

ARTNEWS



*View of the border wall prototypes from the southern side of the U.S.-Mexico border.
COURTESY MAGA / BJARNI GRIMSSON*

Artists, Curators Respond to Christoph Büchel's Border Wall Project

Maximiliano Durón Posted 02/07/18 5:19 pm

[ARTnews](#)

A number of art professionals have signed [an open letter](#) that criticizes Swiss artist Christoph Büchel's recent proposal to preserve wall prototypes that have been built in Southern California, near the United States-Mexico border. It calls for a boycott of both Büchel's gallery, international powerhouse Hauser & Wirth, and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, which is the meeting point for tours the artist is offering of the wall prototypes. ([In a statement](#), the museum said that it is not officially involved with the work, and that

it was not consulted about being a meeting place for tours.) It also challenges the *New York Times* over its coverage of the project.

Under the aegis of a group called MAGA, Büchel has proposed that the prototypes for the wall, long advocated by President Trump and challenged by opponents as racist and wasteful, should be protected by the Antiquities Act of 1906 on the grounds that they have “significant cultural value and are historical land art.”

The letter argues that Büchel’s piece makes plain “the failures of Contemporary Art: concerned more with spectacle and irony than critically dismantling oppressive structures that undermine the lives of the most vulnerable. . . . Not only do Christoph Büchel, Michael Walker (of the *New York Times*) and Hauser & Wirth Gallery fail at critique, they reinforce the use of art to euphemize and aestheticize state violence, and mock the lived experiences of those most affected by that violence.”

The letter comes after discussions that began last week when Hauser & Wirth began promoting the tours on Twitter and Instagram without mention of Büchel. [One tweet](#), dating from January 29, reads in full: “Join MAGA on a tour of the Border Wall Prototypes built for Donald Trump’s proposed border wall between the United States and Mexico @Maga_Prototypes” and then includes a link to the group’s site.

Reached by phone, prior to the publication of the open letter, writer Gelare Khoshgozaran, who organized its drafting, said she initially wanted to ignore the project, but seeing a post on the gallery’s Instagram for the project was shocking to her. “I was taken aback by how matter-of-fact it was that they just reposted this video of the promotion of the tours,” she said.

“It touched a part of me that I’m dealing with on a daily basis, and I can’t possibly look at it as an objective art subject or topic that I’m looking at just from critical point of view,” Khoshgozaran, who recently got her green card and holds an Iranian passport, added. “And I’m not talking about just that specific wall, I’m talking about

walls and borders and the way that they racialize our bodies, limit mobility, the way that they separate our families, the way that they affect your mental health and your well-being.”

Chon Noriega, the director of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center, told *ARTnews* by email that he found the gallery’s promotion of the project to be “tone deaf.” “We are in a moment in which the U.S. government is actively targeting Latino families with no less than 4.5 million people directly and immediately harmed by these recent decisions,” he wrote. “So you can imagine how upset people might be for an artist and gallery to seek profit and entertainment from governmental actions that dehumanize Mexicans and Mexican Americans.”

In an emailed statement, provided to *ARTnews* prior to the publication of the open letter, Hauser & Wirth said:

“Christoph Büchel’s PROTOTYPES campaign seeks to have the pre-existing border wall prototypes protected from destruction under the American Antiquities Act of 1906, so that these objects can continue to stand as evidence of bigotry and fear in American culture, and serve as catalysts for transforming political discourse. With its vast population of immigrants, undocumented workers, and people of Mexican and Latin American descent, Southern California is particularly sensitive to issues of xenophobia and border violence. The fact that PROTOTYPES has tapped into the public’s anxieties reinforces why this is such a relevant project. We support our artists’ work and encourage debate as an essential component not only of the PROTOTYPES project but of art’s crucial role in effecting societal change.”

Reached today, following the publication of the letter, a spokesperson for the gallery said that it had no further comment.

Büchel has often courted controversy in his work. At the [2015 Venice Biennale](#), where he represented Iceland, he converted a deconsecrated church into a mosque, noting that there was no mosque in the city’s historical area. Soon after opening, it was shuttered by authori-

ties, who said that it lacked proper permits. At the Frieze New York fair in 2012, he displayed homeless people's shopping carts as sculptures that were available for sale.

Arlene Dávila, an anthropologist who studies the ways in which U.S. Latinx and Latin American art is marginalized within the global art world, particularly within the market, said in an email, "The fact that any arts organization is patronizing or in any way endorsing the aestheticization of violence against migrants is abhorrent. I don't think I could add anything else."

MAGA, the nonprofit that Büchel founded for the *PROTOTYPES* project, makes no mention of the artist on [its website](#). It has been involved in organizing tours to view the border wall prototypes, which cost \$25. Because viewing the walls from the U.S. side of the border requires a complicated arrangement with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency, Büchel has opted for viewing them from the Mexican side of the border.

"The greatest impact of the prototype walls is their symbolic ability to enter the daily consciousness and psyches of immigrant communities," Maurizio Hector Pineda, a Southern California-based independent curator originally from El Salvador, told *ARTnews* by email. "The prototypes create an anxiety that not only affects border cities but Middle America as well. Under our current administration and political climate, both documented and undocumented American immigrants of color have to consider the hard fact that they and their families may be displaced."

Representatives from MAGA declined to make Büchel available for an interview and highlighted his interview in the initial article in the *Times* with Michael Walker. [That article](#), which carries the headline "Is Donald Trump, Wall-Builder-in-Chief, a Conceptual Artist?," terms the proposal an "intriguing possibility" and details the project with comparisons to Minimalism, historical Land Art, and Marcel Duchamp's conceptualization of the readymade, saying, "Aesthetic considerations are largely secondary to brute strength, but, when

viewed up close, the walls collectively have the undeniable majesty of minimalist sculpture.”

Two weeks after the *Times* piece, Jerry Saltz, the senior art critic for *New York* magazine, [wrote about](#) the project enthusiastically, calling it “brilliant”: “[Büchel] pulls back the curtains on several pressing ideas at once—ideas that deserve to be taken seriously, not dismissed as simple provocation or the disrespectful sanitation of a serious situation. On the contrary: Büchel’s proposal allows us to see through layers of flimflam, illusion, posturing, and political theater, while also revealing a dark side of one of art’s most respected recent art movements.”

Saltz also commended the walls from the perspective of a distant time when Trump would presumably no longer be in power, allowing them to serve as reminders of the current political climate: “From that vantage, these prototypes will be a perfect memorial to how close the United States came to giving in to the ghosts of racism, xenophobia, nativism, white nationalism, mediocrity, and a cosmic fear of the other.”

Betty Avila, a co-director of Self-Help Graphics, the nonprofit arts organization that is often regarded as the heart of the Latinx/Chicanx community on the east side of Los Angeles, said she viewed the project, the tours, and the coverage of it as coming from a privileged perspective that is “so disconnected from the communities who don’t have the ability to move so freely across these borders.”

“I think there’s a way to attack this issue that is much more connected to lived histories of people,” Avila added. “It’s a luxury to be able to separate anything symbolic from the wall from people and from the history of people who have been oppressed by the wall. . . . There’s a very clear difference between keeping something as a reminder of something that is passed—and having that be a retroactive action—versus attaching that kind of historical value to something when we’re in the middle of it.”

Gonzalo Casals, the director of the Leslie-Lohman Museum in New York, positioned the project within the larger national conversation around monuments and memorials. “In a moment that cities across the U.S. are debating how to handle public monuments and markers celebrating confederate history, it is important to rethink the process in which contemporary monuments are created,” he said by email. “The Border Wall represents myths and misconceptions about immigration that are hard to defy. . . . While MAGA’s initiative brings attention to immigration from Mexico and Central America, it fails to present a more human and nuanced understanding of the reason those prototypes were created. At this point, as the conversations about the need of a wall are still happening, we need to create platforms for artworks that celebrate the contributions of immigrants to this country, and shed light on the real issues behind the creation of the wall.”

L.A.-based artist Raul Baltazar, who [recently staged a performance piece](#) as part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA that dealt with the past, present, and future of the city’s Chicane community, said he wondered what Büchel’s relationship to the border was, citing an indigenous mantra of “all of my relations,” referring to one’s relationship to any topic, particularly fellow humans and the land.

“I can understand what he’s trying to do as an art project but what is his relationship to it?” Baltazar said by phone. “It reminds me of the work that Sam Durant did,” [alluding to the artist’s controversial sculpture](#) in Minneapolis about the execution of Native Americans. “They’re so far removed from the actual violence and the signage of that oppression. He’s coming at it from an observational perspective. In the end, it shows privilege and distance.”

“Like many of his projects such as *THE MOSQUE: The First Mosque in the Historic City of Venice*, 2015, Christoph Büchel’s MAGA ‘tours’ project is a provocation,” Pineda wrote. “He clearly enjoys and profits from his privilege while he feeds the 1% with culturally insightful satire. Büchel’s ‘tours’ are for the ‘culturally aware elite,’ and mega galleries like Hauser & Wirth fuel the market with his brand.”

Pineda likened these tours to people wanting to tour favelas in Brazil or to visit Havana before it changes, and reminded him of Luis Gomez's 2016 installation *A Sufi Dream*, which reads, "Would you like to buy my misery?"

"They want to see the ghettos and the slums, and this is one more version of that," he told *ARTnews* by phone. "It's sad but it's the reality that we exist in."

Updated 02/07/2018, 6:25 p.m.: *MCA San Diego's statement about not being affiliated or consulted with Büchel has been added to this post.*

Correction 02/08/2015, 3:40 p.m.: *An earlier version of this article misspelled Chon Noriega's last name. The post has been updated to reflect this.*

© 2018 ARTnews All Rights Reserved. ARTnews® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.