

Art as Advocacy: Protecting the US-Mexico Border Environment in Amanda Keller Konya's "Specimens"

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ABSTRACT: Amanda Keller-Konya's multilayered photographic image construction in "'Specimens' from North America's Most Polluted River" helps the viewer perceive the magnitude of the damage sustained by US-Mexico's border region residents in California's Imperial Valley and the effort necessary to clean the area's New River. The river originates in Mexicali city, Baja California, northwestern Mexico, crosses the border, flows north through California's Imperial Valley, and empties into the Salton Sea, the state's largest and most contaminated lake. A sustainable environment is crucial to the health of the valley's residents and surrounding farms that supply most of the nation's winter produce. Recovery of the area's ecosystem includes solving the impact of agricultural runoff and toxic dust as less water flows into the Salton Sea, a body of water vital for the wellbeing of Southern Californians, the fish, and the migratory birds that depend on it for survival.

KEYWORDS: Border ecology, Ecosystem, Ekphrasis; Imperial Valley farmlands; Imperial Irrigation District's Quantification Settlement Agreement; Mexico-US Border, New River, Salton Sea.

Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If you, not just you in this room tonight, but in all the thousands of other rooms like his one...will do this... you will change the earth.

William Faulkner

"The U. S.-Mexican *border es una herida abierta* where the third world grates against the first and bleeds" (25). Gloria Anzaldúa's often-quoted description of border culture provides the context to analyze the materials and images Amanda Keller-Konya, a Southern California photographer, used to create "Specimens" from North America's Most Polluted River.¹ In "Specimens," the viewer sees the landscape photographs through the river water samples collected in 10 jars. A label attached to each bottle with an appropriate quote from various media sources helps the observer grasp and further explore the sociopolitical issues embedded in the intersecting visual and verbal representation modes. The project's multifaceted design captures the suffering/ bleeding at the border rooted in social injustice through environmental degradation. By underscoring the United States' long-standing approach to border ecology, Keller-Konya, hopefully, contributes to healing the violent environmental toll and the deep hurt area residents carry.

Border area residents treat the contaminated New River as an open wound on the landscape and a health hazard to be avoided

The New River area residents in California's Imperial County treat the contaminated waterway as an "open wound on the landscape and a health hazard to be avoided" ("Poisoned Cities"). Luis Olmedo of the Comité Civico del Valle, a long-time activist for cleaner air in Imperial Valley, highlights the impact of border politics on the water and air quality in the region. "Is it because we're over 85% Latinos?" Olmedo asks. "People of color, living in poverty that are not worth that investment?" (Anderson). As Arturo Rodriguez, president of the United Farm Workers, affirms, "[t]he wealth of the agricultural industry has been built on the suffering of generations of farmworkers, from direct abuses in the fields to degradation of the land and environment" ("The Salton Sea is Dying").

New River Committee member Pablo Orozco's "Specimens" bottle-label account underscores the area residents' lack of political clout to effect change:

A lot of people have the attitude that it is not going to change for us. We don't have the economic or the political clout to demand a better quality of life, a better environmental quality. If this river was running through San Diego or San Francisco Bay, there would have been mitigation long ago perhaps even penalties or reparations to those affected.

Untreated sewage and industrial waste, teeming with contaminants and viruses that cause encephalitis, cholera, typhus, asthma, e-coli, and other illnesses, course down the river engulfing surrounding communities in lethal fumes and creating surreal effects.

The earth's neon-like orange color seen through the river sample water in one of Keller-Konya's "Specimens" is as unsettling as a hunter's observations on the bottle's label: "[...] One morning we saw green fog hanging over the river. If I didn't see it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it. The whole river smells like a shithouse [...]."



Amanda Keller-Konya



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Mexico and the US have recognized the river as a toxic danger for decades. Imperial Valley consistently has the highest rates of asthma associated hospitalization among California counties. The *Imperial County Public Health Status Report* 2015-2016 estimates the 2014 asthma emergency visits in Imperial County at 149.6 in comparison to California State's at 80.7 per 10,000 residents among children aged 0-17, and asthma hospitalization rates at 17.8 per 10,000 in that age group as significantly higher than the statewide 10.9. (69)

Despite binational agreements and cleanup efforts, the river continues to be the most polluted and lethal in the United States.

In the past two decades, the U.S. and Mexican governments have spent more than \$91 million on jointly funded upgrades of Mexicali's sewer system. ("Toxic River") In 1993, Governor Pete Wilson officially declared the New River a disaster. In fact, this was just another in a series of similar pronouncements that date back at least to the 1940s, when the New River first began to attract attention as a major source of pollution and disease. At the same time Wilson was speaking out on the New River, commissioners of the International Boundary and Water Commission —Narendra Gunaji from the United States and J. Arturo Herrera Solis of Mexico— signed Minute 288, called by some the most ambitious and comprehensive binational New River cleanup resolution to date. (McNeese et al)

Mexicali's rapid growth and the proliferation of maquiladoras [assembly plants south of the Mexican border that promote job-seeker immigration to the area], have outpaced the sewer infrastructure. "Government funding for wastewater projects has declined during the past decade" (Toxic River) and the New River continues to function as raw sewage and industrial wastewater disposal system. McNeese estimated Mexicali's sewage load in 1993 to be over 35 million gallons a day.



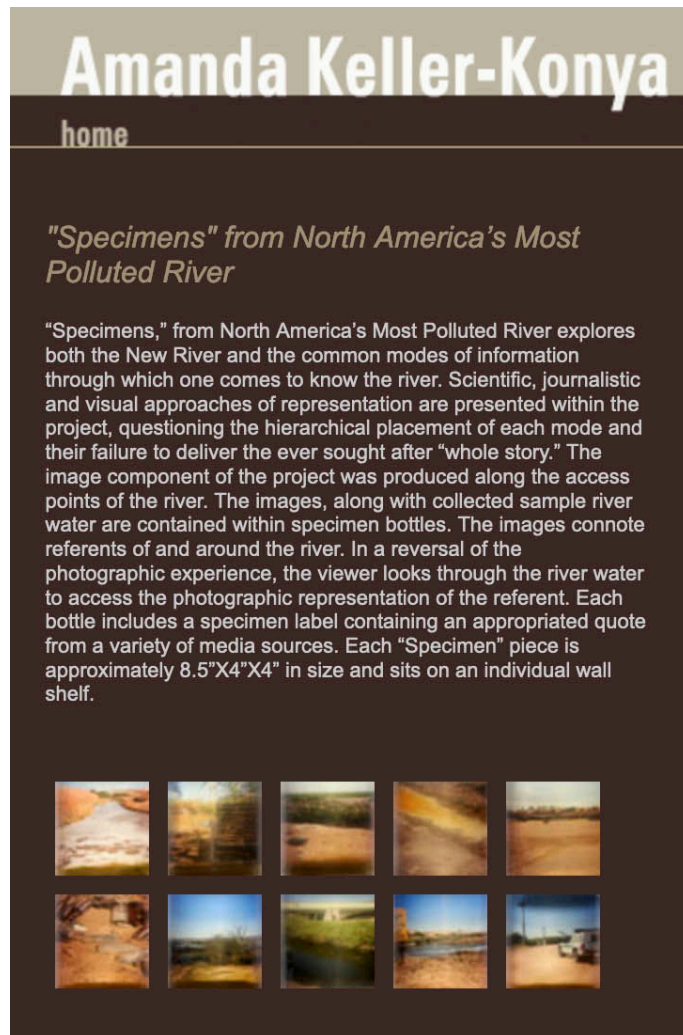
Amanda Keller-Konya



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Keller-Konya's multilayered approach to image construction

Keller-Konya's website displays the 10 photographs. The image components of "Specimens" consist of photographs taken at various US access points of the New River, considered one the most polluted rivers within the United States (Xu 131). "Each bottle is approximately 8.5" X 4" X 4" in size and sits on an individual wall shelf" (" 'Specimens' from North America's Most Polluted River. ").



By mousing over the picture, the bottle label narrative appears at the bottom of the page, and so does the photographic image within the specimen bottle on the right side.

"Specimens" is ekphrastic in the best sense of the term. The remarks printed on the tags attached to each bottle serve as verbal representations of the landscape's visual representations. As J. Heffernan reminds us, narratives connected to images "begin the work of interpreting the picture for us." At the same time, "picture titles and any kind of writing that is explicitly concerned with a work of art can express precisely what ekphrasis so often delivers: a radical critique of representation" (303-304). Keller Konya's multilayered approach to image construction "explores both the New River and the common modes of information through which one comes to know the river." The label comments present "scientific, journalistic, and visual approaches to representation, questioning the hierarchical placement of each mode and their failure to deliver the ever sought after 'whole story'" (" 'Specimens' from North America's Most Polluted River. "). Furthermore, the bottle label narratives record "the thoughts and experiences from police officers, border patrol agents, immigrants, hunters, activists, and community leaders" ("Art and Text"), helping the viewer grasp the magnitude of the New River's environmental degradation, which runs through California's Imperial Valley, jeopardizing human beings, fish, wildlife, and "crops grown and eaten every day by Americans nationwide" (Art and Text).

The interface among the various materials in "Specimens" stages the sociopolitical issues in Keller Konya's work as her intent is "to provoke new questions and dialogs, offering viewers the opportunity to contemplate further the world we live in" ("Art and Text"). The tag narratives express concerns and offer

solutions. Sgt. Gonzalo Gerardo from the Calexico Police Department explains: "[...] I am not going to go into the water other than to save somebody's life [...] but not to catch somebody." Another tag speaks for the immigrants who gain access to the US through the toxic waters. The New River Sanitation Improvement Project spokesperson proposes "[e]nclosing the River along Highway 96 for about three miles [and building structures at the beginning and end of the enclosed river] that would function as a natural water pretreatment." John Ridley, California Councilman, observes, "that crazy as it sounds, dirty as the river is, somebody is making a power grab for it. The L.A. metropolitan water district wants a piece of the New River betting in can be someday cleaned up enough to use."

The New River-Salton Sea Connection

"Specimens'" image/text combinations inspire the viewer to investigate further and seek to understand Imperial County's catastrophic environmental conditions. For example, another bottle label quote from California's Environmental Agency's spokesperson reveals the close connection between the New River and the Salton Sea. "The present day channel of the New River was created in 1905-1907 when the Colorado River washed out diversionary works and the entire Colorado River flow coursed into the Salton Sea Basin creating the New and Alamo River channels and the present Salton Sea, thus the name 'new' river."

The New River flows north from Mexicali Valley, Baja California, northwestern Mexico across California's Imperial Valley, and empties into the Salton Sea, the state's largest and most contaminated lake.

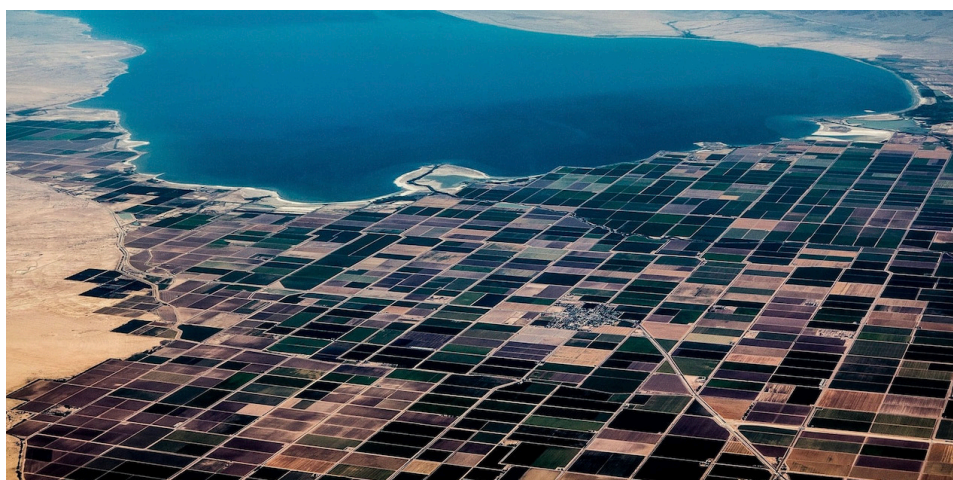
The New River and the Salton Sea are impacted by agricultural wastewater rich in nitrates, as well as pesticides, selenium, and four million tons of salt discharged from the soil every year (Boyle) from more than 500,000 acres of heavily irrigated Imperial Valley farmlands surrounding the two bodies of water. The health of the valley's residents, wildlife, and



Mapquest. Distance between Mexicali and the Salton Sea



Mapquest. Baja California, Southern California's Salton Sea and surrounding areas.



Aerial view of the Salton Sea and Calipatria CA

©2013, Dennis R. Dimick

mar nature's beauty. One of the photographs captures a view of the New River from the vantage point of a folding patio chair surrounded by a canopy of golden foliage. It is easy to imagine the region's former natural magnificence and the urgency of protecting Imperial Valley's ecosystem and the crops surrounding the two bodies of water.

California's most productive agricultural region, whose crops yield "over 80% of the nation's winter produce" (About Us), depends on a sustainable environment.

The neglect and decay captured in Keller-Konya's New River photographs echo the surreal deterioration at the Salton Sea; the remains of wildlife that succumb to the lake's hyper-salinity dot the increasingly drying seabed, as does the multitude of dead fish and birds floating along the receding shorelines. However, the sight of discolored signs and discarded property do not ultimately



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The Salton Sea's former grandeur is still evident. The lake's geographic splendor and diversity still attract photographers and desert art communities. Noteworthy desert art sites have established themselves in Slab City's East Jesus and Bombay Beach. Motivated by the sea's

climate change impending catastrophe and the urgency of averting a public health disaster, the artists transformed the area into open-air museums and recital venues. Their off-beat and often ironic creations and performances in various media are designed to advocate saving and restoring the Salton Sea to a live sea for enjoyment and recreation.

Fifteen times larger than the Island of Manhattan (Goodyear), the Salton Sea has no outlet and cannot cleanse itself. Runoff from farms has made the sea twice as salty as the ocean. Algae blooms from fertilizer phosphates and nitrates deplete oxygen and kill wildlife. Mitigation efforts for correcting the toxicity of the New River and the Salton Sea have been unsuccessful. As less water flows into the lake, the seabed is increasingly drying. The progressively receding shoreline exposes toxic dust that threatens all Southern California and Mexicali across the Border. Without effective mitigation, it is estimated that one hundred tons of dust will be air-born every day ("Toxic Dust and Asthma Plague Salton Sea Communities"). "In 2012, the terrible stench from the fish killed by one such bloom smothered Los Angeles for days, demonstrating the distance that toxic dust might travel" ("The Salton Sea is Dying").

The Audubon Society, environmental activists, and Anthropocene scholars urge exercising caution when referring to the Salton Sea as an accidental lake because it ignores the harm done to area residents. The Colorado River created the Salton Sink. Lying approximately 230 feet below sea level, it is in Boyle's estimation one of the hottest and driest sinks in the world. Since its inception, the Colorado River, depending on natural desert weather cycles, filled the dry seabed with freshwater or returned it to a dry basin. To consider the Salton Sea the product of an engineering accident justified government agencies from taking action to protect the lake and designated it as a repository for agricultural runoff. Ironically, building irrigation canals to create unnatural farmlands in the desert is responsible for the sea's increased salinity and pollution. Since 2003 the lake has been entirely fed by irrigation runoff and industrial/wastewater discharge from its two tributaries—the New and Alamo Rivers. Freshwater supply to the sea ended in 2003 when the Imperial Irrigation District's Quantification Settlement Agreement initiated the transfer of Colorado River water from Imperial Valley to San Diego. John Ridley's "Specimens" tag narrative explains California's "bloody battles" over water: "[...] this is California, a state born out of bloody battles over water [...]." The same bottle's photograph displays a sizeable yellow sign warning people to keep out of the New River's contaminated soil and water.



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Safeguarding wildlife and biodiversity in the New River and the Salton Sea area is vital to the United States. "Despite being hyper-saline and growing saltier all the time, the sea provides habitat to some four hundred and thirty species of birds, some of them endangered, and is one of the last significant wetlands remaining on the migratory path between Alaska and Central America" (Goodyear). "During the summer of 1999, more than 8 million tilapia died in a single day, leaving them to wash along the shore in a band that was about three miles wide and 10 miles long. A variety of species no longer exist in the lake—only tilapia and the desert puff fish, which is an endangered species, remain, [...]." (Graham).

An old idea has acquired new momentum per Ian James and Sammy Roth's *USA Today*'s article titled "Two Paths for Long-Term Fixes at California's Shrinking Sea." The idea, which has high costs and could reach billions of dollars, transfers water from Mexico's Sea of Cortez into the lake and desalinates it through the area's plentiful geothermal power. According to the article, a subsidiary of Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway, which owns 10 operational geothermal plants near the lake's southern shore, sent a desalination proposal to the state legislature.

In March 2017, California released a draft of a 10-year plan for the sea with a total of 30,000-acre restoration of the exposed seabed at an estimated cost of more than 400 million ("The Salton Sea: In Search of a Sustainable Future"). James and Roth voice concerns that the state's proposal will leave more than half the lakebed exposed, and there are no plans beyond 2028. State officials are considering building a "perimeter lake" stretching 60 miles around the lake's shoreline. The project would exclude seawater transfer as the process is complicated

and costly. According to James and Roth, the perimeter lake would require a levee, and the price of the levee alone would reach more than 627 million. California is still far from a solution to the Salton Sea crisis. The 10-year plan remains severely underfunded, and community members are frustrated with officials who have ignored their exposure to lung-damaging dust and "done little to protect the region's vulnerable residents from impending health emergency." ("California Far from Solutions")

Without a more aggressive long-term dust suppression plan, hazardous air pollution will make more people sick. "Specimens" New River photographs help the viewer grasp Gloria Anzaldua's reference to wounds at a precise US border location. The suffering and hardships Latino communities of farmers and their families endure as "the third world grates against the first and bleeds" in California's Imperial Valley is illustrated in Christian Garza's testimonial:

I was born with asthma. Last year there was a dust storm over a couple of days. I had an asthma attack, and I went to school, but the steroids I had with me wouldn't make it better. My mom picked me up and rushed me to the hospital. They called a code blue and told me I had a partially collapsed lung. If I'd been out there 10 minutes longer, my whole lung would have collapsed, and I'd have suffocated.

The attacks used to be once a month—now it's every couple of days. I'm only 19. What am I going to do when I'm 25? And I'm not the only kid with asthma here; there are so many kids with worse asthma than I have [...]. Every time I'd have an asthma attack, it would cost \$200 for medication because I didn't have proper insurance. Then I would have to go down to the food bank because we couldn't afford food after that. I always felt a huge burden—as a little kid, I would lie to my mom and tell her I didn't have an asthma attack because I knew there was not going to be food on the table after that ("Code Blue for the Salton Sea").

Conclusion

The observer learns the magnitude of the damage sustained by border area residents and the effort necessary to clean Imperial Valley's New River through Amanda Keller-Konya's "Specimens" multilayered photographic image construction. A sustainable environment is crucial to the health of the valley's residents and the California farms that supply most of the nation's winter produce. Recovery of the area's ecosystem includes solving the impact of agricultural runoff and toxic dust as less water flows into the Salton Sea, a body of water vital for the wellbeing of Southern Californians, the fish, and the migratory birds that depend on it for survival.

NOTES

¹ Southern California native Amanda Keller Konya received an MFA in photography from Otis College of Art and Design, a BFA in photography from California Institute of the Arts and an MA in art education from California State University, Northridge. Keller Konya's photographic practice is multifaceted. Her clients have included: CBS, Clear Channel, the Consulate General of France in Los Angeles, Google's Intersection, and Herrera MediaWorks. Keller Konya's personal work is mindful of the continuing state of flux in photographic media and addresses sociopolitical issues including: toxicity, school closures, foodstuff, land use and public/private space. Keller Konya's work has been exhibited at a variety of cultural institutions including: The University of Texas Centennial Museum, The Annenberg Space for Photography, the Studio for Southern California History and the Angkor Photography Festival in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Her images have been included in publications such as: Orion Magazine, Ornamental Others, and The Story of O exhibition catalogue. In addition to her Los Angeles based studio practice, Keller Konya heads the Photography and Imaging Program at Citrus College. As a photographic educator, her major goal is to provide students a positive and safe environment in which they can learn to use technological tools as a means of mindful communication. She is motivated to encourage students to engage in the analysis and production of images through personal projects and portfolio development for the students' desired industry workplace.

² Dennis Dimick is an American journalist, photographer, presenter, educator, and citizen of the Anthropocene. He served for years as executive environment editor for National Geographic magazine, and was a picture editor for the National Geographic Society for more than 35 years until retiring in December 2015.

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