

EDGE WALKERS





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Edge Walkers

What boundaries exist between the disciplines of art and design?

Featuring six artists/designers who make innovative use of wide-ranging materials from birdseed and rope to steel and alpaca fleece, *Edge Walkers* examines the dynamics of contemporary practices that work across plural disciplines. With hybrid approaches to materiality and ambiguous relations to utility, the works included in *Edge Walkers* blur the boundaries between the disciplines of art, design, and craft.



Keenan Rowe

Tanya Aguiñiga is the founding director of AMBOS (Art Made Between Opposite Sides), an ongoing project of artist interventions and commuter collaborations that build communication and examine identity in the U.S./Mexico border regions. Influenced by her upbringing in Tijuana, Mexico, Aguiñiga's work uses craft as a vehicle for community empowerment by generating conversations about identity, culture and gender.

Ayako Aratani and Evan Fay are innovative furniture makers who were named to *Dwell* magazine's top 24 "designers to watch" list in 2018. The duo founded the Detroit-area design studio Aratani · Fay in 2016, shortly after graduating with an M.F.A. in 3D Design from Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Doug Johnston is an artist and designer who creates unique hand-formed sculpture, vessels, baskets and bags out of cotton rope and thread in his Brooklyn studio.

Aya Kawabata is a Japanese designer known for her precision oriented graphic design work and playful futuristic textiles. She won an award for "Best New Talent" at DMY International Design Festival Berlin 2016.

OOIEE (Office of Interior Establishing Exterior) is a Minneapolis-based cross-disciplinary design practice that combines elements of architecture, landscaping, industrial design, and relational art. Run by designer Matt Olson, OOIEE embraces playfulness while rethinking the modernist design canon.



Born in Tijuana, Mexico, Tanya Aguiñiga commuted to San Diego to attend school. For 14 years, she crossed the border in order to attend classes- a process that she has likened to waiting at the DMV for 3-6 hours a day. This daily experience of contrasts between life on either side of the border shaped her artistic practice, which often plays with notions of duality and opposition.

As founding director of AMBOS (Art Made Between Opposite Sides), Aguiñiga has staged multiple interventions and artistic collaborations along the U.S./Mexican border regions that foreground the differing experiences and identities of those who are able to cross, as well as those who are denied that mobility.

Tanya Aguiñiga



Tanya Aguiñiga's works in *Edge Walkers* use traditional craft media, such as clay or fleece, in non-traditional ways that challenge normative understandings of identity, culture, and gender.

For example, Aguiñiga's *Gynic Dispossession 4* is a complex tangle of cotton ropes that hang from the ceiling. As the ropes droop, they cradle a pink spherical form, that vaguely references an eye or a breast. The knotted rope, coated in wax, becomes a swing and cradles the ball perfectly in its grip. The references to the human body- if a disfigured body in parts, gives the work an added dimension of anxiety. Her surreal abstractions are both abstract, yet loosely figural, both body and not-body.





Aratani • Fay

Ayako Aratani and Evan Fay team up as studio partners to create ambitious furniture and creative lighting design. The *Lawless* chair and the *Roommate* lamps featured in *Edge Walkers* juxtapose irregular forms against rigid geometric systems. Aratani's *Roommate* lamp molds its light shade out of a cloud of bent wire, while Fay's *Lawless* sofa weaves chaotic ribbons of foam over a hard steel frame. According to Fay, the chair is a "celebration of irregularity" in a society often dominated by rigidity and control.







Doug Johnston

Based in Brooklyn, New York, Johnston creates hybrid sculptural objects which reflect his interests in transforming plants into fiber, two-dimensional materials into three-dimensional objects, and space into structure. His signature coiling process stitches layers of nylon or cotton cord together to build works of varied sizes and colors. This technique recalls ancient hand-building vessel construction techniques, but is accomplished with industrial sewing machines instead.



"I have worked to build a formal vocabulary and studio practice that engages my varied interests in architecture, spatial and landscape formation, commerce, and fundamental human technologies. My work often sits at the intersection of art, design and craft, taking the position that no made object is exclusively aesthetic or utilitarian."

Doug Johnston

Doug Johnston's works can be playful-whimsical even-as they challenge our expectations of the differences between functional and non-functional objects. For example, *Strider* upsets our expectations of form by adding a third leg onto an otherwise humanoid shape. This third leg creates added stability even as it reminds us of the tumbling and tripping experiences of three-legged or sack races from the picnics of our childhoods.





Two Hump Haus, also in *Edge Walkers*, is a collaborative work created with Tomoe Matsuoka in which twinned cocoons are formed out of coiled rope. The scale and humanoid shape of this work evoke both the presence, as well as the absence, of the human body.

Aya Kawabata

Aya Kawabata is a Japanese designer whose complex illustrations and textiles won the award for “Best New Talent” at the DMY International Design Festival in Berlin 2016. *Edge Walkers* featured five of her vibrant tapestries whose landscapes summon up composite worlds of futuristic robots and playful hybrid animals. Fabricated on a Jacquard power loom, her works have a dense texture and a layered tactility. The complex relationship between the warp and weft yields dramatic color combinations, which read differently by the spectator when standing at different viewing distances. Due to their complexity of form and brilliance of color combination, these weavings won awards at the Salone Del Mobile, Milan and at the Brno Biennial in 2016.







OOIEE

OOIEE, the Office of Interior Establishing Exterior, is run by Matt Olson out of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Concerned with breaking down barriers between design, architecture, and art, Olson utilizes playful and poetic means to give shape to space. According to Olson, he does not identify as either an artist or a designer. Rather, he prefers to say that he works on projects related to art and design.



OOIEE's works in *Edge Walkers* render iconic hard-edged minimalist works from the 1970s in crumbly, impermanent birdseed. The elemental nature of geometry breaks down as bits of the sculpture potentially flake off or crumble, or even attract curious and hungry rodents. Such playful disregard for the heroic gestures of the 1970s positions the work somewhere between humor/gravity and seriality/unity. In so doing, the work challenges received academic hierarchies and easily digestible narratives.





*In the Service of Radical Kindness:
Collaboration and Care in the Work of Tania Aguiñiga*

Beth Hinderliter

In 2017, Mexican American artist Tanya Aguiñiga performed *Tensión* at the U.S./Mexico border fence. Using the indigenous technique of Mayan backstrap weaving, Aguiñiga and her collaborator Jackie Amézquita formed a loom between their two bodies. As they sat on opposite sides of the fence, they threaded their weaving between the tall slatted metal poles that made up that particular section of the barrier. The fibers wrapped around their bodies stressed the interconnectedness of a single landscape as well as the interrelatedness of the people living in the border regions, all the while this connection remained severed by the material violence of the barrier and its symbolic dimensions and psychic repercussions.

Tensión was a project for AMBOS (Art Made Between Opposite Sides – also meaning *both* in Spanish) an ongoing initiative created by Aguiñiga in 2016. AMBOS consists of a series of works that engages communities along the border and has been shaped by Aguiñiga's experience of growing up in Tijuana, Mexico and crossing the border every day to go to school in San Diego, USA- crossing at 3:30 am to make it to school at 8am. For 14 years, she crossed the border to attend classes- a process that she has likened to waiting at the Department of Motor Vehicles for 3-6 hours a day. The crossing was traumatic - something that she endured without talking about, due to the stigmatization, racism, and classism surrounding repressive immigration policies. Yet, she also recognized that she was one of the lucky few able to cross- her relative ease of crossing the border



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Tensión*, 2017. Photo credit Gina Clyne, Courtesy of AMBOS.



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Tensión*, 2017. Photo credit Gina Clyne, Courtesy of AMBOS.

contrasted with the long lines of thousands of migrants lined up along the border seeking to do what she did every day.

Tanya has explained her work along the border seeks to connect with people and how they feel as they navigate the dynamics of life in border regions. This has been especially challenging after the 2016 presidential election in the United States and the escalation in stigmatization and militarization of the border regions, which included a policy of forcible family separations amongst more than 5,000 immigrant families that has taken place since 2018. As Aguiñiga says, “I took it all raw and emotionally... when I was in emotional distress as a border commuter, all I really needed was someone to check in with me and to ask me how I was feeling. It’s something that we rarely do, we just go about our day. We don’t give a lot of attention to the psychological aspects of the things that we go through every day.”^[1]

As the threads looped around the fence, uniting Aguiñiga's and Amézquita's bodies, *Tensión* engaged what Aguiñiga calls a "reindigenization" of art's forms and processes. Reindigenization involves the use of indigenous techniques such as Mayan backstrap weaving, materials such as alpaca fleece, as well as form and shape. Reindigenization also prioritizes knowledges gained from collective experiences and challenges individualistic understandings of the body and self. While she adopts the forms and techniques of backstrap weaving, she privileges the performative process of weaving over producing a final object. The performative act stresses shared experience as a kind of cultural braidedness in the border region as region (despite which side of the border you are on) while also acknowledging the amplification of extreme forms of nationalism, racism, and fascism that divides these regions. The process itself is symbolic of a shared knowledge- what Dian Million calls "felt knowledge" or what Aguiñiga has herself called "an intuitive body knowledge"- one from which we can learn from when we "listen to our hands."^[2]

The reindigenization of contemporary art that Aguiñiga proposes offers a complex layering of temporality. This is not a reclamation of handicraft within the dimensions of performance or social practice art, whose histories have often centered on rejecting the privileged value of the art object in a critique of the exploitation of labor and the instrumentalization of communication. Aguiñiga remarks that in Mexico most people don't have a problem seeing craft as art and that she uses the vocabulary of craft because "it's open to more people, it's easier to get involved...I like the way craft connects a lot of us beyond identity and socio-economic class and gender."^[3] Beyond a focus on hand weaving, *Tensión*'s production takes shape against the industrial labor exploitation along the border regions, such as the maquiladoras sited within "economic freedom zones" so that



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Tensión*, 2017. Photo credit Gina Clyne, Courtesy of AMBOS.

transnational corporations can avoid national-based labor protection laws and economic restrictions. Aguiñiga's weaving takes meaning against the industrial production taking place in these factories, whose terrible working conditions and exploitative pay have been documented by artists such as Fred Lonidier. Reindigenization proposes another logic beyond the dynamics of art versus craft and the question asked by so much of global art history- is the global art world and its markets a reflection of, or coeval with, economic globalization? Performance crafting – whether she is using felt or backstrap weaving at the border or in Beverly Hills) seeks a collaborative engagement that highlights the interstices between different social domains- whether economic domains such as differences between markets for craft objects or the contemporary art market, or the wealth of neighborhoods where crafting reads as loitering or performance. Either way, it attracts the gaze of the police,



Tanya Aguiñiga backstrap weaving with Mayan weavers in Chiapas, Mexico.

as seen in the photograph of her performance in Beverly Hills, CA.

This intuitive body knowledge, or felt knowledge is also ancestral knowledge. As Aguiñiga has explained “it is about reclaiming lost history, and having a conceptual framework for the future that is actionable versus decolonization.”^[4] Such knowledge is unlocked in the process of creating objects via engaging communities and creating relations. Yet, within the domain of social practice or activist art, which is itself concerned with these same dynamics of community engagement, politics is most often circumscribed within modern

instrumentalized notions of reason and the public sphere. Traditional Western political theory has largely stigmatized the role of emotion in public life by positioning successful political movements solely within the domain of reason. When emotion moves out of the private domain and into the public sphere, it is deemed untrustworthy - the terrain of unruly mobs. By checking in on how people feel and working with felt knowledge, Aguiñiga configures the political as emotive. Furthermore, she is asking how felt knowledge is made invisible within settler colonial power dynamics. For example, even though Aguiñiga had known her collaborator in *Tensión* during their long-term work together on issues of immigration and life in the border regions, Jackie had never told her that she was originally from Guatemala. The performance brought together the personal and the political through its consideration of the dynamics of enforced barriers and rerouted connections.



Tanya Aguiñiga backstrap weaving with Mayan weavers in Chiapas, Mexico.



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Performance Crafting*, 2012, Beverly Hills, California

Aguiñiga brings the theme and enactment of care into contemporary art spaces that have been historically uncomfortable with gestures of care, preferring instead the language of criticality most often expressed within critical theory, especially that of Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics. As conversation around Claire Bishop's 2004 essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" revealed, criticality defined in terms of antagonism in political theory was deemed central to the efficacy of relational or "artist" art. In response, artist Liam Gillick pushed back on this narrow vision of criticality, asking if certain art works gained greater acclaim if they upset a larger number of people? Central in the conversation was the idea of maintaining a friction between social and aesthetic dimensions of work. More recently, Marina Vishmidt has criticized artists such as Tino Seghal and Theaster Gates for what she sees as a lack of criticality that allows for aesthetic practices to move squarely into the social realm and even take up business practices and logics that are imperialist, domineering and anti-art. [5]



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Performance Crafting, Felt-in*, 2019. James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Photo credit: Jolie Shank.

Pointing to a frictionless exchange between the aesthetic parameters of these works and the social realm in which they operate that defeats any capacity for critique, Vishmidt consigns these artists to the realm of affirmative culture or glossy entrepreneurship. Citing Adorno, she points to the benefits of the autonomy of art, no matter however tenuous or alienated, from its social conditions of being. In this formula- a kind of monadic narcissism, art shrinks itself into the smallest of corners possible until it submits to the triumphal logic of capital and modernization. Then art begins to use its own resources for social engineering. In this view, critique is highly foreclosed, gesturing in small gasps and breaths to that which exists outside of the logic of these machinations.

Felt knowledge reorients us away from this narrowness of criticality, asking us how we can open up future potential rather than see in it only foreclosed options - as if the future was only the repayment of deals or contracts made in the past. Here, the care that accesses and gives form to felt knowledge might also be thought in terms of the “care of the possible” that Isabelle Stengers has spoken about as a way of thinking from the point of view of future possibility rather than considering what doors have been closed.

Care has been both a practical and theoretical component of Aguiñiga's work in recent years, playing a large role in particular at her exhibition *Craft and Care* at the Museum of Arts and Design in 2018, where she aimed to “put people in an emotional space where they would be open to receiving a lot of heavy information.”^[6] Whether in a NY museum, a Virginia university campus or along the US Mexico border where she has worked collaboratively over the past many years, Aguiñiga has deployed affective strategies- highlighted in sensorial awareness and experiential activation- to bring forward painful experiences in U.S. / Mexican border regions

and clarify the processes of cultural erasure and colonial violence.

At a 2019 performance crafting workshop at James Madison University in Virginia, Tanya Aguiñiga engaged participants in a circular structured “felt-in.” As each person encased a neighbor’s hand in felt, Aguiñiga, asked participants to consider the dynamics of being cared for while caring for another. Such negotiations of care required thought about consent- consent to be touched and consent to touch - as felting is a time intensive process requiring a duration of handing rubbing raw wool saturated (in this instance) with olive oil-based soap. Performance crafting asks participants to engage with their sensorium- how might the soap feel slippery, the wool feel rough, and how does their hand feel after being wet and encased in a felt glove after 5 minutes or after 30 minutes?

Such experiential activation derives in part from the legacy of avant-garde projects from the 1920s, such as El Lissitzky’s *Cabinet of Abstraction* (1926) that asked viewers to become participants in the museum through use of optical effects and hands-on kinetic elements, and was developed as a key strategy of contemporary art from the 1950s forward as a defense against the anesthetizing effects of capitalist spectacle. However, in Aguiñiga’s practice, caring for another while simultaneously being cared for bodies forth spaces of *radical kindness*, as she describes it.

What is radical kindness? How do we collaborate with others- both human and nonhuman- and center being in good relation with others? Is radical kindness the erasure of conflict as a way to care for the possible? Success in her AMBOS project was, according to Aguiñiga, for viewers to be “able to read people’s stories about the border and how all the different places feel, so they understand that the border is a larger, complex places that’s constantly evolving and reacting to



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Performance Crafting, Felt-in*, 2019. James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Photo credit: Jolie Shank.

policy on both sides, and that it's something that we need to learn to use as a starting place for a conversation, rather than something that negates someone's humanity."^[7]

When care is not defined counter to an antagonistic criticality, one can begin to unpack and differentiate emotions previously foreclosed upon and invisible. The weavings created during *Tensión's* performance were left at the border wall as reminders of transversal or transcultural connections that the barrier repudiates even as it is structured by them. Radical kindness opens participants and viewers to the world and allows them to "consent to be more than a single being," to use Fred Moten's terminology. This multiplicity exists on plural registers, from the sensorial and somatic to the conceptual and epistemological. Embracing this polyamorous approach reframes the relation of art and politics- not as dialectical- but as enmeshed- thereby centering plurality *with* consent, without which a multiracial, queer-led, differently-abled, anti-imperialist politic is impossible.

Notes

[1] Aguiñiga as quoted in Alex Teplitzky, "Tanya Aguiñiga's Art Tells the Story of Communities Along the US/Mexican Border." *Creative Capital*, October 31, 2018. accessed November 10, 2019. <https://creative-capital.org/2018/10/31/tanya-aguinigas-art-tells-the-story-of-communities-along-the-us-mexican-border/>.

[2] Dian Million, "There is a river in me: theory from life." In Simpson, A., & Smith, A. (Eds.). *Theorizing Native Studies* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014): 31-42. See also Teplitzky, 7.

[3] Teplitzky, 6

[4] Personal communication with the artist, November 1, 2019.

[5] See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79. Liam Gillick, *Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"* *October* 115 (Winter 2006): 95-107. Marina Vishmidt, "Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated": Social Practice as Business Model,' *E-flux* 43 (March 2013): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60197/mimesis-of-the-hardened-and-alienated-social-practice-as-business-model/>.

[6] As quoted in Diana Budds, "To Better understand the U.S.-Mexico Border, One Artist Is Tying Knots." *Curbed.com* (May 14, 2018). Accessed September 28, 2019. <https://www.curbed.com/2018/5/14/17352992/mad-museum-exhibits-tanya-aguiniga>

[7] Teplitzky, 7.



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Performance Crafting, Felt-in*, 2019. James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Photo Credit: Jolie Shank.



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Performance Crafting, Felt-in*, 2019. James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Photo credit: Beth Hinderliter.



Felt mittens created during the performance crafting workshop



Exhibition Checklist

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Agamic Senescent*, 2016. Cotton rope, cotton thread, foam, gauze, alpaca fleece, wool, nylon and beeswax. 36 x 34 x 11 in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Agamic Senescent 2*, 2016. Cotton rope, cotton thread, foam, gauze, alpaca fleece, wool, nylon and beeswax. 46 x 6 x 4 in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Frail Flotation*, 2016. Cotton rope, cotton thread, foam, gauze, self-drying clay, alpaca fleece and beeswax. 32 x 10 x 7.5 in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Gynic Dispossession 5*, 2016. Cotton rope, cotton thread, canvas, self-drying clay, alpaca fleece and beeswax. 56 x 10.5 x 10.5 in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Gynic Dispossession 4*, 2016. Cotton rope, cotton thread, canvas, self-drying clay, alpaca fleece and beeswax. 52 x 14 x 14 in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Harbor*, 2017. Self-drying clay, alpaca fleece, mirror. 8h x 14w x 11.50d in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Hold 4*, 2015. Self-drying terracotta and alpaca fleece. 5h x 8w x 8d in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Isonomy in Decline*, 2016. Cotton rope, cotton thread, foam, canvas, self-drying clay, alpaca fleece, wool and beeswax. 68 x 6 x 6 in.

Tanya Aguiñiga, *Pierced Earth*, 2017 Self-drying clay and alpaca fleece. 3.50h x 4w x 4d in.

Doug Johnston, *Goed*, 2015. Cotton cord, sewing thread, metal ball chain.

Doug Johnston, *Manifold*, 2015. Nylon and cotton cord, sewing thread.

Doug Johnston, *Navy Shroud*, 2015. Nylon cord, sewing thread, urethane resin.

Doug Johnston, *Pitchdrop*, 2015. Nylon and cotton cord, sewing thread.

Doug Johnston, *Strider*, 2014. Cotton cord, sewing thread, stainless steel base.

Doug Johnston, *Rumpleskillskid*, 2011. Cotton cord, sewing thread.

Doug Johnston and Tomoe Matsuoka, *Two-Hump Haus*, 2014. Cotton cord, sewing thread.

Aya Kawabata, *Sun and Night 1*, 2016. Tapestry, 42 x 63 in.

Aya Kawabata, *Sun and Night 2*, 2016. Tapestry, 42 x 63 in.

Aya Kawabata, *Lake Under Forest 1*, 2016. Tapestry, 42 x 63 in.

Aya Kawabata, *Lake Under Forest 2*, 2016. Tapestry, 42 x 63 in.

Aya Kawabata, *Lake Under Forest 3*, 2016. Tapestry, 42 x 85 in.

Ayako Aratani and Evan Fay, *Lawless Lounge Chair*, 2016. 61 x 34 x 36 in. Steel, brass, foam and scuba knit.

Ayako Aratani and Evan Fay, *Lawless Stool*, 2016. Steel, brass, foam, scuba knit, 19 x 17 x 25 in.

Ayako Aratani and Evan Fay, *Roommate Stand Lamp*, 2016. Steel, brass, electric components, 25 x 25 x 70 in.

Ayako Aratani and Evan Fay, *Roommate Desktop Lamp*, 2016. Steel, brass, electric components, 13 x 13 x 16 in.

OOIEE, *(IT IS PART OF IT) After Judy Chicago*, 2018. Birdseed. 9 x 12 x 18 in. Edition 2 of 10.

OOIEE, *(IT IS PART OF IT) After Mel Bochner*, 2018. Birdseed. 3 x 12 x 7 in. Edition 2 of 10.

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