

Art in the time of cholera

By JOSE MANUEL SPRINGER

Among the flames of xenophobic anxiety raised by the recent approval of the California anti-immigrant initiative Proposition 187, it may seem pointless to view the efforts on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border as demonstrating that there is an understanding between the two countries and seemingly opposing cultures.

However, the recent exhibition inSITE 94 proves that the visual arts are dealing with issues central to the relationship between Mexico and the U.S.

The bi-national, region-wide exhibition and festival of installation and site-specific art, brought together more than 38 institutions and 100 artists — Mexicans and Americans mostly — for this biennial, in an effort to show that cultural links between Mexico and the U.S. are alive and well, Proposition 187 notwithstanding.

The exhibition, which opened on October 16 in Tijuana and nine days later in San Diego, centers around three major "hubs": downtown San Diego, that city's Balboa Park and downtown Tijuana.

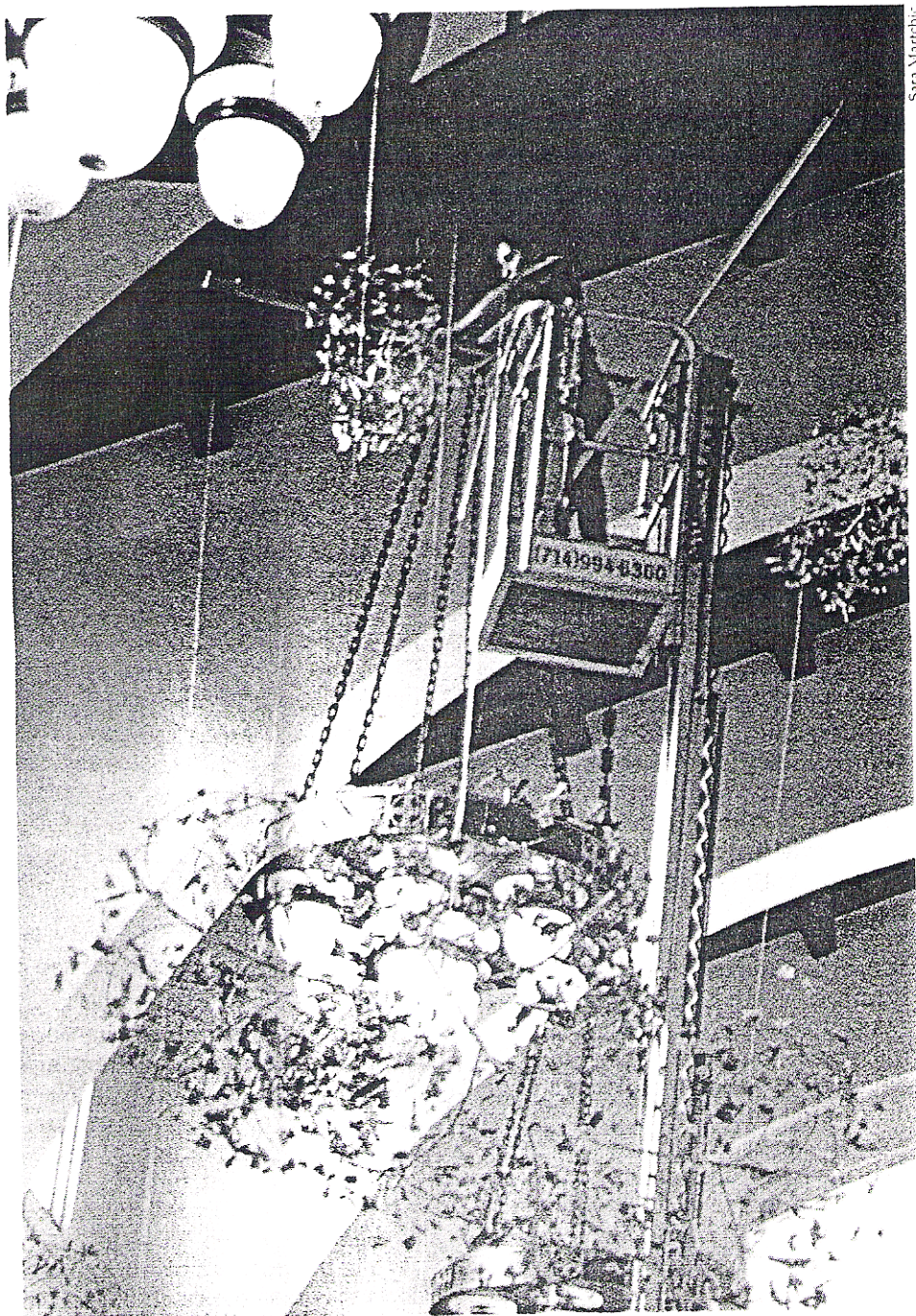
But sites for the works are varied. They include: the historic Santa Fe depot, with its vast chambered baggage building, in downtown San Diego; the remains of the Agua Caliente resort in Tijuana, now a public high school; the 14-mile border fence that segregates San Diego and Tijuana; the new California Center for the Arts Museum in Escondido; as well as the Centro Cultural Tijuana; AND the beaches and the streets of both capitals.

Some of the works are permanent, others will disappear from

public view when the exhibition closes in the last days of November.

Installation art has a long history in the United States, but not so in Mexico. It emerged as an art form

early in this century with the works of the Dada movement. During the Sixties the so-called Fluxus movement and Land Art resorted to installation as a way to counter the policy of modern art



Sara Marchic

ARTISTS BRANCH OUT: Bones and branches make-up Yolanda Gutierrez' installation piece "De Paso" on display in Santa Fe Depot.

museums to amass enormous collections of paintings and sculptures as the preferred means of expression of Modernism.

Action art, happenings, ambiance and Mail Art (art that traveled throughout the world in envelopes among individuals) were favored as a reaction to the precious behavior embedded in traditional art forms.

Installation art is an art of the ephemeral. It deals with specific circumstances outside of the traditional safe ground of the museum.

Installations cannot be marketed as easily as other artifacts, therefore they tend to deal with social, environmental, and — more often than not — political issues. These include the living conditions of minorities or the forgotten poor and have proved to be the visual art's answer to our end-of-the-century troubled environment and spirit.

This is not to say that installation art should serve different ends and proposals that make it unaccountable to critique, as in the case of any other art form.

The inSITE 94 exhibit is the first occasion since the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement that Mexico and the U.S. have worked together on a show put on by non-profit organizations. Proof that mammoth exhibitions such as *Splendor of Thirty Centuries*, put together by government agencies and mogul *empresarios*, are not the only or most effective way to strengthen ties and foster dialogue.

"The collaborative structure of this project represents a unique national model of resource-sharing in a period of declining funding for the arts," notes Michael Krichman, president of Installation Gallery and coordinator of the event. "No

one institution could possibly mount a comparable exhibition."

Since the exhibition is centered around regional issues, it avoids the archetypal exchange between art centers, such as Mexico City and New York or Los Angeles, where the exchange of the exotic for the trendy and vice versa often hinders a deeper understanding.

"This region is a wonderfully rich environment for the creation of site-specific work — art that depends on, and directly interacts, with, its unique location and context," says Lynda Forsha, inSITE 94 director.

Marcos Ramirez, a Tijuana resident, built a shack house — named simply Century XXI — just outside the spacious main entrance of the Centro Cultural Tijuana, reflecting the living conditions of thousands of migrant workers that await a chance to cross the border in the dusty outskirts of Tijuana.

Terry Allen, from Santa Fe, New Mexico, got away with a mobile installation called *Across the Razor*, located at shifting points along the

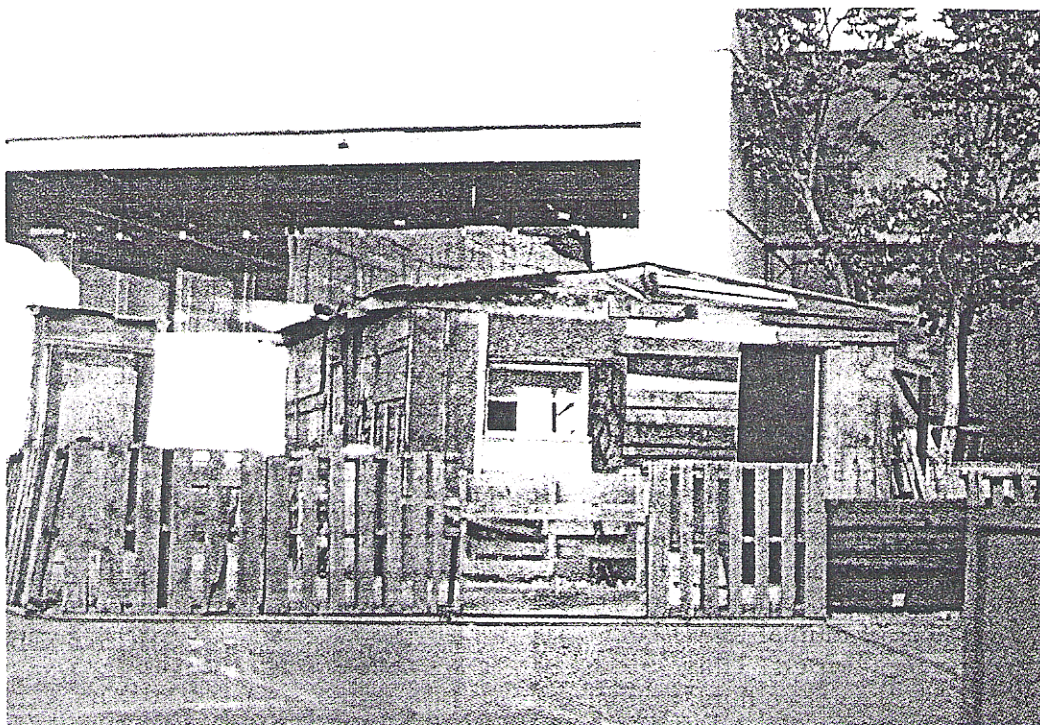
border fence. Two vans, one in the U.S. and one in Mexico, were outfitted with rooftop platforms on which a microphone with amplification was used by people on both sides to express themselves. Topics ranged from discrimination, the need for an understanding, and sharing of, the blame and reality of life in the border region.

Cuban artist Jose Bedia placed sails on the corners of the Santa Fe Depot railroad station as a message to his countrymen fleeing the island for economic and political reasons.

Japanese artist Yukinori Yanagi presented a set of flags made of sand representing the hemisphere's countries. Ants were used to carve tunnels into the flags and slowly produce a colorful accumulation of sand grains, representing the continent as a whole.

Perhaps similar events in the future will help people on both sides of the border — indeed, around the world — to focus on their similarities rather than on their differences.

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BORDER ART: Recreates migrants "home away from home."

Gabriela Lopez Portillo