

Yishai Jusidman

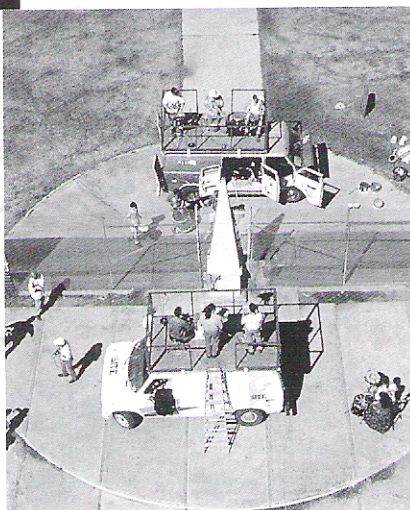
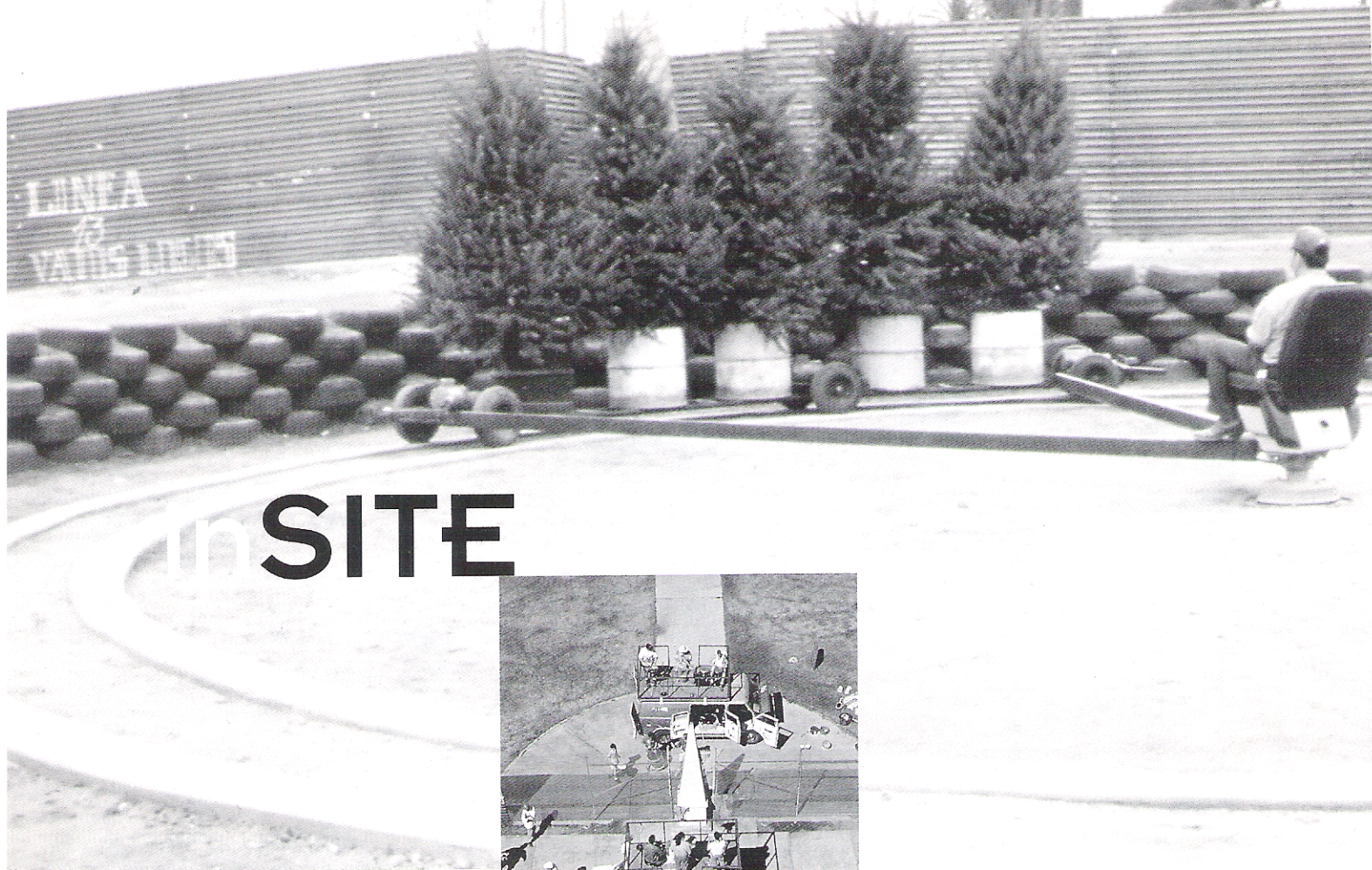
Ever since cave paintings were believed to ensure a successful hunt by trapping the animals' semblances in advance, the history of art has been fueled by a succession of outlandish fantasies. A medieval icon was as good as a direct line to God. Nineteenth-century romantic poetry was imagined to restore unsynchronized spirits to Nature's all-encompassing beat. And only a decade ago, some remarkably bad paintings were widely believed to secure for their owners an ever-appreciating equity, immune from the forces of the market.

Recent episodes suggest that the demise of one belief regarding the powers of art only brings about yet another. Once the business-driven art cult of the nineteen eighties was finished off, many saw the need for a moral rebirth. Today, the dreaded commodity is said to be in the process of being purged, and righteousness is promoted as the new supreme aesthetic value. As a consequence, avant-garde art's infrastructure—the gallery, the dealer, and the collector—is being replaced by an "alternative": the not-for-profit space, the curator, and the foundation. Attuned to the country's recent infatuation with conciliatory activism, art becomes of merely instrumental value to this institutional conglomerate—as good as the weight of its social benefits.

The exhibition "inSITE '94" promised to make good the word of this new faith as well as to draw the San Diego-Tijuana region into the top-ten list of "most cultured places".

By commissioning more than seventy ephemeral site-specific works to be spread across both sides of the westernmost U.S./Mexico border, the organizers of "inSITE '94"—Michael Krichman and Lynda Forsha of Installation Gallery—portrayed themselves as purveyors of the ultimate in uncommodifiable art-with-a-mission. Thirty-eight non-profit arts institutions, eighty-two sponsors, sixty-three advisors, almost forty curators, and over one hundred artists pooled their talents, monies, and goodwill to make possible this three-million-dollar bi-national extravaganza.

As one of the most shamelessly contrasting places on the planet, the San Diego/Tijuana enclave offers optimal conditions for the deployment of therapeutic aesthetics. In spite of their irreconcilable differences, SD and TJ are linked by the busiest border-crossing point on earth, which is also fast becoming one of the most zealously guarded. In such surroundings, anything you do or say—and anything you *don't* do or say—suggests a political posture. This politicized atmosphere was instrumental in the few successful works at "inSITE," yet it was overbearing to the many who tried to sidestep the issues and instead commune in some anaesthetized lyrical vision. Insofar as the recently erected twelve-foot-tall steel fence that marks the border is the most potent artifact in the region—both practically and metaphorically—it was somewhat puzzling that only a handful of artists took on



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the challenge of actually using it in their work.

All but one of the pieces directly on the border were on the Mexican side. At Playas de Tijuana, Helen Escobedo's *By the Night Tide* put together four unusable fence-wire boats armed with make-believe catapults aiming at the American side, symbolizing the obliteration of the immigrant's journey and his presumed desire for demolishing the barrier. Yet Escobedo's attempt to tame the fence by assimilating it into her allegory was only a symbolic effort. It was not nearly as powerful as Terry Allen's *Across the Razor*, the only work in the show to use both sides of the fence, and to avoid being overshadowed by it. On either side, a van with a platform on its roof allowed bystanders to climb up and look over, while talking to others across the fence through a P/A system. Since the vans were separated by no more than ten feet, the farce of amplifying voices in turn amplified both the absurdities of the attempt to differentiate between what are in fact contiguous territories, as well as of the presumption that art can bring about understanding among peoples.

So-called site-specific art (a term originally coined to refer to works not in museums or galleries) is said to be favored by the new aesthetics because of its supposed ability to enlighten the "common man"—i.e., the one who hasn't enjoyed the blessings of art because he hasn't had the opportunity, or the interest, to go to museums. Yet there was very little at "inSITE" that was not sheltered, both physically and aesthetically, by an institution. Most of the exceptions were—again—in Tijuana, perhaps because of its more lax regulatory constraints on public works. However, these pieces tended to succumb in one way or another to the peculiar forces that roam through Tijuana.

The misunderstanding of Tijuana's precarious social conditions backfired on many installations. Joyce Cutler-Shaw's *The Human Condition* completely covered the walls of Tijuana's General Hospital with an elaborate array of allegedly restorative drawings and poetic graphics; yet during my visit patients were being transported on broken stretchers, underscoring the futility of the fluffy assistance this art was meant to provide. Jean Lowe's didactic confabulations about animal rights in *A Lesson in Civics*, installed in a local art school, was rather uninspiring in light of the destitute condition of the humans living nearby. Ulf Rulof of Sweden and American Michael Schnorr built a number of wood-heated brick benches supposedly designed to entertain and warm up children whose parents have jumped across the border (*Abandoned II*). The humanitarian effort satisfied only the artists' own tongue-in-cheek wish to appear charitable. For in suggesting that youngsters are abandoned at the foot of the fence and left to the mercy of the elements, they prejudicially raised doubts about the humanity of the Mexican people.

Silvia Gruner mounted a long row of clay figures of an Aztec fertility goddess onto the fence at a popular jump & run point. By the time I made my pilgrimage to the site, most of the statuettes had been appropriated by the locals, probably to adorn their less-than-humble dwellings. (Although not quite as intended, Gruner's *Middle of the Road* did fulfill the call for Art for the People.) Kim MacConnel's figurines were not as fortunate. Cast cement replicas of Tijuana's tourist curios set up on La Escalinata—an old stairway that now serves as a backdrop for avid graffiti exchange—were smashed to pieces by gangs on the first night of the show. The People proved to have more impact on the art than Art could ever have on them.

But aside from such lively behavior, Tijuana's denizens have long shared their city with site-specific art of a more in-



Ulf Rulof

23 September, 1994

Fir trees, motor, car seat, barrels, chassis

Colonia Libertad, Tijuana

Photo: Sarah Marchick

Terry Allen

Across the Razor, 1994

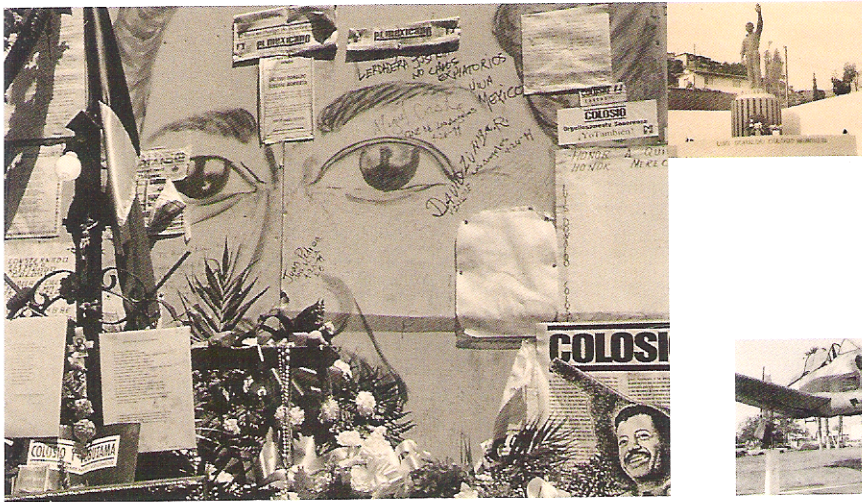
2 vans, amplification system, translators

Playas de Tijuana

Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann

Monument to the Free Grammar-School Textbook

Monument to Free Speech



digenous sort. I'm of course referring to the official monuments that adorn Tijuana, and which express its unique cultural flavor. Though these works would not quench the sophisticate's thirst for virtuous worthiness, they more than comply with the requirements for the certification of site-specificity as listed in "inSITE"'s valuable guidebook. What could be more "integrally linked with its site" than the monument to the Mexican Air Force: a dilapidated fighter jet suspended on a pedestal, which separates the back end of the airport from a dirt-poor neighborhood? What could have its content more "inextricable from its form" than the Mussolini-meets-Oldenburg monument to the free grammar-school textbook? How can anything surpass the tumbling memorial to the recently assassinated Presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio—a poignant collage of picture portraits, drying flowers, and misspelled mementos and poems set up on the miserable spot of the gunning—in the task of "interacting with and deriving meaning from the space it inhabits"? Tijuana's monuments testify to the attempts by the Mexican authorities to give a national identity to this remote corner of the country. But they reveal as well the city's rare ability for resisting any attempt to make it more urbane. Thus, Tijuana is "site-specific" in the strictest sense; for the city's "formal" decrepitness and unedifying "content" are wholly integrated within its geopolitical situation.

"inSITE"'s manifesto is correct in calling for an intimate and symbiotic relationship between an artwork and its site. Nancy Rubins' *Airplane Parts and Building, A Large Growth for San Diego*, a tumult of aircraft debris which appears to have crashed right into the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art (or to have grown out of it), as well as Robert Therrien's Gulliver-sized table and chairs filling a deserted warehouse in the Santa Fe depot, both fulfilled this promise. But the "inSITE"-ers are wrong in claiming that the genre of site-specific installation has an intrinsically superior ability for achieving such intimacy with its surroundings. For instance, at the San Diego Children's Museum, some "kid-spirited" installations failed precisely because of miscalculations about the effects that would be derived from their context. While the museum's own playgrounds engaged the kids in typical play & learn ac-

tivities, the layered complexities of Chris Burden's sprawling simulation of neighboring towns (*A Tale of Two Cities*) remained buried beneath the work's portrayal of the artist as a grown-up who won't allow the restless kids to play with his toys. Much the same can be said of Dennis Oppenheim, whose cacophonous, giant dancing cacti scared the hell out of many of the children.

Like some of the artists in the event, "inSITE"'s organizers took too lightly the idea that the content of a politically charged context enters directly into the content of the art placed there, instead naively believing that just by having art engage with its context, a favorable result must ensue. In its current incarnation (be assured, there will be more to come), "inSITE"'s significance comes from bringing the fiction of site-specificity closer to its bursting point, from exposing the ineffectual pomposity of the cultural altruism to which art's moral rebirth has given rise, and from sparing bewildering Tijuana from becoming, God forbid, "cultivated."

Yishai Jusidman is just a painter, now living in Mexico City.

Memorials to Luis Donaldo Colosio

Monument to the Mexican Air Force

Nancy Rubins
Airplane Parts and Building, A Large Growth for San Diego, 1994
 Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego
 Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann

Photos of Tijuana Monuments: Robbin Larsen and Rubén Ortiz-Torres