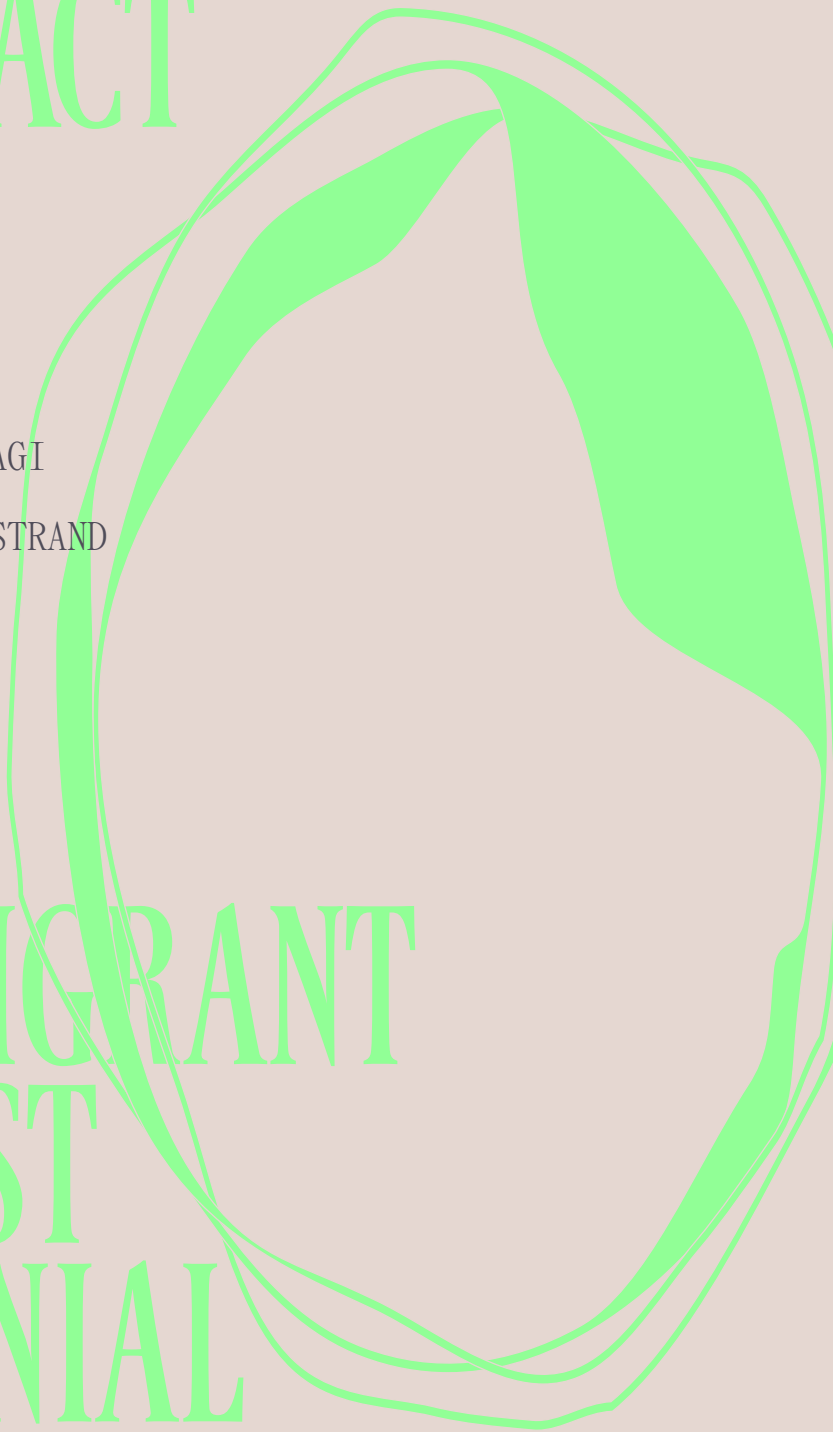


CONTACT ZONE

CO-CURATED BY
BIANCA ABDI-BORAGI
KATHERINE ADAMS
ANNA MIKAELA EKSTRAND

THE IMMIGRANT ARTIST BIENNIAL 2023



CONTACT ZONE OVERVIEW

A stage where cultures clash and merge, *Contact Zone* presents more than fifty artists from over thirty-five countries across nine venues in New York City and New Jersey. Centering U.S. and international immigrant and exiled artists the programming explores how storytelling, embodied memory, and projections of diasporic futures can be strategies for navigating conflict and straddling different political terrains. With an aim to voice immigrant experiences to build solidarity, the biennial will present Contact Zones (exhibitions), Field Work (panels), and Arena (performances and screenings) in addition to a Field Guide (catalog). It is co-curated by Bianca Abdi-Boragi, Katherine Adams, and Anna Mikaela Ekstrand.

As a first, *Contact Zone* will host a roundtable on undocumented and DACA-recipient artists at Brooklyn Museum. Presciently, a panel on Ukrainian artists and the ongoing war will be held at EFA Project Space.

TIAB is funded through its Patron Circle, grants, individual donations, and host partners.

FOREWORD

In 2023, The Immigrant Artist Biennial is as relevant, if not more urgent, as ever. Taking some time to decompress, heal and rebuild after 2020, I invited three curators to collectively co-curate the second iteration, broadening the notion of an immigrant through incorporating exiled and nomadic artists, displaced by ongoing wars and global conflicts. TIAB 2023: *Contact Zone* highlights the need for compassion, humanity and acceptance, and proposes a platform, where complex relationships to place, body, trauma, home, identity, and belonging can develop and co-exist.

Exploring the intersections of mediums, genres, ideas, cultures and languages, the biennial reinvig-

orates the conversation about humane integration and communication, signaling a common need to establish a mutual contact zone and coexist peacefully in the world. The ever so necessary need for community is reevaluated and poignantly rebuilt in these times of world health crisis, climate catastrophes, and wars. Artists of many backgrounds pursue new forms and avenues of experimentation, dialogue, and profound exchange—, in the face of dislocation and adversity, whilst seeking connection and society.

TIAB 2023's robust programming offers a multiplicity of spaces forof contemplation and optimism, whilst paying close attention to challenges and unique perspectives of immigrant artists and their audiences. As the war in my native Ukraine rages on, I am especially inspired, uplifted, and re-energized by the curatorial team's unrelenting passion and the selected artists' critically engaged propositions within the conceptual realm of The Immigrant Artist Biennial.

Katya Grokhovsky
 Founding Artistic Director
 The Immigrant Artist Biennial

SUPPORTING THE *CONTACT ZONE*
FROM THE CURATORS
BIANCA ABDI-BORAGI
KATHERINE ADAMS
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4

Selected independently by our founding artistic director, we were all involved with The Immigrant Artist Biennial (TIAB) 2020: *Here, Together!*. Bianca Abdi-Boragi as an exhibiting artist, Katherine Adams as exhibitions manager, and Anna Mikaela Ekstrand as co-curator of *Mother Tongue*—although, like with many smaller organizations, both Adams and Ekstrand had many responsibilities beyond their dedicated roles working on public programs, public relations, and fundraising. With a small and mostly volunteer-run organization, the power of action lies in taking initiative and following through. With prior understanding of the project's facets, we approached the early curatorial process through reading circles and studio visits as a way to let artists guide us to build out the concepts of the previous biennial while preserving its activist and artist-driven ethos.

Whereas the O1-visa—and, more broadly, procuring visas in the U.S.—was a focal point of the biennial's programming in 2020, *Contact Zone* spotlights undocumented artists, many of whom have less direct contact with the immigration system. We also wanted to widen our engagement of immigrant experiences to reflect second-generation,

non-U.S. based immigrant artists, and—due to the Russo-Ukrainian war—artists in exile. Ukrainian artist Maria Kulikovska and curator Valeria Schiller, both hailing from Crimea, fled Kyiv, where they lived during the full-scale invasion. Over the past year, Kulikovska has moved from residency to residency with her baby, while Schiller has established herself in Berlin. They are processing the war in real time. Our roundtable “Ukraine, Making Art in Times of War” and an essay in this catalog by Schiller serve as platforms for their grievances, hopes, and emotions. Argentinian artist Marcelo Brodsky fled Argentina and lived in exile in Italy and Spain for some years after his brother disappeared at the age of twenty-two, killed by the military regime that was in power between 1976-1983. Much of Brodsky’s work has centered on uprisings, migrants, and memorializing genocides through archival research and editing photographs with paint. These artists share perspectives on victimhood, agency, the body, relationships to statehood, and personal and communal rebellion. U.S. Pakistani-diaspora artist Sa’dia Raman, and Erika DeFreitas, born to a Guyanese mother and Trinidadian father in Canada, are two of our second-generation immigrants who explore memory and transculturation. Dominique Duroseau was born in the United States and is a U.S. citizen but grew up in Haiti. In her work, Duroseau investigates blackness, race, and being the “other” through both racial and cultural lenses. These artists relate to the term ‘immigrant’ without having worked their way through the immigration system.

As the scope of our sense of “immigrant” broadened for this second edition of the biennial, our team was often engaged in questions of where and how this designation functioned in our work. Ultimately, our curatorial work follows a legalistic definition of this term—fundamentally, “immigrant” as we use it implies a certain actual or possible confrontation with the borders and boundaries of the nation-state, be this in the United States or elsewhere. Even as we played within and critiqued the limits of this legal architecture, we became aware of the

other dimensions at play in the formalism underlying this version of immigration—ideas of what it means to settle *permanently* as opposed to temporarily, to *stay* as opposed to remain nomadic, to arrive from somewhere *foreign* to somewhere local, to be recognized or unrecognized by the state. Naturally, as curators who each engage critical studies from other fields, we discussed problems such as the issue of settler colonialism and the history of forced migration of Africans to the Americas under slavery. If the legal immigrant or their family is a recent arrival, for example, non-indigenous settler communities are just as foreign to the lands we find ourselves on as new Americans. Our focus on the former, formal sense of immigration is one that centers the experience of being potentially cast out of the country in which one lives—in reference, crucially, to a supposedly *more original* place; in which the state confronts oneself or one’s family as a foreign element, or locates one’s reality in reference to an external coordinate. Here, “immigrant” reflects a lived encounter with the legal and governmental architectures that map territorial access onto the body and which wield the power to force you (in that awful epithet) “back where you came from.” Part of what *Contact Zone* asks is: back where? Migration shapes one’s experience of the “homeland,” just as it charts new relationships to place wherever one immigrates. After leaving, one perhaps never comes entirely back to the same place. Likewise, arrival reconstitutes one’s new site.

Our engagement with the idea of a “contact zone” came out of our shared desire for a way to think about place as affected by migration in this way—as shaped by processes that are partly formal and legal in nature, but whose lived experiences are indelibly marked by a diasporic relationship to territory, identity, and history. While we use the “contact zone” idea in many ways throughout our exhibitions and programs, we directly engage the paradigm anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt forged when she coined this term in 1991. For Pratt, the “contact zone” is more than a place where different cultures meet (although it is also this). It is fundamentally connected to an idea of “autoethnography” in which

groups and individuals create self-representations that critically engage with existing narratives of themselves, forging new histories and weaving together different accounts of place to create a transcultural territory through which they can persist and survive.¹ Hence *Contact Zone's* engagement with forms of fabulation and incantation (at Wendy's Subway); surreal or magical realist renderings of place (at Alchemy Gallery); hybrid bodies that merge with the environment (at NARS Foundation); multi-cultural upbringing (Accent Sisters); and the problem of carrying the weight of a distant politic in the present (at EFA Project Space); among other projects touching on the theme.

In the course of planning this project, we have been delighted to see attention to immigration paralleled in highly established arts projects. It was recently announced that curator Adriano Pedrosa's 2024 Venice Biennial *Foreigners Everywhere* will feature artists who are "foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporic, émigrés, exiled, and refugees."² Notably, this increased engagement with artistic inquiries into immigration opens pathways to advocacy for the well-being of immigrants.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS: INSITE AND "GLOBAL EXHIBITIONS"

The Immigrant Artist Biennial straddles a few contentious terrains that have rapidly changed in organization and reception within the arts industrial complex. These are, first, "global exhibitions"—projects showing work by non-local artists that has been made specifically for certain sites according to geographic location and, sometimes, local context. Second, what Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung calls "geographic specification-ing:"³ including certain artists solely based on their origin. And, lastly, the biennial model format. For our thinking, the emergence

1 See: Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

2 See "Biennale Arte 2024: Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere," June 22, 2023, accessed online at: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2024-stranieri-ovunque-foreignerseverywhere>.

3 Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung. "Dis-othering as Method: Leh Zo, A Me Ke Nde Za" in *Geographies of Imagination* (Berlin: S A V V Y Contemporary – The Laboratory of Form Ideas, 2018), 3.

of exhibitions by non-local artists with work made for certain sites is exemplified by curatorial projects in the 1990s and early 2000s such as INSITE (1992-present). INSITE was motivated by overt political considerations—the development of economic growth between Tijuana and San Diego, and an aim to develop new, site-responsive public art—as well as by an investigation into multiple curatorial formats ranging from exhibitions and biennials to open-ended research. The Immigrant Artist Biennial shares a similar origin—one combining political motivations and open-ended curatorial investigations.

While TIAB was founded as a personal rebellion against the U.S. immigration system, and in support of immigrants, INSITE was founded by artist Ernest Silva and gallerist Mark Quint to strengthen economic and cultural relationships between Mexico and the United States. At first, it accomplished this by creating cultural ties between Tijuana and San Diego and bringing American artists to Mexico; the first two editions in 1992 and 1994 were formatted as a loose assemblage of parallel exhibitions held at institutions in these two cities. It was not until its third edition in 1997 that INSITE abandoned this institutional network model to become independent and curatorially driven, pushing its participating artists to engage further with the border as a site.⁴ Curators and artists were invited for residency-like research trips to explore the sites together, allowing work to develop over time. In this way, curators helped artists respond to their surroundings.

Behind the scenes, INSITE executive directors Carmen Cuenca and Michael Krichman worked on fundraising, bringing patrons from Mexico and the United States closer together and allowing the project to transcend art and extend into the development of business.⁵ Andrea Fraser's performance *Inaugural Speech*, which mirrored the format of

4 See: Anna Mikaela Ekstrand and Julius Lehmann. "INSITE San Diego–Tijuana and Mexico City, 1992–Present" in *Assuming Asymmetries. Conversations on Curating Public Art in the 1980s and 1990s* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022).

5 Ekstrand and Lehmann. "Pushing Boundaries. A Conversation with Carmen Cuenca and Michael Krichman," in *Ibid*, 319–327.

an inaugural speech to critique its institution, was shown at *inSITE97* and outlined some of the ways in which the organization operated as a vehicle to further collaboration between sponsoring organizations and participants, for economic gain.⁶ In 1994, NAFTA went into effect, eliminating tariffs and turning the United States, Mexico, and Canada into the world's second-largest trading bloc after Europe. Following NAFTA's emergence, increased militarization of the border and more vigilant policies from the U.S. government were put into effect to deter migrants from entering. The development of NAFTA and the increased surveillance on the border formed a clear demarcation between migrant workers and commerce—a tension between human labor and capital. *INSITE* is a prime example of how “global exhibitions” have had beneficiaries beyond the art world, creating stronger connections between Mexico and the United States but also criticizing U.S. border politics.

Indeed, *INSITE* was negatively impacted by the tightening of border control that took place during the 1990s due to the increased surveillance and power allocated to local law enforcement under presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Later, in 2003, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) was founded to curtail cross-border crime and migration, leading to violent and invasive measures. The curators of *INSITE*'s editions in the 2000s no longer expected audiences to visit works on both sides of the border; instead, they envisioned that visitors would happen across whoever works crossed their paths. During this time, Javier Téllez worked locally with collaborators for over three years to realize his work “Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida)” for “*INSITE_05*,” a partnership with a group of psychiatric patients. The work took shape as a town fair crowned by a human cannonball, David Smith, being shot over the border. The artwork parodied the border zone across which movement had become increasingly difficult.

We do not currently know what the next iteration of The Immigrant Artist Biennial will look like nor when it will take place. *Contact Zone*

⁶ Ekstrand. “Damn, I Should Have Done a Commencement Speech: A Conversation with Andrea Fraser,” in *Ibid*, 328–336.

runs three years after *Here, Together!*, straying from the every-other-year biennial timeframe. It remains a “global exhibition” that—instead of focusing on “geographic specification-ing”—focuses, like *INSITE*, on responsiveness. In the case of *TIAB*, artists work with “global” themes around migration and its emotional and societal effects—but also its potential causes. The climate crisis is emerging as a major cause for migration. Swedish artist Linnéa Gad's sculptures *Shoals* (in Nolan Park on Governors Island) engage with the life cycle of lime and oyster rehabilitation in the Hudson estuary. As Scandinavia is home to million-year-old lime quarries, Gad's research links her two homes. Illustrating the realities of curating immigrant artists, Gad was not able to attend her installation as she delayed her return to New York while waiting for her O-1 visa to be processed by the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm. We expect that, as in this iteration, future *TIAB* curators will continue to respond to the political environment while highlighting the realities of what it is like to live as an immigrant artist: the effects of the immigration system, how immigrants enter and form new communities, and how immigrant artists relate to their “home” culture.

Pratt's thinking on “contact zones” focused on language, communication, and culture, attempting to create a more sophisticated anthropological idea of ‘community,’⁷ she delves into many of the topics that the curators and organizers of *INSITE* attempt to de-tangle, observe, or engage with. These include asymmetries in power, heterogeneity, and transculturation. We believe that “asymmetry of power” emerges as an important term from the 1990s and that its resurfacing is relevant today as we ponder what heterogeneity, transculturation, and more contemporary terms such as representation, diversity, and inclusion (to benefit marginalized groups) can look like in a neo-liberal art world in constant negotiation with capital.

⁷ Pratt launched the term at her keynote address at the Responsibilities for Literacy conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1990—two years before *INSITE* was founded.

TIAB BEYOND EXHIBITION: PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Given the political agenda of TIAB to support immigrant artists, public relations is one of the most straightforward ways in which we support our artists beyond just exhibiting their work. Specifically, TIAB facilitates the attainment of press placements that artists can use to verify their “extraordinary ability or achievement” to the U.S. immigration system. Most of TIAB’s featured artists are O-1 visa holders—the visa for “Individuals with Extraordinary Ability or Achievement” which requires exhibitions, references, press to prove eligibility, and (most commonly) a lawyer to process the application. TIAB’s inaugural 2020 biennial, *Here, Together!* focused deeply on the O-1 visa through a panel and legal clinic with the Center for Art Law. One panelist was Arden Sherman, co-curator of “The Extraordinary,” an exhibition generated from an open call for artists holding or applying for an O-1 visa. Exhibitions such as “The Extraordinary” and TIAB make visible the economics and labor behind procuring an O-1 visa. Our explicit acknowledgement of the situations created by visa processes allows us to approach artists with an understanding of the emotional and financial hardship of being entangled with the U.S. immigration system. Although *Contact Zone* highlights undocumented artists—through our roundtable “Undocumented Artists: The Politics of Visibility” with Ana Armengod, Raul De Lara, Christopher “Unpezverde” Núñez, and American Immigration Council representative Annie J. Wang at Brooklyn Museum (moderated by dani lo machado)—the shadow of the O1-visa looms and our press efforts to support artists in their applications are significant.

Our roundtable at Brooklyn Museum will mark the first conversation that is free and open to the public about undocumented artists at a major New York museum. According to a report issued by New York City’s mayor’s office—Bill de Blasio—the city was home to 560,000 undocumented people with a 70% working rate in 2018. However due to the necessity for undocumented people to stay hidden from the system, the number of irregular immigrants living and working in New York City was certainly larger. Furthermore, research consistently shows

that undocumented workers are exploited in the workforce, sometimes working under dangerous circumstances and more often than not with less pay than legal residents. In addition, undocumented women suffer higher rates of domestic violence—if they go to authorities they risk detection and deportation—and, as Columbian indigenous artist Coralina Rodriguez Meyer uncovers in her solo-presentation at Artists Alliance/Cuchifritos, undocumented women do not have access to adequate maternal care. Although many of them pay income tax, undocumented individuals have fewer rights than the rest of the population and are therefore more vulnerable to exploitation, sickness, and violence.

Advocacy for undocumented people and artists mostly takes place around the U.S. and Mexico border. However, undocumented populations are integral parts of all U.S. society in all states. In 2015, Tania Bruguera was appointed the first artist-in-residence at the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) with the aim to support undocumented residents in navigating idNYC, a municipal identification card program.¹¹ Although not solely focused on undocumented populations, this residency built-upon and collaborated with Bruguera’s project Immigrant Movement International (IM International) at Queens Museum in cooperation with Creative Time in 2011 which provided educational, health, and legal services to immigrants.¹²

No amnesty programs exist to create legal pathways to adjusted status for irregular immigrants in the U.S. The DACA program provides legal status but does not lead to citizenship and is often in legal jeopardy as policy makers and politicians attempt to cancel it, as the Trump administration tried to in 2017.¹³ Raul De Lara, who is a recipient, will speak about the insecurities of living on this program at Brooklyn Museum. Passed by the house in 2021, the Build Back Better Act includes

11 Claire Voon. “Tania Bruguera Will Help NYC Provide Services to Undocumented Workers,” Hyperallergic, July 14, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/222043/tania-bruguera-will-help-nyc-provide-services-to-undocumented-workers/>.

12 See: Immigrant Movement International (IM International)’s website <http://immigrant-movement.us/>.

13 “What is DACA and Who Are the DREAMers?” ADL, September 9, 2022, https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/what-daca-and-who-are-dreamers?gclid=Cj0KCQiWgNanBhDUARIsAAElcAvngdyoisJfyqPOSaiGxf47HzZQLbw6L7CrDzz_Rr32LaxhWlaNgggaAmihEALw_wcB.

temporary protections and work permits for certain undocumented immigrants, and the opportunity to apply for adjustment to lawful status for some who have lived and worked in the U.S. for more than eleven years.¹⁴ Based on the continued resistance to DACA, and immigration reform’s potential to be whittled down or completely removed, the future for legal pathways to adjusted status for undocumented immigrants is still bleak.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Listening to immigrant artists and their varied experiences has been a guiding principle in our curatorial work. (And having an artist-curator on our team, Abdi-Boragi, further facilitates a deeper approach to artists and their work conditions.) Considering TIAB’s artists as “immigrant artists” is contextualizing their practice through the lens of their work and living conditions. “Immigrant artists” come from all over the world and stem from all social classes. We acknowledge that the processes immigrant artists move through—marginalities, cultural inheritances, and individual and shared experiences—do not necessarily wholly define them as individuals but rather are conditions they navigate. Observing these conditions helps create humility, humanity, and a richer understanding of the world, while building community.

14 Jens Manuel Krogstad and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera. “Key facts about U.S. immigration policies and Biden’s proposed changes,” Pew Research Center, January 11, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/01/11/key-facts-about-u-s-immigration-policies-and-bidens-proposed-changes/>.

