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Insurgent envelopment: The emergency blanket and scenes of exposure at border zones

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Abstract

Critical engagement with spaces of exposure is an important research agenda in the contemporary social sciences and humanities. Developing and extending this agenda, this paper offers an account of how scenes of exposure at border zones are mediated materially, aesthetically, and politically by forms of envelopment. Specifically, it discusses the geographies of exposure and envelopment that unfold through the use and re-use of the emergency blanket at these zones. Fabricated from metallised polymer films, emergency blankets are used commonly to provide thermal protection for bodies at risk of exposure in a range of situations. More than functional, however, these objects also have a distinctive aesthetic allure. By attending to the material and aesthetic qualities of the emergency blanket, this paper explores its visibility and significance in scenes of exposure at border zones. Highlighting how the blanket is deployed as a device of minimal comfort, the paper then considers artistic works that repurpose this object as part of a creative critique of conditions at these zones. Drawing on the work of Stacy Alaimo and Ronak Kapadia, among others, the paper develops the concept of insurgent envelopment to understand how artists use the emergency blanket in works that simultaneously foreground, disrupt, and reimagine relations between exposure and envelopment.

KEYWORDS

art, borders, envelopment, exposure, mobilities

1 | INTRODUCTION

Critical engagement with spaces of exposure has emerged as an important research agenda in the contemporary social sciences and humanities. Although used in different ways, exposure is often deployed to highlight critical aspects of the material and affective conditions of living in increasingly turbulent elemental worlds (Engelmann & McCormack, 2021; Neale et al., 2022; Papadopoulos et al., 2021). Perhaps the most forceful consideration of exposure is offered by Alaimo (2016), for whom the issue is central to understanding the ethics and politics emerging from the material transformations of

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the Anthropocene. For Alaimo, the question of exposure does not refer to a generalised condition, but to specific forms of transcorporeal entanglement in milieus that are variously toxic, benign, or nourishing. Exposures, in that sense, are about the interactive relations and disjunctions between bodies and their surrounds. As Alaimo also makes clear, these exposures, and capacities to modify and mitigate them, are differentially distributed, while also taking place across multiple geographies and durations.

This paper develops and extends geographical engagements with exposure by offering an account of how scenes of exposure at border zones are mediated by materials and practices of envelopment. Although such scenes are nominally about thermal exposure, they also foreground wider aspects of the relation between exposure and envelopment. The paper unfolds three aspects of this relation. First, it foregrounds the material specificity of this relation by highlighting how envelopment can take different forms. It is possible to be enveloped, for instance, by a sound, an atmosphere, an emotion, or a crowd (Anderson, 2009). The focus of this paper is on a particular object – the emergency blanket – as a form of envelopment. Also known as ‘space blankets’, ‘survival blankets’, or ‘thermal blankets’, emergency blankets are used in a range of situations to provide thermal protection for bodies, devices, and infrastructures. The materials from which these blankets are fabricated have specific affordances, properties, and qualities that matter both to how they are used and to how they are creatively repurposed. Second, by thinking about the use of these objects, the paper interrogates the politics of the relations between envelopment and exposure. The use of emergency blankets reveals how exposure is mediated and mitigated by different forms of envelopment, to what degree, for whom, and to what end. A politics of exposure focused on these objects begins with attention to their use as devices for modifying thermal conditions (McHugh, 2022; Starosielski, 2020). Going beyond this, however, it also involves using this attention to reflect more widely on how scenes of exposure might be critically and creatively reimagined and reworked.

Consequently, and third, by focusing on the use and re-use of the emergency blanket, the paper develops a critical discussion of the aesthetic politics of exposure and forms of envelopment. The lightness, reflectivity, and strength of the materials from which emergency blankets are fabricated have proved alluring for many artists whose works engage directly with specific conditions and circumstances of exposure at border zones. Here these properties and qualities are understood in terms of material-specificity, a term that parallels recent engagements by Harriet Hawkins (2021) with the medium-specificity of artistic and creative geographies more generally (see also Hawkins, 2019). By highlighting the material-specificity of the emergency blanket in this way, the paper therefore offers an account of the politics of envelopment and exposure that turns on how forms of envelopment are used to mediate the exposure of bodies to hostile conditions and, in turn, how the meaning and materiality of those forms is contested through critical and creative interventions.

Border zones are particularly important sites for tracking the critical and creative relation between exposure and envelopment in this way. As part of highly politicised ‘emergency mobilities’ (Adey, 2016), emergency blankets are used routinely to offer a degree of thermal comfort to people displaced and/or detained at these zones. The visibility of these blankets has meant that, like other objects, they have been used by artists to highlight conditions at such sites. Framed by wider engagements by geographers with the relation between art and geopolitical sites (Çayli, 2021; Ingram, 2015), my analysis of the use by artists of the emergency blanket is a contribution to a broader set of engagements by geographers and others with creative disruptions of borders (see Amoore & Hall, 2010; Giudice & Giubilaro, 2015; Konrad & Szary, 2022; Moze & Spiegel, 2022) as intensely affective and embodied sites (Brigstocke et al., 2023). This analysis also contributes to a critical understanding of aesthetics of mobility (Adey & Barry, 2020). Examples of such work have been offered by Aguiar (2021), Barry (2019), and Tzanelli (2018), each of whom has written about Chinese artist Ai Weiwei’s engagement with migration (for a critique of his work, see Zimanyi, 2022). Barry (2019) does so to foreground the material aesthetics of mobilities, while Aguiar (2021) focuses on Ai’s use of the life jacket in *Safe Passage* (2016) to explore the affective power of artistic representations of refugee ‘crises’. According to Aguiar (2021, n.p.), the significance of this work is how it offers a ‘powerful mediator in bringing together places proximate and distant from the scene of crisis’.

Oriented by these engagements with the material and political aesthetics of mobility, this paper considers how the emergency blanket is used to perform what, drawing on Stacy Alaimo (2016) and Ronak Kapadia (2019), can be termed ‘insurgent envelopment’. I develop this term to frame the work of artists who deploy the emergency blanket as a form of envelopment for critically and creatively reworking scenes of exposure at border zones. Such works tactically mobilise the aesthetic qualities of the emergency blanket to highlight the violence of these scenes while also foregrounding the fragile agencies of lives exposed to this violence. In this work there is an acute awareness of how the emergency blanket erases, conceals, and occludes the experience of those it envelops. At the same time, the material-specificity of such work points to fugitive forms of meaning-making and embodied agency emerging through situated practices and affective experiences of envelopment.

The argument of the paper is developed as follows. The next section turns to questions of exposure and envelopment, before considering the emergency blanket as a specific form of envelopment. In doing so it foregrounds both the role of the blanket as a thermal mediator and its distinctive aesthetic allure. This provides the context for a discussion of the deployment of the emergency blanket in the 'humanitarian' situations faced by migrants and refugees at border zones. The remainder of the paper examines how emergency blankets are used in artistic interventions that exemplify insurgent envelopment as a creative critique of conditions of exposure at these zones. The conclusion zooms out to think about the relation between the politics of this form of envelopment and wider geographies of exposure.

2 | GEOGRAPHIES OF EXPOSURE AND ENVELOPMENT

As a condition of life and death in diverse worlds, exposure has different temporalities and geographies. Exposure is sometimes understood as a slow process of becoming affected by forms of environmental violence (Bickerstaff, 2022; Davies, 2018; Nixon, 2011). In other work, exposure is traced through the histories and geographies of colonial and decolonial processes (Tousignant, 2018), or in the treatment of life in circumstances of political and institutional decline (Petryna, 2002). Much of this work details the violence and harms of exposure, especially in relation to toxicity (Liboiron et al., 2018) and does so by focusing, for instance, on exposure to urban air pollution (Garnett, 2020; Jokela-Pansini & Militz, 2022).

It is possible, of course, to foreground exposure without it becoming the defining condition of exposed lives to the extent that their agency seems exhausted or the promise of worlding evaporates (Murphy, 2017). One way of avoiding the latter is through pursuing possibilities for performing or reworking non-heroic agencies in conditions of exposure (see Kemmer et al., 2022). The importance of these possibilities explains, at least in part, the emergence of weathering as a providential concept for thinking exposure as both diminishment and endurance (Neimanis & Walker, 2014). In these terms, exposure can be framed as an embodied orientation affected and influenced by conditions of vulnerability (Rush-Cooper, 2020) and, simultaneously, as the condition of possibility for certain forms of living and being otherwise. This sense of exposure is central to Alaimo's (2016) influential engagement with the material politics of the Anthropocene. Especially interesting is Alaimo's suggestion that rather than only diagnosing exposure as a condition of vulnerability, it is also possible to perform exposure otherwise as part of weathering increasing fragile worlds. For Alaimo, artistic practices provide generative resources here. By tracing how exposure is 'performed' in activist art and elsewhere, Alaimo considers potentials for crafting a materialist politics connecting multiple sites and lives. In her words,

Performing exposure as an ethical and political act means to ... grapple with the particular entanglements of vulnerability and complicity that radiate from disasters and their terribly disjunctive connection to everyday life in the industrialized world.

(Alaimo, 2016, p. 5)

Oriented by Alaimo's work, in this paper I consider the importance of envelopment in thinking about and performing the ethics, politics, and geographies of exposure. Envelopment is implicated intimately with exposure. And like exposure, it is a broad topic. In a literal sense, envelopment, at whatever scale or duration, is fundamental to the existence of many worlds and forms of life, whether through cell membranes, skin, architecture, clothing, packaging, or wrapping. Envelopment tempers the hostility of the conditions that threaten the coherence, consistency, or durability of human or non-human life, while also allowing for the generation of milieus, atmospheres, and surroundings that can be variously life-sustaining or destroying. In this sense it mediates the material relations between inside and outside in ways that variously amplify, reduce, or modify the transcorporeality (Alaimo, 2010) of these relations. In more societal terms, as Peter Sloterdijk's (e.g., Sloterdijk, 2011) work suggests, the metaphor of envelopment foregrounds the organisational forms and influential atmospheres of social worlds from the scale of the individual to the planetary. For Sloterdijk, envelopment has a problematic 'immunological' aspect – it functions to separate, isolate, and insulate, in a protective and defensive sense. Equally, envelopment can also be a material practice for generating hostile, violent, or deadly conditions or atmospheres from which withdrawal becomes an intensely politicised and differentially distributed capacity (Feigenbaum & Kanngieser, 2015; Phillippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016; Trigg, 2016). At the same time, the metaphor of envelopment offers a way of conceptualising spacetimes of experience and, more specifically, experiences of interiority and immersion facilitated by technologies and practices, whether analogue or digital (Ash, 2016; McCormack, 2018; see also Burdon, 2023, Dickens & Edensor, 2021). Finally, if envelopment offers

a way of thinking about the spacetimes of experience, it also directs attention to how this experience is differentiated. As Irigaray (2005) has argued, this differentiation often casts certain bodies as passive envelopes or containers. For Irigaray, however, this does not preclude envelopes of differentiated experience becoming spaces for experimenting with uncontained political gestures or agencies.

In this paper envelopment does not figure as a metaphor for diagnosing broad societal formations or political conditions. Instead, by unfolding geographies of exposure through the emergency blanket, the paper focuses on the material, aesthetic, and political specificity of forms of envelopment as they modify and mitigate situated exposures. In doing so, it highlights how the properties and qualities of forms of envelopment make a difference to their affordances in the performance of envelopment as an ethical and political act. The situations of exposure that figure in this paper are limited in duration and can usually be captured as 'scenes'. Unlike slow exposures to toxicity, for instance, these situations are more immediate, localised, and urgent, even if they can be understood in relation to wider and slower emergencies (Anderson et al., 2020). These situations involve the movement, apprehension, rescue, and detention of migrants and refugees at border zones. In these situations, the emergency blanket has become part of an array of technologies of preparedness (Adey & Anderson, 2012), figuring as a distinctive form of envelopment distributed ostensibly benignly to reduce the immediate risk of thermal exposure. My argument is that the use of such blankets in these situations for what is nominally the modification of thermal exposure has become the focus for a particular form of what Ronak Kapadia (2019) calls 'insurgent aesthetics'. Kapadia offers this concept to think about how a range of contemporary artists fashion forms of 'alternative sensorial relation' (Kapadia, 2019, p. 4) to conditions of war and violence, articulating, in the process, a 'minoritarian' critique of violence through the production of new 'sensuous affiliations and political imaginaries' (Kapadia, 2019, p. 11). Building on this proposition, in what follows I consider how the emergency blanket is used by artists to fabricate different forms of envelopment – what I name here as 'insurgent envelopment' – that provide possibilities for disclosing and reimagining exposure at border zones.

3 | EMERGENCY BLANKETS

The blanket and the process of blanketing are linked intimately with ideas about envelopment. As Kara Thompson has written, a

blanket can be *anything*, really, anything that covers and insulates, protects, obscures, or makes one feel secure. Blankets can be made of wool, cotton, pine boughs, skin, another body, snow, smog, fog, rocks, sidewalks, grass, cities. Blankets are everywhere and anything, banal and extraordinary. They are matters of life and death.

(2019, p. xv)

Blankets, as Thompson continues, are often mundane objects, but in some circumstances can be highly symbolic. The blanket is also a rich and flexible metaphor, its indeterminacy especially useful for thinking about the folding and refolding of space and time. Something about the blanket also, however, suggests embodied intimacy, closeness, and the experience of comfort, associations also linked sometimes with a feminisation of the envelope and envelopment more generally (Irigaray, 2005). As a distinctive form of envelopment, the emergency blanket exemplifies many of these associations. It is designed to offer a degree of comfort through its proximity to bodies in situations where exposure to the elements might be harmful. At the same time, it can be a highly visible and alluring object that reflects and amplifies the affective, aesthetic, and political qualities of the scene of its deployment.

Both the functionality and aesthetics of the emergency blanket are shaped by the materials from which it is fabricated. BoPET, or biaxially oriented polyethylene, was developed and trademarked by DuPont in the early 1950s as Mylar (see also McCormack, 2022). This film is strong and light, highly resistant to heat and cold, with a high level of impermeability to moisture and chemicals. Like many synthetic films it can be metallised by the application of a layer of vaporised metal, usually aluminium. The development of Mylar and other films by DuPont during the 1950s was part of the process through which plastics became woven into the affective and imaginative fabric of everyday worlds (Meikle, 1995). Promotional adverts dramatised the qualities of Mylar to demonstrate its physical, electrical, chemical, and thermal properties, and their extensive applications (e.g., DuPont, 1955). The promise of synthetic films as new materials of envelopment drew together different versions of the elements as part of the engineering, imagining, and aestheticisation of worlds (Engelmann & McCormack, 2021). This promise centred on the mastery and manipulation of molecules, while also celebrating new

material capacities for modifying exposure to the temperature, humidity, and chemical composition of milieus, with all kinds of practical consequences in areas like food packaging and preservation. Such films have since become critical components of 'containment technologies' that allow different atmospheres to be engineered and enveloped (Kenner et al., 2019).

Two aspects of these materials are particularly important here. The first aspect is their role in what Nicole Starosielski (2020) calls thermal mediation – the process by which thermal conditions are modified across, within, or between different bodies and the milieus in which they are generatively implicated. The capacity to modify heating and cooling through envelopment is essential to the operation of many infrastructures and worlds. While the thermal properties of Mylar were part of its early marketing, the most visible use of these materials was in the US space programme, where Mylar was one of many materials from which suits worn by the Apollo astronauts on the moon were fabricated. A similar material, Kapton, also manufactured by DuPont, provided insulation for the external surfaces of the lunar lander, and the gold-coloured film became associated closely with the appearance of these craft. The use of this material in the form of emergency blankets for individual bodily comfort is often presented as one of the spinoffs of the 'space race' (NASA, 2007): the blankets were first used as thermally reflective devices for athletes during the 1980 New York City Marathon. Because the human body continues to cool following vigorous exercise, the temperature of runners can fall rapidly, especially in cold conditions. Emergency blankets help prevent this by reflecting radiant body heat back towards the body. These blankets are also regularly deployed in responses to emergencies of a different scale and nature. For instance, in 2005 approximately 150,000 blankets were used in response to an earthquake near Balakot, Pakistan (Heatsheets, 2022).

The second striking aspect of these materials is their aesthetic allure, involving a combination of colour, lightness, and reflectivity. Indeed, the aesthetic appeal of these materials was amplified by their association with the US space programme. This association encouraged various artists, including Andy Warhol, Les Levine (see Kirsch, 2021), and Ira Cohen (Grabaud, 2019), to experiment with Mylar and similar materials in the creation of a range of immersive and participatory works. The appeal of such materials in these and more recent artistic works is a reminder that the aesthetic allure of materials is a function, at least in part, of how materials are fabricated and the forms into which they can be fashioned. The variable allure of materials, in turn, shapes their political affordances. Coleman's (2020) work on glitter as a 'ubiquitous thing' is especially helpful here. Coleman argues that the politics of glitter are multiple and include, for instance, how it contributes to plastic pollution. She also shows how glitter becomes a material for experimenting with different futures through forms of affective embodiment. For Coleman, 'the movement of glitter in and across different worlds is transformational and future-oriented. ... Glitter has the capacity to world differently, to create a variety of futures' (2020, p. 1). Like Coleman, in this paper I am interested in how the allure of metallised films like Mylar shapes its participation in the minor politics of bodies and their worlds. And, like Coleman, while acknowledging that one version of this politics centres on the environmental impact of synthetic films, the primary aim of the paper is to show how these materials interlace with other political possibilities. Notably, while it is often fabricated from the same base material as glitter, the emergency blanket as a form of envelopment takes shape as a completely different object, with different properties, affective resonances, and political possibilities.

4 | SCENES OF EXPOSURE AT BORDER ZONES

My attention to the deployment of the emergency blanket is organised around scenes of envelopment and exposure at border zones. I use the term scene deliberately here. A scene, as geographers and others have argued, is both imaginative and affective (see Anderson, 2022; Hann, 2018). It suggests the occurrence of an event that requires explanation, but which also has a disruptive impact on those who witness it. The scene can be clearly demarcated, most obviously in the aftermath of a crime, but also through the framing of an image, set, or stage. Yet the scene can also be leaky, porous, gesturing to processes and events that happen beyond its frame. Circulating across media platforms, scenes of exposure and envelopment at border zones can and have become the focus of critical and creative attention. These scenes link different senses of exposure – the corporeal, the elemental, and the photographic (see Zhang, 2020) – often through the depiction of displaced bodies. Such scenes disclose the conditions to which bodies are exposed (Yusoff, 2007) while framing the agencies of those bodies in particular ways. 'Condition' can mean quite different things here. It can mean exposure to hypothermia-inducing water or weather. But it can also mean exposure to the hostile atmospheres of detention centres and holding cells designed deliberately to generate minimal comfort or actual discomfort.

Scenes of exposure at two border zones – the Mexico–US border and the southern border of the European Union in the Mediterranean – are especially visible. Both zones are entangled in multiple geographies that go well beyond the scope of this paper (see, for instance, İşleyen & Qadim, 2023). In many representations of both zones, however, emergency blankets figure prominently.

In 2016 and 2020, photographs surfaced of immigrants detained by the US CBP (Customs and Border Protection) in a facility in Tucson, Arizona (see [Figure 1](#)). Released as part of a lawsuit, the photographs revealed some of the conditions under which detainees were held by the CBP. They depicted people packed tightly into cells, many covered with emergency blankets (Pilkington, 2016). Other photographs released by the CBP in 2018 showed detainees, including children, held at the Ursula detention centre in McAllen, Texas, many of whom were lying on mats on a polished concrete floor with only emergency blankets for cover. In 2018, Human Rights watch published *In the Freezer*, a 50-page report based on 110 interviews with former detainees in holding cells along or near the US border with Mexico (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This report described in detail the hostile conditions of detention. Interviewees refer repeatedly to the uncomfortably cold temperatures of holding cells, spaces described as ‘iceboxes’ by the CBP officers (2018, p. 10), and in which detainees often only received emergency blankets for warmth. According to the report:

Most of the women we interviewed received sheets made of Mylar, thin blankets similar to the foil wrappers used by marathon runners, which the women described as a material akin to plastic, aluminium, or nylon. (2018, p. 16)

Given their visibility it is unsurprising that these blankets became part of political demonstrations highlighting conditions in CBP detention centres. Many demonstrations focused specifically on the detention of children. In June 2019, for instance, 24 pop-up installations appeared on sidewalks in New York City near the offices of Google and major news organisations, including CNN, Fox News, *The New York Times*, and *Newsweek*. The installations featured cages with what looked like small human figures covered in emergency blankets. The tag ‘No Kids in Cages’ ran along the top of the cages, and a recording of children crying at a holding facility was played (Refugee and Immigration Centre for Educational and Legal Services (RAICES), 2019). Removed within 24h, the intervention was replicated in other US cities, becoming a focal point for opposition to the detention of migrants. An instruction manual with an equipment list for ‘how to build a protest’ like those in New York City was also published (Badger Agency, 2019).

Blankets also became props for political figures who were not necessarily aligned with the ‘No Kids in Cages’ campaign. In late April 2021, Republican member of congress Lauren Boebert unfolded a blanket on her lap in the House Chamber while listening to and live tweeting President Biden’s address to the nation. Boebert tweeted subsequently about the noise made by the blanket while juxtaposing an image of herself in the Chamber alongside a photograph of detainees at a facility near the US–Mexico border covered by the blankets. In a follow-up opinion piece in the *Denver Post*, Boebert claimed she had ‘forced the fake news media to cover [the crisis] by wearing the same kind of Mylar blanket that the Biden administration is giving to the record-setting 18,000 unaccompanied minors in their custody’ (Boebert, 2021, n.p.). Boebert’s gesture generated other responses, however, in which her stunt was turned against her – posts on social media compared her gesture with the practice of using tinfoil as protection from electrical energy.



FIGURE 1 Images from CBP detention facility holding cells in Tucson, Arizona. Images released by US Custom and Border Protection Agency as part of lawsuit. Available at: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/content/photo-exhibits-doe-v-johnson>.

The emergency blanket as a form of envelopment has also become associated closely with scenes along the southern borders of the European Union (MacDonald, 2018). In 2015 and 2016, photographs of migrants arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos from Turkey began circulating across media platforms. In many photographs they were depicted draped in emergency blankets (e.g., *The Guardian*, 2015). So visible were these blankets that they became the subject of stories of their own (Basu, 2016). Equally notable were photographs taken at Ludivico near Ventimiglia in 2015. Commenting on a photograph taken by Jean Pierre Amet (distributed by Reuters), the writer Christian Salmon noted,

These refugees draped in survival coverings almost no longer have any human form: they are like ghosts, revenants, or aliens from Mars. At least, they are not wholly human; they preserve little of their former condition except an imprint on the polyester film that serves as their wrapping; these are mutants. They belong to a different condition to our own. The image reveals ... a latent fear of these refugees who are perceived as invaders, and a barely hidden desire to see them disappear.

(Salmon, 2015, n.p.)

Similar images continued to surface. In May 2021, a photograph appeared of a body wrapped in an emergency blanket on a beach near Ceuta, a Spanish autonomous city on the north coast of Africa. The person had drowned attempting to cross from Morocco into Ceuta following what seemed like a decision by the Moroccan authorities to relax security measures at the border. The image was especially stark, even if, unlike other much-publicised images, the body was not visible. And, like other images, this one circulated widely as part of the 'necro-aesthetics' of mediated death at border zones, particularly along the Mediterranean Sea (Ibrahim, 2018). In the context of this sensorium, the emergency blanket could be seen as a shroud, even as its colour and reflectivity amplified the aesthetics of the scene. Indeed, with its surface folded and crinkled, catching the light, it was difficult to avoid drawing similarities between the blanketed body and a kind of site-specific art-object or intervention.

5 | PERFORMING INSURGENT ENVELOPMENT

The prominence of emergency blankets in such scenes has attracted the attention of artists as part of the wider appropriation and repurposing of imagery and objects associated with migrant and refugee 'crises' (González Ortega & Martínez García, 2022; Mortensen, 2017). The blankets have been used by major international artists, including Ai Weiwei, although not without controversy. At a gala dinner coinciding with Ai's 2016 installation *Safe Passage* at Berlin's Konzerthaus, emergency blankets were distributed to celebrities who then posed for and shared selfies while wrapped in the blankets, encouraged by Ai (Carastathis & Tsilimpounidi, 2020). The not-so-subtle use of these blankets drew criticism from various figures, including Tim Renner, Berlin's Culture Secretary, who viewed it as exploitative and tacky, and suggested that it trivialised the experience of refugees (Barnes, 2016). Certainly, distributing blankets in this way allows them to become playful objects distanced and disconnected from the situations of exposure in which they are deployed.

Conversely, other artists have created works that use the emergency blanket to suggest the gravity of the losses, traumas, and absences associated with migrant and refugee journeys. Consider *Ghost* (2007), by Algerian-French artist Kader Attia. *Ghost* began as a repeated casting in aluminium foil of Attia's mother kneeling at prayer to create multiple figures. In the installation, visitors approached the figures from behind, only grasping their hollowness after passing them. *Ghost* did not address the journeys of refugees or migrants directly, gesturing instead to interrelated questions of religion, belonging, and multi-culturalism. MacDonald (2018) has read 'Attia's work through the survival blanket', suggesting that in *Ghost* 'the human has been erased, and only the blanket survives. Attia's carapaces could be tinfoil graves for dead and missing bodies, ghosts who never made the crossing' (MacDonald, 2018, p. 253). For MacDonald, *Ghost* illustrates how the emergency blanket has become a 'topos that circulates' (MacDonald, 2018, p. 253) in depictions of refugee mobilities. MacDonald's idea is a powerful one, resonating with the more general claim that the blanket folds space and time together through its movement. And yet *Ghost* is not actually constructed from emergency blankets. Its haunting figures are fabricated from aluminium foil and not metallised Mylar.

Why raise, or dwell on this point of difference? Because the specificity of materials matters to how particular forms of envelopment take place. Like aluminium, metallised polymer films are also alluring, characterised by a lightness and reflectivity that catches the eye (Sheller, 2014). However, where the former holds its shape, the latter does not. Mylar is also significantly stronger than aluminium foil. Equally, the thermal properties of metallised Mylar differ to those of the latter. These differences might seem minor, but they have a significance for how the emergency blanket is used critically

and creatively in artistic interventions about borders. More specifically, the fact that the aluminium holds its shape allows it to be used in works, like *Ghost*, that suggest emptiness, absence, disappearance, and passivity. It is more difficult to do this with the material from which the emergency blanket is fabricated: its aesthetic qualities and material properties mean that it is used to craft different kinds of artistic works that foreground and render palpable in diverse ways the tensions between the promise of envelopment and the violence of exposure. Crucially, artistic works that use this object and its properties go beyond highlighting the inadequacy of the emergency blanket as a device of thermal comfort. They also foreground the multisensory forms of affective envelopment and embodied intimacies in which these blankets are implicated. In doing this, they offer compelling reminders that what is nominally a scene of thermal exposure can also prompt reflection on wider questions of exposure at border zones.

The remainder of the paper considers such work. Not all of it involves the staging or restaging of the kinds of scenes referred to in the previous section (see also Bridle, 2016). Critically, even where this is the case, enveloped bodies are presented as figures with a range of constrained agencies and capacities rather than as corpses or shrouded bodies. So, while the images and works considered here are always 'haunted' by such spectral associations (see O'Neill, 2022), they also point to possibilities for thinking the relations between exposure and envelopment otherwise, possibilities that are also informed by the work of figures including Alaimo and Kapadia noted earlier. I 'unfold' five important ways in which the use of emergency blankets in artistic work offers possibilities for performing exposures at border zones otherwise.

In the first place, and most obviously, emergency blankets are used to create objects or surfaces of attention that gesture to conditions of exposure without necessarily depicting or representing those lives caught up in those conditions. For instance, in 2018 the Spanish street artist SpY used emergency blankets to make *Sun*, a 15-metre diameter disc on the side of a building in Ibiza (see Figure 2). The installation exemplified SpY's art more generally, which tends to focus on large-scale installations that create 'stark conceptual contrasts between the aesthetics of his artworks and the difficult connotation of the objects they are built with' (SpY, 2018, n.p.). In this case, the aim was to create an object which, because it was difficult to look at due to the intensity of its reflective surface, amplified the sensation of exposure to heat and light. *Sun* generated a distinctive form of what, following Kapadia (2019), might be called a 'sensuous affiliation' with the elemental conditions to which migrants in the Mediterranean are exposed. The work foregrounded the embodied vulnerability of those migrants, whose displacement renders them acutely exposed to those conditions. At the same time, *Sun* problematised the reflective aesthetics of the materials in which those migrants are enveloped by making those materials difficult to gaze upon. In doing so, it focused the relation between exposure as both visual and embodied (Yusoff, 2007). In the harshness of its reflected light, *Sun* deliberately occluded the bodies of migrants while scrutinising the embodied gaze of the viewers of images of those migrants.

Second, the emergency blanket is creatively repurposed in works that challenge its sterile functionality as a device of minimal thermal comfort for lives that, in detention, are often reduced to the physiological needs of bodies. Instead, various artists deploy the emergency blanket, or representations of it, to reaffirm the cultural and political agency of those detained at border zones. In some of this work the neutrality of the blanket is reclaimed by layering its surface with cultural meaning, and especially with symbols of significance for detainees. Chicana artist Katie Ruiz has used the emergency blanket as part of a wider engagement with blankets as spaces of dis/connection across border zones. In her



FIGURE 2 *Sun* (2018) by urban artist SpY. Available at: <https://spy-urbanart.com/work/sun/>. Used under fair dealing.

painting *Seeking Asylum*, for instance, four masked women are shown covered by emergency blankets. In a more sculptural work, *American Dream*, traditional Oaxaca blankets are juxtaposed with emergency blankets. In these works, Ruiz reappropriates the meaning of the emergency blanket by refusing its anonymity and importantly, in doing so, challenges how the disposability of the blanket becomes associated with the disposability of the lives it envelops. Ruiz writes:

What I ended up thinking about was how fragile that blanket is, the emergency blankets, just this little silver film that is meant to be disposable. And so the first thing I did was take one of those blankets and paint the symbols of traditional textiles that I learned from Oaxaca — protection symbols and some different symbols that I felt were important to put onto the blanket as my way of saying I feel helpless about the situation.

(cited in Dixon Evans, 2021, n.p.)

The act of reclaiming and reworking the meaning of the blanket is also central to the work of Spokane artist Charlene Teters. In *Way of Sorrows*, a 2020 installation at the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Teters used emergency blankets to generate ‘a new myth of ancient vision and wisdom; the mother-saviour’ (Teters, 2020, n.p.). The installation featured objects and images emphasising the alienating aspects of the blanket – one wall was covered with Mylar and toys made from the material hung from the ceiling, representing children detained near the border. At the centre of the exhibit, however, were a video and a photographic mural featuring the artist ‘robed in silver and gold emergency blankets like those given to the desperate, separated, forgotten and interned refugees around this planet’ (Teters, 2020, n.p.). In these images the figure enveloped in the blanket is no longer presented as a passive body or a corpse covered in a shroud. Instead, the blanket is used to suggest the performance of envelopment as an aspect of embodied agency, and to appropriate and rework the scene of envelopment as the locus of meaning-making, fabulation, and mythical possibility. Here, the form of insurgent envelopment is intentionally figurative. The point here is not, of course, to suggest transcendence of the conditions of detention via mythical figures. Rather, in this work, objects normally deployed in ways that reduce the problem of comfort to the thermal properties of detained bodies are now repurposed to afford opportunities for making visible the constrained agencies and cultural worlds of lives detained at border zones. Paralleling artistic disruptions of the rituals of border security (Amoore & Hall, 2010), such works offer glimpses of an ethics of creative defamiliarisation, through which the mundane objects of detention and minimal care are reworked to conjure facets of the lives, worlds, and attachments of those detained.

This points, in turn, to a third way in which emergency blankets are used by artists – this involves staging *scenes* of exposure directly or indirectly referencing those at border zones. In doing so, this work often foregrounds an alienating sense of displacement that unsettles the relation between the scene of arrival and the figures enveloped by the reflective material in such scenes. *The Unknown* (2012–2015) is a series of works by Austrian artist Nicole Weniger in which the emergency blanket figures prominently. In *The Unknown*, groups of figures covered in emergency blankets appear at various locations, including South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Austria (see Figure 3). Most of the locations are close to water, unpopulated, and feature difficult terrain. Staged thus, Weniger’s photographs look like the scenes of blanketed figures photographed in 2016 on the coast of Italy (see Kuijers, 2015). Evoking as they do such scenes, Weniger’s images suggest, once again, that even as the blanket as form of envelopment is offered as comfort, it simultaneously alienates and dehumanises those to whom it is offered. In her photographs, however, the figures seem to be complicating such scenes of vulnerability by performing exposure otherwise (Alaimo, 2016). The figures have actively appropriated and refashioned the blankets as part of an encounter with an unknown landscape. Enveloped thus, the figures combine different meanings. To some extent the blankets have been fashioned into what appear as burqas. At the same time, however, the figures evoke the space-age associations of metallised polymer films in what look like space-suits designed to protect the wearer against exposure to unearthly milieus. Critically, the figures appear to have arrived in the scene already enveloped: there is no evidence that the blankets have been distributed by rescuers, first responders, or humanitarian agencies. Instead, the figures look like they have possessed and claimed the blanket as a material of security in hostile worlds. Enveloped thus, Weniger’s images stage scenes of other-worldly visitors actively trying to make sense of an alien landscape in which they have arrived without explanation, without being met, greeted, or welcomed, and from which they appear to remain estranged.

Fourth, the emergency blanket is also used to experiment with and depict the constrained agencies emerging in the multi-sensory spaces between envelopment and exposure. Such work often deliberately places blanketed bodies at sites where they are exposed to the force of the elements. This is exemplified in the work of Iranian-born interdisciplinary artist Raheleh ‘Minoosh’ Zomorodinia (see Figure 4), whose deployment of the emergency blanket is framed by climate and refugee crises. In the video series *Sensation* (2016–2018), Zomorodinia stands in a series of exposed locations (snow-covered mountains, deserts, hills, and rocky terrain) draped in an emergency blanket pressed to the artist’s body by the



FIGURE 3 *The Unknown* (2012-2015) by Nicole Weniger. Available at: <https://nicole-weniger.webflow.io/projekte/the-unknown>. Used under fair dealing.



FIGURE 4 Still from *Sensation III* (2016) by Raheleh Zomorodinia. Available at: <http://rahelehzomorodinia.com/video/sensation/>. Used under fair dealing.

force and direction of the wind. Zomorodinia describes this work as an ongoing unfolding of a relational encounter with the wind, the force of which shapes the kinds of images that emerge. These images, she writes, ‘document my struggles with the air that covers my entire body, making its force visible, caressing my form, emphasizing every movement and act of resistance’ (Zomorodinia, 2022, n.p.).

A similar emphasis on working with and against the force of the elements is also evident in *Resist*. This work accentuates the difficulty of controlling the emergency blanket when exposed to the elements – rather than producing graceful shapes, the artist struggles to hold, let alone ‘wear’ the blanket. Zomorodinia has elsewhere used the emergency blanket in more obviously performance-based works. *The Moving Clouds* and *The Moving Waves* are ongoing projects, in which, ‘each performance portrays various actions in repetition ... to express the feelings I encounter in response to global warming and the migration crisis. The reflective material visually connects nature, land, and the physicality of the human body, while re-creating the sounds of the ocean’ (Zomorodinia, 2022, n.p.). Crucially, these works, and especially perhaps *Sensation*, amplify the distinctive sound of the blanket. When Zomorodinia’s blanketed body is buffeted by the wind, the noise of the rustling is constant, and overwhelming, adding to the sense that she is

At the Edge of Distance

October 26, 2022



FIGURE 5 Ana Teresa Fernández's *At The Edge of Distance* (2022). Available at <https://anateresafernandez.com/at-the-edge-of-distance/>. Used under fair dealing.

almost being suffocated. The labour of persistence and resistance in this context is multi-sensory. *Sensation* does not reference in any direct way scenes of migrant detention or arrival. However, while watching and listening to the clip it is difficult not to be reminded of the sonic discomfort experienced by people in a room full of detainees blanketed by continuously rustling material.

Fifth, and finally, the emergency blanket is deployed by artists to dwell, albeit briefly, in the tense condition of enforced intimacy and distancing at border zones. This tension is explored in recent work by Ana Teresa Fernández, who in various projects (e.g., *Bodies and Borders*, 2018) has explored conditions at those zones. *On The Line* (2022) and *The Space Between Us* (2022) are short video pieces, from which Fernández also derived a series of oil paintings called *At The Edge of Distance* (see [Figure 5](#)).

These works feature the artist enveloping her own body and those of others with emergency blankets in site-specific actions undertaken at the shoreline section of the border between Tijuana and San Diego. One painting depicts Fernández wrapped in an emergency blanket as it hangs from a washing line, in a 'doubled effect that suggests both the comfort of cover as well as the chilling erasure of self' (Catherine Clark Gallery, 2022a, n.p). Another features the artist and her partner, both of whose heads are wrapped tightly in the blankets. Their heads touch but their skin remains separated by the thin layer of the blankets. The painting, and the video from which it is derived, evokes 'frustrated intimacy' while also centring 'metaphors of isolation and contact at the border' (Catherine Clark Gallery, 2022b, n.p). In these scenes, the emergency blanket as a form of envelopment amplifies separation between bodies. For Fernández, this gesture addresses the physical separation of families along the border. But the separation is also elemental, pointing to the affective and sensory experiences of thermal discomfort associated with envelopment. As Fernández writes,

During the performance I began to sweat inside the blanket, unable to feel my lover's breath, even though he was right in front of me. I would inhale and the blanket would press up against my face, suffocating & completely isolating me. My space was contained, no breath, no warmth shared between us.

(2019, n.p.)

Like many of the other works noted above, Fernández deliberately challenges the idea that the blanket is merely distributed for comfort at border zones. It is instead used as part of the reproduction of conditions in which, under the guise of comfort, forms of envelopment constrict, isolate, and separate, while also rendering bodies physically, morally, and emotionally distant from one another. At the same time, Fernández refuses to let the emergency blanket be reduced to a containment device for a passive, inert body. In doing so, her work exemplifies possibilities for reimagining the space of envelopment, echoing Irigaray (2005) in particular. In the works above, experimenting with envelopment is a process of giving shape to a concern for others while also resisting the reduction of the envelope to a passive form of containment for bodies. Although the blanket becomes a moving boundary layer between bodies, the figures blanketed in Fernández's works remain active and agential, working within and stretching the constraints of forms of envelopment to generate ways of relating, moving, and feeling that are not exhausted by the violent conditions at border zones.

6 | CONCLUSION

This paper has offered an account of the geographies of exposure and envelopment that unfold at border zones through both the distribution and the creative/critical repurposing of the emergency blanket. In doing so, the paper has attended both to the properties of a synthetic material – metallised polymer film – and the object into which it is fashioned to show how relations between exposure and envelopment unfold at border zones. In these zones, envelopment can be framed benignly as an urgent and necessary response to an emergency. However, the distribution of blankets can also be part of tactics designed to expose migrants to thermal discomfort. The blanket offers a minimal level of care for lives already exposed to violence – its deployment contributes to the deliberate weaponisation of thermal conditions (Starosielski, 2020) against people in relation to whose mobilities it is deemed necessary to secure borders. As a form of envelopment, the emergency blanket mediates the transcorporeal relations between inside and out, between bodies and their surrounds, but in a way that offers no real comfort. In doing so, it folds together the promise of envelopment as welcome and comfort at sites of arrival and transition and, simultaneously, the reproduction of alienation, discomfort, and disposability.

As an alluring form of envelopment, the emergency blanket is central to the anaesthetisation and mediatization of scenes depicting lives exposed to the violent conditions of border zones. In this context, artistic works can intensify the visibility of these scenes while also, however, risking reproducing the necro-aesthetics of certain metonymic images of bodies washed up on beaches. But artistic works can also rework the meaning and materiality of these scenes while signalling the geographies in which they are implicated, through repurposing the objects that figure in such scenes. In that sense, the artistic works discussed above are ‘representations-in-relation’ (Anderson, 2019) that link ‘exposure as an ethical and political act’ with what Alaimo calls an ‘insurgent vulnerability’ (2016, p. 5). As Alaimo continues, to ‘occupy exposure as insurgent vulnerability is to perform material rather than abstract alliances, and to inhabit a fraught sense of political agency that emerges from the perceived loss of boundaries and sovereignty’ (2016, p. 5). As this paper has tried to show, the emergency blanket offers a form of envelopment through which to perform this ‘fraught sense of agency’ by staging scenes that direct attention to the conditions of those enveloped by the blanket while also performing it otherwise. This sense of insurgency is amplified by a parallel use of the term by Kapadia (2019) as part of his formulation of ‘insurgent aesthetics’. For Kapadia, ‘insurgent aesthetics is about the creativity and fugitive beauty that emanate from the shadows of terrible violence incited by the forever war’ (2019, p. 9). As he argues, this kind of aesthetics can be traced through artistic interventions that ‘divine other, more sensuous and affective ways of knowing this ... war’ (2019, p. 9). Securing borders through the detention of migrants is an obvious aspect of the situated geographies of this war. And, in this context, the works considered here perform fugitive versions of insurgent envelopment in a critical effort to make visible, sensible, and affectively palpable the thermal conditions of those exposed to the violence of border zones, even when this violence is disguised as comfort. ‘Fugitive’ has many meanings, of course, but Kapadia’s use of the term amplifies its association with creative practices that stage critique through forms of evasive envelopment and the refusal of exposure (on fugitivity, see Cante, 2023). In working fugitively, the artistic works considered here produce scenes that foreground what Kara Thompson calls the ‘inescapable paradox’ of the blanket insofar as ‘what it covers is that which is most exposed’ (2019, p. xv).

Finally, these scenes can be connected to wider geographies of exposure, through thinking, for instance, about how the blanket, as *topos*, seems to fold different temporalities and conditions together. The blanket connects the intimate violence of exposure to the more insidious and longer-term transcorporeal exposures of human and non-human bodies to the violence of toxic milieus. The aggregate accumulation of the materials from which emergency blankets are fabricated remains invisible unless their scale or volume can be rendered appreciable – the use of Mylar by artist Tara Donovan can be read in this way (see Morton, 2013). To focus on a specific object and the circumstances under which it envelops individual bodies might seem to deflect attention from how ‘plastic becomes a disruptive pollutant as a multitude’ (Boetzkes, 2019, p. 218; see also Davis, 2022). However, both the emergency blanket and wider issue of exposure to pollution are connected through the question of who or what is discardable or disposable. Even if the artistic works discussed in this paper do not themselves engage directly with the waste matter of the materials they deploy, central to the value of these works is their folding together of geographies in which the discardability of emergency blankets is connected intimately with the discardability of the exposed lives they envelop.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

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