



**ZEBRAS AND UFOS: THE COOPERATIVE
VANDALISM AND HYBRIDITY OF
TOROLAB'S TOROVESTIMENTA**
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Serving as a doorway into a much larger thesis on Torolab, a collective of artists, architects, and musicians who work at the Tijuana-San Diego border, this essay will establish not only the ways in which issues of this border are addressed by Torolab in the clothing design project *ToroVestimenta*, but also how their utopian ideologies and proposals operate in the realm of art and commodity.

Zebras and UFOs: The Cooperative Vandalism and Hybridity of Torolab's *ToroVestimenta*

The drive down the I-5 from San Diego to Tijuana is a jarring experience. The hyper-consumer architecture which takes shape in the clean, commodity-driven utopias of the American strip mall (one announcing itself as "The Gateway/La Puerta Las Americas") unfolds into the sprawling, disordered spattering of houses that seem to bubble out of the single-hued desert hills of Tijuana. The bright colors and chaotic shapes seem to be in conflict with the slick geometry of San Diego (to an American, who has been indoctrinated by this homogeneous visual gridding.) Signs with the silhouette of an entire family—father dragging his wife, in turn dragging their child in a desperate sprint—warn that it is people darting in front of your car, not road rage, that you need to worry about on this stretch of the highway. And as you cross the border into Tijuana, signs for ATMs and insurance replace those for tract homes ("perfect for the first-time buyer at only \$300,000"), announcing that cash and safety are the hottest commodities in this part of the world.



These signs that portray a family in a desperate sprint line the I-5 for 75 miles, from San Diego to the San Onofre checkpoint.

Photograph by Julio Cesar Morales
Courtesy of the photographer

The experience of crossing this border is so jarring, in fact, that it is hard to imagine that these two cities do indeed share a common population base that breathes the same air, drinks the same water, and is exposed to the same pollution and disease. It is as if San Diego has adopted an architecture that could thwart the feeling of a continuous landscape. Crossing the border from San Diego to Tijuana is easy (unlike the Tijuana to U.S. crossing, which can take four hours), in car or on foot, and as soon as you do, the signs become more colorful, the traffic becomes more noisy, and even the graffiti reads upside-down. The monotony of capitalist cleanliness is replaced by the phantasmagoric interplay of a city caught between two countries, cultures, and economies. Tijuana has been considered the sloppy, sexy, drunken, hobo brother of San Diego in the past, but there are many here that both contest this image and propose another, while still loving the drool and drink.

Raul Cardenas and Marcela Guadiana de Cardenas are two people who do propose another Tijuana—one of endless possibilities in the negotiation of the complex and hybrid everyday experience of this border town. From Mazatlan and Mexicali, respectively, they have decided to stay in this city (which for many is the last stop on the road to a "better" life in the North), for they see Tijuana, and its unique positioning between two different cultures and economies, as a laboratory for crime and exploit, and incredible potential. Says Marcela: "You have to see this place with special eyes. It's not about the present—this is emergency architecture, the architecture of survival—but it's about the potential."¹ Raul and Marcela met, married, and graduated as architecture students at Tijuana's Universidad Autonoma de Iberoamerica. They are at the helm of Torolab, which is

a contraction of the words *toro*—a reference to Raul's father, who trained bulls for bullfights—and *laboratorio*. This word also signifies Raul's empathy for the underdog; the *toro* rather than *toreador*, or Tijuana rather than San Diego. Started by Raul in 1995, Torolab is not a fixed collective but rather serves as an umbrella for a "movement" in Tijuana that includes artists, writers, musicians, architects, and DJs who strive to make art out of the chaos. In diverse projects, some only proposals, they have taken Tijuana as their site, medium, and mission.

Brazenly utopian, Torolab's projects not only attempt to interrogate the inequalities of the border but also purport to offer a better option. In their own words:

Understanding that Tijuana is a region of urban interaction, of complex necessities where the solutions are never enough for ideal development.[sic] Also understanding that violence is a factor in our everyday life, Torolab studies this context looking for solutions to these special conditions.²

Proposal rather than protest is the modus operandi of all of their projects, which include *ToroVestimenta* (clothing for the border-crosser), *Carmen's House* (a modular house built from the "emergency" materials of the border), and *The Vertex* (a binational architectural construct). In this essay I will focus on one of their projects, *ToroVestimenta*, to better understand how Torolab's work at the border interrogates and attempts to intervene into the unique contemporary cultural condition in Tijuana.

Transience and Hybridity

ToroVestimenta:

The sublime of the quotidian.

ToroVestimenta is an experiment of The Lab: it is our equipment for living (dwelling). Equipment that comprises furniture, clothing and everyday accessories . . . in which our interest is to aim at two targets, one with eyes, the other with hands[:] [these] are the horns of TORO: the pragmatic and the iconographic. Like the red and the green of a stereography, they syncretize dynamism and image, the core of our culture and its protagonists.

—Quoted from www.torolab.com

The border, by its very nature, is paradoxical. While it serves as a fence between the United States and Mexico, in an attempt to stop the flow of illegal products, people, and ideas, the border also serves as an open conduit, encouraging its own transgression. It simultaneously takes on the role of a hulking metal fence that cruelly divides the landscape and a line drawn in the sand. Those who dwell in the border zone embrace and engage this schizophrenia, some moving easily, and daily, back and forth across the line, others waiting for just the right time to dash across, never looking back. The border is a highly contested area, of rich histories, diverse economies, and complex identities. It is a lens through which to view constant and open flows of marijuana, cocaine, televisions, people, employees, and resources, as well as a hugely reinforced binational attempt to stop these flows. The local and the global walk hand-in-hand through this corridor and then stop suddenly and devour each other. The flows of consumer products, whether legal or not, keep this border suspended, without a specific geographic location, as only another channel from one market to another through which these products must move. This erased or lost locality mirrors an experience of the global, one of endless possibilities, connections, constant motion, and bewildering placelessness. Simultaneously, the border defines this area's exact "place" in terms of the "us and them" of immigration, the unique hybridity of cultures set side by side, and the gross inequalities of its economies.



The borderline takes diverse shapes—here, in rusting metal panels that abruptly divide the continuous landscape between San Diego and Tijuana.
Photograph by Julio Cesar Morales
Courtesy of the photographer

Tijuana embodies this same schizophrenia as its people and products cross the border constantly, and yet the fence, made of recycled metal panels used in the Gulf War, serves as backdrop and ever-present reminder of physical impasse. Torolab's clothing line, *ToroVestimenta*, attempts to engage this conflicted border identity through its *Transborder Trousers*. Made of durable fabric, in muted hues of green or denim, the pants are tailored especially for the exploration of the border zone. Equipped with hidden inside pockets, they can accommodate the different needs of the border crosser, depending upon the nationality of the wearer. If Mexican, the pockets can hold a passport and "visa laser" (immigration document implemented by the United States to efficiently access data on the holder.) If American, the same pockets can hold credit cards or medicines (bought inexpensively and without prescription from one of the myriad pharmacies in Tijuana.) Because the pockets are internalized, they also deter potential pickpockets or can be used to transport contraband, and in this way recognize the social reality of those living in the border zone, while providing a practical solution.

These are not pants that are specifically for the Mexican or the American, but for the crosser, without an inherent designation of nationality. According to a statement by Torolab, these pants present the movement across the border as connection *and* division:

Tijuana is a city formed through movement and axis of urban connectivity. It is a region of urban interaction delimited by ranges of vehicular mobility, having clear routes of connection with entities on both sides of the border. The transborder trousers catch this phenomena of regional movements conditioned by migratory documents.³

Although at times the identity of the *Transborder Trousers* are determined by what side of the border their wearer resides on, it can also be understood that they erase this designation by being a product of the act of crossing, rather

than a product of Mexico or the United States. In this way the pants themselves can be seen as a metaphor for this simultaneous erasure and confirmation of the border.

And at the point of crossing, the *Transborder Trousers* act as a link between two countries, cultures, and economies, creating a connection that the border itself strives to break. Can we say that these trousers not only interrogate the border between Mexico and the United States but also mirror the modern experience of placelessness in a globalized world in which subjectivity is no longer determined by a location, geography, or nation, but rather by the connections and movements between many? Torolab proposes that at the point of crossing, the wearer is neither Mexican nor American (or French, Taiwanese, African, etc.) but a crosser, a connector, or commuter between many localities.

T-shirts constitute an important element of the *ToroVestimenta* project and, according to Toby Kamps, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, "fly off the shelves in Stockholm, Tokyo, and San Francisco."⁴ Featuring heavily designed futuristic iconography, Torolab's t-shirts alternately signify the hybrid culture of Tijuana and mirror the practice of appropriation of popular icons that is prevalent here. In Tijuana, Bart Simpson piñatas are sold underneath a sign for "KISS Fashions" (in which the icon for the American rock group from the seventies is now used to sell dresses). Appropriation is part of the culture in Tijuana, as logos or icons taken from American consumer products are torn from their original context and reinscribed with meaning by shopkeepers and street vendors, on t-shirts, bags, signage, and billboards. The Coca-Cola icon may be taken over and the words changed to reread as an advertisement of a local product or utilized in its original form to sell products that are unconnected to cola in any way. Engaged

in a semiotic clash of meanings, the icons are freed from their previous identity and now serve a different purpose. And the icons used by Torolab emulate or mirror the practice of appropriation that forms an integral part of the hybrid identity of those living at the border.

Juxtaposition and appropriation have long been tactics utilized by people at the border to create their own language, which can reflect their transient and hybrid experiences. In the 1930s, Mexican muralists layered visual icons and images in the service of social commentary. Images such as the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, or human sacrifice, or the Spanish conquest were set alongside images of industry and portrayals of socialism in the figure of Lenin. By bringing together different localities—of Mexico and Russia and different temporalities,

past and present—the muralists could pinpoint a cultural identity, which comprised the connections between different nationalities, temporalities, and ideologies. And Chicano muralists who wanted to create a space in which their own complex experience living at the crossroads of the border could be told later adopted this “tradition.” Tomas Ybarra-Frausto explains the contemporary tactics of Chicano art, which utilizes the same tactics of the Mexican Muralists and layers them with wholly unique border aesthetics in the act of *Rasquachismo*:

... the utilization of available resources for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration. *Rasquachismo* is a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence . . . a delight in texture and sensuous surfaces . . . self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography . . . the combination of found material and satiric wit . . . the manipulation of *rasquache* artifacts, code and sensibilities from both sides of the border.⁵

In this way the transient and hybrid nature of the experience of living on both sides of the border is engaged by the layering of images and icons. Creating a fissure in the sign and signifier, possibilities are opened up and a new language is formed to give voice to these complex and conflicted experiences. This



Tourists in Tijuana pictured with a mule painted with shoe polish to resemble a zebra
Photographer unknown
Courtesy of the author

addresses the concept set forth by theorist Michel Foucault (paraphrased by Dick Hebdige) that “speech is both enabling and proscriptive, that it creates new objects, new relations to existing objects, and yet does so, first and foremost, by operating as a system of exclusion, that is, according to the basic rule of language, that which is not nominated, remains unsaid”⁶ In the act of *Rasquachismo*, the dominant language (or language of dominance) is broken down by juxtaposition and layering enabling the enunciation of difference. This can be seen everywhere in Tijuana, in the “KISS Fashions” sign and the Bart Simpson piñatas. Bridging two nationalities, economies, and cultures, these products of the imagination speak to the cultural identity of Tijuana and in turn create a space of agency and empowerment.

The icons that are featured on Torolab’s t-shirts often speak directly to the unique performances of hybridity that are implicit to the border zone, and specifically to Tijuana. One of the t-shirts features the image of a zebra—which has been called the “unofficial icon” for Tijuana itself—which is actually a mule painted with shoe polish to resemble a zebra. Entrepreneurs looking to exploit the tourist traffic during Prohibition in the 1920s began painting the mules so that tourists could pose with the “zebra” and take a photo home as evidence of a truly exotic experience. Fictionalizing, exoticizing, and recontextualizing their own history by making reference to a false Aztec culture that domesticated zebras, these entrepreneurs became a staple of Tijuana’s *Avenida Revolucion*. The icon on the Torolab t-shirt utilizes the mule/zebra to point to this practice of playful juxtaposition of histories. The mule, as a mixture of horse and donkey, is *mestizo*, and the burro, as zebra, is Tijuana.



The icon for the seventies rock band Kiss is appropriated and recontextualized to sell dresses - this action is inherent to the culture of Tijuana.
Photograph by Julio Cesar Morales
Courtesy of the photographer



This Torolab T-shirt was designed for ToroVestimenta by Terrestre, Nortec musician and Torolab collaborator. Courtesy of Torolab

On another t-shirt, a graphic of a street vendor pushing a modified cart made from cast-off palettes from the *maquiladoras* (international factories at the border) and parts from a 1966 American golf cart speaks to the hybrid visual identity of Tijuana. And like the layered imagery of the Mexican muralists, this icon juxtaposes temporalities as well as spatialities, illustrating the makeshift nature of the cart (and perhaps the image of Tijuana as a “makeshift” or underdeveloped city) and graphically pushes it into the future, establishing a unique cultural moment in the present. A chicken tethered to a UFO on another t-shirt also speaks to the hybrid identity of the border while juxtaposing temporalities. Referring to the word *pollo* (chicken), a derogatory term used to describe the image of illegal aliens

lynched by Texas Rangers at the border in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and linking it to the hovering UFO, this icon interrogates, and renegotiates, the past and future. The past is embodied in the inequalities and violence of the border by the image of the chicken (*pollo*) but is connected or strung to an alien (read illegal) spacecraft that hovers above the border, dissolving its physicality, with the promise of erasing the inequalities here—and perhaps proposing another world altogether. An icon of people floating in the sky on swings, seen from below as if on a ride at a modern carnival, refers to the Aztec ritual of *los voladores*, in which four men swing around a maypole on ropes, completing thirteen turns each, in reference to the Aztec century of fifty-two years. Syncretism in this way creates a layered visual language in the service of representation of the unique cultural experience of the border.

By utilizing the tactics of *Rasquachismo* in these icons, Torolab has attempted to create a space for intervention in the form of reinterpretation of their past and future. And as Homi K. Bhabha states in his book *Location of Culture*:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with “newness” that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The “past-present” becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of the living.⁷

By interrupting the linear narrative of their own history by overlapping temporalities in their icons, Torolab strives to create an opportunity for their own history to be recontextualized and renegotiated as a pastiche of the present, not the end result of a linear history. This cultural negotiation is played out in the performance of the present as a palimpsest, the past emerging and interrupting the seamless picture of the present. The border too, can be seen as a place, in which temporalities are layered as the past, in cultural memory, constantly reinscribes itself into the experience of the present. Industrialization in the form of the *maquiladoras* represents the globalized future of mass consumerism and trade, and yet replays the economic exploitation of the past in furthering the economic divide. The present moment as translated by Torolab is interrogated by the past—it is suspended between tradition and modernity.

The icons themselves are carefully designed and fit easily into a contemporary aesthetic that takes its cues from HipHop/DJ culture and draws from sources that are as wide ranging as modernist furniture designs to architectural plans to Mexican Wrestling.

The graphics that combine these elements are flat, two-dimensional screen prints and are rendered in two- or three-color blocks. Placed in several different locations on the t-shirt (depending on the style)—the front, lower right-hand corner, and across the bottom in the back—the graphics are almost panoramic or panoptic due to their placement. Because of their overt flatness and color-blocking they are easily recognized and readily consumed as a familiar contemporary aesthetic that one sees not only at play on these t-shirts in Tijuana but in HipHop/DJ stores around the world. For those not at the border, the graphics can operate as logos, at once collapsing the narrative structure that constitutes the hybridity and juxtaposition of spatialities and temporalities for those not familiarized with the coding of this hybrid history.

As with the Border Trousers, at this point Torolab sees their icons as a blank slate—providing an opportunity for their meaning to be determined by the wearer. Different interpretations and associations of the wearer can fill the icons with their own meaning and create links between very different worlds, whether Mexican and American, or Parisian and Tijuana. These geographic localities are broken down and the t-shirts operate in a realm in which spatial relations are no longer the defining factor of cultural identity or meaning, and in which the t-shirts can make connections between many localities. And this is expressed by Torolab in a statement included in a recent bio:

1997 *ToroVestimenta* is created, that is an experiment of identity of the frontier, where borders are not limited to US and Mexico, but are more about a floating space.[sic] This t-shirt exercise is *vandalism in cooperation* with people, in which Raul's designs reflect the environment he lives in, and these images make connections with people in different places . . . this creates the image of the frontier.⁸

By invoking the idea of the frontier, which serves as a complex interstitial space of contact that surpasses the boundaries of the border line, Torolab attempts to intervene and dissolve the

binaries inherent at the border and create a visual language in which identity is not wholly defined by which side of the border one resides on. In attempts to intervene into the dominant black (read brown) and white, rich and poor designations of the border, Torolab has embarked upon a project to persistently overstep the boundary line to create a space of constant renegotiation and endless potential. The binaries here are rendered meaningless. In their place is the rhizomatic movement of the nomad, constantly breaking down the grid into a patchwork, or rhizomatic root system. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe the rhizome in terms of language or slang:

A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. . . .

Beyond mimesis or mimicry, the constant juxtaposition of cultural symbols and meaning create a rhizomatic root system that is connected to everything else, not a line connecting two oppositional points. In this way identity becomes something relational, connected to a specific temporality or spatiality, determined by the endless connections that create these points of reference, and in so doing, again, exponentially expand the potentialities of meaning and identity. Decentralized, deterritorialized, reterritorialized, and then deterritorialized again, cultural determinations are presented as in a state of constant flux and movement. By layering and appropriating their imagery from diverse sources, Torolab proposes that the icons serve as reference points among this endless movement—tiny dots on a complex map.

Like the Coca-Cola icons in Tijuana, the icons on the t-shirts operate differently when worn by DJs in Paris than by a partygoer in Tijuana. It is important to note that the only opportunity for those in Tijuana to obtain t-shirts are at rave parties associated with Torolab through NorTec—a collective of musicians

that mixes traditional Norteño music and electronica. By linking the t-shirts to a performance, a specific place, or a happening, the t-shirt as commodity, and icon as logo, serves as a signifier of intimate knowledge of this happening. In this case the t-shirt is brand, identifier, and authenticator. The fetishization of the “real deal” is what makes these t-shirts precious for those at the border. But for Torolab, DJs in Paris unaware of the layering of meaning in the icon have no less connection to them than those dwelling in the border zone. For them, the potential misinterpretation is an act of the imagination, and appropriation on the part of the wearer, thus becoming a creative act of self-representation and empowerment. Ultimately, we are brought back to the mirroring of the appropriation at the border, and in this way, Torolab’s icon can be seen as connecting the wearer to the border.

How do the t-shirts operate differently as commodity? What are the connections opened up in the realm of transnational capitalism? And can Torolab’s idealism stand up in the face of the commodification of their image/icon/logos? What is so utopian about the sale of t-shirts, or of branding one’s identity? The t-shirts can be seen as operating in the realm of commodity, as providing yet another option for self-representation. The act of consumption is released from its role of quotidian drudgery and becomes an act of empowerment. In his book *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai speaks of the consumption of electronic media as expanding the potential for these

connections, as these media have exploded geographical boundaries and dissolved the line between the first and third worlds. Appadurai considers the way images—of lifestyles, popular culture, and self-representation—circulate internationally through the media and are often borrowed in surprising (to their originators) and inventive fashions. The media here are considered to be not the opium of the masses but rather a space in which consumption can provide a broader horizon for the imagination of the self and community. As Appadurai states:

There is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, agency. Terrorists modeling themselves on Rambo-like figures (who have themselves generated a host of non-Western counterparts); housewives reading romances and soap operas as part of their efforts to construct their own lives; Muslim family gatherings listening to speeches by Islamic leaders on cassette tapes; domestic servants in South India taking packaged tours to Kashmir; these are all examples of the active way in which media are appropriated by people throughout the world. T-shirts, billboards, and graffiti as well as rap music, street dancing, and slum housing all show that the images of the media are quickly moved into local repertoires of irony, anger, humor and resistance.¹⁰

In this way, mass media, which was once considered to be the tool of imperialist capitalism, is now used to create a space in which the imagination can bridge the gap between the first and third worlds, and can offer an opportunity for the self to be imagined and negotiated, no longer constrained to one locality or temporality. One can be global by never leaving the local (as geographic place), or can travel while dwelling. Consumption of mass media in the form of commodities is intrinsic to the visual coding in the construction of the self, and the options for this construction are endless. Torolab sees the *creative* action of self-determination as engendered by the consumption of t-shirts, as the icons offer themselves up as part of the repertoire of self-representation of the consumer.

But in the act of appropriation, it must be asked: who or what is being appropriated? When the Coca-Cola logo is appropriated by the shopkeeper in Tijuana to sell items wholly unconnected to this product, simultaneously and reciprocally the shopkeeper is also appropriated by the logo, and serves to be an unaware ambassador of Coca-Cola’s message and influence. In this way, Torolab considers the consumer of the t-shirts as playing into their idea of “cooperative vandalism” while at the same time subverting this tactic and nullifying it—breaking down the original “subversive” action. For the secondary audience, those that buy the t-shirts from shops far from the concerts in Tijuana, the t-shirts can be seen as playing into a cycle in which the icons are decontextualized, deterritorialized, and recontextualized, creating affiliations of meaning.

Deleuze and Guattari talk about this cycle in a discussion of the rhizome:

How could movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterritorialization not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another? The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.) but this is true only on the level of the strata—a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other. At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further.¹¹

Torolab's icons can be seen in this same way, as creating a neverending and exponentially expanding web of diverse connections.

Hence, the t-shirts of *ToroVestimenta* can be seen as attempting to do three things: (1) establish the hybridity of spatialities and temporalities that are at play in the identity of the border zone through the use of *Rasquachismo*; (2) mirror the act of appropriation of symbols and icons and in this way link the wearer, whether part of the primary or secondary audience to the border; and (3) in this act of connection, take part in a rhizomatic web, in which connective narratives are constantly renegotiated and recontextualized in the service of self-representation.

It must be asked whether or not this falls in line with Torolab's intention of "touching the lives of others" with their work. Can a t-shirt as commodity, though making connections between diverse spatialities, temporalities, and identities, really touch the lives of those that buy them? One has to wonder if these t-shirts can accomplish all the goals set forth by Torolab. By adhering to a grandiose idealism they have positioned themselves in a very precarious position. In their own words:

We don't want to be protagonists of fashion or follow the path of red tape artists. What we really want is to establish deep relationship(s) with people, ideas, the equipment of life and the atmosphere of warm humanism: to obtain through these means a better quality of life.¹²

It is important here to note, yet again, that the t-shirts are only available in Tijuana to those that attend NorTec concert/parties. The t-shirts, like the TVs produced in the *maquiladoras*, are for export only, creating a univalent movement and vision that precludes self-reflexivity. I wonder if Torolab themselves do not also lack the ability for self-reflexivity in their staid adherence to an openly utopian vision of change.

The t-shirts and the *Transborder Trousers* of *ToroVestimenta* operate in a theoretical realm in which self-empowerment comes in the form of consumption of transnational consumer products which by their nature produce connections to diverse localities. But what makes the icons on these t-shirts different than the Coca-Cola icon? By contextualizing the t-shirts and *Transborder Trousers* as art, the goals of Torolab can be achieved by more abstract means. That is, if we consider that the t-shirts utilize the tactics of commodities to point to a greater social or cultural moment, as art they operate as a lens through which to view the construction of the self/community through the consumption of these same commodities. Social commentary is at the core of all of Torolab's projects, and issues of transnational capitalism and its effects on the complex issues of cultural identity and community are central to Tijuana.

Certainly Torolab intends to intervene with and interrogate the border, as well as its greater questions of identity and cultural production. But by mimicking the transnational movements and connections made by commodities, has Torolab succeeded or simply collapsed into capitulation? Perhaps *ToroVestimenta*, like the border itself, is conflicted about the role it must play at any given moment—whether divider or connector (art or commodity.) And indeed,



These Torolab t-shirts are framed and hung on the wall in an exhibition mounted at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego. Photograph by Julio Cesar Morales

these t-shirts can be seen hanging on the walls of museums *and* being sold in the gift shop. This problematizes the roles of art, popular culture, and commodity.

Ultimately, it seems that questions of the role of *ToroVestimenta* depend on the context. . . . a t-shirt hanging on a museum wall operates much differently than one worn by a partygoer in Tijuana. I see that the only way that we can really make sense of questions of identity and connection is to look backwards, through the different points of connection, to understand how we got here, not where we will go. And this is not a linear narrative, or equation, of which a map can be made, but rather a gauge of dynamic forces that overlap and create fissures and, in these, empowerment.

Notes

- 1 Toby Kamps, *Torolab: Laboratorio of the Future in the Present* (curatorial statement accompanying exhibition of the same name), Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2002.
- 2 Torolab, artist proposal for Montreal Biennale, 2002.
- 3 Torolab, artist proposal for Montreal Biennale, 2002.
- 4 Toby Kamps.
- 5 Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Chicano Movement/Chicano Art," quoted in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.
- 6 Dick Hebdige, "Posing . . . Threats, Striking . . . Poses: Youth, Surveillance and Display," in *The Subcultural Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 394.
- 7 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.
- 8 Torolab, artist biography, 2002.
- 9 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 7.
- 10 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 7.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, p. 10.
- 12 Torolab, artist biography, 2002.