative in spontaneous shrines when comparing how they work in relation to private grieving practices. She claims, “Mourning in a cemetery has become a private family affair. In marked contrast, spontaneous memorials invite the participation of a community” (44). Westgard (2006) looks at the aspect of visibility and spectacle within the performance of spontaneous shrines, purporting through Klein (1995), “through the ritual one wants the spectators to see oneself, one’s group, or one’s intentions” (161). Here we might liken these practices to Anzaldúa’s *coaticue* state where we might consider these practices of turning inward together as a refamiliarization with or a reaffirmation of self or of (border) culture, a reminder and cherishing of who is still here and an accounting or protective gathering together.

As Westgard (2006) hints at through the inclusion of “one’s intentions” in the above statement, spontaneous shrines and memorials spaces are not only spaces for performative, expressive, and collective grief, but they also serve as spaces of resistance, social commentary, and protest. Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) explain that “vernacular expressions of collective grief and remembrance” can challenge “official” constructions of public memory that are often “built by people with sufficient power to marshal (or impose) public consent for their erection” (151-152). This critical function is not new. Marchi (2006) examines the history of protest in communal mourning practices during the Day of the Dead observances. Quoting Steven J. Stern (1987) Marchi (2006) contends “a certain interplay existed between the heightened moral consciousness experienced while remembering the dead, and an increased collective consciousness of material exploitation” (269). Of this history of resistance, Marchi (2006) further elaborates:

In colonial times, death among the indigenous majority was, more often than not, the result of preventable phenomena such as malnutrition, poverty or abuse by colonial authorities. Therefore, the period set aside each year to remember the dead was simultaneously a space in which the poor might express frustration toward the injustices of the existing social order responsible for some many untimely deaths. (269)

Here remembrance of the dead is not only a ritualized, cultural practice but also is a space held open in which to speak back, to pose truth to power.

Spontaneous shrines as protest and resistance are not relegated to the past. Citing the 9/11 Memorial and the shrine at Columbine High School, among others, Senie (2006) explains, “spontaneous memorials are inherently also expressions of protest, calling attention to the underlying conditions that led to the random death(s) being commemorated” (45) and “are the sign of an engaged populace responding to personal need for public mourning and civic protest” (46). Here grief and grievance are entangled, revealing the complexity of emotion and experience.

The El Paso Spontaneous memorial is no different. Although its primary function at the time of its creation seemed to fit best into notions of a communal public space for grief and connection, an awareness of the material and political conditions that produced the shooting were brewing. As



“more than one-hundred people marched ...denouncing racism and calling for stronger gun laws a week after the shooting” (Attanasio, 2019, para 1), Chicana historian and writer Dr. Yolanda Leyva (2019) contextualized the violence and racism while protesting, “The El Paso massacre is not an aberration. It is the predictable outcome of two-hundred years of a white supremacist idea’s growth in this state” (para.3). One year later, on the anniversary of the shooting many more are beginning to draw connections between their grief and racism’s institutionalization in Texas and along the border (Aguilera, 2020; Dearman, 2020). Here again, what is important to note are the remarks of Taussig (1994), through Marchi (2006), who claim, “the tremendous moral and magical power of the unquiet dead to flow into the public sphere, empower individuals and challenge the would-be guardians of the nation state” (262). Here our intra-action with spirited objects and the thing power they possess (Bennett, 2010), as well as Anzaldúa’s (and our) refusal of “Western science’s categorical divides across human-matter-nature” (Schaffer, 2018, 1010) and “entreat[ment]...to think beyond human borders” (Schaffer, 2018, 1011) to include the spiritual and cosmic are implicated as acts of resistance and empowerment.

Cosmic Generator and new materialism

Cosmic Generator is a video by Mika Rottenberg that is exhibited along with a tunnel-like entryway and a floor-length cascade of shiny, metallic plastic streamers filling the exit doorway. It is a video work that utilizes documentary and constructed elements to create a disorienting and magical sensibility while tackling issues of global capitalism (Fetzer, 2018) including mass production of cheap goods, free trade or the movement of goods as opposed to the restricted movement of people, and the implied materiality and inertness of mass-produced objects juxtaposed against immaterial labor. *Cosmic Generator* employs footage of colorful underground tunnels, above ground shots of the towns Mexicali and Calexico, scenes of shopkeepers in Yiwu, China and restaurant workers along the border, and depicts magical food carts, men dressed as tacos and businessmen served as Chinese fare, and a traditional-looking Chinese painting in which a crane comes to life to excrete sparkling, toxic green waste. This footage is sewn together in such a way that “there is no spirit/matter or human/nonhuman opposition but rather an internal, incessant generation of new materialisms driven by complex, fast-shifting, unpredictable connections” that “evoke philosophy’s ontology of generative immanence” (Coole, 2019, 37-38)

New materialists (see Barad, Bradotti, Bennett, Coole & Frost, and Grosz) are concerned with an ontological indeterminacy, “material vibrancy” or “force of things” (Bennett, 2010), and enacted agency (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, 55), which breaks down the logic of subject/object predication in such a way that non-humans actors (matter, objects, materials and things) are considered to be continually co-constituted in relation to human actors. Barad (2007) describes “a mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (33) that assumes agency is dispersed among human and non-human actors, that the actors come to be through the act (or their intra-action), and that “provides an understanding of the role of human and non-human, material, discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices” (23).

In Rottenberg’s work, not only is great attention paid to the material in the sounds recorded, imagery, and sculptural objects, but the audience experiences the material world through action and what Barad terms “intra-action” or “becom[ing] together” (Haus, 2018, 1306) which “is processes that change [or make] all participating bodies” (Haus, 2018, 1308). Coole (2019) explains, “Her audiences...do not just look from afar but also crawl, listen, and touch the spaces and places she recreates, experiencing their own bodies as lively and passive modes of matter interacting with

nonhuman material things” (37). Not only does Rottenberg consider the body’s compositional ontology or its co-constitution with (Trafi-Prats, 2017) and of non-human actors (Keating & Merendia, 2013), but she also highlights the life of things (Bennett, 2010), or the ways that food carts, air conditioners, tunnels, ponytails, steaks, ceiling fans, light bulbs, noses, hair, dough, moist towelettes, bubbles, cheap plastic goods, pasta dishes, sneezes, rabbits, rouge, treadmills, cheese, cabbage, and tacos “are not inert and lifeless” (Hood & Kraehe, 2017) and “are not tied to our intentions or willful action” (Frost, 2019, 35).

The spontaneous memorial and matter mattering

Karen Barad concerns herself with many notions of matter. Ideas of mattering and matter are interchanged in their ideas and they play with the word’s meaning in order to highlight our epistemological biases and to advocate for the idea that the material or matter ought to matter as much as, if not more than, language, discourse, and culture. All of this, Barad (2003) explains, has come to matter or to have greater significance in our episteme and are (therefore) given more power to act. They contend that matter should and does possess agency, and therefore we should come to realize how matter matters. This attention to mattering or the ways that matter matters or makes a difference (is significant or indicates signification) or how it comes to be is helpful in not only thinking through Rottenberg’s work, but also in thinking about the cultural practices of collective mourning described above.

In the practice of spontaneous memorials, material objects not only carry meaning and significance for the performance of loss or mourning (they are matter that quite literally matters through its meaningful signification), but we also perform or become mourner in the moment or immanence of loss. We are undone, lost, and bereft through our relation to objects. In other words, materials and objects often referred to as mere matter come to matter through our relation with them and through their ability to act as entities that assemble in a special, immanent site of mourning. We become the bereft in the act of mourning or through our relation to materials and objects that act upon us as we make a gesture by giving them over to the mass. The affective grief that we feel in the giving over, the breaking of the bond, reveals the object’s ability to act on us. Furthermore, as objects of loss, they give themselves over to the aggregate mass of loss. They, too, are in a process of becoming greater than the singular object, and in their massing, they aggregate in relation to and as an assemblage with other objects and mourners. They create new bonds with other matter and materials and we are reconfigured so much that that mass now affects or acts on us with an even more profound and horrifying immensity of loss. In our affective response of mourning and loss, matter matters.

Cosmic Generator: Strange shifts in subject/object agency and mystical movement

Auspiciously, *Cosmic Generator* takes place along the U.S.—Mexico border in the towns of Calexico (U.S.) and Mexicali (Mexico). This parallelism in names is not to be ignored, as it relates quite clearly to an eerie sense of the magical—the oddness of the material unfoldings and the metaphor of broken glass kaleidoscope seemed to imply a sense of the magic of parallel realms or a sense of multiple universes and wormhole-like travel across time and space. This sense of multiverses is further enhanced by the artist’s alternation between above-ground and below-ground shots. A sense of the mystical or magical is conveyed through tinkling sounds that are reminiscent of mystical bells or Tinkerbell-like fairies and accompanying twinkling starlike graphic overlays. These tactics set the stage for absurdist movie magic in which a woman pushing an umbrella-covered food cart magically enters and then later leaves the story with a loud woosh and magician’s poof of smoke. We know



that this is not real, and yet it unquestioningly fits within the larger narrative where it works to unsettle our comfort with reality.

In *Cosmic Generator*, as throughout much of Rottenberg's catalog, the magical, the spiritual, and the cosmic are all conveyed through epistemic/ontological reversals. The work exhibits "conocimiento," Anzaldúa's "more than human perspective that begins with respect for the nonhuman and openness to all existence" (Keating & Merenda, 2013, 8). Objects are forceful, spirited, and productive, while humans are often depicted as stationary or inert, moving little while working at their jobs, or they are portrayed as raw materials or the primal matter that undergoes magical, surreal changes in state or phase. In a Chinese restaurant at the edge of the border, a restaurant worker removes the covering from a dish to reveal a man dressed as a taco and a man in a business suit. The taco men are absurdly spirited and enflashed and idea that a taco is imbued with human characteristics and wriggles on the plate upsets our sense of reality. On the other hand, the man in the suit conjures a sense of familiarity; his attire and ontology (businessman) fit well within our epistemic paradigm. Yet, the scale shift (he is small enough to fit on a bed of cilantro on Chinese platter next to two tacos) and his immobility (he is presented to us flat on his back and unable to move any more than a baby that wriggles in its crib) all upset our expectations of reality and human agency.

Likewise, Rottenberg's use of tunnels extends connections between the cosmic, surreal, or spiritual and the perceived realness of Euclidian space, cultural history, and global politics. Tunnels are a pervasive element in *Cosmic Generator* as they quite literally are the vehicle that moves the viewer through the video. Simultaneously, they reiterate the work's interest in movement (where movement also implies agency, power and its lack, inertia, objecthood, unproductivity, or oppression) and allude to cosmic time/space movement like wormholes. Rottenberg uses fantastical shots of a man dressed in a taco suit crawling through a tunnel illuminated by an intermittently changing colored light and shots that are composed in such a way that it appears we are inside a mining cart, moving along the track inside the same colorfully-lit tunnel, and shots of colorful glass being broken into a kaleidoscope of colors with more documentary-like shots of traffic waiting to cross the border with the iron border fence in the background and images of shops in Calexico, Mexicali, and Yiwu. Rottenberg's conflation of documentary with constructed footage "contributes to our complete disorientation." (Fetzer, 2018, 57). The juxtaposition of the obviously unreal, magical, or mystical with real footage of absurd excess leads us to question these taken-for-granted realities.

Rottenberg refers to the actual tunnels between Calexico and Mexicali (that her work references) as earthworks, conjuring relationships to Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Nancy Holt's *Sum Tunnels*, or Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* that consider man's interaction and use of the land through large-scale, site-dependent sculptural explorations of the phenomena of land, space, site, and sight. Unlike the earthworks, whose only clear political statement might be environmental, the tunnels under Mexicali are decidedly cultural and political. Originally, they were developed by the Colorado Railroad Company at the turn of the 20th century, which for fifty years housed Chinese immigrants in an underground city, La Chinesca, and which brought them to the region to build the railroad and canal irrigation systems (Norton, 2019) and who were pushed out of the United States by anti-immigrant legislation (Miranda, 2022). Finally, *Cosmic Generator*'s reference to and use of tunnels not only harkens to a historical relationship between the border region and China, but the tunnels also reference resistance to systems that oppress movement, strained immigration policies between the U.S. and Mexico, and famous and fabled attempts to foil systems of detention and detection such as El Chapo's (Feuer, 2019).

Figure 4. El Paso Strong Spontaneous Memorial with Wal-Mart/Sam's Club Sign Looming



What's the matter with (a shooting at a) walmart

That the El Paso shooting took place in a Walmart and that the shrine was constructed outside of a shopping center is not to be ignored. There is much to be considered regarding the materialist and consumerist implications of these events and circumstances. These include that the shrines are primarily constructed from mass-produced goods that circulate throughout and support a capitalist system seen as unjust and materialistic, that the spontaneous memorial was located at a site of commerce rather than a separate, ritualized site of mourning like a church or cemetery, and the shooter's choice to target Hispanics² inside of a global consumer conglomerate while proclaiming jingoist intent.

Mass produced mourning

Although a few handmade items, including drawings and paintings, were among the objects placed at the Cielo Vista Walmart spontaneous memorial, much of what made up the shrine was either mass-produced objects like teddy bears, silk flowers, plastic rosary-like beads, or fresh flowers, a global product. Mass-produced objects are used "because they are inexpensive and easily available" and they are "the products of a modern mass culture that valorizes impermanence and disposability in order to fuel patterns of consumption" (Doss, 2006, 299). Here, the practice of constructing a spontaneous shrine is tied to contemporary notions of production and consumption in the

² The term "Hispanics" is used throughout this paper as a reflection of the shooter's terminology and his self-described intention. This may not be the most accurate or self-representative identifier of those shot or of the border.



neoliberal capitalist system and “capitalism and mourning collapse into each other” (Thomas, 2006, 36).

The spontaneous memorial truly encompasses the monumental amassing of material, objects, matter, and things that characterizes the unquenchable, desirous need to consume that typifies global capitalism, and yet this is an unironically personal act for the mourner. According to Thomas (2006) spontaneous shrines “can be seen as expressive of consumer culture and ... They reflect the influence of multinational capitalism... and mass-produced objects are increasingly important in our expression of self” (36). Despite Thomas’s critical look at the capitalist consumer aspects of spontaneous shrines, she ultimately concludes that the act of assemblage (gathering together objects and creating new meaning through them) is quite significant and transformative for the mourners. Thomas (2006) explains:

In the face of such horrific disintegration, a response that reassembles things—even consumer commodities—to form a new creation is not mere pastiche. It is an assemblage of the realities of felt experience; it is the pain and suffering of the human subjects of history manifest symbolically and concretely. It is active and political: it is about the realness of grief and love—all of which are often apparent and made concrete again in the detail and shared work in the creation of spontaneous shrines. (37-38)

Here, Thomas taps into the transformative, healing potential of spontaneous shrines by describing an impetus much like Anzaldúa’s (2015) *coyolxauhqui* imperative to heal, to be “the scar [that] can become a bridge linking people split apart”, and “to gain a foothold on los remolinos [whirlpools] and qaugmires” (21). Here this collective, creative action, despite its use of consumer goods, acts to heal and transform those affected by and mourning losses.

Mercantile memorials

The construction of the spontaneous shrine on the property of a multi-national corporation not only brings up notions of public and private (see earlier discussion of Senie, 2006) but also questions of access and property. In discussing a similar mercantile-based spontaneous shrine constructed for Princess Diana at Harrods in London, Thomas (2006) commented “the shrine is not in or near a church; instead, such a traditional sacred place is replaced by a shopping space” (36). While Thomas’s comments imply a concern that the spiritual or sacred might be being subsumed through consumerist materialism, the secular space of the shopping center may allow for far more ecumenical participation. Thomas’s comments, however, are not unfounded. The notion that the memorial take place near a satellite of a multinational corporation rather than, say, a local ecumenical spiritual gathering site or meaningful community space raises issues of propriety and community connection.

Matters of nationalism and globalization

That El Pasoans were the target of this shooting cannot be singularly attributed to the racist history of Texas and the region (see Lleyva 2019). Rather, this historical and situated understanding must be considered within larger national political rhetoric and globalized politics. For years, Americans have been told and believed that the seen and unseen other have taken their jobs³ and, more recently, President Trump stoked the fires of neoliberal discontent in his calls to “build the wall” and racist

³I recall (vividly) how this argument was vehemently defended during a discussion in my ninth grade Civics class (nearly thirty years ago) where we were asked to debate the (in)appropriateness of adopting a national language in the United States.

claims that Mexicans are “drug dealers, criminals, and rapists” (BBC News, 2016). An examination of racism’s historical and contemporary role in capitalist and corporate economies and global corporations’ complicity in acts of violence that are direct and indirect results of their global capitalist, neoliberal design is largely absent from our discussion of racist hate. Issues that result from this kind of corporate structure are: global corporations’ dislocation from the local communities they serve in their ability to really be a part of a localized community (i.e., the corporations’ ability to mourn the passing of members of a locality and community is limited), the creation of economic conditions in which goods are able to move across borders and to traverse the globe with greater ease and mobility than many people are, and the de-skilling and devaluing of national, unionized notions of labor which are replaced by extremely low-wage and relatively unskilled jobs subsidized through corporate welfare as a symptom of the powerful global reach of multinational corporations.

The latter is particularly concerning when contextualized against working class white male dissatisfaction with the labor market, a dark American history of mobilizing poor and working-class whites against blacks, people of color, and immigrants, and contracted opportunity (see Standing’s [2011; 2016] notion of atavistic precarity) resulting from late capitalism’s global market and its erosion of higher wage positions for white males with little to no formal education beyond high school. Here, the picture of corporate capitalism’s role in a system that produces real and imagined material inequity and racist actions comes full circle in the shooter’s choice to attack Hispanics and border people inside of a shrine to global capitalism.

Despite these grim matters of material and ‘manufactured’ difference, the El Paso spontaneous shrine speaks back to the global capitalist structures that produce and sustain spaces of inequity and that create discursive spaces of racist rhetoric with material consequences. It is a beacon for and by the community that reaffirms the humanity of the border, and it does so through the complicated and implicated agency of material goods and the cosmology of a spiritual, political space of relational potential. Here the spiritual, affective, and relational space of shared mourning resists racist and capitalist practices of objectification and holds open the potential for connection, creation, and healing together.

Matters of materialism in Cosmic Generator

Like the El Paso Strong spontaneous memorial, *Cosmic Generator* considers themes of commerce, capitalism, and materialism which manifest in the artist’s exploration of mobility, agency, and movement. In order to explore how materialism and mobility are intertwined in *Cosmic Generator*, we will first examine how they work in her larger body of work.

Rottenberg’s works (*NoNoseKnows*, 2015; *Cheese*, 2008; *Sneeze*, 2012; *Tropical Breeze*, 2004) focus on the body’s capacity as producer or as raw material as part of an absurd capitalist system of production. In *Tropical Breeze*, a delivery driver’s profuse sweat is harvested to make freshly scented wet wipes and in *NoNoseKnows* an office worker’s magical sneezes produce a myriad of pasta dishes harvested with the intent of feeding factory workers who perform freshwater pearl propagation and sort and separate pearls in pearl-making factories in Zhuji, China.

Cosmic Generator is less interested in what the body can produce and seems more concerned with the ways that bodies are confined within global capitalist systems of production, while objects are able to move across vast distances and experience various states of being. In an odd phase shift, shopkeepers do no visible work and are rendered with inertia usually attributed to objects; one



reclines with an airplane pillow around her neck, while another naps bent at the waist, supported by a desk. These acts of inaction do not take place at home, but rather the shopkeepers' lack of work and of production is showcased against the elaborate backgrounds of the grotesquely abundant items for sale in their shops- reminders of excesses of production and consumption. Here we see an odd recombination of immaterial labor that Tervo (2019) sees as “blur[red]...boundaries between work and life both spatially and temporally” (3).

Even though the workers in *Cosmic Generator* are not producers in the same way that they are in many of Rottenberg's other works, when we view the works together, we realize that each tells a similar story of “a spiritual kind of Marxism” (Louisiana Chanel, 2020) in which the worker is absurdly tied to the system of production. We come to understand that even the workers who we had presumed were not producers were indeed inactive producers whose body seems to produce its inactivity and confinement for the good of the system.

Finally, as human agency recedes it is replaced with the fantastical and powerful movement of objects. We see objects in Yiwu, China that traverse the globe and wind up in shops along the U. S.-Mexico border. Rottenberg's supposition that globalized cheap goods (and certain materials, objects, and matter) can pass more easily across national borders upends humanist priorities and suggests that objects may have more agency and mobility than certain people. We begin to see the strangeness of the capitalist system, a system in which objects may appear more capable or valuable than the lives of certain people. It becomes absurdly clear how this capitalist system might deem people subhuman in light of the capacity of objects. Scheyer (2018) explains, “Rottenberg chooses surreal images to illuminate the paradoxes of our late capitalist consumer society” (97).

Conclusion

This paper looks at *Cosmic Generator* and others works by Mika Rottenberg along with the El Paso spontaneous shrine in order to examine the material conditions of difference with which we construct meaning. This paper utilizes an entangled methodology of diffraction and *conocimiento* to explore connections and complexities created in discussing categorically different works. It does so in order to probe and produce complicated understandings of politics, race, and capitalism. Rottenberg's cosmic generator complicates easy understandings of space through playing with wormholes, tunnels, and national borders. Likewise, she questions the human-object divide that undergirds capitalist and racist practices and utilizes a playful, cosmic or magical sensibility to call out the absurdity of serious injustice. The El Paso Spontaneous Shrine acts as an important space of healing that, along with its restorative power, speaks back to the traumas afflicted on the border and its people. Collective and community acts of accumulating objects of mourning are transformed through acts of creation, mourning, and self-love to be “a psychospiritual/political fram[ing]” (Anzaldúa, 2015, 21), one where the coyolxauhqui imperative and coatlicue state “can help us overcome our desconocimientos, which dehumanize other people and deny their suffering, prompting us to realize our common humanity” (Anzaldúa, 2015, 20). Not only does the El Paso Spontaneous Shrine hold the possibility to heal the border community of El Paso, but its complex constitution of devotional objects with capitalist and colonialist, religious origins is entangled with systems of production and people elsewhere. Here our efforts to heal ourselves, to know in a deeper more complex way through personal gestures of mourning, self and community care possess a powerful possibility to connect and heal with others, the ultimate resistance to racism.

All this is done while furthering border studies' application in art education and expanding new materialist methodologies in art education beyond art making to include discursive notions of

making. This making involves the generative creation of understanding (conocimiento) where unlike works are cut together-apart, plugged in, or read with and against each other to produce new and complex meaning. Ultimately, this plugging-in produced a more complex understanding of the meaning and circumstances of the work, and in particular we are left with a deeper understanding of the border as a space of cosmic possibility juxtaposed against a notion of racism complicated by an economic system that we are all implicated in through our shared, differential becoming, and coming to know through our entanglement with each other, our space, and the economic system of which are all a part.

Diffraction/cutting together apart/conocimiento allows us to see complexity and to hold multiple ideas together apart and to exist in various/multiple states of being. It allows us to hold the many aspects of the spontaneous shrine, its materialism, its capacity for protest, resistance, and activism, its potential for healing, mourning, and spiritualism together apart. It allows us to see the agency of objects and people's productivity and production while questioning a materialist system that produces inequity and privileges objects over people (and renders some people lower than objects). It allows us to view two works of art considered categorically different together. Through the acts of conocimiento and diffraction new, complex understandings (and ontologies) are created. We are able to see how border ontologies that involve conocimiento complicate (art education's) traditional categorical understandings of objects, artworks, and people.

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