

# LIQUID WALLS

## The Digital Art of Tamiko Thiel

Matthew Wilson Smith

You find yourself in a room, with rice-paper walls and bamboo mats, a Japanese house standing on stilts in middle of the sea. Wooden stairs lead down to the surface of the water, and on the water floats a boat. You descend the staircase and you are in the boat and you sail into the sea in this boat drawn by seahorses, as golden icons float upwards overhead like self-similar fractals, products of some iterated function system, or air bubbles from some invisible leviathan. You are Mariko Horo, Mariko the Wanderer, or you are seeing the world through her eyes, and the time is some point, or many points, between the twelfth and twenty-second centuries. You sail westward to a land that alternately appears as Paradise, Purgatory, Limbo, and Inferno; you reverse Marco Polo's travels, discovering and dreaming Venice as an exotic Occident. Ghosts of Palladio and Dante haunt these islands, as do darker specters of a more recent past, of Vietnam and Abu Ghraib, of the Virgin Mary as Guan Yin, of Byzantine frescos and Tibetan tankas swirling in a fiery Court of Final Judgment.<sup>1</sup>

Like her creation Mariko Horo, the digital artist Tamiko Thiel is a border-crosser and an explorer of virtual space. She recalls:

growing up mixed race in the U.S.A. at a time when the media did not admit of non-white Americans. Although born in the U.S., my first memories are from Japan (where I lived from ages two–five . . .), and my first impressions of the U.S. were of a strange, empty land filled with tall, pale people. As a child, growing up outside the Japanese American community in a white, working-class neighborhood in Seattle, since I could not “see” myself in the images of America, I maintained that I was Japanese—until I turned fourteen, that Age of Enlightenment, and realized that I was not socially Japanese, would not fit into Japanese society and would not want to do so.<sup>2</sup>

The daughter of a Japanese-American mother and a German-American father, Thiel moved to Berlin in the 1980s, and now works largely out of Munich, while at the same time moving around the world, principally exhibiting in Germany, the U.S., and Japan. She exhibited *The Travels of Mariko Horo* in an initial version at

the Media Arts Festival in San Jose in 2006 and in a final version in Munich that same year. The work has gone through several variations, including one in which it was coupled with a live Butoh dance performance, for which the dancers Shinichi Iova-Koga and Ishide Takuya used the installation as real-time virtual space before which, and within which, to perform.

Thiel's creations take place in immersive virtual space, typically as part of a museum or gallery installation. The software runs on a Windows gaming PC and a projector displays the image on a large screen before which stands a podium with a joystick. The spectator takes the joystick and, much as in a video game, journeys through the virtual world. Borders and border-crossings, central to the medium of VR generally, are especially so in Thiel's work. Two installations, one exhibited before *Mariko Horo* and one after, are particularly noteworthy as they form a virtual diptych of the politics of walls. The first installation is entitled *Beyond Manzanar* (2000) and the second *Virtuelle Mauer/Reconstructing the Wall* (2008).

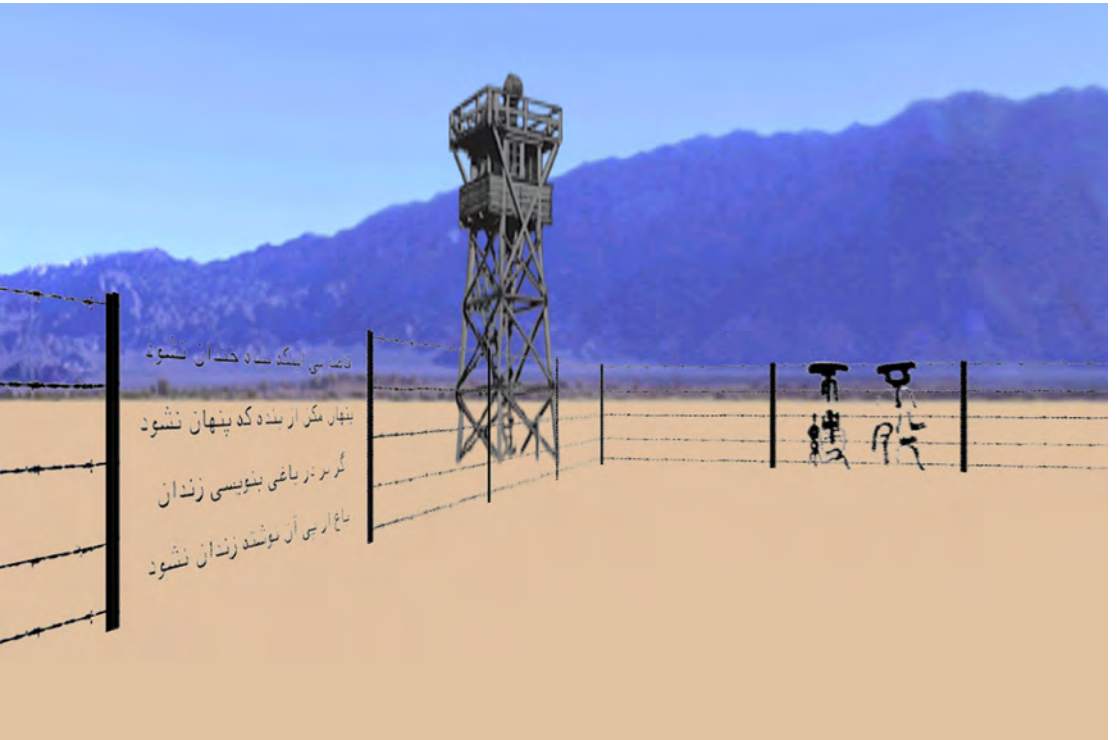
Thiel created *Beyond Manzanar* in collaboration with the Iranian-American writer Zara Houshmand. The installation, now part of the permanent collection of the San Jose Museum of Art, virtually re-embodies the internment of Japanese-Americans in camps such as Manzanar. Built near an oasis in the high desert of Eastern California, Manzanar was one of ten camps to which over a hundred thousand Japanese-Americans were forcibly relocated and imprisoned as a national security measure during World War II. *Beyond Manzanar* reflects on that site, and draws parallels between it and threats made against Iranian-Americans after the hostage crisis of 1979–80. Begun by Thiel and Houshmand in response to the targeting of people of Middle-Eastern background in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the piece gained new significance after similar targeting in the wake of 9/11.<sup>3</sup>

Stepping into *Beyond Manzanar*, you may begin by finding yourself in a desert surrounded by mountains. Journeying a short distance in one direction, your way is blocked by a barbed-wire fence; farther in the distance stands a guard tower. Something is out of place: there, trapped in the wires of the fence, are characters, words, lines of verse, in Japanese, Farsi, English—poems of imprisonment. You now turn to discover barracks, rows of them. Hovering in the air overhead hang fragments of texts announcing war, announcing racial hostility. You enter the barracks to find them filled with ghostly impressions and whisperings. And suddenly—you are in a Japanese garden. Cherry blossoms, a quiet pond, the music of a koto; you might imagine yourself in a wholly other world if it weren't for the persistence of the mountain in the distance. Noticing this, you are torn away, standing once more outside the barracks, trapped in a desert at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Your journey back to Manzanar has begun, a journey that will ultimately take you through Manzanar to other places, times, and people.

The displacements of time and space in *Beyond Manzanar* are also connections. The first “beyond” of the title is the “beyond” that leads from the persecution of Japanese-Americans to the persecution of Iranian-Americans some four decades later.



Top: The Court of Final Judgment, from *The Travels of Mariko Horo*. Photo: Courtesy Tamiko Thiel.  
 Bottom: Poems trapped in barbed wire, from *Beyond Manzanar*. Photo: Courtesy Zara Houshmand and Tamiko Thiel.



In the early twenty-first century, we are now in a position to move beyond even this beyond, for it is impossible to view the piece without thinking of the condition, still precarious, of Muslims in this country and, even more troublingly perhaps, in Europe. And there is another “beyond” here as well, one that leads from the concrete and steel spaces of the historical past to the data space of this virtual-reality installation. This too is a movement beyond Manzanar to a more fluid condition, a condition to which I’ll return later.

There are both Japanese and Iranian formal gardens in the piece, both of which appear suddenly around us, and are just as suddenly swept away again. These are not fairytale gardens, but gardens haunted by history; the Japanese garden we find ourselves suddenly thrust into and out of from the Manzanar camp in fact alludes to an historical artifact, a formal garden built as a site of solace by camp detainees. “She talked about this garden and how she would sit herself very carefully and try not to move for as long as possible,” Thiel says of Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, the co-author of *Farewell to Manzanar* and a former internee.

Because as long as she held still, and held only this view, she could pretend she was in paradise of her own accord. But as soon as she moved, she fell out of the garden, because you could see the barracks or see the fence or see the watch-towers. And this was for me the key that said this project has to be done in virtual reality, because only that medium can capture that moment for other people. . . . It was that moment, and all of those associations and also the realization that a garden is an ancient form of *Gesamtheater*, of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of virtual reality, where you try to create an imaginary world that you can fully inhabit.

For Thiel, this garden is a kind of theatre, indeed a total theatre or total work of art, a genre I have argued elsewhere exhibits a strong influence on VR performance.<sup>4</sup> But for this Edenic totality to exist and persist, we must remain, like the spectators at Wagner’s Festival Theatre at Bayreuth, immobile and enraptured. To break the spell is to be thrust out of the garden—and to be thrust out with a bad conscience. Thiel writes that “The sense of unity with nature is deceptive and temporary, a momentary dream in the dull reality of camp life. Users are left with the feeling of responsibility, however inadvertently, for having destroyed the dream of the garden.”<sup>5</sup> The fleeting moment, paradoxically, must be held still if it is to exist at all, and the garden’s appearance and disappearance is an effect of the observer as well as the observed. We are complicit in the environment we witness, culpable even for having destroyed the dream and being cast back to the bleaker grid.

Navigating the space of *Beyond Manzanar* produces a sense at once oppressive and vertiginous, a sense that we are perpetually *bounded in* and on the verge of being *bounded out*. Space itself is the issue. The space where the piece “starts,” so to speak—in fact it may “start” anywhere, and visitors frequently pick up not at the so-to-speak beginning but at the middle or end and loop back to the camps—the space where the piece “starts” is in the rigidly geometrical order of the Manzanar

camp, an order dominated by the Cartesian grid. We return to that order, literally or in shadow form, again and again. In materials accompanying the installation, Thiel and Houshmand note that the grid-like form of the army camp evokes the geometric order of Iranian gardens, representations of the paradise—a word that comes from the Farsi “paradis,” meaning “walled orchard.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether from the ground or from an aerial perspective, the grid is a hell and a paradise; the grid provides refuge from the grid as it opens and closes along strange points. Thiel calls the structure a “hyper-storyboard” or “spatial narrative.”<sup>7</sup> Inspired by *Digital Baroque*, Timothy Murray’s study of digital culture, we may say that the hyper-storyboard or spatial narrative of *Beyond Manzanar* recalls the *fold*, in the sense that Deleuze employs that term. Deleuze encourages us to think of matter not as coherent surfaces or graph-paper regularities or fixed positions but as “an infinitely porous, spongy or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns.” Digital technology, with its capacity for hyperlinks and its infinite replicability, and with its affinity for twisting, open-ended narrative structures, is in many ways particularly suited to the fold. *Beyond Manzanar*, like many virtual-reality worlds, is a “continuous labyrinth,” which, as Deleuze might say, “is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surroundings.”<sup>8</sup>

But it would be wrong to say that the Cartesian space of *Beyond Manzanar* is a mere façade, beneath which lies the fold; it would be better to say that the Cartesian spaces of *Beyond Manzanar* are as much an embodiment of digital technology as are its origami-like, hyperlinked connections. The fold, as Murray writes, “embodies the elasticity of seriality and the continuous labyrinth of single points (1’s and 0’s)”<sup>9</sup>—to which I would add that one paradox of digital culture is that, even as it embodies the fold, it also continues to emphasize that which the fold displaces, often insisting upon a fixed-point perspective and Euclidean systems of projection. Thiel’s work wrestles with this paradox. She comments that “[t]he 3D real time rendering engines that make interactive 3D virtual worlds possible also impose a Cartesian perspective view onto the worlds. It’s a strange twist that perspective, which is so difficult for an artist to create freehand, becomes a straightjacket when creating 3D interactive worlds.” The irony is that the grid perspectives of real time rendering engines also enable hyperlinks, such that “[t]he very technology that makes it so easy to create Cartesian spaces also makes it easy to replace one space with another.” This fixed and folding space is not so much *anti-* as *hyper-*Cartesian.

We are reminded of this paradox at one point in *Beyond Manzanar*, when we are suddenly torn from an Iranian garden to find ourselves flying high above the camp in what appears to be a fighter plane or a bomber. We cannot control this plane, which seems to be on a bombing run, and the image before us is a starkly geometric view-from-above, a skyhook perspective that consciously replicates the imagery of a first-person video game. Thiel comments that the scene “is a subliminal message about our stance on war, that this whole [virtual reality] technology was developed

in order to train jet fighter pilots and is used mostly now for shooter games.” The first-person “shooter” simulation, with its lethal fixed-point perspective and spatial grid, was one of the historical points of origin for virtual reality, a medium born from Pentagon flight simulators, and a form that flickers back and forth between fold and grid.

One is tempted to view this work as “good” virtual reality, against which we can set the sorts of VR that train their users in the instruments of death. I am thinking not only of the ubiquitous first-person-shooter video games, but more importantly of the technology that birthed them and now exploits their innovations. A decade ago, to take but one example, the US Army signed a forty-five million dollar contract with the University of Southern California to develop VR technology to improve the realism and quality of its training simulations, as well as to test prototypes in future weapons acquisitions programs. If this is one aspect of virtual reality, then Thiel and Houshmand’s work would seem to offer a more promising direction for the medium. And yet this tidy distinction is complicated by the end of *Beyond Manzanar*. The first-person “bomber” perspective which ends the work also seems to indict us, the viewers. What, after all, is the moral cost of simulating such histories, of “virtually” inhabiting such a camp? Navigating through this installation, have we become complicit in, if nothing else, the aestheticization of this horror? The game-like structure of the work further begs the question even as it self-reflexively critiques its own medium. Oscillating between absorption and critique, *Beyond Manzanar* embodies the paradoxically immersive distance of VR itself, this medium that makes us “really” present in an alternate world, and yet shields us from the consequence of a crash.

From Manzanar we turn to the Berlin Wall, a space, like Manzanar, built to keep a population not *out* but *in*, to confine a people not for crimes committed but for interests of alleged state security. The task was notoriously difficult. The so-called “fourth generation” Wall, the version built between 1975 and 1980, consisted of forty-five thousand sections of concrete, reinforced by mesh fencing, signal fencing, anti-vehicle trenches, barbed wire, guard dogs, beds of nails, 116 watchtowers, twenty bunkers, and a “death strip” of barren land lit by floodlights, patrolled regularly, and sited for machine gun fire. It is a monument to “heavy modernity,” in Zygmunt Bauman’s phrase, to “the epoch of weight and ever more cumbersome machines, of the ever longer factory walls enclosing ever more populous factory crews, of ponderous rail engines and gigantic ocean liners.” It was an age in which “The logic of power and the logic of control were both grounded in the strict separation of the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’ and a vigilant defense of the boundary between the two.”<sup>10</sup>

*Virtuelle Mauer* makes us feel this weight. The work, a collaboration between Thiel and the artist Teresa Reuter, was completed in 2008. It focuses on a section of the Wall stretching from the former border crossing at Heinrich-Heine-Strasse, over the “Engelbecken” to Bethaniendamm/Engeldamm. As we walk along, above, and across the Wall, we journey also forward and backward through the 1960s, the 1980s, and the 2000s. As with all of Thiel’s work, our journey is a “hyperstory,”

without explicit linear progression through space or time, able to be entered or exited at any point.

On one level, *Virtuelle Mauer* is a historical recreation similar to works such as Virtual Vaudeville (a simulation of a nineteenth-century vaudeville house) and the Pompey Project (a simulation of the Theatre of Pompey). Much of the documentary value of such a recreation lies in the fact that photographic images were often forbidden from the East Berlin side of the Wall; this re-creation is therefore a restoration and preservation of memory, one that involved archival research, the tracking down of (often illicit) photographs, and interviews with former inhabitants. The restoration of the now iconic graffiti on the West Berlin side of the Wall has a similarly valuable documentary function. Whatever these virtues, however, *Virtuelle Mauer* is not simply an exercise in historical re-creation; it is also an artistic meditation on heaviness and liquidity.

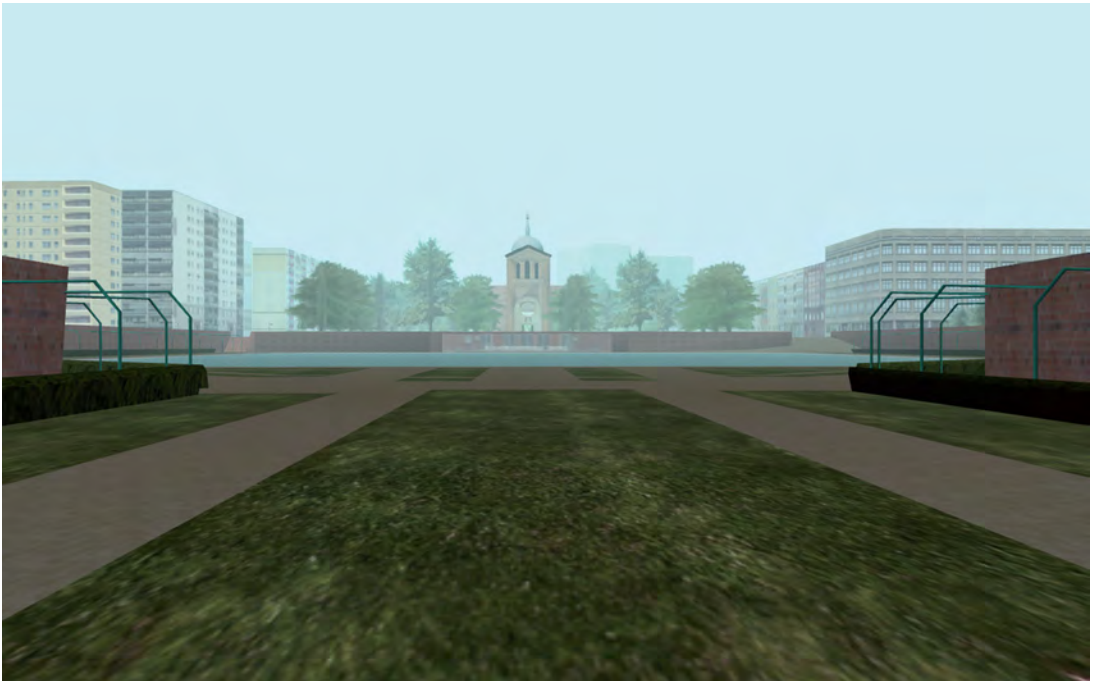
Particularly as we wander on the East German side circa 1980, the virtual space feels fixed and immutable, confining and separating, simultaneously hyper-rational and paranoid. Like a horizontally stretched panopticon, spaces such as the view over the death strip from a neighboring apartment building give us the sense of moving toward some dystopia of instrumental reason. Once more, however, the grid oscillates with the fold. Wandering along the West German side of the wall, there is a position by the Engelbecken where the space that existed during the time the Wall—a wasteland of sand, guarded by two watchtowers—suddenly melts away and is replaced by its current landscape: a park in the meridian of the road, widening to a pond. As with *Beyond Manzanar*, time and space become radically compressed at surprising points, and we slide or are slid across their wrinkles. Some of these unfoldings open us up, others pack us in. Moving too close to the Wall on the East German side, we are suddenly interrupted by a border patrol calling “*Ausweis, bitte!*” (“Identification card, please!”)—and our vision fills with white light and our ears with voice-like buzzing—the nervous shock, it seems, of interrogation.

And there is another nervousness to this work, too, one less explicit and more ubiquitous; this is the tension of hard things becoming liquid. *Virtuelle Mauer* functions not only as a folding landscape in and around a segment of the Wall, it functions also as a sort of liquefaction engine. The Berlin Wall—the real one—that icon of modernity at its heaviest and most bluntly territorial, that monument that no one misses and everyone wants a piece of, *that* Berlin Wall is gone, and its passing, suitably enough, is marked by chunks of concrete lying in souvenir bins. In 1989, the Wall fell; a year earlier, the Internet had been opened to commercial interests, and the following year Tim Berners-Lee would call for the creation of a “World Wide Web.” Germany, Europe, the world were all shifting toward a more fluid condition.

Bauman describes the period of “liquid modernity” as a transformation of the principles of the preceding order. Fixity, enormity, and solidity are no longer the central measures of economic rationalization; lightness, quickness, and flexibility become more crucial to success. The relatively unconstrained mobility of capital and the



Top: Graffiti on the Berlin Wall, from *Virtuelle Mauer*. Bottom: The Engelbecken, from *Virtuelle Mauer*. Photos: Courtesy T+T (Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter).





instantaneity of electronic communications together produce what David Harvey has called an economy of flexible accumulation, a global market defined less and less by the production of physical goods and more and more by the exchange of symbolic services and instruments of credit—what the economist Diana Coyle calls the “weightless world” of the digital economy.<sup>11</sup>

Heavy modernity had many icons, the Berlin Wall being one, but the monuments of liquid modernity all tend to be counter-monuments, self-consciously fleeting and conditional, like Christo and Jean-Claude’s wrapping and unwrapping of the Reichstag in 1995, an act that enveloped state power in literal folds. Or like Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz’s “disappearing monument,” a column planted in Hamburg-Harburg in 1986 that gradually sank into the earth over the course of time, until it vanished completely six years later. Or like Thiel’s *Virtuelle Mauer*.

But why this persistent nervousness? Surely free motion, free commerce, free borders are no bad thing; surely the liquid resists the constraints of the heavy; surely there is no one left who misses the Wall? *Doch*. Navigating the folds of *Virtuelle Mauer*, I found myself, from time to time, longing for this Wall I never knew. Perhaps even we Americans can feel a twinge of *Ostalgie*, a longing for such a “supreme testament to the power of the dialectic,” as Alan Balfour puts it, for such a plainly *heavy* structure.<sup>12</sup> For water too can wear down resistance, often better than stone and steel. *Virtuelle Mauer* fluidly depicts a massive instrument of confinement and surveillance, and yet the data stream we find ourselves in is strangely, even dispiritingly circular; journeying more or less freely through this space, we find ourselves coming back to the same places, navigating or being flung through the same folds of space and time. Does a liquid medium present no obstacle? Is a virtual wall no wall at all?

One answer may be found in a recent headline from an online division of *The Economist*.<sup>13</sup> The headline reads: “A ‘virtual wall’ between the US and Mexico creates business opportunities for technology vendors.” Organized by the “Secure Border Initiative Network,” largely in partnership with Boeing, the structure would include “ground-based and tower-mounted sensors, cameras and radars; fixed and mobile telecommunications systems; ground-penetrating detecting systems; command and control centre equipment; and database and data analysis systems.” This virtual wall is of course one of many being built, large and small, across the world. It recalls Thiel’s work in showing how the concrete and the virtual, the bounded and the streaming, the grid and the fold are now not only inseparable, but mutually reinforcing. It suggests that the travels of Mariko Horo may loop back again to the camps of Manzanar. It reminds us that, in the digital age, our journeys risk becoming our walls.

## NOTES

1. An online portfolio of Thiel’s work, including pictures, videos, and commentary of all the works discussed in this article, may be found at <http://www.mission-base.com/tamiko>.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Thiel are from conversations and e-mail exchanges with the author.
3. Thiel and Housemand address this connection in an open letter dated September 24, 2001, "In the Wake of Sept. 11," *Beyond Manzanar*, <http://www.mission-base.com/manzanar/911.html> (accessed January 25, 2010).
4. Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
5. Tamiko Thiel, "Constructing Meaning in Interactive Virtual Reality," adapted from a paper presented at the COSIGN 2001 Conference, September 10–12, 2001 in Amsterdam, Holland, <http://www.mission-base.com/manzanar/articles/cosign/cosign.html> (accessed January 27, 2010).
6. See <http://www.mission-base.com/manzanar/history/origins.html>.
7. Thiel's description of the "hyper-storyboard" may be found at <http://www.virtuelle-mauer-berlin.de/english/devFiles/hyper-storyboard.htm>. In an e-mail exchange (February 10, 2010) Thiel writes that "more and more I like the term 'spatial narrative.'"
8. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 5, 8.
9. Timothy Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2, 5.
10. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000, 113–14, 115.
11. Diana Coyle, *The Weightless World: Strategies for Managing the Digital Economy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
12. Quoted in Johannes Birringer, *Media and Performance: Along the Border*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, 271.
13. The Economist Intelligence Unit: Global Technology Forum, "US/Mexico: A Virtual Border," July 17, 2007 (accessed January 26, 2010).

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