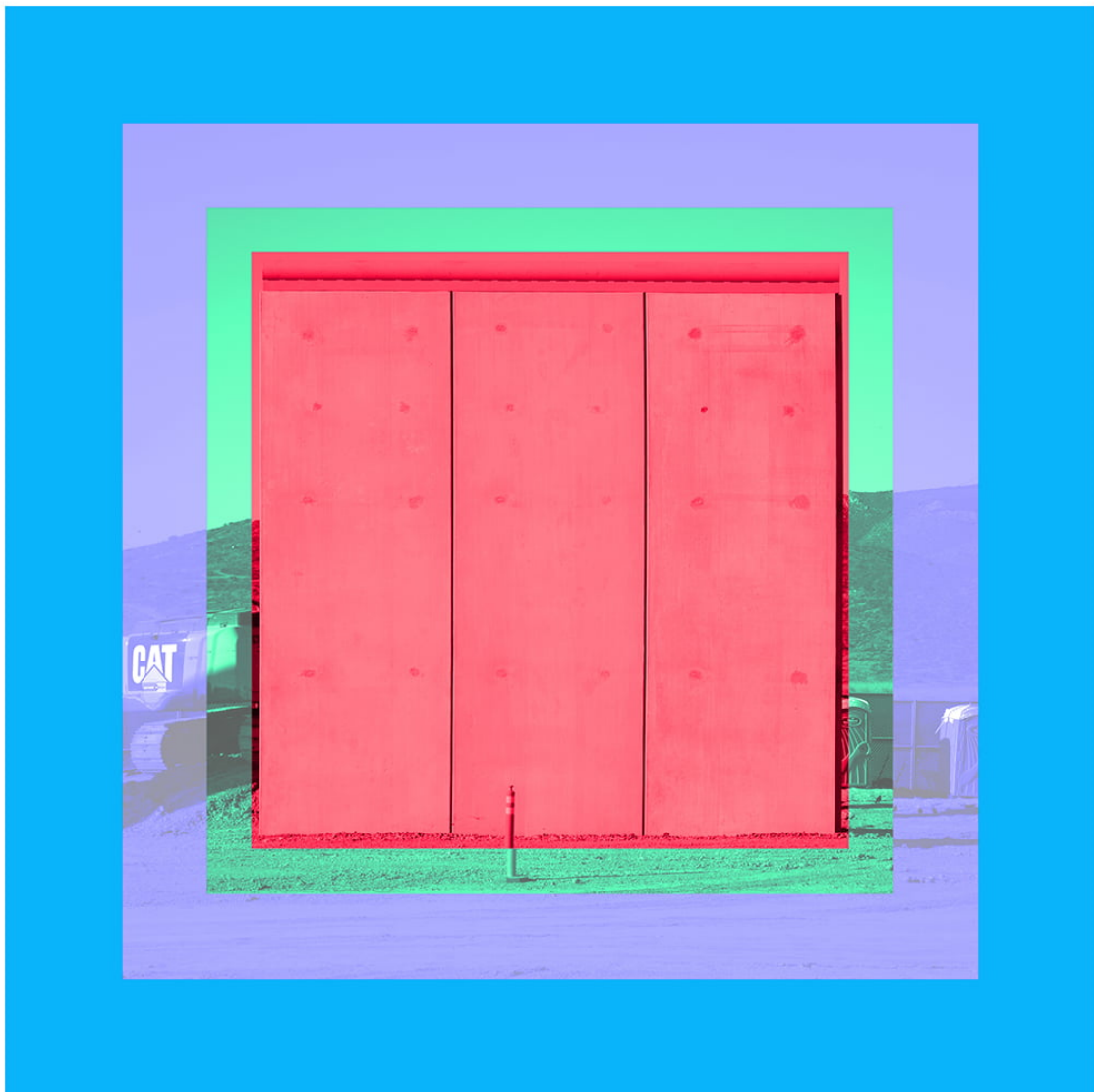


PARANOID ARCHITECTURE

Tony de los Reyes



Tony de los Reyes, Paranoid Architecture 2, 2018, 1 of 8 archival pigment prints, 14 x 14 inches, Edition of 3 + 2 AP

"On day one, we will begin working on an impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern border wall."^[1]

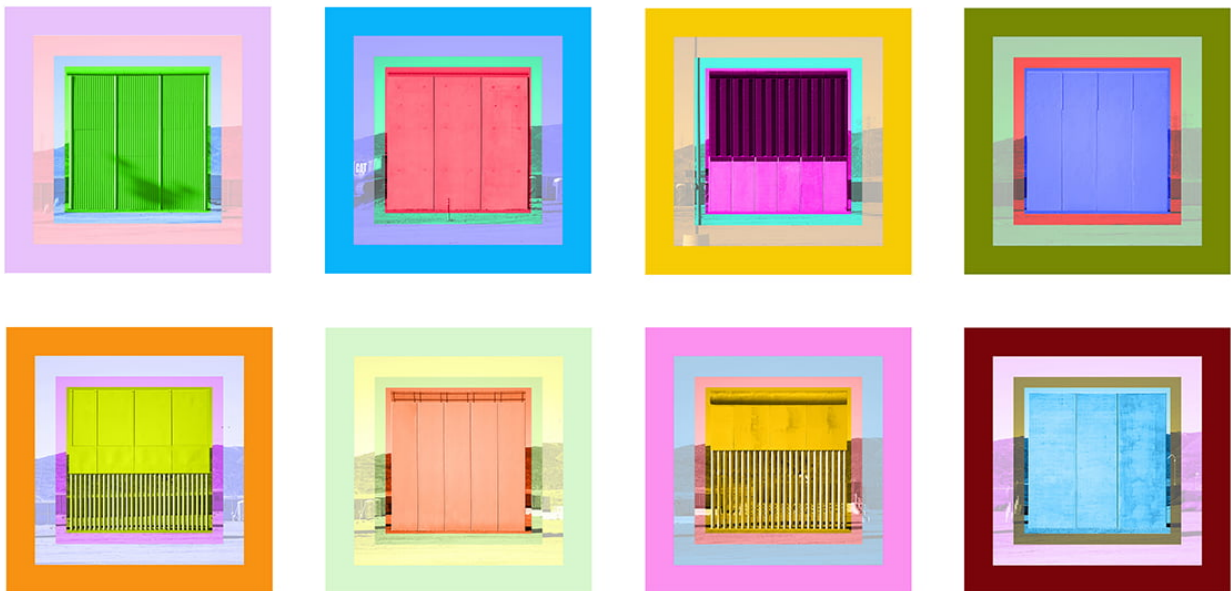
On January 25, 2017, only five days after his inauguration as president of the United States, Donald J. Trump signed Executive Order 13767, which directed the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to begin the design and construction of new, more intimidating physical barriers along the southern border with Mexico.^[2] Previous border walls had already been removed and replaced with sturdier, bollard-type fencing implemented under the Clinton-era Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, and the Bush-era Secure Fence Act a decade later. A few months after this decree, the Customs and Border Patrol's (CPB) Office of Facilities and Asset Management solicited requests for proposals of "wall system" prototypes, with a single, modular design potentially replacing all existing border walls, and new construction fast-tracked along currently unsecured sections of the border.^[3] The commission resulted in the construction of eight equally spaced, nine meter square concrete and steel prototypes, fabricated on a site directly facing the existing, dilapidated sheet-metal fence in eastern Tijuana, Mexico. Trump's vision of a "big, beautiful wall," the centerpiece of his campaign, immediately appeared quite different than those conceived and built by his predecessors. Expressing more than a boundary delineation, it would be the embodiment of state power compressed into a simplistic, architectural logo of Trump's "America First" brand. Unwittingly, these eight austere yet imposing models signaled something more than national security. They seemed to corrupt the modernist aims of abstraction, as found in architectural utopias and minimalist sculpture. The mantra of form and function, so esteemed by progressive twentieth century artists and architects, had found itself equally applicable to neo-fascist policies. Ironically, Trump's vision of an aestheticized fortress aligned neatly with the visual language of avant-garde myths, something which provoked the creation of my print series, *Paranoid Architecture*.

Six companies were awarded contracts for eight border wall prototypes, costing between \$300,000-\$500,000 each. Four were to be made entirely of reinforced concrete. The rest were instructed to have partial steel slat, "see-through capability" features to facilitate CPB situational awareness along the border. Requirements were grouped into five categories: breaching, scaling, constructability, engineering design, and aesthetics. The goal was to learn from industrial innovations, and to test each barrier's strength and impassibility. For example, one CPB test team used various tools to see how long it would take to cut a 12-inch diameter hole through the concrete; another team attempted to reach the top of the walls during timed tests, both unassisted and assisted (using climber's aids and tools).^[4] The commission disregarded environmental concerns regarding disruption to animal migration patterns along pristine sections of the southwestern border, which include endangered species such as ocelots and pronghorn antelope. The location of the prototypes was particularly significant. Since they were commissioned as engineering tests, they could have been built well away from the border itself, as long as equitable site conditions were considered. But constructed a few kilometers away from the world's most active international crossing between Tijuana, Mexico, and San Ysidro, California, and directly adjacent to the existing border, they were clearly positioned to intimidate the Mexican people and proudly declare a new, xenophobic philosophy.

On March 13, 2017, President Trump and an entourage of CPB and DHS personnel reviewed the completed prototypes in a media event that was more theatrical than evaluative. Less than two hours long, it completed its primary goal as a viral moment emphatically revising prior US immigration policies. The president, who had stopped to examine the prototypes on his way to a fundraising event, received everything he wanted from them: a stunning photo op of himself as patron, surrounded by engineers, contractors, law enforcement officers, and administrators, in front of his first commission as commander-in-chief. It also exemplified Trump's allegiance to a more hermetic America. As a strategic means of softening, as well as aggrandizing, his new national imperative, the term "aesthetically pleasing" had been placed within the commission's directive. Trump, a self-proclaimed architectural impresario *par excellence*, had always taken aesthetic ownership of his buildings, especially hotels and casinos, designed in a style dubbed "dictator chic."^[5] He was determined to keep the Trump brand of power

architecture as potent as ever, whether in the service of hospitality or politics, and make sure the world knew that America was *his* by design.^[6]

Paranoid Architecture was inspired after seeing the wall prototypes from the Mexican side of the border. Since I was unauthorized to visit the restricted construction site, with the aid of a ladder, and conveniently-located mounds of dirt, trash and rubble, I was able to peer over the existing sheet-metal fence and photograph the prototype's square façades. Their formal, systematic alignment and equitable size immediately reminded me of modernist attempts to utilize the square's conceptual capacities, and with each prototype I moved to a central position that emphasized their geometric rigor. The square, a form whose modernist taxonomy begins with Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), remains a platonic model with which to pursue endlessly speculative projects. A seminal work such as Josef Albers' *Study for Homage to the Square: Departing in Yellow* (1964), with its chromatic nuance, and nesting, compositional scheme, encourages an objective, revelatory encounter with color and form. Albers' search for "...character and feeling...without any additional 'hand writing' or, so-called, texture," relies on the square's iteration to produce thought unencumbered by imagistic relationships.^[7] Seen as a whole, his *Homage to the Square* series (1950-1975), and other modernist works using the square as stimuli for theoretically objective grounds, possibly extends praxis into fetish. However, in opposition to the affect created by Malevich and Albers, the squares comprising Trump's prototypes emit a function of malevolence. Albers' generous aim of reducing "hand-writing" from his work is upended: Trump's implicit signature is the most prominent aspect of the structures. They exude a dictatorial power antithetical to aesthetic musings, inverting the square's sanctified, formal power, into brute objects capable of physical harm. Trump's walls are weaponized squares. They are forces of intimidation, geometry engineered as political myth.



Tony de los Reyes, *Paranoid Architecture*, 2018, 8 archival pigment prints, 14 x 14 inches each, Edition of 3 + 2 AP

Alternating between formal abstraction and photographic documentation, each of the eight *Paranoid Architecture* works contains a single square image of a prototype encased within a series of three additional square frames. At the perimeter of each work is a square of completely opaque color, which, as it moves successively inwards, changes chromatically and proportionally as it approaches the central image. Conversely, the central prototype systematically reduces in clarity and expands in scope as it moves towards the outer

edges of the print. This fluctuation of appearance and apprehension, between two types of focal determinants, one photographic and one abstract, is unified by alternating squares of color, whose spectral differences add to an overall field of intense, visual oscillation. While the edition maintains a tight compositional logic, when considering coloration, the opposite is employed. Chromatic values are untethered to rational or political motifs, complementary colors are inconsistently exchanged, and inter-chromatic relations are atonal. Overall, *Paranoid Architecture* looks to generate an anxiety similar to my reaction as an eyewitness to Trump's monumental project. The edition, when hung as a group, visually mimics the kind of systematic, psychic assault conjured by the eight prototypes strictly aligned along the border.

When considering the blunt power of massive, geometric artworks, and their ability to bear immense weight upon an otherwise undistinguished landscape, many have commented that the careful sequencing of the prototypes significantly resemble Land art and sculptural works whose aesthetics seek to maximize psychological tension between the viewer and site/object. The work of Richard Serra, an artist peripherally attached to Land art (and who had incidentally worked with Albers while attending Yale), shares a peculiar kinship to the kind of inert, physical hostility towards the environment as found in Trump's prototypes. His massive, raw steel sculptures, with their emphasis on antagonizing context through material and form, yield an intense awakening to spectacular spatial disruption. A work such as *Shift* (1970-72) conditions viewers to exchange seemingly immutable properties of landscape for its subjugation by dominant, foreign objects, and recognize the artwork as a catalyst for reckoning contiguous zones of presence and absence. Serra's comment, "How do you deal with a space in a way that will bring sculptural resolution to all its indices? How do you take a field that is undifferentiated or heterogeneous and turn it into a homogenous sculptural place that anybody can recognize the moment they walk into it?" reveals an intention to both maintain *and* eliminate locale.^[8]

In particular, Serra's *East-West/West-East* (2014), located in a remote section of the Brouq Nature Reserve in Qatar, offers a remarkable visual parallel to Trump's prototypes. Comprised of four monumental, vertical steel plates (each 10 cm thick, between 14.7 to 16.7 meters in height), these colossal works converge with the vast desert landscape in an axial opposition of color, form, material, and orientation. Aligned equidistantly along the one-kilometer site, they serve to accentuate and obliterate the topography, and as a whole, assert a singular will to eclipse the terrain. As such, the site is conceptually dislocated through a spasm of architectonic interference. Serra claimed as much in an interview about the project, stating:

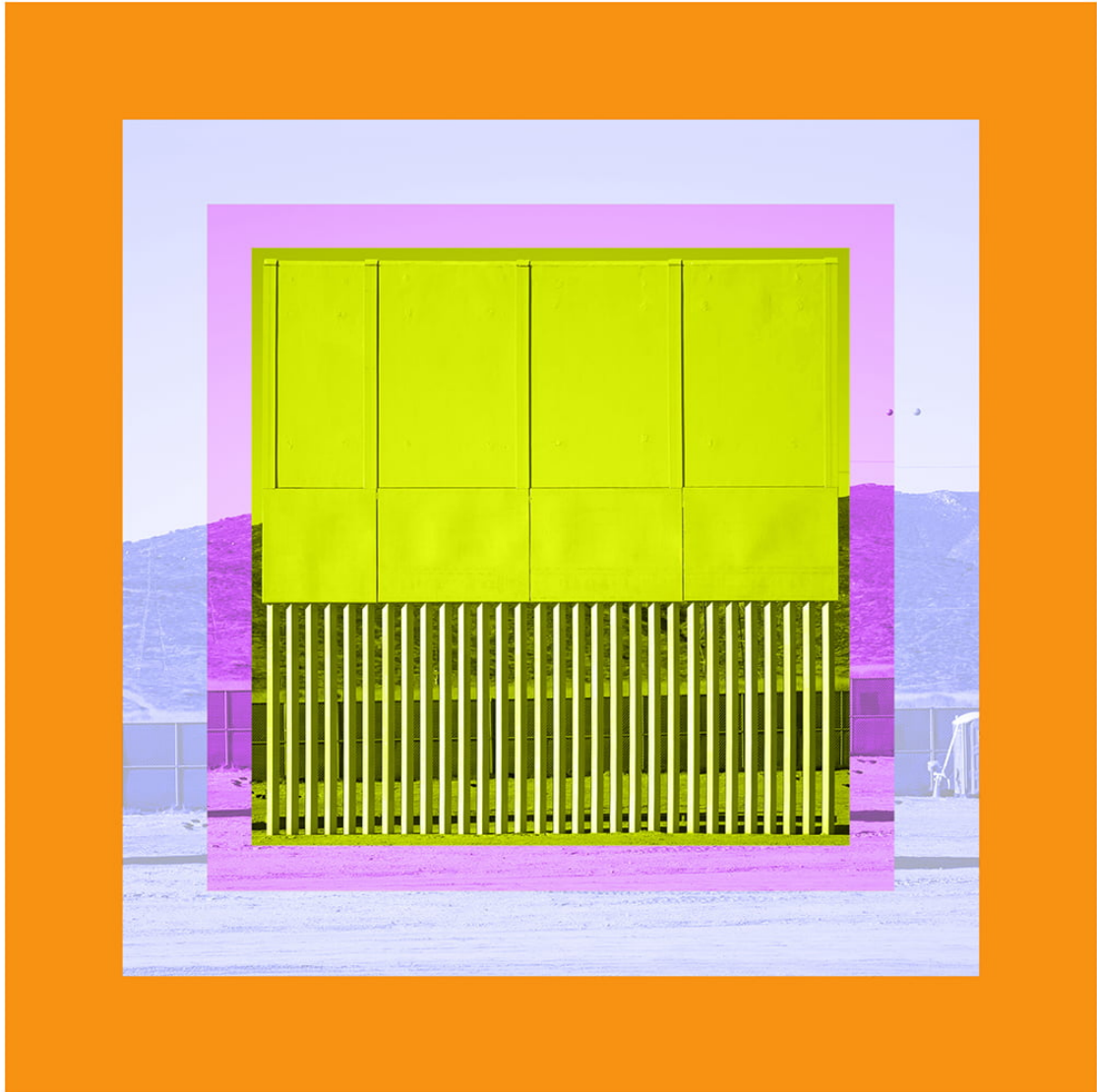
Before, there was no way of discerning where anything was in relation to where you were, because you had no point of reference. What that piece does is give you a point of reference in relationship to a line, and your upstanding relationship to a vertical plane, and infinity, and a personal relationship to a context—and pulls that context together. It makes it graspable. That's actually a place out there now, and there certainly wasn't one before. We did that simply by putting up four plates.^[9]

Due to their distinctive scale and isolated locations, both *East-West/West-East* and Trump's eight prototypes could not have been made without significant state support. Serra's project would not exist without the extensive financial holdings of the Qatar Museum Authority and its ties to the royal family, and Trump's prototypes could not have been authorized without congressional approval. The prototype's total cost of \$32 million is insignificant when compared to its proposed implementation along vast stretches of the US-Mexico border. Currently, the average projected expense is \$24.4 million per mile, although this figure increases with each revised estimate, taking into account specific costs of buying private property along the border, creating access roads to remote sites, and other environmental complications.^[10] Regardless of intent, both *East-*

West/West-East and Trump's border wall fundamentally serve as state-supported extensions of power dynamics. They are intentionally dictatorial, immutable structures, implicitly projecting the strength of separate regimes through the construction of massive, aestheticized territorial markers.

The image of a continuous, 2,000 mile-long wall along the US-Mexico border has long been the fantasy of many paranoid Americans. Scholar Greg Grandin theorizes this dream as the capsized doppelgänger of American imperialism, with the metamorphosis of virile, "frontier" characteristics of independence and self-reliance inverted into fear-based, protectionist policies.^[11] One reoccurring argument by nativists and isolationists alike has been the certainty of terrorist attacks caused by agents accessing targets via the Mexican border. This was intensified by Trump's multiple re-tweets of unsubstantiated stories, such as that of a New Mexican rancher finding Muslim prayer rugs in the southwest desert.^[12] And stoked by conservative media's agitated coverage of international, undocumented immigrants seeking refuge from violence and lack of economic opportunity, debate over sensible immigration policies has been effectively replaced by racist hyperbole. Trump declared such in 2015 at the announcement of his presidential campaign, stating, "The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems." This rhetoric was mirrored by exceptionally militaristic immigration enforcement policies, such as 2018's "Operation Faithful Patriot," which proposed migrants being met at the border by heavily-armed soldiers, rather than Border Patrol agents offering asylum-seeking processes called for by federal law. Such actions summon those panicking at the thought of an unraveled America losing its white, Christian foundation myth. Combined with the administration's all-consuming investments in new border wall design and construction, America has completely reversed its self-serving, mythic narrative as a nation welcoming "huddled masses" via Frédéric Bartholdi's *The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World*.

America's history of territorial anxiety can be seen in the evolution of its southern boundary markers. From the modest, early twentieth century marble and cement obelisks, which replaced the first surveyed markers made of piled stones, to the more recent five meter high steel bollard walls commissioned after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, these revisions are a reminder that during the past 150 years, the United States has incrementally contracted in scale, and fortified its extremities, through panic and fear. Regardless of the reality of Trump's border wall completion, its preoccupation continues to shrink the nation's confidence and global stature. Even with the ruinous funding and national will necessary for its construction, the security it promises is delusional. But all of it is compelling, and many artists have made it their primary concern to reject and revise political certitude surrounding the border.^[13] *Paranoid Architecture* is my reflection on the intersection of politics, design, and aesthetics induced by Trump's proposal. It is critical to note, then, on the prototype's subsequent demolition and removal. In early 2019 I returned to the site where I took the original photographs for *Paranoid Architecture*, and was shocked to see their absence. The ground had been cleared and smoothed, and the flimsy sheet-metal fence I had once peered over had been replaced by newer, more substantial construction. In a brief moment of disbelief, it seemed as if my entire project was an extension of the same hallucinatory thinking that surrounded Trump's vision. His prototypes had sanctified an unremarkable stretch of land as a theater for conjoined artistic and political narratives. However, upon their physical erasure, a certain fascist amnesia takes root, whose political vibrato remains unclear. Unexpectedly, *Paranoid Architecture* now serves as a mnemonic confrontation with Trump's slippery aesthetic project, and an introspective response to an uncertain American future.



Tony de los Reyes, Paranoid Architecture 5, 2018, 1 of 8 archival pigment prints, 14 x 14 inches, Edition of 3 + 2 AP

Footnotes

1. The Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump during a 2016 campaign speech in Phoenix, Arizona. [↑](#)
2. "Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements". January 25, 2017. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-border-security-immigration-enforcement-improvements/> [↑](#)

3. United States Government Accountability Office. "Report to Congressional Requesters: Southwest Border Security". July 2018, p. 9. Available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/693488.pdf> ↑
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17. ↑
5. York, P. "Trump's Dictator Chic". *Politico*. March 2017. Available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/trump-style-dictator-autocrats-design-214877> ↑
6. Metal plaques in Calexico, CA, attached to sections of remodeled border wall authorized under the previous Obama administration, claim a certain "ownership" by Trump. Under a large image of the American eagle as depicted on the presidential seal, the largest type reads, "DONALD J. TRUMP," and later, "THIS PLAQUE WAS INSTALLED ON OCTOBER 26, 2018 TO COMMEMORATE THE COMPLETION OF THE FIRST SECTION OF PRESIDENT TRUMP'S BORDER WALL." ↑
7. Albers, J. "On My Homage to the Square". (ca. 1954, typescript), folder 263, box 27, Josef Albers Papers (MS 32), Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University. ↑
8. Foster, H. *Richard Serra Hal Foster Conversations about Sculpture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2018. p. 57 ↑
9. Byrnes, S. "American Sculptor Richard Serra has Planted Four 50ft Steel Towers in Qatari Desert for Latest Project East-West/West-East". *The Independent*. April 9, 2014. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/american-sculptor-richard-serra-has-planted-four-50ft-steel-towers-in-qatari-desert-for-latest-9249514.html> ↑
10. Minority Staff Report, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Available at <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Southern%20Border%20Wall%20-%20HSGAC%20Minority%20Report.pdf> ↑
11. Grandin, G. *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books. 2019. ↑
12. Serwer, A. "Trump's Prayer Rug Paranoia". *The Atlantic*. 2019. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/trumps-prayer-rug-paranoia/580792> ↑
13. Many exceptional artists, architects, and collaborative groups consider the consequences of the US-Mexico border. Ranging from personal relationships, cultural connections, and political histories, most view their work a salve healing the physical "scars" left by the border. Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence/Valla Repelente* (2015), a two mile long, bi-directional, aerial installation across the border between Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Sonora, instills a contrasting vision of longitudinal passage; likewise, bi-national participation is fundamental to Ronald Real/Virginia San Fratello's *Teeter Totter Wall* (2019), between Sunland Park, NM, and Ciudad Juárez, MX. Such works are reminders of the influence artists, architects, and local communities have to change the aura of the border from finitude to plasticity, letting the wall itself be used as a fulcrum with which to leverage profound dialogue. For positive prescriptions, Rael's *Borderwall as Architecture* (University of California Press, 2017) is an indispensable guide towards a healthy, renegotiated and reimaged border through architectural innovation. For an interpretation of the border's significant, personal impact among artists and the public, Tanya Aguiñiga's AMBOS (Art Made Between Opposite Sides) project creates multiple platforms for questioning the border's status quo. A work such as *Border Quipu/Quipu Fronterizo* offers bi-national commuters at the San Ysidro crossing to participate in conceptual and physical connectivity through the production of *quipu*, an Andean Pre-Columbian organizational system of recording history. A directory of border artists can be found at www.ambosproject.com, and Stefan Falke's ongoing photographic compilation, www.borderartists.com, which documents over 200 bi-national artists that create and produce in the shadow of the wall. This thriving community is regularly on display in the *Transborder Biennial* exhibitions held simultaneously at the El Paso Museum of Art, Texas, and Museo de Arte Ciudad Juárez, which reflect on life in the border region, and issues of physical, linguistic, and cultural hybridity. Critical writing is also abundant. An excellent, concise source for understanding the

contextual, architectural significance of the current and future state of the border wall can be found in *Unwalling Citizenship* by Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman, <http://averyreview.com/issues/21/unwalling-citizenship>, and Michael Dear's *Why Walls Won't Work* (Oxford University Press, 2016), which traces the border's history of cultural interaction since the earliest Mesoamerican times to the present day, contemporary life along the border zone, and the existence of an unrecognized, "third nation" space.